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EL DORADO, LICENSED VICTUALLING AND SOCIAL MOBILITY, 1840-1939

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The term El Dorado originated in a book which Sir Walter Raleigh wrote when well-established in Queen Elizabeth's court in late sixteenth-century England, entitled the 'great and golden city of Manoa (which the Spaniards call El Dorado)' [1] He was out of favour in James I's court, so Raleigh spun his story about the prince who was coated in gold dust in a part of South America unknown to the Spanish, which meant that he could go looking for gold without disturbing the peace with Spain that King James wanted to maintain. Whether there was a golden legend that Raleigh believed to be true is hard to say; certainly there was not any gold and he had his head cut off. So we have a place with unlimited gold, and publicans later might be thought to have the key to this kingdom.

El Dorado — the legend which evoked gold and vast treasures almost achieved effortlessly as rewards awaiting neophyte men — naturally enticed ambitious but seldom prosperous men to liquor retailing. Part of its magnetism was the image itself, promising the underclass and petty bourgeoisie a path to unimaginable riches, one to which many aspired but which few actually attained. Limited paths out of slumland made it a powerful attractor of the uneducated, uninformed and untutored.

El Dorado served as a recurring emblem for those seeking to enter licensed victualling in the century after 1840. Early expression of the El Dorado legend appeared in testimony before Parliament's *Select Committee on Public Houses* in 1853. One representative of Samuel Allsopp & Sons, a major Burton-on-Trent brewery, recounted buying a pub and turning his modest investment into vast profits on reselling it. There was no shortage of similar tales of immense riches awaiting ambitious retailers. To the same committee, an individual formerly associated with a London brewery, offered his unqualified judgment: 'A well-conducted public house I believe to be a lucrative business'.[2] He was not alone in this judgement.

Among the earliest popularisers of the pub as a 'Gold Mine' was public house broker F.W. Thornton, whose pamphlet succinctly caught the spirit of El Dorado in 1885. In *How to Purchase and Succeed in a Public House*, the first guide for neophytes seeking tenancies, he criticised them for having 'acted as if they firmly believed they had nothing further to do than to open their doors and their fortunes were made.' Sidney Peel reiterated this sentiment. 'To a certain class of people a public-house is a sort of El Dorado, in which all their little savings may be profitably invested.' So pervasive was this symbol that critics of drink even knew of it. 'There is a certain glamour about the possession of a public-house ... tenancy ..., and a man thinks it is a regular El Dorado, and that he is going to make his fortune there,' testified trade official George H. Croxden Powell to a late Victorian royal commission. El Dorado's imagery thrived well into interwar England as George Izzard, son of a publican, learned when investigating available tenancies. Not all enthusiasts proved as sceptical and wary of such imagery as he did. Powell grasped the consequence: the contender for liquor licences 'does not make sufficient inquiry before he goes in'.[3] Seemingly informed critics still subscribed to El Dorado. Dividing available pubs into four categories, Lord Balfour of Burleigh identified the third, ordinary establishments, as affording applicants with £600-£1000 gross per month. Here he thought El Dorado flourished: 'Brewers have a hundred applicants for everyone (sic)'.[4]

Like so many other retailers, Nancy Banks-Smith's father, tenant of a Lancashire pub, had achieved El Dorado, a feat apparently requiring so little effort for so much monetary gain. Repeated throughout the country, this sentiment only varied in its precise expression. As one servant to an Aston-under-Lyne publican's family said pithily, 'it was plain to see that they had money to burn.' Walter Seeley, landlord of the George IV in London's interwar Poplar district, fully grasped why working-class males admired pub landlords: 'It is generally believed — particularly among the poorer classes — that to be a publican is to have arrived at the highest pinnacle of success'.[5]

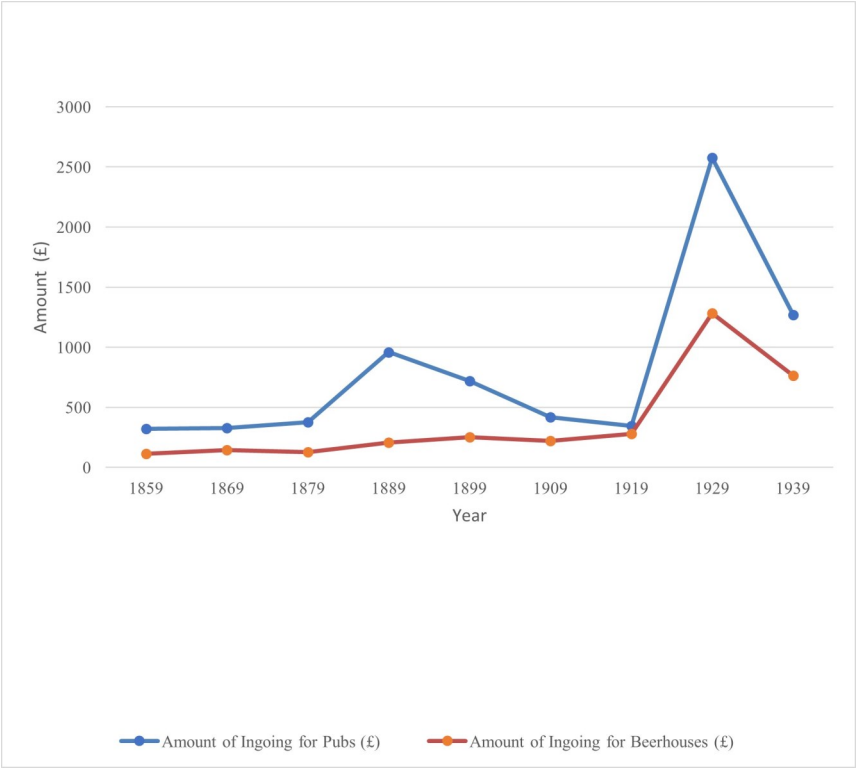


Figure 1. Ingoing prices for pubs and beerhouses, 1859-1939. Amounts based on advertisements in the *Morning Advertiser*, 1850-1939.[6]

Ambitious working- and lower-middle class men often expressed implicitly the sentiment of El Dorado; commentators subscribed to it as well. Writing in 1904, Edward R. Pease (Secretary of the Fabian Society) articulated the pervasive popular view that 'the public-house trade is a business so profitable that failure is impossible with even moderate commercial capacity'.[7] Not everyone entertained such notions. Before the First World War I, one knowledgeable commentator reflected that 'the idea that the man behind the bar is a person who must, by the very nature of his calling, be "piling up money," is a delusion widely entertained.' Decades later Thomas Cox (Chairman of Newington's magistrates) encountered novices frequently who regarded licensed victualling as irresistibly seductive. In these same years the *Licensed Victuallers' Gazette*, the leading provincial publicans' newspaper, thought that 'there still remains an impression that ownership or even managership (sic) of a licensed house is as near a heaven on earth as most mortals may deserve'.[8]

Drawing on his own experiences in pub work, John Hampson wrote about these prevalent sentiments in his highly regarded interwar novel, *Saturday Night at the Greyhound*. Appraising the local innkeeper, Fred Flack, 'a drunken townsman of shady repute,' Mrs. Taplin describes him as anticipating making 'a living, and more, out of the Grovelace villagers.' This belief 'amuses Mrs. Taplin, splendidly.' Having lived for decades among Derbyshire rustics, she has the historical perspective to offer a detached, realistic assessment: 'Fools believe in their folly, and expect others to do so the same'.[9] For her, El Dorado is a mystifying mirage, wholly deceiving the unwary into embracing the riches awaiting them.

From Victorian England through the interwar era, nothing seemingly dethroned the glamour of running public houses. Integral to any newcomer's appraisal was a vision of El Dorado, a nirvana which promised unimaginable wealth, high social status, respect and social mobility as rewards for those limited in income but not in ambition. Typical was how Chester's late Victorian Chief Constable described hopeful publicans' expectations: 'They go in and they think they have found an El Dorado; and that they are going to make their fortunes.' Successive generations of El Dorado adherents upheld belief in licensed victualling as 'a bed of roses'.[10]

Aspiring publicans usually explored available pub tenancies in the *Morning Advertiser*, the sole daily licensed victual-

lers' newspaper which published advertisements specifying the amount of the 'ingoing.' When acquiring the licence, the aspiring tenant had to find the cost of the goodwill of the house and its fittings and stock, generally known as the ingoing to pay the departing publican, as well as giving the brewer the initial rent and the cost of new supplies of beer. Seldom had he the means to strike a deal outright with the two parties, the incumbent retailer and the brewer-owner, so he had to borrow more money from the brewer (less often from another party) to cover such costs. In exchange for this financial assistance, the incoming tenant signed a contract with the brewer in which he agreed to stock just his brewer's beers (and later other items) in exchange for monetary assistance. Such an arrangement became known as the tied house system, which, though a convenient financial mechanism for tenanting retail outlets, imposed important restraints on tenants in terms of what liquors could be sold, prices charged and penalties imposed for violating the tied contract. Far from being a static arrangement, restrictions in tied house contracts became ever-widening, especially in the interwar years, when brewers abandoned paternalism while instituting more rigorous controls aimed at maximizing profits.

Throughout Victorian and Edwardian England, the amount of cash in hand varied considerably, reflecting falling per capita beer consumption from 1876, spiralling London land prices and a national boom in licensed property values (Fig. 1).

Central to El Dorado was the tied house, praised for opening 'the gates of entry into the retail trade to innumerable individuals who could never have become lessees or tenants under the old regime.' Sydney O. Nevile, Managing Director of Whitbread's, elaborated on this vital defence of El Dorado and tied houses. 'A man with a quite small capital can rent a house, whereas if the tied house system did not obtain, the only way he could get a public house would be by paying a very large capital sum of money.' The *Brewers' Journal* substantiated this argument with precise figures. 'Possessors only of a capital of anything from £200, are enabled to control businesses valued at from £1000 to £100,000' because of the tied house system. Moreover, the same pro-brewer newspaper contended that 'the system of 'promotion' of tenants who have shown themselves worthy of better houses is common throughout the Trade.' El Dorado linked with tied houses thus became synonymous with social mobility and the kingdom of vast riches.[11]

Leading London newspapers — the *Standard* and *Telegraph* as well as the licensed victuallers' *Morning Advertiser* — devoted regular columns to foretelling vast riches awaiting eager but inexperienced publicans, enormously impressing the unwary. Newspaper advertisements 'are very glowing of the amount of money to be made,' affirmed one Bristol trade official in late Victorian England.[12]

Reinforcing the mystique of El Dorado, some publicans throughout the land left estates worthy of its strongest proponents: Charles Walker (London, £8,230, 1903); Samuel Hyslop (Newcastle-under-Lyne, £12,000, 1900); and 'Dandy' Pat Byrne (Liverpool, £40,000, 1890).[13]

Once the stigma of running pubs diminished by 1918, individuals with higher social status increasingly entered licensed victualling — sharply contrasting with pre-war years in which disrepute of running a pub had deterred many from becoming publicans.[14] Such post-1914 changes elevated publicans' image as part of the local elite's privileged world. Growing numbers elected as Mayors underlined publicans' rising status.[15] No one was more symptomatic of this development than George F. Parson, elected as Mayor of St. Pancras in 1918, the first licensed victualler to attain this position in the borough, the most representative of all the capital's boroughs based on the statistical data collected by the Charles Booth and Sir Hubert Llewellyn Smith surveys.[16] Nationally, publicans duly acquired heightened social recognition with election to Parliament.[17]

When precisely did such adulation of publicans' occupational begin? Historian Peter Clark's study, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830* (1983), points to the aftermath of the Restoration as decisive in establishing the reputation of the alehouse 'as a sure route to prosperity'.[18] More influential commentary came in Georgian England when Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) declared that 'there is scarce any common trade in which a small stock yields so great a profit' as that of innkeepers.[19] Thinking more broadly some years later, Dr. Samuel Johnson felt investing in Barclay's Brewery presented the prospect of growing rich beyond the dreams of avarice.[20]

Adam Smith and Dr. Johnson writing about innkeeping and brewing respectively encapsulated social mobility, one vital dimension of El Dorado's fascination. In these years, innumerable aspiring individuals began as innkeepers and then became brewer-publicans, brewing beer in a small way with premises attached to an inn or pub.[21]

Several factors shaped the type of personalities recruited as publicans. The stigma attached to the occupation itself had deterred some strong candidates from seeking tenancies. Falling per capita beer consumption from 1876 equally drove some law-abiding publicans out of the trade, forcing brewers to accept growing numbers of inexperienced men as tenants who focused solely on selling alcohol 'with the least



Figure 2. Public bar and class at the New Inn, Willenhall, Staffordshire, built by William Butler & Co., as an improved public house, probably at its opening in 1931. Here was the public bar, the pub's most plebeian room with its traditional 'masculine republic.' Two factors caused customer discomfort: working-class drinkers in their customary sanctuary drinking amid some unwelcome outsiders, bourgeois drinkers (wearing fedora hats standing at the bar or seated near the fireplace); and workers drinking in the masculine republic in the gentrified ambience, with its carpeting, prints on walls, tables and absence of spittoons, attired in flat caps. Molson Coors Source: Beverage Company/National Brewery History Trust.

possible effort and no real desire to cater for the public needs in other directions,' remarked Sydney Nevile.[22]

Intensifying competition in a deteriorating Edwardian retail market for beer likewise influenced who stood behind Victorian and Edwardian drink bars. Three practices — the long pull (topping up pint beer mugs at no extra charge), (bogus working-class) clubs and beer hawking (more formally called direct delivery of beer) — epitomised this rivalry among brewers. As total beer consumption plummeted from 1899 and breweries confronted over-capacity, brewers aggressively exploited these long-standing tactics to combat falling demand, which exacerbated relations with their tied tenants.[23]

Given these circumstances, orthodox brewers as upholders of the status quo accepted a turnover of proprietors in pubs of astonishing proportions. Was there any wonder then that such brewers found themselves perpetuating a belligerently masculine culture extolling heavy drinking and sporting prowess as the established business strategy for the industry's prosperity? Unrealized then and certainly still unvalued much later was the impact: alienating women and other members of the respectable classes whose disgust at such behaviour fostered the pub's unsavoury reputation that did so much to besmirch the brewing industry's public image.[24]

Both the nature of licensed victualling and public drinking were transformed more in interwar England than in any other time since 1840. As the stigma of running pubs decreased, individuals of higher social status increasingly entered licensed victualling — sharply contrasting with pre-war years in which the disrepute of running a pub had deterred many from becoming publicans. Such post-1914 changes elevated publicans' image as part of the privileged world of the local elite.



Figure 3. Assembly Room (more often called the lounge) at the Merry Hill (Wolverhampton) rebuilt by William Butler & Company in 1929. Alone or in groups, emboldened respectable women drank publicly in the new improved pubs, where brewers introduced gender-neutral space without challenging the pub's traditional reputation as a masculine republic, perpetuated in the public bar. Source: Molson Coors Beverage Company/National Brewery History Trust.

Retired military officers, policemen and war heroes began replacing stereotypic pugilists, athletes and village stationmasters as the basis of liquor retailing in interwar England. Others who came from the professions as architects, social workers or authors were university educated and keenly aware of challenging long-established but now outdated stereotypes; these men would help reconfigure the status, standing and social mobility of a new generation of innkeepers and licensed victuallers.[25]

An influx of propertied pub proprietors in interwar England coincided with brewers' interest in fostering a wider clientele embracing middle-class beer drinkers and pub goers, changes which altered perceptions more broadly of licensed victualling. Progressive brewers foresaw a veritable social revolution encompassing publicans and the pubs' ambience, attracting patrons of similar social background. Nothing more epitomised this complex transformation than the lounge's introduction into the pub as an entirely separate, gender-neutral room immediately following World War I.[26]

Class was now redefined in England's drinking establishments. Here was El Dorado, appropriated from the upper-working and lower middle-classes, reincarnated as part of the ethos of the propertied classes. Altogether, these factors powerfully contributed to diminishing, if not altogether eliminating, the stigma of running pubs.

Elevation of licensed victualling as an occupation was inseparable from broader social, economic and societal changes, most notably Progressivism. From it came an entirely new conception of public drinking, gender roles and class relations. Never before had English brewers credited a concept such as environmentalism with shaping how the layout of pubs affected drinking habits, notably sociability, sobriety and class behaviour. Indeed, orthodox brewers ironically were as hidebound in their outlook as the 'masculine republic' to which they catered.[27]

Cutting across geography was legislation — the Wine and Beerhouse Act (1869) and the Licensing Act (1872) — extending magisterial control over new beerhouse licences. In introducing stricter licensing provisions, approximately 10% of existing beerhouse licences within one year were cancelled largely owing to their inability to meet higher standards. Over three decades (1869-1901), total numbers of beerhouses dropped by over 40% (20,000). Likewise, magistrates became far stingier in granting new full-licences, including elevating beerhouses. This form of social mobility, which Jennings thought had constituted the main route into li-

censed victualling, now abruptly ended. Portsmouth afforded a revealing example of its impact: the percentage of beerhouse keepers undergoing mobility declined sharply from 18.2% (1858-69) to 3.2% (1879-1900). Likewise, Sheffield reflected the new act's effect as mobility slumped from 9.2% (1837-45) to 1.2% (1883-93). Clearly, whatever had been the case for viewing beerhouse keepers as antecedents of licensed victuallers in the pre-1869 era, the new legislation had transformed the context dramatically. London represented an exception in the 'free licensing' period because relatively few beerhouse keepers became publicans. Just one of the 60 candidates who arranged loans with Truman, Hanbury & Buxton in the 1850s, for example, had experience as a beerhouse keeper.[29] Beershop keepers no longer had claim to monopolising the gateway to upward social mobility into licensed victualling. This became still more pronounced when the numbers of beerhouse keepers transitioning to licensed victuallers slumped in the twentieth century, with Portsmouth having less than 1%.[30]

Despite Jennings's assertion, beerhouse keepers failed to serve as a significant source of licensed victuallers not just in the mid-Victorian era, but well into the twentieth century. Biographical material in the *Licensing World*, the publicans' chief weekly newspaper in the twentieth century, gave information on publicans, none of them former beerhouse keepers.[31] Applications for tenancies with Truman's in the 1930s further support this conclusion. Of the 50 candidates, fully one-half had no experience with the trade whatsoever, while the other half had experience but none with beerhouses.[32] Outside London, licensing records reveal the same story. Bentley's Old Brewery received 40 applicants for pubs from 1933, but none involved a beerhouse keeper.[33]

Joshua Tetley's applications for tenancies — rare survivors documenting social mobility — suggest that just one of ten managers (but virtually no beerhouse keepers) received promotion to a tenancy in interwar England. Those entering licensed victualling, either directly as managers or indirectly as beershop keepers never constituted more than a miniscule percentage of the overall number of a brewery's total tenants, notwithstanding Paul Jennings' conjecture.[34]

The Mystique of Running the Public House in England: Quest for El Dorado (Routledge, 2024) marks the first scholarly attempt to explore relations between brewers and publicans in the brewing industry over a century (1840-1939). In detailing the history of the local, historian Paul Jennings offers a readable, synthetic account aimed at the popular market, with little analysis or archival evidence. No original interpretation is advanced to offer readers a new understanding of this century. Nothing has really rivalled public interest in Britons' beloved 'local' save for weekend visits of and publication of books on historic country houses.

Central to my study are the over 400 interviews with candidates which provide details of their backgrounds, trade experience and reaction of the brewery's interviewer. I am the first scholar to exploit such a valuable source, affording considerable insight into the recruitment process. Another overlooked historical source — evidence of royal commissions heard in secrecy (called *Camera*) — affords insight into how brewers dealt high-handedly with recalcitrant tenants. Likewise, legal records illuminate the publicans' occupation. Charged with evaluating the 'character' of persons seeking alehouse and beerhouse licences, police supplied detailed information about their background and licensing experience to licensing magistrates, enabling a comparison into how magistrates defined the concept of "respectability" for these two categories of licences. 15 licensed victuallers' newspapers were consulted for the entire period read without the benefit of digitised data bases. This too was the case with the massive evidence in five parliamentary commissions. Surviving licensed victuallers' records were also consulted. Representations of publicans in literature, cartoons, films and art were also incorporated into the book.

Mystique builds on my three earlier monographs on the topic: *Protecting the Pub: Brewers and Publicans against Temperance* (Royal Historical Society/Boydell, 1989); *Pubs and Progressives: Reinventing the Public House in England, 1896-1960* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2006); and *Women Drinking Out since the Early Twentieth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2014). *Mystique* breaks entirely new ground in exploring a topic neglected by scholars.

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