

‘WASHY BEER AND EMPTY CELLARS’: THE BEER RIOTS OF 1919

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Historians have somewhat surprisingly ignored the unrest over beer supplies that took place in the months after the Armistice. This is a pity because the potential for trouble and the related debates at Cabinet about the production and strength of beer show how the government was keen to meet working class concerns. Well aware of revolutionary sentiments, the Cabinet did not want a scarcity of beer at home to be the catalyst for unrest. Food shortages in Russia and Germany had lain behind revolutions in these countries. The beer shortage may seem a minor problem in the context of the time, but it was a real cause for discontent among the industrial working classes. And one that could not be resolved by negotiation with trade unions.

The events in the spring of 1919 also saw the end of effective temperance advocacy at the highest levels. The immediate need to satisfy working class thirsts was greater than the need to save their souls or their livers.

As Robert Duncan reminds us, the supply of beer during the First World War was a contested issue. He writes that:

The drink debate ... exemplifies how British society focused on unpatriotic social habits when the war was not going well. Somebody had to be blamed and the drinkers of the nation provided a useful scapegoat.¹

In particular, working class male drinkers were targeted as they were overwhelmingly the biggest customers of pubs and beer was their drink.² Spirits - mainly whisky - were also in short supply, but this was an issue mainly in Scotland.

Under the urbane Lord D’Abernon the Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic) was created in 1915 to supervise

the production and consumption of alcohol in wartime. The Board became a bastion of moderate temperance and so loathed by drinkers, publicans and brewers alike.

From 1916 pub opening hours were curtailed and many restrictions were introduced, the most petty of which was the no treating rule, which forbade buying drinks for other people. More seriously the production of beer was severely cut back - in theory to allow imported barley to be used for bread - and its strength was much reduced to make better use of valuable raw materials. Indeed, the First World War was a particularly trying time for the brewing industry. Terry Gourvish and Richard Wilson, in their magisterial history of British brewing, conclude:

Higher costs, stimulated by higher taxation, input shortages and general inflationary pressures were combined with a reduction in the quality of material used in brewing. At the same time, controls were imposed both on the volume of output and on its strength, i.e the specific gravity of the beer to be brewed. Nor was this all. Consumption was restricted by the means of the twin mechanisms of price control and much tighter licensing regulations ... Much of the blame on brewing could thus be directed at government intervention.³

In February 1917 the Cabinet agreed to cut production of beer from 26,000,000 standard barrels of beer per annum to 10,000,000 - a reduction of well over half - and stated that half the production had to be of beer of less than 1035 Original Gravity (O.G.), which was considerably less than the pre-war average of 1053 O.G.⁴ By the Armistice beer production had recovered slightly to 12,600,000 standard barrels.

Under rules imposed in April 1918 the average strength of beer was reduced to 1030 O.G. Much beer was now

produced at a strength of 1020 O.G. - that is around 2% alcohol by volume. Although approved by the temperance lobby, this beer, known for obvious reasons as washy beer or Government Ale, was strongly disliked by munitions and industrial workers. It was estimated that drinkers had to consume six pints before they felt even the slightest bit tipsy.⁵

In addition, the price of a pint of beer increased significantly ahead of wages, although the price of washy beer and other weaker strength beers were laid down by the government. However, bottled beer remained unregulated. Beer was ever more heavily taxed. By 1919 duty had increased to 70s a barrel from 7s 9d in 1915. Beer duty was now a significant element of taxation.⁶

The rhetoric over the need to save imports for the war effort was persuasive and despite grumbling the changes were generally accepted by both brewers and drinkers.⁷ Although concerned over the quality of their products brewers were happy with the profits they were making. Indeed, there were fears that they could be accused of profiteering by the press, particularly over the price of bottled beer. W. Waters Butler, of Mitchells and Butlers in Birmingham, wrote to the Secretary of the Brewers' Society on 3 December 1918 of his concern:

6d for 1038 is quite enough: we are giving 1040 in Birmingham and making large profits. The prices for bottled beers are more than "profiteering", they would justify a much stronger term being applied. Fancy being allowed - and our tenants will take advantage of it - to charge 1s 2d for a pint bottle of beer (6d more than draught) at 1038 ... Any movement by the Trade to increase present prices to the public, in the public bar in particular, will bring about a great outcry against the trade.⁸

During the last eighteen months of the war, as industrial relations worsened, the lack of beer and its poor quality was frequently cited as a cause. The Whitely Enquiry into Industrial Unrest gave beer shortages as one reason for the unrest when it reported in July 1917. The detailed Ministry of Labour Intelligence Reports, which were circulated to Cabinet also reported difficulties.⁹ In February 1918, for example, the 'shortage of beer was causing discontent in Bolton.' And a few weeks later complaints were recorded on Clydeside about the closure of pubs after working hours and on Saturday evenings.¹⁰

The end of the War led to calls for the restrictions on beer production to be relaxed. Almost immediately after the Armistice it was agreed to increase output by about a quarter to 14,700,000 barrels. However, the Control Board urged that this be deferred to 'until the end of the acute stage of public excitement' but admitted that the increased barrelage would not involve any 'danger of an increase of insobriety'.¹¹

The powerful temperance movement protested against any increase in production of beer and spirits. The Wesleyan Temperance and Social Welfare Committee wrote to the Cabinet citing the need to supply the famine-hit countries of central and eastern Europe with barley before helping British drinkers, the need to meet the industrial challenge from the newly dry United States, and the desire to maintain public order during demobilisation.¹²

Their pleas went unheeded. As Sir Alfred Mond told the Cabinet Home Affairs Committee in March 1919: 'It was a question of satisfying the working man or the temperance advocates and he considered it policy to satisfy the former'.¹³

Within weeks of the Armistice in November 1918 warnings began to reach Cabinet about potential unrest across the country as the result of the shortage of beer. On 30 January 1919, Sir Walter Roffey, of the Ministry of Food, received notification that

the dockers are refusing to load spirits and beer for export owing to local scarcity for consumption and will continue this attitude until they get some assurance that the Government are prepared to grant an increase of both commodities.¹⁴

To head off protests the Cabinet permitted incremental increases in beer production and increased the strength of beer. On 4 February 1919, it announced an increase by a quarter in 'the permitted statutory barrelage' and 'an increase of two degrees in the permitted average gravity' and also regulated the price of bottled beer sold in pubs. Brewers were warned that they should not attempt to profiteer and they:

should understand that the new scale of prices is sufficiently liberal in to leave room for an increase in duty if and when the Government may see fit to impose it.

It was hoped that the:

new regulations will provide a larger supply of beer of better average gravity at lower prices than those now obtaining in the case of beer of very low gravity, and at the same time will limit the prices of the better beers, and more particularly those sold in bottle.¹⁵

The brewers were unhappy at the prices that were to be set for bottled beer. Colonel John Gretton MP, Chairman of Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton, wrote to Austen Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer:

I have gone very carefully into the price of Burton Pale Ale, viz 7d per half bottle or 6½d per bottle containing less than 9 ounces. At 7d the price is cut very find indeed, as we as brewers shall have to reduced to such as scale that we shall not make our pre-war profit as the case stands: this reduction will only enable the bottler to carry on, and there will be nothing for the retailer; at 6½d per half bottle the trade cannot be done in Burton Pale Ale.¹⁶

Less than six weeks later the Cabinet sanctioned a further rise in beer production and another increase in strength. Walter Long, the First Lord of the Admiralty, told his colleagues that

The working man regarded the indifferent quality of beer as a typical case of class legislation, and complained that whereas the labouring classes could only get a very poor quality of beer, the upper classes could still get wines of pre-war strength.¹⁷

Despite these increases in production beer remained in short supply. It is not clear why this was the case. It may be that after years of restrictions it must have taken brewers time to find supplies of raw material and recruit extra staff in order to expand production. And there were also problems in delivering the extra beer. Undoubtedly a factor was the rapid demobilisation of the Army. Ex-servicemen could not understand, after their sacrifices for the country, why they could not get a decent pint of beer on their return. In fact, the armed forces had largely been shielded from shortages at home as special efforts had been made to provide adequate supplies of beer overseas. The chairman of the Control Board, Lord D'Abernon, put the demand down to 'the advent of summer, coupled with the unprecedentedly large number of people moving



Figure 1. Colonel John Gretton MP, Chairman of Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton.

about, both in town and country, with plenty of money in their pockets'.¹⁸

And where it was available pubs were drunk dry almost immediately. At the height of the shortage in mid-May a representative from the Control Board visited 100 pubs in South East London. He found 47 closed and 53 open, although twelve of the latter had no beer on sale, including the refreshment rooms at Waterloo Station, and two of the largest pubs in the capital, the Elephant and Castle and the Rockingham. Austen Chamberlain, who presented the report to Cabinet, wrote that:

Such a scarcity of beer is in the opinion of both the Food Controller and myself a source of grave and legitimate discontent and public danger. In my opinion it threatens the maintenance of even a reasonable control.¹⁹

The discontent over beer was summarised in the weekly reports on revolutionary organisations, prepared by

Sir Basil Thompson head of the Home Office's Directorate of Intelligence, for the Cabinet. On 30 April, Thompson mentioned that 'In various parts of the country there has been local disorder in public houses.' A week later he warned ministers that 'Workmen and businessmen' were dissatisfied about the continuing restrictions on pubs and 'The workers in and around Birmingham are also dissatisfied and attribute the shortage to prohibitionist propaganda'.²⁰ More seriously in the period of the fine weather, Thompson wrote on 21 May that: 'The beer and spirits shortage is still a principal case of unrest among men engaged on hard manual work'.²¹

Thompson was right. On 19 May trouble erupted in Openshaw near Manchester. Frustrated drinkers protested outside closed pubs. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* reported that:

The shortage of beer and the fact that many licensed houses did not open their doors led late Monday night to riotous scenes in the Lower Openshaw district of Manchester. Ex-Army men were the ring-leaders in a crowd numbering hundreds of both sexes. The trouble began at ten o'clock, and few minutes later the whole district was in a pandemonium.

Placards were also displayed saying 'We want more beer.' The rioters threatened further action on the following Friday unless supplies improved.²²

A few days later *The Times* reported that in Manchester 'the protestors have attempted no violence, but they have just stood in the road and stopped the traffic. The police have avoided measures that might have provoked disorder'.²³ Indeed they were sympathetic to the protests. The Chief Constable of Salford contacted the Control Board to ask them to relax the controls on pubs.²⁴

The protests inevitably targeted individual pubs blaming profiteering publicans and demanding that all beer be put on sale. In Bury, the *Manchester Guardian* noted on 15 May that:

Some thirsty individuals have developed a skill in locating the existence with the result that the usual customers have not had access to rationed supplies to the extent to which they may consider themselves entitled.

Landlords were being bullied to serve beer until they ran out and, in several places, men leapt the bar to help themselves.²⁵

Across the Pennines, the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* reported that

On Wednesday night a gang of roughs made a demonstration outside the Foresters' Inn...and threatened to break into the cellars to look for beer...A crowd of some 200 people gathered but for the firmness of Mr F Shelton, the landlord, would no doubt have carried out their threat.²⁶

In the middle were the pub landlords who bore the brunt of the protestors' frustrations. They were accused of keeping beer back for regular customers as well as profiteering. Local licensed victuallers' associations argued that if the restrictions on drinkers continued

the murmur [against this would] become too loud for the Government to withstand and they would have to drop the Control Board and throw over their staunch supporters, the fanatical teetotallers.²⁷

Yet by the end of June the protests ended as quickly as they began. The reason was simple. The demands of the protestors had largely been met. At the height of the protests on 22 May 1919 the Cabinet agreed to increase the production of beer to 26,000,000 barrels and to restore the strength of beer to an average Original Gravity of 1040. Neither were at pre-war levels, but they were enough to please the drinker in industrial areas. As *The Times* pointed out:

It will be weaker stuff, but the cubic contents will be enough to satisfy the moderate man...[But] it was resolved to the rowdies to win the real victory [of increased production].²⁸

What is unusual in these protests was the total absence of any involvement by trade union or labour leaders, maybe because many of them were teetotal or had temperance sympathies. The papers reported a meeting in London to discuss what action to take, but it seems to have been very ineffectual and overtaken by events.²⁹

What happened was a spontaneous protest without leaders and with two related objectives in mind, to restore beer production and to get rid of the wartime weak washy beer. As *The Times* ruefully commented rea-

soned, protests to Parliament was 'not nearly effective as to jump over the bar and get it yourself'.³⁰ And behind it was a feeling that unless the problem was quickly solved worse would follow. A shop steward from Birmingham wrote to Austen Chamberlain that:

There is a very bitter feeling among the men and unless something is done at once there will certainly be trouble ... the matter is very grave and a strike once started with extend with great rapidity.³¹

The protests had other consequences. Firstly, the government forewent £13,000,000 of duty provided the brewers did their bit by both brewing more beer and increasing its strength.³² The temperance inclining President of the Local Government Board Christopher Addison questioned the sacrifice:

if we are to sacrifice thirteen millions of revenue, the least we could look for in return would be the promotion of an increased measure of satisfaction amongst those who consume beer. This does not seem to be secure ...³³

Another soft temperance minister, H.A.L. Fisher, President of the Board of Education, argued that:

The policy of the Government should be to encourage the brewing light beers in the industrial population. There are signs that these desirable results have been promoted by the policy of restriction, and there is every reason to fear that they would be jeopardised by the abandonment of restriction.³⁴

The sacrifice occurred during a period of severe pressure on public finances, a result of the shift from a wartime to a peacetime economy. In addition, the clear unpopularity of restricting beer supplies and providing washy beer, which the moderate end of the temperance movement, such as H.A.L Fisher, had believed would be acceptable to the working-class drinker, proved to be a mighty blow to Prohibition in Britain.³⁵

In the end £13,000,000 and a few thousand tons of barley was a cheap way to remove a potential cause of industrial unrest. At a time when even the police were on strike and industrial workers were in uproar, this was a sum well worth paying.

The impact of the protests were limited. The strength of beer did not return to pre-war levels, for weaker beers -

if not washy beer - had proven popular with drinkers. And the protests hid the fact that nationally beer was no longer the drink that it was once. Although there was an upwards blip in 1919 and 1920, beer consumption fell by half between 1913 and 1922. Ironically this was particularly the case in the industrial areas - the centre of the 1919 protests - which faced prolonged depression. Colin Owen points out in his history of Bass that:

Brewers were obliged to face the fact that the public now preferred to drink smaller quantities of lower quality beer and to spend a much greater proportion of their income on motor vehicles and a wide range of other consumer goods.³⁶

References

1. Duncan, R. (2013) *Pubs and Patriots: the Drink Crisis in Britain during World War One*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, p.225.
2. In much the same way that their wives, daughters and girlfriends who worked in the munition factories were attacked for wasting their earnings on fripperies.
3. Gourvish, T.R. & Wilson, R.G. (1994) *The British Brewing Industry 1830-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.317.
4. Duncan, R. (2013) op. cit. p.188; Gourvish, T.R. & Wilson, R.G. (1994) op. cit. p.321; Cabinet Home Affairs Committee, 25 September 1918, item 2. CAB 126/1.
5. Gourvish, T.R. & Wilson, R.G. (1994) op. cit. p.322. For more about the brewing of washy beer, or Light Luncheon Ale as some brewers euphemistically referred to it, see HO 185/241.
6. Figures provided by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to Cabinet on 23 June 1919, CAB 23/30/31.
7. The position of brewing in the First World War is well summarised in Gourvish, T.R. & Wilson, R.G. (1994) op. cit. pp.317-35.
8. Quoted in a letter to Austen Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, 12 December 1918. T 171/159. Underlined in original. See also Gourvish, T.R. & Wilson, R.G. (1994) op. cit. pp.334-5.
9. Gourvish, T.R. & Wilson, R.G. (1994) op. cit. pp.320-1.
10. 'The Labour Situation: Report for Week Ending 13 February 1918'. CAB 24/42/6 GT 3606 'The Labour Situation: Report for Week Ending 6 March 1918'. CAB 24/44/41 GT 3842. A few weeks later Liverpool dockers took similar action, see CAB 24/78/95 GT 2196 'Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom' 30 April

1919, p.3.

11. Output of Beer: Memorandum by the Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic), 14 November 1918. See also TNA CAB 24/69/83 Paper GT 6281 Output of Beer. HO 185/267.

12. 'Output of Beer. Letter from the Temperance and Social Welfare Committee of the Wesleyan Methodist Church addressed to the Members of the War Cabinet' 29 January 1919. Another reason given was the need to curry favour with the United States who might be reluctant to sell barley for alcoholic beverages. CAB 24/74/28 GT 6727.

13. Home Affairs Committee, 10 March 1919, item 2. TNA CAB 126/1. Unless indicated all original material quoted here can be found at The National Archives (TNA).

14. Roffey to G H Roberts, 30 January 1919. HO 185/267.

15. Minutes of War Cabinet meeting, 4 February 1919, item 8. CAB 23/9/12.

16. Gretton to Chamberlain, 29 January 1919 T 171/159. Gretton was referring to pint bottles.

17. Minutes of War Cabinet meeting 12 March 1919, item 3. CAB 23/9/31.

18. 'Supply of Beer: Memorandum by Lord D'Abernon', 21 May 1919. CAB 24/79/60 GT7296.

19. 'Supply of Beer: Report by the Chancellor of the Exchequer' 21 May 1919. Visits took places on Sunday 18 May. CAB 24/79/95 GT 7295.

20. 'Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom' 30 April 1919, p.3. CAB 24/78/95 GT 2196
'Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom' 7 May 1919, p.4. CAB 24/79/18 GT 7218.

21. 'Report on Revolutionary Organisations in the United Kingdom' 21 May 1919, p1. CAB 24/780/5 GT 7305.

22. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 21 May 1919, p.2.

23. *Taunton Courier*, 29 May 1919, p.9.

24. *Manchester Guardian*, 22 May 1919, p12.

25. *ibid.*, 15 May 1919, p.7. See also *The Times*, 22 May 1919, p9.

26. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 1919, p.3.

27. *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 29 May 1918, p.7. Under a headline of 'Hard Lot of the Man behind the Bar' the paper was a reporting a meeting in Birmingham.

28. *The Times*, 23 May 1919, pp.12-13.

29. *Diss Express*, 30 May 1919, p.7.

30. *The Times*, 23 May 1919, p.13.

31. 'Copy of an anonymous letter received by the Chancellor of the Exchequer', 12 June 1919 CAB 24/81/91 GT7491.

32. Discussions at Cabinet meetings on 22 May 1919 CAB 29/10/18; 29 May 1919 CAB 23/10/21; 6 June 1919 TNA CAB 23/10/25; 23 June 1919, CAB 23/30/31.

33. 'Beer', 30 May 1919. CAB 24/81/9 GT7409.

34. 'The Gravity of Beer: memorandum by the President of the Board of Education', 15 June 1919. CAN 24/81/96 GT7496.

35. See for example Lord D'Abernon's comments to the Home Affairs Committee, 26 August 1918. CAB 26/1.

36. Gourvish, T.R. & Wilson, R.G. (1994) *op. cit.* p.340; Owen, C.C. (1992) *The Greatest Brewery in the world: a history of Bass, Radcliff & Gretton*. Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society, pp.153-4. Only the prosperous area of London bucked the national trend according to Owen, p.153. See also Gourvish & Wilson, p.335, 337-9.