

ALEHOUSES AND GOOD FELLOWSHIP IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND: AN OVERVIEW

MARK HAILWOOD

Drinking spaces and places attract a lot of attention from historians, sociologists, public health researchers, politicians - indeed, anyone with an interest in the role of alcohol in any society is likely to direct their focus towards the principle sites of its consumption, be that pubs, bars, night clubs, or increasingly, the home. In the English context 'the pub' features prominently in academic and policy discussions about drinking - but how well do people know the history of the institution, especially its early history? Any discussion about drinking spaces and places would benefit, it seems to me, from at least a rudimentary grasp of how one of the most significant, the English pub, first made its way to the centre of our social and cultural life. It is a story at the heart of my recent book on *Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England*, and what I want to offer here is a brief synopsis of some of the key themes and arguments of that book as a means of adding some context to ongoing discussions about drinking spaces and places.

So, the argument runs something like this: the century between 1550 and 1650 was a crucial one in the history of English drinking places, witnessing as it did the first emergence of 'the pub' - then termed the alehouse - as an institution central to the recreational life of virtually every community in the country. This essay will offer a broad-brush overview of this development, detailing the dramatic rise in alehouse numbers and outlining the reasons why the alehouse enjoyed this ascent despite the considerable hostility directed towards it by church and state. Crucial to its popularity was its association with 'good fellowship', a set of cultural values and social practices that were championed in cheap print as well as being observed in the everyday drinking practices of the time. Contrary to a long standing misconception that

pre-modern drinking culture was marked by the desperate pursuit of narcotic oblivion on the part of the downtrodden poor, I argue that the rise of the alehouse in these years reflects the emergence of recreational drinking in pubs as a positive socio-cultural activity for its participants - which included many members of the middle class and a perhaps surprising number of women. Recognising the legacy of these early years of English pub culture is vital to helping us understand the subsequent development of drinking places.

To highlight the significance of the early modern period in the history of the alehouse it is worth sketching out developments in the period that preceded it. Whilst no dedicated studies of the alehouse exist for the medieval period, what evidence we do have indicates that the institution was not particularly prominent. Of course, pubs had existed earlier than the 1500s, but to get the story straight we need to make a distinction between the different types of pubs that existed. Indeed the term 'pub' would not have been recognised at that time - it only came into use in nineteenth century as an abbreviation of 'public house', which itself had only emerged at end of 1600s as a catch all term for drinking establishments, which were divided by contemporaries into three categories: inns, taverns, and alehouses.

Inns were large, purpose-built establishments whose main function was to provide lodging, stabling and refreshment for travellers-such as, famously, Chaucer's pilgrims at the George in Southwark. They first began to appear in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and were mainly located in towns and on major roads. Taverns were drinking houses that specialised in the retail of wine (to the upper ranks of society) and they too appear

in the historical record from the twelfth century onwards. They were mostly located in large towns and cities, and there were only a very small number of them. Both of these tended to cater to a wealthier clientele, but the alehouse - the most humble of this triumvirate of drinking establishments - retailed low cost ale on a small-scale, usually from the rooms of a private dwelling rather than purpose-built premises. They do not appear to have had substantial roots prior to the Black Death. Although ale formed an essential part of everyday diets for men, women and children, it was generally produced and consumed domestically. Any surplus might be sold to neighbours or passers-by - a branch or bush placed outside alerted potential customers, which is also the origins of the pub sign - but such retailing was generally temporary, and 'out-of-doors', rather than involving on-site recreational drinking in the manner seen at taverns or inns.

In the years between the Black Death and the Reformation this situation began to change as brewing became increasingly commercialised. Crucial here was the introduction of hops to the brewing process, which technically distinguished beer (hopped) from ale (unhopped), though the terms were often used interchangeably throughout the early modern period. Hops acted as a preservative, so whereas ale spoiled quickly and was thus produced in small batches, beer kept for longer, could be brewed in larger quantities, and transported over longer distances. This led to larger scale commercial brewing operations, less domestic production, and an increased role for commercial retailing. Some of those who had sold ale occasionally began to do so on a more permanent basis as a business venture, though still generally retailing out of homes rather than purpose-built premises. The more permanent 'alehouse' began to get a foothold in English society.

From this foothold in the late medieval period, the century or so between the Reformation and the Civil Wars saw the alehouse come to occupy a central place in early modern English society. Although we do not have evidence of their numbers from the earlier period, a government survey of drinking establishments in 1577 has allowed historians to estimate their numbers from this date forward, and they show the number of alehouses in England doubled between the 1570s (c.24,000, or 1 to every 142 inhabitants) and 1630s (c.50,000, or 1 to every 95 inhabitants). It is difficult to be precise about

the causal process behind this rise of the alehouse in the second-half of the sixteenth and first-half of the seventeenth centuries, but there are a number of factors whose contributions are clear enough. The process of commercialisation in brewing continued apace, as it did in English society more generally in these years. The Reformation was also a factor: before the Reformation, church festivals had been the focus of much communal and recreational public drinking - hosted either in the churchyard or in purpose built church-houses - but as Protestant reformers came to attack drunkenness in general, they also focused in particular on its association with worship and sacred space. The result was that the number of festivals was curtailed and communal recreational drinking was forced out of churchyard - and into the newly emerging commercial alehouse.

This rise in prominence of the alehouse across English society - it was by 1600 conventional even for small villages to have at least one alehouse, and many had several - did not go uncontested. Indeed, by the turn of the seventeenth century they were coming under attack from that unholy trinity of church, state, and the sharp-elbowed middle class. Protestant reformers feared that alehouses were serving as 'nurseries of all vice and sin' - and kept people from going to church. The central government worried that they provided venues for people to talk about politics. And many wealthier villagers and townfolk (who quite happily frequented inns and taverns themselves) were concerned that poor men were spending too much time and money in alehouses and not enough at home.

None of these groups wanted to ban alehouses altogether. It was recognised that ale and beer were essential components of the daily diet of pretty much everyone, and needed to be widely available to purchase (and cheaply too - price regulation at this time was about keeping prices low). So, first they tried to limit numbers with a 1552 Licensing Act, which stipulated that licenses should be reserved for those who had no other means of income, and thus widows became very prominent as alehousekeepers. As we've seen, though, this did little to halt the growth in numbers, so in the early years of seventeenth century the central government passed a raft of legislation aimed at limiting recreational drinking in alehouses: they introduced a 1 hour time limit for drinking in an alehouse in your home parish; a 9pm closing time; no games were allowed; and drunkenness

was made a crime with a 5s fine (about 4 days wages for a craftsman in the building trade). All of these measures were designed to police border between drinking for sustenance, which was entirely acceptable, and drinking for fun

This was a remarkably ambitious campaign on part of government to police people's everyday leisure activities, and provides an interesting case study in state formation. Was it at all successful? Well, it relied for its implementation on village constables: amateur, unpaid officials elected from among the heads of household in a village to serve for one-year, who were generally reluctant to upset neighbours by enforcing what were undoubtedly unpopular policies. However, some shared the concerns of government and preachers, and did try, at least, to enforce the laws. Let's look at some examples from Moulsham, Essex, of how they got on.

A suburb of Chelmsford, Moulsham was an area with a notorious concentration of alehouses and there was no shortage of alehousekeepers prepared to meet attempts to regulate their alehouses with bold defiance and dismissive insults. Richard Northe and John Boys, who had the unenviable role of constables of Moulsham, entered the alehouse of Peter de Cort in April of 1629 to find two labourers playing the popular but forbidden pub game of 'slide groat' which they subsequently tried to halt. De Cort, the alehousekeeper, told the officials that they were 'too busy' and told them he 'cared not a fart' for them or their laws-and later 'skoft' when they came to serve a warrant on him. They encountered a similar response at the alehouse of John Sturgin when attempting to serve him with a warrant for allowing 'misorder' in his house after the legal closing time of nine o'clock in the evening. Sturgin called one officer a 'Knaive' and the other a 'hog's che[e]k', and also demonstrated a confidence in the limitations of the local authorities by bidding the officials to 'do their worst' in attempts to suppress his house. Similar evidence can be found in the regulatory records across the country, and demonstrates that in many places-and even when the local officials were prepared to take action against disorderly alehouses, as many were not-an uncooperative disposition on the part of alehousekeepers and their patrons could act as a serious restraint on any attempt to establish control over these institutions. Ultimately, this meant that the government's campaign failed in its attempts to curtail the recreational function of the alehouse.

But what was it, exactly, that alehousekeepers and their patrons were so keen to defend? An earlier generation of historians argued that it was their right to get what we might call, in modern parlance, shit-faced. This was, after all, a period of dramatic population growth which brought with it massive food price inflation and a stark growth in economic inequality: against such a backdrop alehouse-goers in this period have been seen by some historians as men simply looking to 'sublimate their miseries in drunkenness', or who 'took to drink to blot out some of the horror in their lives'. But there was undoubtedly something more socially and culturally significant about the appeal of the alehouse than this 'narcotic oblivion' interpretation allows - a significance we can see in the genre of 'good fellowship' balladry that began to flourish in the early decades of the seventeenth century.

Ballads were a form of 'popular' print - there were millions of them printed across the seventeenth century - and a significant genre of them might reasonably be described as drinking songs: these were targeted at alehouse-goers, set in alehouses, with many containing drinking games within them, and we also have evidence that they were pasted up on alehouse walls. What they depict is an alehouse culture based not on the pursuit of atomised alcoholism, but on the pursuit of meaningful relationships and social bonds. They obsess over the qualities that were deemed admirable in a drinking companion - and by implication a friend - and stress the importance of company and collectivity to the alehouse drinking experience. Evidence of alehouse sociability in practice - collected from court records and contemporary diaries - likewise shows that drinking was above all a means to foster and reinforce social relationships: drinking alone was rare, and drinking to the point of oblivion was seen as shameful.

Of course, alcohol was part of the appeal of the alehouse - and it is probably a fair criticism of my book that in my attempt to overturn the 'narcotic oblivion' interpretation of earlier scholarship I've probably gone too far the other way in downplaying the importance of the physiological effects of alcohol in my emphasis on the social aspects of 'good fellowship'. That said, I think the key here is to recognise that seventeenth-century alehouse goers did not think of alcohol as a 'narcotic' - that is, a drug that dulls the senses - but rather as something closer to what we would call a 'stimulant' (or perhaps an

upper). The 1630s good fellowship ballad *A Health to All Good-Fellows*, for instance, suggested that alcohol served as an antidote to sorrow by making its consumers 'merry', rather than oblivious. A group of seamen's wives in one ballad were transformed by consuming bowls of punch into 'jolly dames' who 'merrily danc'd', and a company of 'courageous gallants' in another took to drink 'resolving to be merry' and declaring that it would make them 'jolly'. If drinking lifted the spirits, it could also enhance mental faculties. One ballad character, 'Roaring Dick of Dover', declared of 'strong liquor': 'O it makes my wits the quicker, when I taste it thorowly,' and *The Careless Drunkards* of a late seventeenth-century ballad expressed a similar belief that liquor 'elevates' the mind, and 'puts good reason into brains'

The appeal of alcohol, then, was that it was seen as an adjunct to sociability, making drinkers loquacious and 'merry' - making them better company, in effect. In fact, the term 'merry' was a crucial one here, and occurs in both ballads and court records alike as the ideal state of intoxication, and the key to a good night out was maintaining such a state. Drinking too much resulted in drinkers crossing a line between being 'merry' and being 'overcome' with drink, when a drinker lost control of their mental and physical functions. But even this was not understood as a state of narcosis, so much as one of over-stimulation, whereby drink sent the body into a form of over drive which was impossible to control. So, it was ultimately this combination of alcoholic stimulation and social bonding that gave alehouse 'good fellowship' its appeal (and whilst I haven't said much about this here, that appeal extended to middle class and female patrons, not just to poor men). And it was this positive socio-cultural function of the alehouse that underpinned the fierce resistance shown by its patrons towards the regulatory campaigns of the state, which - by the end of the seventeenth century - had essentially been fought off.

Whereas in the formative century between 1550 and 1650 the alehouse had been associated by its opponents

with political subversion, reckless prodigality, the breakdown of households, the transgression of gender norms, and indeed all manners of disorder, by 1750 a number of these connotations had migrated to other institutions. The coffeehouse was now the site of political disloyalty and sedition; beer drinking was seen as a loyal activity. But much more so than coffee it was gin that had taken the heat off the alehouse. In his famous prints of 1750 William Hogarth depicted 'Gin Lane' as the place where poverty, disorder and transgression were rife. Its companion print, 'Beer Street', depicted an alehouse scene in which prosperous tradesmen and market women drank wholesome beer, and read from broadsides together. It was, in essence, a positive portrayal of 'good fellowship'. It is one that would have struck a chord with the 'good fellows' of a century earlier, but it would have seemed unimaginable to them that their recreational drinking could be held up in public discourse as a model of appropriate behaviour to be contrasted with the evils of the excessive drinking of the poor. It is an indication that the struggle for the legitimacy of alehouses as a site of recreation had been a triumph. The local pub had arrived as a central institution of English cultural life.

For more on all of these themes see:

Hailwood, M. (2014) *Alehouses and Good Fellowship in Early Modern England*. Woodbridge: Boydell.

Hailwood, M. (2013) 'It puts good reason into brains: Popular Understandings of the Effects of Alcohol in Seventeenth-Century England', *Brewery History*. Vol. 150, pp.39-53.

Hailwood, M. (2011) 'Sociability, Work and Labouring Identity in Seventeenth-Century England', *Cultural and Social History*. Vol. 8, No. 1, pp.9-29.

Hailwood, M. (2010) 'Alehouses, Popular Politics and Plebeian Agency in Early Modern England', in Williamson, F. (ed.) *Locating Agency: Space, Power and Popular Politics*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.