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## The pub and the people: drinking places and popular culture

If anyone know of a pub that has draught stout, open fire, cheap meals, a garden, motherly barmaids and no radio, I should be glad to hear of it, even though its name were something as prosaic as 'The Red Lion' or 'The Railway Arms'. (George Orwell)

To drink beer is for your country's good as well as your own. (Brewers Society advert, 1938)

By 1918, the drink question in England had been transformed. The establishment of the CCB had shown that it was possible to impose central planning on the drinks trade. The restriction of opening hours had normalised the idea that special times should be set aside in which pubs were open, whereas previously the assumption had been that special times were set aside in which they were forced to close. The CCB had also encouraged leading brewers to work with the government in setting alcohol policy, rather than viewing legislation as a perennial threat.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the idea of improving the conditions in which people drank, rather than simply restricting access to alcohol, had become firmly established in the minds of both policy-makers and the wider public.

Equally importantly, however, levels of overall consumption had plummeted. At the start of the century, average annual consumption of beer stood at 214 pints per person; by the time the war finished it was just 80.<sup>2</sup> Beer was more expensive, it was weaker and pubs faced unprecedented levels of competition from new forms of entertainment such as the cinema and organised sports. The brewing industry had also shrunk: in 1900 there had been over 6,000 breweries in operation, by 1920 that figure had been halved.<sup>3</sup> The success of the CCB meant that nationalisation was a real possibility. The concept of State purchase had won over established temperance and had gained significant support within the Labour Party.<sup>4</sup> Although the CCB was formally wound-up with the passing of the 1921 Licensing Act, State management was retained in all the districts where it had been established during the war, leaving open the possibility that

the experiment could be extended. Brewers were selling less beer, drinkers were abandoning the pub in unprecedented numbers, and the prospect of nationalisation was beginning to loom large.

### Improving the pub

The most significant response to the post-war malaise within the brewing industry was driven by two brewing companies who had been closely involved with the work of the CCB: Whitbread, and Mitchells and Butlers. The chairmen of the two companies, Sydney Nevile and William Waters Butler, had advised the CCB and had been impressed by the success of the Carlisle experiment. In particular, they had seen that the public conception of the pub could be transformed by sloughing off its image as a mere drink shop and presenting it instead as a place where alcohol provided just one of a wide range of leisure choices. The great development projects of the CCB provided the blueprint for what became known as the 'improved pub', and throughout the inter-war years leading brewers would invest millions in building projects designed to replace the snug, but sometimes sordid, local with a new kind of pub: a genteel and airy establishment in which nutritious food and soft drinks would be as popular as beer, and dancing as popular as darts. Depending on your viewpoint, this represented either the civilising of an increasingly disreputable industry, or the imposition of middle-class values (and patterns of consumption) on the one social institution that the working class could truly call their own.

As we have seen, the idea of the improved pub had its roots in the adoption of the Gothenburg system by temperance campaigners in the late nineteenth century: in the belief that the worst excesses of drunkenness could be curbed by civilising, as it were, the public house itself. Where it had been tried, this approach had proved beneficial to the bigger brewers. In Birmingham, the systematic reduction of licences, which had been in place since 1897, was superseded from 1905 by a system of licence exchange which became famous as Birmingham's 'fewer and better' policy – designed to replace the plethora of low-grade pubs with a smaller number of more respectable establishments.<sup>5</sup> The 'fewer and better' system benefited those brewers who had the resources necessary to improve and expand their establishments. Mitchells and Butlers did especially well out of it; some years later their chairman commented to delegates at his organisation's annual general meeting that 'Birmingham can show types of houses which are unsurpassed for giving good service to the public, and the majority of them, I am proud to say, are the property of the shareholders of this Company'.<sup>6</sup>

As Birmingham magistrates attempted to oversee pub improvement

through the management of licences, organisations like the People's Refreshment House Association and the Central Public House Trust Association strove to make the Gothenburg system a reality through buying up businesses and running them along disinterested lines. While the impact of such companies was numerically tiny, they played a significant role in influencing the activities of the CCB.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, involvement with the CCB convinced Sydney Nevile and William Waters Butler that pub improvement was both socially responsible and economically viable. Consequently, by the 1920s pub improvement had been transformed from the experimental goal of eccentrically pragmatic temperance reformers to the business model of multi-million pound brewing interests.

In 1920, Whitbread established the Improved Public House Company to oversee investment into both the renovation of existing licensed properties and the pursuit of an ambitious project of new pub building. Whitbread were joined by Mitchells and Butlers, Watney, Combe & Reid, Barclay Perkins, Walker-Cain and many other breweries in the dash to polish up the pub's tarnished image. These new pubs did away with snugs and saloons, garish lighting and engraved glass panels and replaced them with spacious, open-plan seating areas, dining halls and even dance floors. Many improved pubs were built on an enormous scale; some incorporated bowling greens, tennis courts, even cinemas. Bar service was replaced by table service, purpose-built kitchens were installed to provide restaurant-standard food; mineral water, tea and coffee were made as easily available as beer and wine. Between 1922 and 1930 over 20,000 pubs were 'improved' to some degree, and over the whole of the inter-war period 79 new 'superpubs' were built at enormous cost to their developers.<sup>8</sup>

While brewers invested heavily in pub improvement, their supporters in Parliament sought legislative support for the movement. Between 1919 and 1928 three Bills were introduced proposing separate licence certificates for improved pubs. Although no legislation was forthcoming, a Select Committee was appointed to look at the issue, which reported in 1927. The Committee's findings acknowledged the good intentions of the pub improvers, and noted that some licensing Justices were not always as flexible as they could be in approving the extensions necessary to replace a traditional pub with an improved version. However, they also commented on the extent to which improved pubs alienated many traditional pub-goers, noting that 'where a public house is improved and enlarged there is a tendency for the old clientele which used to frequent it to remove to another unimproved house while another and better class of customer ... comes to take their place'.<sup>9</sup>

The pub improvement movement opened a new frontline in the battle for control over the working-class drinking place. However, because

it was driven by brewers themselves the goal was not the destruction of pub culture, but its incorporation into a new economy of leisure in which the biggest players were the ever-expanding middle class. George Orwell dismissed suburban superpubs as 'dismal sham Tudor' atrocities which represented a 'serious blow at [the] communal life' of the working class.<sup>10</sup> Orwell's own idea of a perfect pub (as set out in a 1946 article entitled 'The Moon Under Water') reflected his idiosyncratically lower-upper-middle-class vision of England as a sort of lower-upper-working-class idyll.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Orwell understood the peculiarly fundamental role that the idea (whatever the reality) of 'the local' played in popular English culture and he was angered by the paternalistic social engineering which pub improvement attempted to achieve.

The motivation of the brewers involved in pub improvement was complicated. The fact that they were faced with collapsing beer sales, continuing temperance pressure and the real possibility of State purchase meant that brewers had to do something to reinvent their trade. As William Waters Butler put it, 'Carlisle has certainly roused in the trade the spirit of self-preservation if it has done nothing else'.<sup>12</sup> In addition to these pressures, brewers remained locked in conflict with licensing magistrates who were determined to pursue a 'fewer and better' policy, especially when granting licences for pubs on the new suburban estates. London County Council famously allowed for just one pub to be built on its Downham Estate, despite the fact that it contained homes for around 30,000 residents. The Downham Tavern, built by Barclay Perkins in 1929, would become one of the most enormous superpubs of the era. Brewers knew that they had a better chance of securing the potentially lucrative licence for such estates if they could convince the licensing authorities that their primary goal was the encouragement of sobriety rather than the sale of alcohol. Giant, improved pubs were expensive and their returns were by no means guaranteed, but they were seen by the brewers as providing a way of 'retaining trade which might otherwise be lost by the transference of population to a new district'.<sup>13</sup>

While it is tempting to dismiss pub improvement as a cynical attempt by the bigger brewers to secure their market position, it has more recently been suggested that their motivations were altogether more public-spirited. In a detailed study of the pub improvement movement, David Gutzke has argued that the improving brewers 'promoted pub reform as a tactic not to secure impressive profits, but to restore order, discipline, efficiency and fair competition to the marketplace'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Gutzke argues that the pub improvement movement was motivated primarily by the 'Progressive convictions' of the brewers.<sup>15</sup> While none of the key figures in the CCB or the pub improvement movement described themselves as 'Progressives'

(and the London Progressive Party – who had dominated the London County Council at the turn of the century – supported a policy of simple licence reduction),<sup>16</sup> ideas associated with American Progressivism, such as a belief in the importance of the physical environment in developing social progress, were echoed in the thinking of the pub improvers. Pub improvement was certainly more closely akin to progressivism than it was to either the religious conservatism of the CETS or the political absolutism of the Alliance.

Pub improvement was an idea developed initially by temperance reformers who sought to ‘civilise’ the pub by turning it into a more respectable, more middle-class institution. The champions of pub improvement within the CCB – people like Henry Carter – were temperance men with a pragmatic approach to social engineering and a willingness to accept that the pub played a crucial role in the cultural lives of the working class. The adoption of pub improvement by leading figures within the drinks trade reflected the extent to which the idea provided a vision of the trade on which moderates from both sides could agree: a vision in which the business of selling alcohol was secured, but in a manner which stripped that business of its seemingly intractable associations with both drunkenness and the distasteful social habits of the lumpenproletariat. It also opened the trade up to the expanding, and increasingly affluent, middle class while presenting that expansion as an exercise in social responsibility.

The pub improvement movement was not confined to the work of brewers; numerous charitable and philanthropic organisations sprang up in the 1920s and 1930s which attempted to contribute to the transformation of the pub from ‘an unclean place of furtive self-indulgence’ to a ‘centre of happy social life’.<sup>17</sup> One of these groups, the Committee for Verse and Prose Recitation (or ‘Poetry in Pubs’ as it soon became known), organised performances of Shakespeare and poetry readings in improved pubs, beginning with a performance of *Twelfth Night* in the Downham Tavern in June 1937. Their goal was to encourage ‘a wider appreciation of our language and literature in its higher forms’ and thereby pursue a self-declared ambition of bringing culture to the masses.<sup>18</sup> Like many of the brewers, Poetry in Pubs both looked forward to an age of mass cultural embourgeoisement and back to a mythic notion of the tavern as the centre of an authentic folk culture.

With the emergence of the pub improvement movement the drink question once again revealed itself to be a question about where and how people drank.<sup>19</sup> For the pub improvers, this question was to be addressed by training people to drink differently rather than through the coercion of draconian licensing policies. In the narrow sense this represented a conflict between two approaches to the drink question: between those

who argued for restriction to access and those who argued for access to improved sources.<sup>20</sup> In a wider sense, however, it was a continuation of the attempt to establish social order through the civilisation of manners. From this perspective, many of the long-standing divisions between temperance reformers were tactical rather than fundamental. All temperance reformers saw excessive drinking as a brake on the establishment of social order, and most saw the establishment of more rational forms of recreation as key to the 'civilisation' of lower-class culture. The difference between those whose stated goal was 'fewer and better' and those who placed their faith in counter-attractions only, was simply that one group understood that the pub was not going to disappear, while the other believed it could be made to wither away. The coalition of interest groups who backed pub improvement represented a significant victory for the pragmatists – or, put differently, those who understood that the establishment of cultural hegemony always involved a degree of give and take.

That victory, however, turned out to be partial. Reporting in 1931, a Royal Commission on Licensing noted a marked change in manners, going so far as to assert that 'drunkenness has gone out of fashion'.<sup>21</sup> However, whether this was due to gentrification, counter-attractions, licensing restrictions or the price of beer was unclear. The brewers involved in pub improvement successfully sustained the meaningful channels of communication between themselves and policy-makers that had been established under the CCB, and they went a long way towards establishing the perception that some brewers at least had the interests of wider society at heart. Prominent sceptics such as Lord Astor may have insisted the whole enterprise was 'eyewash', but in the opinion of the chairman of Watney, Combe & Reid, the principle had been 'triumphantly vindicated' by the press, politicians and the clergy.<sup>22</sup> Of course, the brewers also obtained many potentially lucrative licences to service the new housing estates, even if that came at a significant short-term cost. However, despite investing up to £99 million in total on pub improvement over the inter-war period,<sup>23</sup> the improved public house proved to be a white elephant. By 1937 the *Brewer's Journal* was decrying the absurdity of 'freak public-houses', such as the Downham Tavern, which had been 'imposed at the behest of people who had never entered a public-house as customers in their lives'.<sup>24</sup> The same year saw the Downham Tavern's owners, Barclay Perkins, apply to the authorities for permission to reintroduce a stand-up bar – that symbol of old-style unreconstructed boozing – into their flagship superpub. Orwell's condemnation of improved pubs as inaccessible sham-Tudor eyesores reflected a widespread public feeling that the paternalism of the pub improvers, well-meaning or otherwise, was little more than class snobbery.



## The pub and the people

As many commentators noted, the most significant flaw in the pub improvement movement was that it embodied a notion of what the pub could be which was conjured up in the minds of people who had very little idea of what the pub actually was. Of course, the brewers were intimately involved in the ownership, supply and, depending on the degree of autonomy allowed to tenant landlords, management of pubs. However, the boards and shareholder meetings of the big brewing companies, and the licensing benches who facilitated the improvement schemes, were simply not made up of the kind of people for whom the pub was the heart of their communal life.

Indeed, the alien nature of pub culture to sections of the middle class gave rise to a spate of quasi-anthropological investigations of pubs between the wars. In 1927, the social commentator Ernest Selley, who had written a pamphlet in support of nationalisation of the drink trade three years earlier, published a book-length investigation of pub life entitled *The English Public House As It Is*. Based on observations Selley made in pubs across the country, the book set out to counter the problem that most of what was written about pubs was produced by people who ‘obviously never use them, and, therefore, fail to understand the point of view of those who do’.<sup>25</sup> However, while Selley clearly saw himself as contradicting the widespread ‘rubbish written about what goes on inside public houses’, his descriptions, though based on actual observation, were filtered by a sometimes narrowly judgemental perspective.<sup>26</sup> A drinker at one improved pub who objected to the ‘continental system’ of waiter service is dismissed by Selley as ‘a member of what I once heard described as “The Flea and Sawdust School”’; one of the type which prefers the stuffy “coziness” of the dirty, ill-ventilated taproom to any of the “new fangled” ideas’.<sup>27</sup> Like countless Select Committee reports, Commissions of Inquiry and journalistic accounts, Selley’s drinkers were spoken on behalf of, described from the position of the ‘neutral’ observer, and defined by parameters not set by themselves. The one group, it seemed, who never got to state their view on the drink question was the actual people who did the drinking.

That default perspective was challenged when Mass-Observation published a study of pub life in 1943.<sup>28</sup> *The Pub and the People* was part of Mass-Observation’s larger ‘Worktown’ study, which involved volunteers observing and documenting the minutiae of everyday life in Bolton. The difference between Mass-Observation’s work and the work of people such as Ernest Selley was that while it remained primarily (though not exclusively) based on the observation of behaviour, subjective and largely



condescending commentary was replaced by the presentation of detail which was, in theory at least, left to speak for itself. *The Pub and the People* sought less to demean the 'coziness' of the taproom than to mine its complexities (not least by setting out in minute detail the subtle, but critical, differences between taproom, vault, lounge and bar). Women, Mass-Observation noted, were excluded from taprooms – but nevertheless made up 31 per cent of the pub-goers in 'Worktown'. Under-25s represented the lowest proportion of pub-goers, but were the biggest frequenters of milk bars. Pushing attention to detail to entirely new levels, they recorded that standing drinkers finished a gill of beer in an average of five minutes and thirty-four seconds, while seated drinkers took over thirteen minutes (odd as such a calculation appears, it did serve the purpose of neatly illustrating the impact of the environment on drinking behaviours).<sup>29</sup>

*The Pub and the People* sought to overturn established myths about pub life. Having meticulously ascertained how long drinkers took to finish their beers at different times of the evening, the authors concluded that extended opening hours would not lead to more drunkenness since: 'First, people do not go to pubs to get drunk. Second, their drinking is limited by their spending capacity. Thirdly, as our timings show, they could easily get drunk in the available hours if they wanted to do so'.<sup>30</sup> The fact that significant numbers of women drank was not presented as a measure of social decay, but as a reflection of the complexity of the social rules which governed drinking – rules which, nevertheless, imposed all sorts of taboos on where and what women could drink. The fact that the pub-goers went to pubs to drink beer rather than eat food was presented not as a mark of their incivility, but as a measure of the importance they attached to beer as both a social lubricant and a source of nutrition.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the study, the authors repeated their claim that the reasons for pub attendance were social, and that to understand the pub one had to strive to understand pub culture rather than obsess about levels of consumption, opening hours and public drunkenness. The 'basis of sound legislation,' they insisted 'must surely be the stabilization of what goes on *inside* the pub, not ... the minority that reel out from them blind-to-the-world and disorderly enough to attract a PC'; the reason so much legislation was unsound, however, was because it was usually drafted by 'persons who are automatically too high up the social scale to know much, if anything, about ordinary pubs'.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, however, Mass-Observation saw the greatest threat to the pub not in the cultural elitism of magistrates, but in the cultural narcosis of mass society: in the 'passive and individual' forms of leisure provided by the mass media. 'The pub,' the authors claimed:

stresses the fact that you are living among your fellow men, that the issues of life, whether faced or escaped, are not solitary but communal. The Church and the political party say the same thing, in a different way. The films and pools do not.<sup>33</sup>

The novel conclusion of Mass-Observation's study, then, was not that the pub needed improving, gentrifying or reinventing but that, if anything, in an age when popular culture was becoming increasingly commodified, individualised and passive, the traditional working-class pub needed to be saved.

### Beer and Britishness

It was precisely this sense that the pub was losing out to the 'drug-like pleasures of the cinema and the radio', that attracted George Orwell to Mass-Observation's study.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, reviewing *The Pub and the People* in 1943, Orwell also noted that it was 'a pity that this large and careful survey could not have had a short appendix indicating what effect the war has had on our drinking habits'.<sup>35</sup> The fact that it had been unable to cover the impact of war on pub culture was *The Pub and the People's* greatest weakness. The Second World War may not have given rise to the dramatic changes in drinking culture that took place between 1914 and 1918, but its impact was significant nonetheless. In economic terms, the most important effect was an enormous increase in taxation: between September 1939 and April 1943, the basic duty on a barrel of beer went up from 48s to 138s, a rise of almost 300 per cent. Because the duties imposed on beer increase according to strength, beer also tended to become much weaker over this period.

Despite this, however, consumption actually rose. Significantly, the government made no attempt to suggest that beer-drinking was unpatriotic or detrimental to the war effort. In what was a far cry from Lloyd George's 'Germany, Austria and Drink' comments twenty-six years earlier, in 1940 the Minister for Food, Lord Woolton, declared that 'it is the business of the government not only to maintain the life but the morale of the country. If we are to keep up anything like approaching normal life, beer should continue to be in supply'.<sup>36</sup> In the context of a war in which distinctively 'British' values were being corralled by the government as part of their internal propaganda effort, beer was too rich a signifier of those values to be subjected to official condemnation. In the cultural imaginary of Churchill's Britain it was the hearty fellowship of honest ale (albeit weak and overpriced), not the prim decency of temperance, which provided the soundest bulwark against both the cultural and military threat of the German war machine.

Many underlying demographic shifts were also accelerated by the Second World War, the most significant of which was the popularisation of the pub among young women. Mass-Observation had already observed that a significant number of pub goers in the late 1930s were female, however the majority of these were women aged forty and above.<sup>37</sup> In the early 1940s, however, there was a measurable shift in the age profile of women drinkers so that by the end of the war up to two-thirds of female pub-goers were under forty.<sup>38</sup> There were a number of reasons for this: the real increase in wages which many women experienced when moving into traditionally male-dominated occupations, the liberation from familial controls which came from entering the workplace, the disruption of other forms of leisure activity such as cinema-going, and the fact that courtship in pubs became increasingly acceptable as opportunities to engage in other leisure activities were curtailed.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the American saloon, the English pub had never been the site of an exclusive gender divide and the issue of women's rights had never overlapped with temperance to the degree that it did on the other side of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, many of the gender taboos surrounding public drinking, especially concerning young, single women, were undermined by the shake-up of gender roles enforced by wartime conditions.

Pub-going among young men also increased in the early 1940s, so much so that it led to something of a revival of temperance campaigning. In June 1943 the British Temperance League commissioned a report on juvenile drinking – ill-advisedly, perhaps – from Mass-Observation who concluded, much to the annoyance of their patrons, that such concerns were ‘grossly exaggerated’.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, in December Henry Carter was moved to write to *The Times* reminding its readers of the success of the CCB in the previous war, and calling for the reintroduction of anti-treating orders to curb drunkenness among the young.<sup>41</sup>

The fact was, however, that while beer consumption had increased among men and women, the political sting had been drawn from the drink question by the experiences of the preceding quarter century. The drop in consumption during the course of the First World War had been enormous, and levels had never recovered since. The palpable threat posed by public drunkenness had, therefore, receded leaving temperance campaigners with little to point to but their own moral rectitude. The establishment of the CCB had led to a rapprochement between government and the brewing industry which was based, for the first time, on open cooperation rather than either mutual suspicion or surreptitious influence. The Licensing Act of 1921 had also provided a compromise in which many of the demands of the more moderate temperance campaigners had been met, especially regarding opening hours. The pub improvement movement

had gone some way towards neutralising the cultural status of the pub by suggesting that its flaws were redeemable rather than fatal. Furthermore, the ungainly collapse of prohibition in America had dealt a mortal blow to the already weakened prohibitionist campaign in Britain.

The wartime mobilisation of 'Britishness' as an identity grounded in moderation, fellowship and good-humoured stoicism compounded the weakening of the traditional temperance movement by positioning beer and the pub as symbols of what was best, not worst, about British culture. In contrast to America, where the saloon and the brewing industry were successfully depicted as alien by a temperance campaign which came to rely increasingly on nativist rhetoric, in England beer's ambient association with national identity proved unshakable. It was this 'Beer Street' version of what beer-drinking meant – a version in which beer-drinking was presented as rational, social and civilised – which was shared by pub-improving brewers, social commentators like George Orwell, and, ultimately, the policy-makers of a wartime administration who needed to defend all the unifying national myths they could. Beer had always been 'the people's' drink, and how attitudes to beer changed said as much about the shifting role of the idea of 'the people' on the grand political scale as it did about anything else.

### Market forces

For all that the Second World War helped see off the residual threat of the traditional temperance movement, it also put the brewers in a vulnerable position. High taxes and weak beers may have been accepted as a justifiable imposition while the war continued, but once hostilities were over consumers were in a position to seek out alternatives. Mass-Observation had already noted that young people were more attracted to milk bars than old-fashioned pubs, and young people began to revert back to such establishments soon after war ended.<sup>42</sup> Add to this the increasing popularity of the cinema, the rise of television and the widespread availability of an array of soft drinks whose cultural connotations made them far more glamorous to young consumers than beer, and you had a recipe for real concern within the drinks industry.

Even before the war brewers had begun to respond to these cultural shifts by investing heavily in advertising. In the late 1920s, Guinness launched their 'Guinness for Strength' and 'Guinness is Good for You' adverts: a campaign which managed not only to convince one generation of drinkers that beer made from overheated malt somehow acquired mysterious health-giving properties, it managed to establish that idea with such success that it remains a standard feature of drinking lore today. By

1931, the Royal Commission on Licensing estimated that at least £2 million was being spent annually on alcohol advertising.<sup>43</sup> This figure was further boosted by a controversial advertising campaign launched in 1933 after the chairman of the Brewer's Society, Sir Edgar Sanders, called for an advertising campaign to 'get the beer-drinking habit instilled into thousands, almost millions, of young men who do not at present know the taste of beer'.<sup>44</sup> Sanders had been vocal in his condemnation of increased beer duties, warning in the same year that increased costs were fostering 'sullen resentment' among working-class consumers.<sup>45</sup> However, his call for a nationwide advertising campaign raised the hackles of both temperance campaigners and newspaper editors who resented Sanders's suggestion that any advertising expenditure should be contingent upon editorial support from the papers in which adverts were placed. Samuel Story, president of the Newspaper Society, condemned Sanders's speech as an 'impudent threat' to the neutrality of the press, and emphatically denied that 'the editorial policy of the Press of this country can be dictated or influenced by the purchase of advertising space by any trade interest'.<sup>46</sup>

The subsequent 'Beer is Best' campaign followed Guinness in attempting to reinforce the notion that beer was a health drink.<sup>47</sup> Of course, this dovetailed neatly with the pub improvers' attempt to reposition the pub as a 'healthy' social space, and the campaign was strongly backed by Sydney Nevile. Whitbread also launched a campaign featuring endorsements from celebrities such as Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and images of Whitbread beer being drunk in an array of glamorous settings. Where 'Beer is Best' harked back to deeply held cultural beliefs around beer, Whitbread were innovative in trying to reposition their brand as unashamedly upper-class.

### Post-war planning

Beer sales did increase in the years immediately following the 'Beer is best' campaign, but to nothing like the levels seen before the First World War. Despite the continued increase in consumption during the Second World War, the austere financial climate of the immediate post-war years only exacerbated the problems which had faced the drink industry in the 1930s. By the 1940s the combination of high taxation, low disposable incomes and proliferating counter-attractions was achieving outcomes that a century of temperance campaigning had signally failed to achieve. Beer was expensive, weak and often low-quality; the pub, by extension, was losing custom. The post-war Labour administration, meanwhile, sought piecemeal extensions to the State management of licensing which threatened to further undermine attempts by the brewers to re-establish the pub as the centre of social life. A Planning Act passed in 1945 empowered

local planning committees in areas of extensive war damage to determine the licence requirements in their areas. Four years later, the Labour Government passed a Licensing Act which extended State management to all new towns under the auspices of locally-based licensing advisory committees. Had it been implemented, this would surely have represented the most significant extension of State control over the drinks trade since the establishment of the CCB, and it would have provided a platform from which supporters of complete State purchase could have forcefully argued their case. As it was, the legislation was repealed by the Conservatives before it could be acted upon. Nevertheless, the Licensed Premises in the New Towns Act, passed by Churchill's Tory administration in 1952, still brought in licensing committees for new towns which were empowered to identify what licensing needs were in their areas, and what types of licences would be most appropriate.

In 1953 a major Licensing Act further shored up the power of local authorities to put limits on the number of new licences in their jurisdiction by demanding that licences only be granted to buildings which were 'structurally adapted to the class of licence required'. Under these terms, only buildings with two rooms for public accommodation could be considered for an on-licence, and structural renovation could be imposed as a condition for licence renewal. In effect, this meant that licensing authorities could demand expensive renovation work to be carried out on pubs, with the threat of closure if the owner was unwilling, or unable, to stump up the necessary outlay.

By the mid-1950s, then, the drinks trade had seen off the organised temperance movement, and it had witnessed the fragmentation of the great Victorian drink question into a series of loosely connected debates over planning, mental health, economic efficiency, advertising and national morale.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, it remained mired in some familiar problems. On the one hand, the licensing system still placed significant control in the hands of local authorities, many of whom jealously protected their right to manage the number of drink outlets according to what they saw as the level of local need. On the other hand, the demand for drink remained sensitive to fluctuations in both production costs and levels of disposable income. Furthermore, every new leisure activity provided a counter-attraction which posed a threat to the traditional role of the pub as the centre of social life outside the workplace.

### Consolidation

The response from the drinks industry came in the form of two related developments: the promotion of new drinks, especially lager; and the

consolidation of the brewing and retail industry itself. The technological developments which transformed the retail end of the market were largely driven by the realisation that customers were being turned off by the unpredictable quality of traditional beers, a problem exacerbated by the fact those beers were now considerably more expensive than they had been. One response to this problem was the development of keg beers, which brewers began to produce in significant quantities from the mid-1950s onwards. However, while kegging had a significant impact (and would lead to the formation of the Campaign for Real Ale in 1971), the more seismic long-term change was the belated adoption of lager production by British brewers.

Imported lager had been available in bottles in Britain since the early years of the century, and the first lager brewery had been established in Wrexham, North Wales, in 1882. Throughout the early twentieth century, a small but significant number of British brewers attempted to produce lager on a profitable scale, despite the financial risks involved in buying the expensive refrigeration needed to successfully carry out the 'top' fermentation that distinguishes lager from other beers. While brewers saw the long-term market potential for a beer that was both attractive-looking and consistent, few had the will to take the economic gamble required to start up a large-scale lager concern.<sup>49</sup> In 1953, however, a deal between the Hope and Anchor brewery in Sheffield and the Canadian businessman Eddie Taylor saw the production of a new lager – Black Label – backed by the financial clout of the Canadian brewing giant Carling. Carling Black Label initially struggled to achieve a market share, not least because the tied-house system meant that it was hamstrung by Hope and Anchor's limited number of national outlets.<sup>50</sup> Taylor's solution to this problem would help set in motion a revolution not only in lager consumption, but in the shape of the drinks industry itself.

Taylor was a formidable operator.<sup>51</sup> Faced with the problem of tied houses, he responded by buying up a series of small brewers and, in 1959, established Northern Breweries. Within a year Northern Breweries had bought stakes in over twenty rival brewers, taken over six and, with the acquisition of Ulster Breweries, become United Breweries. Taylor's spectacular assault on the British brewing establishment coincided with an unexpectedly high valuation placed on Watney's during a takeover bid in 1959. It transpired that the bid was based on a valuation of the capital value of property that Watney's owned.<sup>52</sup> Although the bid fell through, potential buyers realised that many brewers were worth far more than their market listing suggested, because their properties had been consistently undervalued. Once again, the tied-house system blurred the line between brewers as commodity-producers and brewers as property-owners and



provided the economic framework for a transformation of the industry.

Over the next three years the big brewers scrambled to both buy up smaller concerns, and to forge mergers which would protect them from their more voracious rivals (especially Taylor's ever-expanding empire). The mergers were also driven by a realisation that the brewing industry needed to modernise to survive. That meant pursuing the kind of efficiencies that could only arise out of conglomeration. Economies of scale in the production of beer, combined with the consolidation of distribution and retail networks required the merger of small and medium-sized breweries into enormous concerns, capable of competing on a national level.

The change was dramatic. In 1940, the ten leading brewers had produced 40 per cent of the beer consumed in Britain; by 1961 just eight brewers were producing 60 per cent of beer.<sup>53</sup> Part of this process involved a turn towards lager production on the part of many of the major brewers. By 1972, keg bitter and lager dominated beer sales, and the drinks trade as a whole was dominated by just six companies producing 82 per cent of beer for the domestic market.<sup>54</sup>

### Easing restrictions

The consolidation of the brewing industry, and the development of new drinks, coincided with the decline of post-war austerity and the emergence of a new and affluent generation of consumers. It also coincided with a diminution of public concerns over drinking – something clearly reflected in the legislation. The Licensing Act of 1961 is notable for its focus on the relaxation of restrictions on access to drink: weekday opening was extended to 11p.m. in London and 10.30p.m. elsewhere, and Sunday closing put back from 10.00p.m. to 10.30p.m. At the same time, off-licence opening hours were extended so that, for the first time, off-licences could be opened throughout the day. In effect, this meant that the new supermarkets could sell alcohol as a standard commodity. Long opening hours for dancing clubs were extended from London to the rest of the country, new licences relaxing restrictions on the sale of alcohol in restaurants and hotels were introduced, and under-fourteens were permitted in bars where food was served. The 1961 Act also relaxed the rules so that pubs could play radio, television or recorded music without applying for a special licence, and for the first time billiards and music were allowed in pubs on a Sunday.

In 1961, for the first time in many years, licensing legislation was used to actively liberalise access to alcohol. This represented an important rejection of temperance ideology because it was legislation designed around the needs of the moderate drinker, rather than targeted towards

the control of problem drinking. This is an important shift. Even when previous licensing legislation had veered towards liberalising the trade, it had always done so in terms which paid lip-service to temperance-led calls for greater control. The 1961 Act marked a clear change in tone, one further entrenched when a 1964 Licensing Act was passed, consolidating the Acts of 1953 and 1961. Under the 1964 Act (which provided the legislative framework for licensing until the system was overhauled in 2003) the new opening hours were retained, although Sunday closing was brought back to 10p.m. Exemption orders and special certificates were introduced, allowing for premises to apply for licence extensions for special occasions (something that would eventually contribute to the end of fixed opening hours altogether). The Carlisle system was retained, but its days were numbered. This last remnant of State control disappeared when the management of the drinks trade in Carlisle was returned to private hands by an Act of Parliament passed in 1971.

Under these conditions the alcohol industry fared well and sales began to increase considerably. One of the most significant developments was the expansion of the wine market. In 1950, around 14 million gallons of wine were being consumed in the United Kingdom annually. By 1960, this had doubled to 28 million gallons, and by 1970 it was over 51 million gallons.<sup>55</sup> In a sense, this increase represents the democratisation of a once exclusive market: it shows the fruition of Gladstone's vision of an expanded wine trade driven by the sale of wine in off-licences and grocery stores. Wine sales, as well as canned lager sales, were boosted enormously by the development of supermarkets – something which has driven up overall alcohol sales ever since. The popularisation of wine also represented the adoption of those 'continental' patterns of alcohol consumption so beloved of the moderate wing of the old temperance movement. Certainly, the increase in wine consumption was driven, in part, by the expansion of opportunities for foreign travel and the desire among British drinkers to adopt seemingly sophisticated modes of consumption. Wine continued to signify cultural capital, but in an age of expanding affluence and aspiration (as well as the expanding power of supermarkets and off-licence chains) those with the capacity and the desire to adopt wine-drinking increased massively.

The 1960s, of course, also saw the growth of other forms of drug consumption, and much of the energy of temperance was harnessed to the campaign to bring drugs other than alcohol under legislative control. Drugs legislation was passed in 1964, 1966 and 1967, all of which was consolidated in the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. Major reports into aspects of drug legislation were carried out by the Brain Committee in 1965 and the Wootton Committee in 1968. This flurry of activity reflected the

development of a far more sophisticated market for intoxicants in which different states of mind became, for an increasing number of people, part of their smorgasbord of consumer choices. As we shall see later, it has been argued that the development of an advanced consumer market in intoxicants has had a profound impact on the alcohol market in recent years.<sup>56</sup> Drug use aside, the proliferation of lager, wine, exotic mixers and novel spirits reflected an increasingly diversified consumer culture – one which produced a demand to explore taste, identity and even consciousness in a market which was increasingly effective at providing just the array of commodities with which to service such desires.

By the mid-1970s, alcohol consumption had increased to levels unheard of since the outbreak of the First World War. Per capita consumption virtually doubled between 1950 and 1975 and the range of drinks being consumed had increased. Lager, which represented just 1 per cent of the beer market in 1961, represented 20 per cent of it by 1975.<sup>57</sup> In the same period spirit consumption had more than doubled and wine consumption more than trebled; the adult population, over the same period, had increased by less than 8 per cent.<sup>58</sup> Increased levels of disposable income, an upsurge in sales through supermarkets and off-licences, and a more efficient drinks industry selling more reliable and diverse products all contributed to a rise in consumption across the board. People were still drinking less than their Victorian forebears: the 1970s were more sober than the 1870s. Nevertheless, the marked rise in consumption over this period helped trigger a resurgence in debates on problematic drinking within the medical community and the reappearance of calls for government to use its power to actively reduce the amount people drank.

## Notes

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- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-1.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 218.
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