

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Roadhouse Comes to Britain: Drinking,  
Driving and Dancing, 1925-1955**

**By Gutzke, D.W. & Law, M.J.**

**London: Bloomsbury**

**2017, Pp.viii + 181, £84.99**

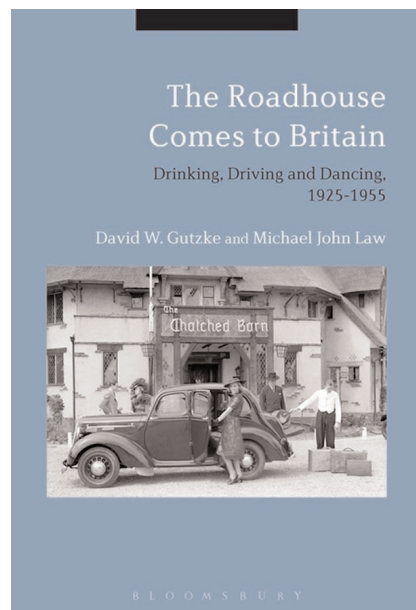
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Ask most British people today what the word 'roadhouse' brings to mind and they will probably reply, depending upon their age, a film starring Patrick Swayze or American gangsters during the 1920s. The fact that there existed a unique version of the roadhouse this side of the Atlantic during the interwar period is now all but forgotten. Yet at the time it featured prominently in newspapers, novels, plays, songs and newsreels due to their heady mixture of glamour, exclusivity and transgression, epitomised by late-night drinking and illicit liaisons.

*The Roadhouse Comes to Britain* is a collaboration between a historian, David W. Gutzke, and a historical geographer, Michael John Law. Readers of this journal will be familiar with the works of the former, particularly his most recent ones which have dealt with women drinking in the twentieth century and the improved public house. In many ways the present book can be seen as a companion to both, although it covers a shorter time period, the era between the two world wars. 'The long week-end', as Robert Graves and Alan Hodge called it, were ones of political, economic and cultural upheaval across the globe. Mass transport and communications ensured that both people and ideas travelled at ever increasing rates. One specific consequence of these factors was the British roadhouse. As the authors state, this was a 'flash in the pan' phenomenon, one that lasted a mere twelve years, coming to an end with the outbreak the Second World War. Yet, unlike many other products of its time, the roadhouse has largely disap-

peared from both the public and academic's mind. This book attempts to analyse why this is the case, especially as, at the time, they were so (in)famous. In doing so it also seeks to explain their origins, success and demise.

The roadhouse, as defined by the authors, 'required, as a minimum, an establishment on a roadside location providing food, drink and some form of diversion or entertainment to motoring customers. Entertainment varied considerably from a small zoo to super roadhouses that offered dancing, swimming, outdoor sports and flying fields' (p.17). Such a diversity in scale and amenities meant that the cost of launching a roadhouse also varied dramatically, from just a couple of thousand pounds to £80,000 which was the estimated price of Britain's largest, the Thatched Barn, situated on the



Barnet Bypass. In the authors' words, 'this purpose-built Elizabethan-style creation was designed to catch the attention of passing motorists heading to the Great North Road and to pull in a London-based audience to its members' Barn Club. ... Massive in scale, it sported a thatched roof and half-timbered elevations. It had a huge swimming pool and a car park that could accommodate 1,000 vehicles, while its restaurant could seat 400. Tennis and squash courts, a gymnasium and a golf school also beckoned members. In effect, the Thatched Barn was an early country club in the American sense. As a guidebook put it, "there is dancing every evening to a well-known band and a cabaret every Saturday evening. The place's position, half an hour's run from town, makes it an ideal object for an evening's expedition"' (p.25).

Two factors were central to the birth of the roadhouse, Americanization and the car. The influence of American culture was not as direct as one may imagine, no roadhouse designers or owners, as far as the authors are aware, travelled to the States to examine similar establishments which had existed from before the introduction of Prohibition. Neither was American capital invested in British roadhouses. Rather, the impact was tangential, 'principally mediated through Hollywood films and to a lesser extent newspapers, American literature and music' (p.3). The results were interiors which reflected film sets, bands playing jazz and swing music and the consumption of cocktails. The car, combined with the construction of an arterial road network, was the second major factor behind the roadhouse's success. Situated on the outskirts of cities where land was relatively cheap, most could be reached within an hour's drive. Initially, around the year 1930, only the wealthy could afford a car and this ensured only an elite clientele could frequent the roadhouse.

Yet this reliance on the car as a means of safeguarding such exclusivity was also partly to blame for the roadhouse's demise. Car ownership rose steadily during the 1930s as new production methods brought down their cost. Roadhouses thus became accessible to a far broader section of society, many of whom drove out from the every expanding suburbs which were encroaching and eventually surrounding these once isolated venues. Consequently, their gilt quickly began to fade. Gutzke and Law identify 1933/4 as the tipping point. As they state, between 1927 and 1933 'roadhouses achieved

their pinnacle of fame, becoming an integral part of the elite metropolitan set of the young and highly mobile. Starting in in 1932, scorching summers drove Britons outdoors, fostering a craze for open-air swimming and a boom in constructing swimming pools. Cars, swimming and more generally leisure defined offerings at super roadhouses. The following year represented a peak in numbers of roadhouses being constructed' (p.124). However, from 1934 to 1939, 'growing numbers of automobiles with their middle-class drivers and passengers dramatically affected roadhouses ... Encroaching on elite leisure playgrounds, these uninvited motorists transformed roadhouses into places far less exclusive, depriving the smart set of their previous private club ambience, and ensuring they rubbed elbows with those further down the social scale. The roadhouse's startling commercial success faded quickly' (p.125).

This fascinating book offers a vivid insight into a neglected subject of the interwar period. But why investigate a phenomenon numbering less than 80 establishments in all its guises? Gutzke and Law argue that they were a significant component in the transformation of leisure in the 1930s, that, at their peak, 'roadhouses, powered by increasingly extensive automobile, delivered a new form of leisure that combined a contemporary obsession with exercise, the outdoors and the exotic with West End entertainment. Their remote situation provided the locus for actual and literary transgressions as well as societal concerns about anonymity and wider class mixing. Although loosely based on an American archetype, roadhouses combined English architectural manners with Americanized popular culture prevalent in Britain in the decade before the Second World War' (p.13). It is a case very well made.

TIM HOLT

**The Licensed City: Regulating Drink in Liverpool 1830-1920**

**By Beckingham, D.**

**Liverpool: Liverpool University Press**

**2017, Pp.256, £85**

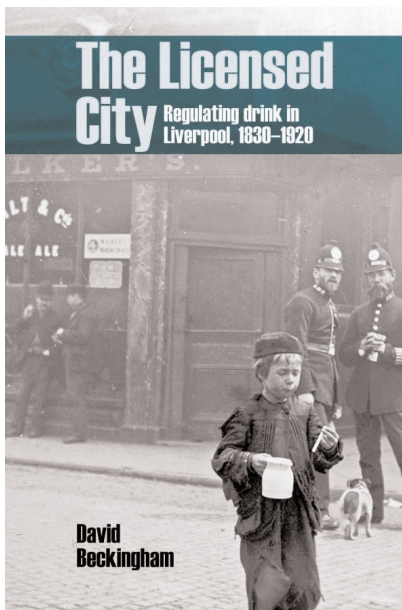
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This book provides a very detailed survey of licensing as a mode of regulation in one city. Whilst based on Liverpool, it provides an extremely useful understand-

ing of the broader scope, especially in terms of the temperance movement in the UK during the period. Liverpool acted as a testing ground and forerunner of legislation which would have major impact on the role and nature of pubs and the licensed trade in general (see Ch.3 on the 1860s experiment with legislative changes on a local scale and also p.127 the reaction of Peter Walker).

Though the analysis and data may be a little technical for most of our members, nevertheless it provides a sound basis for study, for example in understanding the impact on pub layout. The text takes a robust view of the statistics, particularly in terms of drunkenness, and shows how the creation and usage of data is not impartial. This is perhaps crucial in understanding the attitudes towards prostitutes and women in general (Ch.6), such as the length of time they could spend in pubs, as well as touching on some of the religious aspects.

In this it shows how licensing in the C19 became a question of 'controlling various behaviours associated with drinking and drunkenness' (p.21) as much as a means of raising revenue. Beckingham states that his attention is driven by the perceived role of Liverpool as being 'so much worse than the national picture' (p.22). He sees the city as transformed by the management of licence.



For those interested in the design of the late Victorian and Edwardian public houses, he examines how such factors as having a rear entrance to the building and whether the local bobby could easily see who was on the premises were a concern of the local magistrates. Previous articles from *Brewery History* are referenced in terms of this (e.g. Mutch, A., No.127). Chapters 8 and 9 examine the local nature in terms of external challenges such as that of compensation.

Though comparison of civic reputations is well-documented in the book as a driving force behind Liverpool's experiments, perhaps more of such in terms of Preston rather than Manchester might be worthy of future study. Not least because the nature of ownership could be more fully examined. Given the move towards brewery company ownership in the period examined one wonders how this impacted on control of customer behaviour, given that Preston retained a large number of home-brewed pubs throughout the C19. One might argue that brewers such as Walkers not only had a vested interest in the idea of 'fewer and better' but their own self-image, cohered if not colluded with the 'system'. Given that the debate is couched in terms of licence versus liberty, one could also frame it in terms of the small business man running a home brew pub contrasted with the management of a large brewing company, e.g. (p.127) 89% of Walker's pubs were managed by 1891, as were 87% of Higson's and 80% of Threlfall's and (p.208) by 1892 63% of Liverpool's pubs were owned by brewers.

Although focussed on one city the book provides a firm basis for understanding the improved public house movement and Gothenburg system of disinterested management. Both of which were to have national significance, with the former in particular being driven by the growth of the larger breweries, especially in the midlands.

The depth of analysis sets a much appreciated higher bar for future work in the field. For anyone wishing to study the issues raised it is a most welcome addition to the literature.

MIKE BROWN