

Drunk ! Who Cares ?

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WITH ALMOST regular monotony sociologists, whether through their research or through a committee selected by Parliament, set out to show the public what ought to be done to and for the country's inadequate citizens. They are set the formidable task of finding out amongst other things, why people get drunk so often, and as the sociologists are of the highest intellectual standard it is expected to be well within their capabilities to find the answers.

We find also numerous organizations doing the actual caring for delinquents and inadequate people. They decide what help the person ought to have on being released from prison or any other institution, and by controlling their own homes and hostels they say to what extent their clients will conform to a code they choose to impose on them.

One may argue that even in the best hotels, one has to conform to a code of living whether it be displayed in notices or merely accepted as "the thing to do."

This surely does not alter the fact that if one does not like the particular establishments' "do's and dont's" one can complain to the manager whose sole aim is to please, and as a last resort, one can soon go elsewhere to be pampered.

How very different to the lot of those who have nothing, have no choice and whose sole crime is often that they cannot cope with the speed of the twentieth century. The choice for them is Hobson's—either conform to a rigid set of rules or they walk the streets. I wonder how many hotel guests would queue for a room knowing that failure to acquire one by 8 p.m. would leave them walking the streets on what might be a winter's night.

So it goes on—their lives, already made miserable by their own tragedies are being made even more so by those professing to know what they ought to do and want. Why should (in fact, how can) a person who has never known rejection and repression

tell a person who has lived with it for years, what to do?

Where then lies the answer to this increasing problem of social decline? Who can provide an answer to the many causes of crime and drunkenness, and who can best start to re-build these broken lives (accepting of course that thousands could never be helped simply because they don't want or expect it)?

There must be some truth in the saying that one has to live with a person before really knowing him. If this is accepted to any degree at all then I am afraid that all these intellectuals are seemingly on the wrong track, having never really mixed with the men in question.

Such thoughts brought a group of Pentonville prison officers to an effort to get to know the vagrant drunks who are habitually in our care—and to find out what could be done to help them. During 1963, Pentonville alone had an average of almost one hundred drunks per month, serving sentences which ranged from five days to four months. These comprise men between the ages of 30 and 75, with a noticeably high content of men between 40 and 50; it was also clear that a very high percentage of them had no families.

Our aims were far from revolutionary. They were in fact based on the personal interest of who the drunks were and what made them "tick." Forty of them were brought together one evening on

a purely voluntary basis and were told quite plainly that whilst they were to be given no material help from us, someone was interested in them and wanted to learn about them. They were to be the teachers, we were to be the pupils. Response was almost negative. "Why?" they asked did we suddenly show an interest in them when for so long they had been treated like "cast offs?" What were our motives, and why did we pick on them? Our answer was simple. Lots of people had told us about drunks, but there had never been anyone who could tell us so well as a drunk himself.

The ensuing meetings were completely unguided and informal. It was soon apparent that there was a different explanation for each man's drinking habits. Behind the smell of meths, wine and spirits (very little beer), there lay individual personalities. The things they had in common were in fact few—the need of shelter and company and quite frequently a wish for oblivion from reality. Their friends were fellow drunks, their homes were poor hostels, bombed sites or prisons and their outlook on later years was fear. A few would accept that the river would end all pain and suffering—the majority didn't want to look far ahead—"After all, I will be drunk when it happens" were the words of one man.

"All we want is somewhere to live where they don't want us out,

not knowing whether we will be able to get back." "You have to be drunk to be able to stick it in some of the hostels." "You are kicked around like animals." "People leave us alone on the bombed sites." These are a few of the hundreds of comments made—some are so scathing that the speakers themselves winced.

Could they work and would they work? "Anyone can earn two quid a day in casual work and with nowhere to live that is all we can get." Jobs are easy enough to find—it's keeping them when you have nowhere to go afterwards."

What about the Welfare organizations—could they not help with accommodation? "I went there when I left here last week—I wanted to make an effort, but all he said was 'here is ten bob, go and have a drink with it, you will feel better then,' and now I am back with you." "I went for a job one day and was told to come back the next day—To hell with them! I'm not going to run about like that." "They just want us in and out as fast as possible—and they think you are mad if you ask for anything."

All discussion finally seemed to lead to the accommodation problem. Drinking was not even a habit—but merely a means to an end, and they would not want to give it up, but they could certainly moderate it if they wanted.

One of the amazing things to come out of the scheme was the reaction of people outside the prison. At our request several organizations had had their members attending our meetings, and similarly, we visited numerous hostels, associations and "dens of iniquity." We found that whilst there was little known of the drunk fraternity in prison, far less was known outside. A few selected alcoholics were known but the masses were not even known to exist. Long established hostel wardens except two or three shuddered at the numbers we quoted, and quaked to think today's drunks were, in some cases professional men and men with distinguished war records. However, they afforded us their support and assured us that even more help would be forthcoming. It was evident that the biggest shock they suffered was from our being Prison Officers. The welcome that they extended to us was, at times, overwhelming.

Armed with the knowledge we gained outside, we went back to the meetings to really throw out the challenge. We accused our charges of being full of self pity and said that even given a chance, they would not accept it. No one would agree to this although it was true of many. We had in fact been told by one of them that they thrived on self pity but would

never accept this. (This was one aspect that we found interesting. While they would argue and explain at great lengths that no one was really interested in helping them or giving them a hand, their own repeated failure contradicted this.) A large majority of them had at some time received treatment for their drinking habits. Many of them had been given chances of employment and accommodation, but drink had always been the victor. Then again would come the excuse—"All I need is a chance."

At one meeting, we discussed accommodation only. Having so often heard that this was their crying need, we asked their suggestions on what form it should take. Their dream hostel turned out to be what we thought was rather mundane. In it they wanted comfortable beds, a lounge with television, and substantial meals. This, coupled with relative freedom was all they needed; for which they were prepared to pay about £4 per week. But when asked how many would be prepared to support such a place only five out of 30 showed interest in it. The remainder while agreeing that such a place would be a useful stepping stone, said that they would rather live alone, independent, and free to do as they pleased. For this they would choose one room, simply furnished, with cooking facilities. To this we pointed out two suggestions—one, that they would not have the company

they apparently yearned for, and two—that there are unlimited single rooms to be had in London. They could overcome the problem of loneliness they said, by going out drinking in the evening, and if this led to drunkenness they could at least sleep it off in a decent bed. Landladies, they said would have to be tolerant. They said they could not get rooms because they would have to pay in advance and they could not live. Despite these comments, not one had tried it.

As a compromise, we offered to help with accommodation if they found work. Others said that they needed work as well. Our refusal to "carry them" brought forth unmentionable comments, but at heart their feelings, I think, were of relief that they would not be interfered with. They could go back to their bomb sites and the shops that would sell them drink at any time of the day and night. (They were quite disturbed when a familiar face returned one day with the news that one of the sites had been cleared. Without it they were again thrown at the mercy of the police.)

For some we found private rooms, others found their own rooms, but others did not want or intend to leave drink alone. They said they would when they were older, but at the moment they enjoyed it. For half a dozen we found hostel accommodation of

a high standard and the results were noted. Of these six, one arrived at his place too drunk to be admitted—this by lunch-time on his day of discharge. Another to the best of our knowledge, has pulled himself out of his old habits and is now living normally. He eventually left his hostel and has never returned to Pentonville.

I quote from a letter he wrote us some time after his release—"It's wonderful to hear the birds sing and see the trees and flowers all coming into bloom. I don't know when this happened before, I was usually full of drink or suffering from the effects and couldn't care less. I can see now as I have a sober mind and it's wonderful." We realize that by now he may well be in prison elsewhere, but we like to think not.

Almost 12 months have elapsed since the first venture into the world of the drunk, and at this stage we have at least got to know something about them. When they come in they are often still drunk (they are not quite sober for three days after reception) and in those first few days don't want to know anything unless it's wet and in a bottle. After a few weeks, they unfold and become responsive again, only to await their return to the fold.

It is our opinion that a lot of them are more "alcoholic" than is accepted, in fact, that there are only a few recurrent drunks amongst them. They are true and

mainly recidivist prisoners—the highest known number of convictions being 236 in under two years for one man. But prison as it is today is certainly not the answer, nor in fact will it ever be. We don't profess to know the answers any more than the men themselves, but self supporting camps run by the Prison Department would, without doubt be a help in easing the accommodation problem in some prisons and would save thousands of pounds in the cost incurred in the vicious circle we have at present, i.e. arrest, court committal, imprisonment, discharge and National Assistance.

The 'drunks' are not security risks and need not be treated as such. Given a longer sentence, (seven days is hardly long enough to attain complete sobriety,) and useful work, either gardening or repairing furniture for charitable organizations, then a higher success rate than ours could be achieved.

We formed many other conclusions and opinions of various organizations and services connected with the "drinking business" which we have not discussed. From them we learnt a lot and we are grateful to them. This report, however, bears no prejudice whatsoever to these sources. It is simply a report of pupil-teacher activities in a weird, but interesting field.