

Binge drinking: some not-so-dry facts

David Marteau provides a quick tour of drunken disorder through the ages.

Alcohol has been around since the beginnings of recorded history. Archaeologists have discovered traces of fermented grain in China that dates back to before 4,000 BC. The establishment of viticulture and a vast wine trade in the ancient world was not without attendant problems. In classical Greece, Hippocrates identified nausea, insomnia, palpitations and delirium as symptoms of alcoholism amongst his patients. Plato noticed an irritating trend for heavy drinking among young people generally. He suggested a system of legal control that many would happily support today: no alcohol for under 18s; limited amounts for those aged 18-30 (perhaps there was one of those nightmare clubs next door to his holiday home), and unrestricted access for those over 40.

For all the glorification and deifying of wine, we up North stuck loyally to our beer. It's nearly as strong, cheap to make and easier to drink in vast amounts – factors unlikely to promote moderation. So we needed saving from ourselves. In 1503 a statute was passed in England legislating that JPs could close common alehouses and other houses called tipping houses. These were the traditional domains of the rural poor, and collective drinking fomented political unrest in still-feudal England. We continued to get drunk so intoxication was first made a civil offence in 1552, then in 1606 a law was passed repressing the odious and loathsome sin of drunkenness.

Booze went super-strength with the invention of distilling, and eventually the most widely available spirit in Britain was gin. In the 17th century, Oliver Cromwell cancelled the tax on distilling in an effort to destroy the trade in smuggled French brandy. The consumption of gin rose gradually at first, to 500,000 barrels in 1700, then precipitously towards the end, up to 5 million barrels in 1735. Drunkenness was rife. The *Gin Act of 1736* reinstated duty and licensing, but failed to stem the tide; the illicit trade flourished and beer drinking increased. Not since, and probably never before, had citizens of this country drunk so heavily. The reasons were clearly related to the two great catalysts of alcohol problems, price and availability, but were also founded in a reaction to the repression of the Puritan era following the Restoration. What we needed were a new set of prudes. Enter the Victorians.

Moral disapproval of alcohol became just about hysterical in the second part of the 19th century; criminality, sloth, violence and licentious were all put at alcohol's door. This led directly to the growth of the temperance movement. Social historians have identified another factor

in industrialisation. Being drunk in charge of a scythe is only likely to be your problem, whereas drunk in charge of Stephenson's Rocket ... Anyway, the zealots loved the idea of stopping us doing something we enjoy, and in 1873-1914 the Church of England Temperance Society advocated total abstinence for the majority, but moderate drinking for the medical profession and the social elite. 'Bands of Hope' sprang up across the country. Many youngsters regarded taking the pledge as a desirable rite of passage into contemporary adulthood: modern, confident, successful. This vast cultural movement found its legal expression in the limiting of licensing hours in Britain to times of the day when you didn't fancy a drink, and in America to the prohibition era of 1920-1933. The apotheosis saw a sharp decrease in mortality through liver disease, but a marked increase in machine gun related deaths. Hitler, a non-smoking teetotaler but a methamphetamine addict, learned the lesson well and did not attempt to come between the German people and their beer. Or cigarettes.

Post-war affluence and a new modernity left the teetotalers looking a highly anachronistic irrelevance. We began to drink a lot again. Our liver cirrhosis rate, the truest test we have of sustained heavy alcohol intake, has doubled over the past ten years. Cirrhosis rates among women aged between 35 and 44 have risen sevenfold since the 1970s. The number of licensed corner-shops, off licenses, grocers and clubs has soared during the past 20 years, while the price of alcohol in relation to income has fallen significantly, price and availability have re-combined and we're heading down gin lane again, or Special Brew terrace.

The rise is most alarming in Scotland, but drinking has increased substantially in England and Wales too. Some young people are particularly at risk right now. A large study of schoolchildren conducted in 1990 and again in 2004 found that the proportion of 11-15 year olds drinking every week has remained the same at 1 in 5, but their intake has doubled (5.3 units 1990 to 10.7 in 2004). The fastest-growing sub-population of drinkers are young women: one in three of all 16 to 24 year-old women now drink at levels above the recommended government maximum of 21 units per week.

As well as damaging our livers, alcohol can make us behave badly: 40 per cent of violent offences are committed under the influence of alcohol, rising to 44 per cent for domestic violence and 53 per cent for violence committed against a stranger. But most drunken people are unlikely to

commit an offence more serious than repeating the same fairly tedious story or spilling your pint. They may, however, end up with a nasty little problem that involves anxiety, depression, accident and injury unemployment, divorce and watching Countdown in their dressing gowns.

All of this is worrying. Particularly the Countdown bit. But, is it unusual? Well, If you are from just about anywhere on the planet the answer would be yes. If, however, you are as we are, a nation in Northwest Europe, large amounts of binge drinking are pretty standard. A study of adults carried out in 1999 by Scandinavian researchers (Andersson *et al*) shows what has been known for decades – that people from our small corner of the world have a tendency to binge drinking i.e. getting drunk.

The contrast between beer-drinking North Europeans and more steady wine cultures of Portugal, France and Italy to a question along the lines of ‘How many times in the past year have you been drunk?’ was startling. The UK was third from the top of the chart, with males reporting having been drunk 30 times in the past year, compared to France, for example, where males reported having been drunk three times in the past year. The fact is, we are permissive about drinking in this country. We view inebriation as part of life. Comic. This is not a value shared in Saudi Arabia, parts of the USA and much of the Mediterranean. If we were to become neo-puritans and decide as a society we strongly disapprove of binge drinking we could probably reduce it by a substantial amount. As drinking alcohol is a learned behaviour, we first have to stop pub-style drinking ourselves, and we then have to ‘tut’ earnestly every time we encountered anyone drunk, including our friends and members of our family. To be frank, I can’t see us pulling this off.

There is an alternative, which is money. The Norwegians have reined in a lot of their drunkenness by taxing alcohol

to the hilt. This is easy to contemplate but poll-station poison, so no government that wants to be re-elected within living memory is likely to go down this route.

Can problem drinking be treated? The idea that problematic alcohol use may be some kind of treatable condition, rather than just a case of Brits on the piss bad behaviour, came first from an American doctor, Benjamin Rush, in 1785. Rush’s semi-scientific *Moral and Physical Thermometer* drew a distinction between lower-alcohol drinks, which he saw as generally pretty good for us, and hard liquor or spirits, which he calculated could put us in the poor house, prison, or even on the gallows. Rush was in fact very accurate in his identification of many alcohol-related medical conditions. He was less visionary when he came to treatment interventions. Throwing buckets of iced water over his luckless patients and giving them a thorough beating were his top two tips, the evidence base for which tailed off as soon as medical ethics committees and Claims Direct arrived in this country.

There is some proof now that brief interventions can help to reduce problematic drinking. Brief interventions are a collection of short sessions of advice and well-informed questioning aimed at shifting some unhelpful assumptions and preconceptions a person might have about the harmless nature of their drinking, such as a cast-iron belief that drinking is wholly unrelated to their worsening heart condition, spells of anxiety and panic, trips to hospital A&E departments, recent sacking and impending divorce. And that daily viewing of Countdown is a thoroughly viable lifestyle option, while the clock is running down

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Thanks to Dr Betsy Thom, Middlesex University.

From Rush’s ‘Moral and Physical Thermometer’.

INTEMPERANCE				
	VICES	DISEASES	PUNISHMENTS	
0	PUNCH	IDLENESS	SICKNESS	DEBT
10	TODDY AND EGG RUM	GAMING, PEEVISHNESS, QUARRELLING	TREMORS OF THE HANDS IN THE MORNING, PUKING, BLOATEDNESS	JAIL
20	GROG - BRANDY AND WATER	FIGHTING, HORSE RACING	INFLAMED EYES, RED NOSE AND FACE	BLACK EYES AND RAGS
30	FLIP AND SHRUB	LYING AND SWEARING	SORE AND SWELLED LEGS, JAUNDICE	HOSPITAL OR POOR HOUSE
40	BITTERS INFUSED WITH SPIRITS AND CORDIALS	STEALING AND SWINDLING	PAINS IN THE HANDS, BURNING IN THE HANDS AND FEET	BRIDEWELL
50	DRUMS OF GIN, BRANDY AND RUM IN THE MORNING	PERJURY	DROPSY, EPILEPSY	STATE PRISON
60	THE SAME MORNING AND EVENING	BURGLARY	MELANCHOLY, PALSY, APOPLEXY,	DO FOR LIFE
70	THE SAME DURING DAY AND NIGHT	MURDER	MADNESS, DESPAIR	GALLOWS