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A monstrous plant: alcohol and the Reformation

Let me set down this for my general proposition, that all drunkards are beasts.
(George Gascoigne)

Help to blast the vines that they may bear no more grapes, and sour the wines in the cellars of merchant's storehouses, that our countrymen may not piss out all their wit and thrift against the walls. (Thomas Nashe)

In 1628, a writer called Richard Rawlidge published a pamphlet with the eye-catching title *A Monster Late Found Out and Discovered*. That monster was drunkenness. According to Rawlidge, England was suffering from an explosion of social disorder caused by a dramatic rise in the number of alehouses springing up across the country. This, he insisted, had caused a disastrous breakdown in public morality. 'Whereas,' he observed, 'there are within the City's liberties but an hundred twenty two churches for the service and worship of God: there are I dare say above thirty hundred ale-houses, tipling-houses, tobacco-shops &c. in London and the skirts thereof, wherein the devil is daily served and honoured'.¹

Rawlidge's monster was, in truth, not so 'late found out'. In the previous twenty-five years no fewer than six Acts of Parliament had been passed, and two Royal Proclamations published, targeting alehouses and drunkenness. The licensing of alcohol retail was less than a century old, however, and much of the legislation which had been passed in Rawlidge's lifetime was designed to shore up the power of local magistrates who had been tasked with using their licensing powers to control excessive drinking. Underpinning all this was a wider religious attack on drunkenness and the places where drinking took place. The legislative control of alehouses – initiated by a Licensing Act of 1552 – had been accompanied by a rise in the condemnation of drunkenness from the pulpit and in print. In rough historical terms the development of a public discourse on drink, in which drink was identified as a specific social 'problem' in both literature and legislation, accompanied the spread of the Reformation. This is not to say that there was a direct causal link between the rise of Protestantism

and the earliest appearance of the drink question, but it is to say that the social, economic, political, technological and religious transformations that both drove and were driven by the Reformation also created the conditions in which drink became political.

Drunkenness in early modern England

While it would be an oversimplification to draw a neat dividing line between pre- and post-Reformation drinking culture in England, there is no doubt that the sixteenth century saw dramatic changes in the way alcohol was both produced and consumed. In 1500 there were only the most rudimentary of licensing laws. An Assize of Bread and Ale, enacted in 1266, had pegged the price of ale to the price of bread, but it was a law that was only applied in the most ad hoc way.² Since 1393, alehouses had been required to display a stake in front of their doors – a practice which eventually led to the development of the pub signboard. In 1494 legislation targeting the itinerant poor gave local Justices the power to ‘reject the common selling of ale’ where appropriate, but this wasn’t the same as requiring a licence to sell ale in the first place.

In the sixteenth century beer made with hops was still a novelty. Instead people drank unhopped ale, which was thicker, weaker, sweeter and far less stable than hopped beer. The ale people drank was mostly brewed domestically and by women. Brewing ale was a poor person’s profession – often the last-ditch resort of the desperately needy. There were no big brewers and alehouses were as rudimentary as the laws which governed them: often simply a part of someone’s home temporarily opened up for as long as there was a brew for which people were willing to pay. Brewing was seasonal and unpredictable, though reasonably profitable when drinks were actually being sold, and the market for beer was steadily increasing as water sources became increasingly less and less reliable thanks to population expansion and the rise of polluting industries such as tanning.

In the late middle ages, ale also contributed to a rudimentary welfare system. Communal ‘ales’ – local fund-raising events based around a specially-brewed consignment of ale – were one of the key sources of revenue for both parish churches and secular good causes.³ ‘Bride-ales’ for newly-weds, ‘bid-ales’ for needy individuals, and the notorious ‘scot-ales’ (which became a form of semi-official extortion imposed by corrupt feudal lords) involved members of the local community contributing to a fund which would finance the preparation of a special ale brewed for the occasion, the profits would then be passed on to the person for whom the ale was held. Not only were ‘ales’ of this kind an effective way of raising money, they also provided ‘a system of circulating aid in which economic activity,

neighbourly assistance and festivity were subtly blended'.⁴

The Catholic Church initially frowned on any such activities, often forbidding priests from any kind of involvement whether official or otherwise. However, by the mid-fifteenth century 'church-ales', set up to raise funds for the local parish, had become a common, albeit irregular, feature of community life in many parts of Britain.⁵ Church-ales provided a much-needed means of topping up parish finances, but they also provided a useful source of poor-relief. The seventeenth-century antiquarian John Aubrey recalled being told that 'there were no rates for the poor in my grand-father's day; but for Kington St Michael (no small parish) the church-ale at Whitsuntide did the business'.⁶

From the late 1520s links between the Church and ale production became the object of increasing criticism. In 1529 Henry VIII passed legislation targeting the 'plurality of livings' among the clergy, which specifically barred 'spiritual persons' from keeping 'any Manner of Brew-house' other than to produce ale for their own use, a measure which probably contributed to the rise of alehouses by forcing brewer monks to seek new employment.⁷ Church-ales also fell foul of wider reforms of local government which saw fixed taxes, such as 'pew-rents', replace more irregular forms of income generation.⁸ More broadly, church-ales became the victim of a concerted effort by the Church of England to distance itself from the traditions of its Catholic predecessor. From 1576 checks on whether church wardens had 'suffered any plays, feasts, banquets, church-ales, drinkings or any other profane usages' of their churches began to appear in the visitation articles drawn up by bishops.⁹ Nine episcopates included such clauses in their visitation articles between 1571 and 1600, although their application remained sporadic.¹⁰

Early Puritan reformers in particular found something distinctly unsavoury in local churches relying heavily on the periodic facilitation of mass drunkenness to fund their expensive infrastructure and the upkeep of their clergy. In his splenetic invective against vice, *The Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), Philip Stubbes castigated church-ales, complaining that:

when the *Nippitatum*, this Huf-cap (as they call it) and the *Nectar* of life, is set abroad, well is he that can get the soonest to it, and spend most at it, for he that sits closest to it, and spends the most at it, he is counted the godliest man of all the rest ... In this kind of practise, they continue six weeks, a quarter of a year, yea half a year together, swilling and gulling, night and day, till they be as drunk as apes, and as blockish as beasts.¹¹

However exaggerated Stubbes's account may be (and he certainly did have a penchant for rhetorical excess) his argument that drunkenness in the service of God was both immoral and absurd was one that found increasing resonance in Protestant England. Stubbes objected that church-

ales ‘build this house of lime and stone with the desolation, and utter overthrow of his spiritual house’.¹² Even writers who attempted to defend church-ales were forced to acknowledge that ‘drunkenness, gluttony, swearing, lasciviousness’ were not unusual features of such events.¹³ By the late sixteenth century, however, church-ales were in a state of terminal decline. Four years after Stubbes’s broadside, William Harrison claimed that ‘church-ales, help-ales, and soul-ales, called also dirge-ales, with the heathenish rioting at bride-ales, are well diminished and laid aside’.¹⁴

Drink and popular festivity

At the broadest cultural level, the decline of church-ales was one feature of a much wider attack on the festive and ritual culture of medieval Europe. The riotous pre-Lenten carnivals that culminated in Mardi Gras were more a feature of popular culture in mainland Europe than in Britain. Nevertheless, the fundamental elements of carnival – masquerade, the inversion of conventional authority, satire, sexual freedom and considerable drunkenness – were central to festive culture, including church-ales and religious feasts, in medieval England.¹⁵ William Harrison described ‘our maltbugs’ at fairs getting drunk on ‘huffecap, the mad dog, father whore-son, angels food, dragons milk, go by the wall, stride wide, and lift leg’ until they ‘lie still again and be not able to wag’.¹⁶ Drunkenness fuelled the spirit of temporary disorder and communal freedom (tinged with the palpable threat of violence) that defined carnival periods.

The toleration of carnival excess was always conditional, however, and the drunkenness of popular festivities was one of the common reasons given for their suppression. In 1448 a law passed by Henry VI banning fairs and markets on traditional feast days and Sundays cited ‘drunkenness and strifes’ as a cause of ‘abominable injuries and offences done to almighty God’. Responding to sustained attacks on this aspect of its culture, in 1563 the Council of Trent issued a formal warning to Catholics against allowing religious festivals to be ‘perverted into revelling and drunkenness’. Protestant radicals, however, insisted that the problem was intractable. They maintained that popular fairs and church-ales were nothing more than excuses for ‘bullbeating, bowling, drunkenness, dancing and such like’.¹⁷

There has been much debate over the ambivalent role of festive excess in early modern culture.¹⁸ It has been argued that while festive periods often involved outrageous displays of social inversion (the establishment of ‘lords of misrule’, parodies of the Catholic mass, etc.), carnival was always ‘a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony’.¹⁹ Others have gone further, insisting that the ‘supreme ruse of power

is to allow itself to be contested *ritually* in order to consolidate itself more effectively', and that popular festivities simply reaffirmed social power by creating periodic spectacles of illusory freedom.²⁰ We shall see that among nineteenth-century temperance campaigners drink was commonly depicted as a technique by which oppressed peoples were kept in their place by allowing periodic – or even constant – drunkenness to provide a distraction from their actual conditions. Nevertheless, the traditional notion that periodic excess could provide an acceptable, and ecclesiastically sanctioned, safety-valve for otherwise pent-up emotions ran absolutely counter to that Protestant world-view which saw life as a disciplined project of rational endeavour. The post-Reformation suppression of popular festivities, including church-ales, was part and parcel of this. However, this approach risked politicising carnival excess: as Joseph Gusfield has argued, the repression of carnival 'gave to drunkenness and festival behaviour an added feature of social protest that made the emergence of rowdy behaviour even more fearful to those who sought to control it'.²¹ The dialectic between the suppression and celebration of the transgressive behaviours associated with drunkenness would become something which characterised the politics of alcohol throughout the modern period.

The development of the alehouse

The attacks on drunkenness penned by the likes of Philip Stubbes were motivated by a religious desire to redefine Englishness as part of a wider moral reformation. For Stubbes, drunkenness was a feature of an old, corrupt England: an England of not only licentious fairs but also sordid drinking dens. Every city, town and village, Stubbes complained, 'hath abundance of alehouses, taverns and inns, which are so fraughted with malt-worms, night & day that you would wonder to se them ... swilling, gulling, & carousing from one to another, til never a one can speak a ready word'.²² Indeed, from the earliest period of the Reformation alehouses were identified as a particularly pressing problem, for both moral and political reasons. When Coventry magistrates complained in 1544 that 'a great part of the inhabitants of this city be now become brewers and tipplers', they were voicing a common concern.²³ Drunkenness was targeted partly for wider religious and moral reasons, but also because the number of drinking places had increased substantially over the course of the early sixteenth century.

Economic and demographic factors drove this expansion. Both Keith Wrightson and Peter Clark have argued that economic uncertainty and periodic unemployment contributed significantly to the rise of the alehouse as a social institution for two reasons: firstly, more people took to

selling ale as a way of keeping the wolf from the door, and secondly, more people had time on their hands which was as well spent in an alehouse as anywhere else. Furthermore, periods of low employment led to an increase in the number of itinerant workers forced to look for work outside their home town or village. For such people alehouses provided both rudimentary lodgings and a place where they could put their ear to the ground and find out what work might be on offer locally.²⁴

The other key factor in the rise of the alehouse was hops. It was the addition of hops that, broadly speaking, distinguished 'beer' from unhopped 'ale'. Hopped beer was more stable than ale, which made it possible for brewers to produce more and for sellers to store it for longer. Hops had been occasionally used in brewing for centuries; however, its popularisation followed the arrival of Flemish weavers (and their radical brewing techniques) in Britain around 1400. Their hopped beer had a swift impact, such that in 1436 Henry VI was forced to issue a Proclamation to protect Flemish beer producers from the attacks they were suffering at the hands of disgruntled ale brewers.²⁵ In 1441 an Assize of Beer was introduced to standardise beer prices and bring them into line with ale. Hops started to be grown commercially in England from around 1520. The introduction of hops was the pivotal moment in the modernisation of brewing: what had once been seasonal, local and domestic was set to become mass produced and highly profitable. By 1587 William Harrison was describing unhopped ale as 'sometime our only, but now taken with many for old and sickmen's drink'.²⁶

The rise in the number of alehouses coupled with an expanded capacity for the production of stronger beer (another effect of hops) led to concerns over increased levels of public drunkenness. However, drinking places were also caught up in a wider cultural quarrel over both the proper uses of leisure and the politics of social space. In many ways, sixteenth-century concerns over drinking were one aspect of a bigger anxiety about idleness. While wage labour expanded, the range of commodities remained low. With few commodities to spend money on, and almost no scope for rising up the social scale, there was little incentive for the poor to accumulate wealth. Therefore, there was a strong incentive to work just long enough to earn sufficient money to spend on beer: a commodity that was both pleasurable and readily available. To the social elites of Tudor England, increased numbers of alehouses meant increased opportunities for the lower classes to congregate, drink and spend their time and money in idleness.²⁷

Attacks on drinking and alehouses were driven by both religious convictions and concerns over social breakdown.²⁸ However, because there was no way of controlling alehouses there was no way that the State

could put a limit on their expansion. It was this inability to manage the supply-side of beer that led to the introduction of the first Licensing Act in 1552. This Act established the principle of licensing for the first time: it stated that anyone wanting to maintain an alehouse had to obtain a licence to do so from two local Justices and had to give evidence of their good character. Prior to 1552, anyone could open their house up to sell ale, although since 1494 Justices had been given the power to close such establishments down where necessary. In its preamble, the purpose of the 1552 Act was made clear: to counter the 'intolerable hurts and troubles to the commonwealth of this realm' which 'daily grow and increase through such abuses and disorders as are had and used in common alehouses'.

Two things were happening here: the number of alehouses was indeed increasing, but so too was the political anxiety over the risks to social order posed by public drinking. Vesting power in local magistrates provided a means by which the number of alehouses could be controlled and the activities that took place inside alehouses could be regulated. It also reaffirmed the power of local elites by locking them into a national system of control over an institution which formed the hub of lower-class social activity. It was a way of reinforcing politically unifying 'points of contact' between central and local government while identifying an internal threat to national stability which legitimated the introduction of increased controls on the everyday cultural practices of the poor.²⁹

While the term 'alehouse' sounds like a rather misty umbrella term for old-fashioned drinking dens, it referred at the time to a very specific institution. Drinking places were divided by culture and practice into three types: alehouses, which generally just sold ale; inns, which were defined by the fact that they provided lodging, food and drink to travellers; and taverns which, in theory at least, just sold wine. The legal distinction between alehouses and other drinking places was not only established by the 1552 Act, it was reinforced by an Act passed one year later, in 1553, ostensibly designed to 'avoid the excessive Price of Wine'. In reality, this Act took an already fairly exclusive establishment – the wine tavern – and enforced its exclusivity by statute. The Act set strict limits on the number of taverns which were to be allowed in each city: forty in London, four in Norwich, six in Bristol and so forth. It also set up a system of licensing for taverns in which tavern keepers, rather than applying for a licence from two local Justices, needed to be 'nominated, appointed and assigned by the head officers and the most part of the common council, aldermen, burgesses, jurats or commonality'. A much higher hurdle, then – and one designed to ensure that only the much better sort opened and ran wine-drinking establishments.

Clearly the aim of this was to formalise an already existing social hi-

erarchy of both drinks and drinking places, and to prevent taverns being dragged down the social scale by springing up willy-nilly under the charge of dubious landlords. Even so, the fact that there were around fifty alehouses for every tavern in the late 1500s meant that for many, alehouses remained the only accessible place where drinking in company could take place.³⁰ However, there was clearly a desire among some sections of society to isolate the alehouse and to bring it under social control. The success of such legislative interventions was patchy, to say the least. A 1590 Privy Council report noted that alehouses were becoming ‘innumerable’ and that ‘the law for keeping them in order [was] unexecuted’ – a complaint that would become a recurring motif in the public discussion of licensing over the centuries.³¹ Nevertheless, the result of these social, cultural and economic shifts was that from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards alehouses became increasingly identified with the idle poor, social disorder, political dissent and outright drunkenness.

A monstrous plant

Fairs and alehouses were recognised as traditional features of English cultural life. The condemnation of them tended to arise either from the perception that their proliferation had grown out of hand, or that the Reformation provided an opportunity for all such sordid conventions to be swept away on a tide of moral regeneration. However, a slightly different strand of thinking began to appear in the same period; one which identified drunkenness as a peculiarly modern, and possibly foreign, blight on English society. It was not a dominant theme in the public literature on drinking, but it did reflect the underlying way in which concerns over drunkenness were tied up with concerns over Englishness itself.

In 1576, the English writer and adventurer George Gascoigne published an essay entitled *A Delicate Diet for Dainty-mouthed Drunkards*. In it, he described drunkenness as a ‘monstrous plant, lately crept into the pleasant orchards of England’.³² Its increase, he claimed, reflected a peculiarly English attitude to foreign fashions; one in which continental vices and foibles were adopted in such an exaggerated way as to render them grotesque and absurd. Of the Spanish codpiece, Gascoigne wrote, ‘we make an English football’, of German drinking habits ‘we do make banquets and merriments’ by which ‘we surpass them very far’.³³ For Gascoigne, the Germans were ‘the continual wardens of the drunkards’ fraternity and corporation’, but it was a role that the English appeared keen to usurp.³⁴

Gascoigne’s pamphlet illustrates the extent to which concerns over drinking are often overlaid with concerns over national identity. He was, of course, writing at the height of the Elizabethan era of nation-building in

the political, military and cultural spheres, and he was not alone in seeing something worrisome in English attitudes to alcohol. Fifteen years later, the popular writer Thomas Nashe observed that excess in drink seemed to have become embedded in English everyday culture, complaining that ‘superfluity in drink [is] a sin, that ever since we have mixed our selves with the low-countries, is counted honourable: but before we knew their lingering wars, was held in that highest degree of hatred that might be’.³⁵ Whatever their views on the morality of individual drinkers, and whoever they blamed for introducing it to England, what both these writers shared was the sense that a culture of excessive drinking presented a tangible social problem which threatened to undermine the nation-building project itself.

Gascoigne and Nashe were both also interested in the rituals of drinking. For both writers, the fundamental problem was not simple excess but the patterns of drinking that seemed to have become established in popular culture. They would be two of the first writers to suggest that the drinking of healths (the ritual of toasting which led to what, in modern parlance, we might call ‘heavy episodic drinking’), was the real question that needed to be addressed. Whoever invented it – Danes, Germans or Lowlanders – the problem for both Nashe and Gascoigne seemed to be that the English had adopted it with gusto. Whereas for Stubbes *place* was the fundamental problem (communal drinking dens, by definition, produce drunkenness and immoral behaviour), for Gascoigne and Nashe *pattern* was the primary concern (rituals of drink which encouraged heavy consumption led to drunkenness and disorder). As we shall see, these two issues – place and pattern – would remain two of the fundamental subjects in the debate on drink over the following four hundred years.

An odious sin

In early Stuart England, place remained the focus of legislative intervention – of which there was an enormous amount. The spark for a renewed assault on alehouses was the accession of James VI of Scotland to the throne of England. Within a year of his coronation, in 1604, James I passed an Act ‘to restrain the inordinate haunting and tipling in inns, alehouses and other victualling houses’. This Act asserted that ‘the ancient, true and principle use of inns, alehouses and victualling-houses was for the receipt, relief and lodging of wayfaring people travelling from place to place’. This was not strictly true. Certainly inns had always been conceived of as resting places for travellers, and the ancient Roman *tabernae* had fulfilled a similar function. Alehouses, by contrast, had never really served this function in any more than the loosest sense. Under the 1604

Act, however, the dubious claim that alehouses existed for lodging rather than for the ‘entertainment and harbouring of lewd and idle people’ was used to bring in strict rules prohibiting landlords from allowing customers to ‘tipple’ on their premises. What this meant in practice was that the responsibility to ensure that no one drank for purposes other than necessary refreshment (labourers, for example, were permitted to drink on their lunch breaks) fell on individual landlords. This is an important development: the idea that the people serving drinks should be legally responsible for not allowing customers to get drunk remains a contentious but central element of licensing law today (it proved unenforceable in the early 1600s, a state of affairs that arguably has changed little since). At the same time, fines for serving short measures were included in the legislation – something which conveyed the impression that landlords were stingy as well as immoral.

In practice, the law was largely ignored. The idea that either central government or the local magistrates could keep tabs on exactly how long any one of the 20,000–30,000 alehouse-keepers in the country permitted their customers to hang around was never realistic. It would not be the last example of drink legislation tripping up on the problem of implementation. Indeed, just two years later a further Act was passed to tackle the ‘loathsome and odious sin of drunkenness’ which had ‘of late grown in common use within this realm’. This time drinkers themselves were made subject to the law. A fine of five shillings for drunkenness was introduced, as were fines for anyone tipping (i.e. drinking for more than an hour or so) in their home town. While serving people to the point of drunkenness was outlawed in 1604, drunkenness itself became subject to statutory legislation in 1606.

The 1606 Act was no more effective than its predecessor. Three years later a new Act for the ‘reformation of alehouse-keepers’ glumly acknowledged that ‘the inordinate and extreme vice of excessive drinking and drunkenness doth more and more abound’. It didn’t have anything to add to the previous, and obviously unsuccessful, legislation; it simply replaced fines for landlords who broke the law with the draconian measure of banning them from keeping an alehouse for three years on conviction of any offence set out in the Acts of 1604 and 1606.

In 1618 James I released a Royal Proclamation which set out to remedy a situation in which ‘many good and wholesome laws’ had ‘not been duly executed as they ought to be’, and which required local Justices to set up annual licensing sessions.³⁶ As a condition of licence renewal, landlords had to agree to ban cards and other games from their premises. As far back as 1559 there had been official injunctions against ‘innholders and alehouse keepers’ selling drink ‘in the time of common prayer’ and the

1618 Proclamation reiterated the ban on Sunday trading during divine service.³⁷ In addition, however, and the first time such a limit was imposed by law, drinks were not to be served after nine o'clock at night. In order to qualify for a licence, alehouses had to be capable of lodging at least one traveller overnight, and they had to inform local constables of the name of any such travellers who they put up. The 1618 Proclamation also targeted brewers who supplied beer to unlicensed sellers: a rare example of anti-drink legislation taking on the producers.

Charging for licences to run drinking establishments seems to have been James's big idea in 1618, and it provides an early example of how careful we have to be when making sweeping statements about the imposition of cultural power or disciplinary authority. Jacobean legislators may have been engaged in a cultural battle for power in the arena of everyday life, but the State also needed money – and the competing claims of social control and income generation are never more completely at loggerheads than when it comes to alcohol. Drinking may cause all sorts of problems, but an activity so ubiquitous and so economically dynamic is also an irresistible source of State income. Alongside the provisions of the 1618 Proclamation, in the same year King James gave his friend Sir Giles Mompesson the patent to impose a similar system of licences on inns. Mompesson had already carved himself quite a niche in licensing business activities – and reaping the rewards when the licences were broken, or when licence-holders felt it politic to grease his palm in advance of possible prosecutions. In 1621 he was arraigned before Parliament for outrageously misusing his powers: he had prosecuted over 3,000 inns for breaches of their licences, often through entrapment, and was caught providing licences to sixteen inns in Hampshire which local justices had previously closed down for disorder. He was eventually stripped of his knighthood and sentenced to life imprisonment. Like any good disgraced aristocrat, he went into exile and was back pursuing his career in England just a few years later. Nevertheless, in the fallout of the 1621 scandal James was forced to rescind all the legislation requiring licence payments from both inn and alehouse keepers.

At the same time as attempting to regulate alehouse activity, James I moved to reinstate elements of the traditional festive culture, the suppression of which many saw as having contributed to the proliferation of alehouses. In his so-called 'Book of Sports' (1618), James called for the reinstatement of 'May-Games, Whitson Ales' and other festivities, the prohibition of which had led the 'common and meaner sort of people' to 'filthy tipplings and drunkenness, and ... idle and discontented speeches in their alehouses'.³⁸ It was precisely this analysis that framed Richard Rawlidge's pamphlet ten years later. In the past, Rawlidge insisted, 'people scorned to

be seen to go to an Ale-house'; what free time they had was spent 'in the commendable exercise of shooting, and of bear-baiting, stool-ball, foot-ball, wasters, and such like'. Now, however:

those public exercises are left off, by the reason that the preachers of the land did so envy against them as lords of misrule ... and so the preachers and Justices did put down, and forbid all such public sportings on the Sabbath day, but when that the people generally were forbidden their old and ancient familiar meetings and sportings, what then followed? Why, sure ale-house hunting.³⁹

While Rawlidge may have agreed with the King on this, there was no overall consensus on the subject and James's call for the restoration of traditional leisure activities went down badly with many of the more puritanical local authorities, even leading to direct confrontations between local magistrates and the Crown over the issue.⁴⁰ When Charles I published a new 'Book of Sports' in 1633, it became a significant source of attrition between the King and Parliament. Part of the reason why Puritans objected to the reinstatement of traditional festivities was precisely because their suppression in the early years of the Reformation had represented an attack on a carnival culture which ran counter to Protestant ideas of self-discipline and piety. Reinstating them, even if the goal was to weaken the attraction of the alehouse, seemed to many to represent a lurch towards precisely the kind of continental Catholicism that English Protestantism had defined itself against.

While there were disagreements over the causes of alehouse-hunting, the legislative effort to control alehouse activities continued apace. In 1623 another Act entered the statute books which did away with the unworkable distinction between travellers and locals, and extended the ban on tipping to everyone. In 1625 this was shored up by an Act making landlords liable if anyone, traveller or not, tipped on their premises. In 1627 the system of fines was again updated, to resolve anomalies in the existing legislation.

Drink as a political threat

What was happening here? Certainly there had been an increase in the number of alehouses. Documentary evidence for an ensuing rise in drunkenness is, however, very limited (although, as Peter Clark points out, this doesn't mean there wasn't any such rise).⁴¹ Certainly the beer that was being sold in alehouses was stronger than had been available before the introduction of hops, but it remained significantly weaker than the wine that was being, and had for centuries been, drained by the gallon in the taverns and private homes of the wealthy. There is no compelling evidence

that drunkenness per se was significantly on the increase. The reasons for the concerted offensive against alehouses and drunkenness lay elsewhere – in the rise of Puritanism and in the fear of political instability.

The anti-alehouse legislation of the early 1600s suggests something more than the moral condemnation of drunkenness on the part of individual reformers; instead, it looks more like a desire to go after alehouse culture per se, and the wider economic and social networks it both sustained and represented. In part this was driven by a fear of the conspiracies and plots that could be hatched in the murky corners of the lower-class alehouse, or at least of the political disaffection which drunken talk could engender. When ‘the drunkard is seated on the ale bench’, John Downname complained, ‘he presently becommeth a reprover of magistrates, a controller of the state a murmerer and repiner against the best established government ... he thinketh a whole court of Parliament may more easily err in their long deliberated decrees, then he in his present and rash verdict.’⁴² However, while alehouses may well have been the scene of potentially seditious chatter, there is very little evidence that they were ever actually the source of organised political dissent; alehouse-keepers were business people with little desire to undermine their own interests by allowing their premises to be used by conspirators under the noses of local magistrates.⁴³ In fact, where political plots did take place, they tended to take place in taverns – which were never subjected to the same degree of official control.

In truth, the Jacobean suppression of alehouses was less to do with preventing revolution and more to do with the assertion of political and cultural control by both new and existing social elites. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw an increasing range of popular activities become defined, categorised and made punishable under a raft of new laws.⁴⁴ The law, in other words, was increasingly used as a means of controlling the poor by defining parts of their culture as criminal, and therefore subject to both policing and punishment. Alehouse legislation provides an example of this. Taking widespread everyday activities (such as drinking in alehouses) and making them subject to stringent new laws was a powerful way of asserting cultural authority in the domain of everyday life.

Throughout this period, the economics of the beer trade – especially at a local level – remained key to the implementation of legislation. While the Acts of 1623 and 1625 were designed to make prosecutions easier, their effect remained limited. One problem was that local magistrates were often unenthusiastic about arraigning local alehouse-keepers because to do so would be to strip them of an occupation which was often the only thing keeping them off poor relief, and therefore keeping them from adding

to the costs of the local parish. Suppressing alehouses could, especially in tight-knit communities, be a lose-lose situation: the local magistrate would incur the ill-will of the alehouse-keeper, his or her patrons and the local brewer while risking adding another family to the ranks of the unemployed. At the same time, however, it was undeniable that in a period of low wages the existence of alehouses in poor communities could only mean the expenditure of much-needed income on drink: something which tended towards increasing poverty.

The tightrope which local authorities had to walk – between alienating their peers and alienating the poor, between facilitating trade and restricting expenditure – was helped to some extent by moves to ensure that revenue from fines imposed under anti-drink legislation went towards funds for local poor relief. An Act of 1627 further updated the law to redress the fact that fining alehouse keepers, and putting them out of business, would often ‘leave a great charge of wife and children upon the parishes wherein they live’. To solve this problem, it made any such fines payable to local poor relief. Although the prosecution of alehouse-keepers remained sporadic and dependent on local circumstances, numbers of prosecutions did steadily increase in the period before the Civil War.⁴⁵ Partly this was because the revenue from fines was channelled back into ameliorating the nexus of poverty to which alehouses were inextricably tied. However, it was also because as social elites increasingly tried to distance themselves from the poor both economically and culturally, more and more magistrates were prepared to take on landlords and push for wider suppression. The justification given for all this was the threat of crime, the threat of poverty, the threat of sedition and an increasingly coherent religious attack on drunkenness and alehouse culture.

The earliest period of public concern over drink, then, was centred on the threat of social and political disorder. Forms of periodic or socially transcribed transgression that had been a part of pre-Reformation culture were challenged and presented as a threat to both social stability and religious piety. At the same time, however, alehouse numbers were increasing and the beginnings of an organised brewing industry was starting to emerge. The establishment of magisterial licensing put in place a system whereby the will of the State was mediated through decisions made by autonomous local justices; consequently, the tensions between drinkers, producers, religious groups and political elites were always coloured by local circumstance. The localisation of alcohol regulation, through the activities of independent magistrates, would exacerbate an already conflictual situation in ways that would not be resolved for centuries.

Notes

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- 2 F. and J. Gies, *Life in a Medieval Village* (London: The Folio Society, 2002), p. 176.
- 3 R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 59.
- 4 K. Wrightson, 'Alehouses, order and Reformation in rural England 1590–1660', in E. and S. Yeo (eds), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590–1914* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), p. 5.
- 5 Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, pp. 28–59.
- 6 P. Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses* (London: New Shakespeare Society, 1879), p. 308.
- 7 G. Austin, *Alcohol from Antiquity to 1800: A Chronological History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio Information Services, 1985), p. 151.
- 8 Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 145.
- 9 Church of England, Province of Canterbury, 'Articles to be inquired of, by the churchwardens and sworn men: in the visitation of the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury: within the Diocese of Norwich' (1605).
- 10 Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 127; R. Hutton, *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 252.
- 11 Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses*, p. 150.
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- 19 T. Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 148.
- 20 G. Balandier, cited in P. Stallybrass and A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 14.
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- 22 Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses*, p. 107.
- 23 P. Clark, 'Alehouses and alternative society', in D. Pennington and K. Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), p. 50.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 52; Wrightson, 'Alehouses, order and Reformation in rural England', p. 4.
- 25 P. Haydon, *Beer and Britannia: An Inebriated History of Britain* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), p. 33.
- 26 Harrison, 'Of faires and markets', p. 170.

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- 29 *Ibid.*, pp. 118–20.
- 30 Clark, 'Alehouses and alternative society', p. 50.
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- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*
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- 38 James I, *The King's Majesties declaration to his subjects, concerning lawful sports to be used* (London: Bonham Norton and John Bill, 1618), pp. 4–5.
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- 40 P. Heylyn, *Cyprianus Anglicus* (London: A. Seile, 1688), p. 257.
- 41 Clark, 'Alehouses and alternative society', p. 58.
- 42 J. Downname, *Four Treatises, Tending to Dissuade all Christians from four no less heinous than common sins namely the abuses of Swearing, Drunkenness, Whoredom, and Bribery* (London: Michael Baker, 1613), p. 87.
- 43 Clark, 'Alehouses and alternative society', p. 68.
- 44 Sharpe, *Early Modern England*, p. 113.
- 45 Wrightson, 'Alehouses, order and Reformation in rural England', p. 21.