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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Toasting glass

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Keywords

Alcohol

Drinking

Ritual

Tableware

Toasting

Abstract

From the 1680s onwards, the English glassmaking industry strode on, offering ever more specialized types of glass to an increasing range of individuals, clubs and political organizations. Both resistant and elegant, new ranges of glasses were produced for the ritual of toasting. Special toastmaster glasses and custom-made glassware become part of clubs' identity-sustaining paraphernalia. Glasses also served to express individuals' tastes and social standing, or political identities.

In the course of the seventeenth century, toasting, or health-drinking as it was known, evolved into a ritual that spread across all social categories. The custom of drinking out of communal [bowls](#) or cups was increasingly frowned upon and individual glasses became common. This new tendency toward refinement and elegance in sociability was reflected in the glassware that was of high quality in Britain yet produced on an increasingly industrial scale. Glasses reflected developments in sociability, such as the emphasis on good taste and elegance, as well as the requirements of the custom of toasting, and individuals' and societies' wish for distinction and displays of specific identities. Technological improvement, the diversity of drinking venues, expanding markets, political divisions and changes in taste linked to the pursuit of social distinction all contributed to a greater variety of toasting glasses. Punchbowls came in many materials and prices, varying according to social hierarchy and the type of beverage, with pewter, stoneware and the rougher sort of delftware used for alcoholic beverages, and finer, more modern and expensive chinaware and porcelain reserved for exotic beverages (tea, coffee and chocolate). There was only one [punchbowl](#) for the entire company.¹ Those who happened to drink directly out of it signaled their social or moral inferiority and instead punch was usually ladled out into individual tumbler glasses.² That object, disposed in a central position and meant for sharing the intoxicating drink, was the focus of the company and reinforced bonding and conviviality. Punchbowls featured in paintings and caricatures, such as William Hogarth's *A Midnight Modern Conversation* representing a party of drunk gentlemen around a table decked with a decorated punchbowl, flagons and broad-footed glasses. Stem glasses were used for wine drinking, again with considerable variation in price and sophistication. A thick stem foot was ideal for toasting glasses because the glass was more resistant when bumped on a table.

Lead crystal glass, or 'flint glass' was an English imitation of Italian glass, which had been imported from Venice since the sixteenth century but was a luxury that very few could afford despite the foundation of a glass manufacture in London in 1574. A new luxury in the late seventeenth century, flint glass, a hard, white, high-quality product, became increasingly available to the middling orders in the following decades. George Ravenscroft (1632-1683) imported glass and other products from Venice in the 1660s. In 1673 he set up a glassworks at the Savoy, London, in partnership with Italian glassmakers. He quickly obtained a patent for crystalline glasses containing lead oxide. Although the glasses were liable to 'crizzle' (crack) at first and Ravenscroft's venture was probably not a success, technology improved and in the 1690s lead crystal was widely manufactured in England.³ It became the ideal medium for the popular heavy baluster glass, which is characterized by a large pear-shaped stem tapering toward the bowl. In the early eighteenth century the baluster stem was used for small glasses as well as for large ceremonial goblets for communal drinking at court.

New types of glasses were introduced to cater for the needs of convivial venues such as taverns and coffeehouses. 'Fuddling glasses' were conceived for drinking games. In late Stuart London, some taverns offered to their customers 'jolly boys', cups with twisted handles that 'expressed conviviality and linked arms' and were very difficult to drink out of without spilling; similar practices of convivial drinking games are suggested by 'puzzle jugs'

from the 1770s.⁴ Toastmasters' glasses were introduced to enable toastmasters to carry out their duties and drain their glass without losing their dignity: their glasses looked exactly like ordinary glasses but were thicker (to avoid breaking when thumped on the table) and could contain less liquor.

The market for glassware was very reactive and catered for the needs and tastes of individual customers, with fashions changing every decade or so. It was firmly based in London, which distributed glass for the whole of Britain. It broadened over the course of the century, reaching ever further down the social scale and encompassing the whole of the British Empire including India.⁵ Red and white wine would usually be drunk from the same glasses, except hock (Rhenish wine) which required special goblets or *Roemers* (Glanville and Lee 100). The period from c.1700 to c.1775 was marked by growing differentiation, with new categories of glasses being created for each beverage (rummers, glasses for port, wine, punch, grog, cider and champagne flutes). From the 1730s new, thinner, stem types were developed in England: first the 'air twist stem', also known as 'wormed', and from the 1750s the multicoloured 'opaque twists'. The ogee bowl became fashionable in the second half of the century. After 1780 some standardization was introduced (Glanville and Lee 98–99). Wealthy families on both sides of the Atlantic changed their sets of glasses every generation, thus displaying their social status but also their taste, sophistication and awareness of metropolitan fashions. Despite local variations, glasses, decanters and bottles displayed common characteristics on both sides of the Atlantic and helped shape a common drinking culture in the Anglo-American world (Hancock 35).

Purpose-made glasses for clubs

Gentlemen's clubs had their specific drinking rituals and their own toasts; some had utensils made to order. The Kit-Cat Club (active c.1696 to 1720), a literary and political club which boasted leading writers and Whig politicians among its members, was famous for pledging healths to the 'toasts of the town', the reigning ladies of the day, including the daughters of John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough. The [Kit-Cat Club](#)'s toasting glasses were inscribed with the names of the 'toasts' or with verse dedicated to them. As such they became part of literary games, as the Kit Cat Club was a literary as well as a political institution. Poetry written for the club's toasting glasses by Lord Halifax and others appeared in print, paying homage to aristocratic ladies known for their beauty, wit or other qualities, the 'toasts of the town'.⁶

The drinking glasses and plates of the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks (or Beefsteak Club, active 1735–1768) bore gridirons, the insignia of the club. Hedonistic clubs could be more inventive still: the Beggar's Benison, a sex club that operated around St Andrews in Scotland and spawned imitators in Scotland and elsewhere, used phallic-shaped 'prick glasses'.⁷

Political and commemorative glass engraving

Lead crystal glass lent itself to delicate engraving. At least in the first half of the eighteenth century the purpose of engraving was often political or commemorative (e.g. of royal accessions or battles) rather than decorative. Jacobite and Hanoverian drinking customs signaled the drinker's loyalty to either the displaced Stuart dynasty or the Hanoverian dynasty that ascended the throne in 1714. Williamite glass appeared in Britain after the Glorious Revolution, in Ireland in the 1730s.⁸ The Jacobites crafted elaborate rituals of loyalty in which toasting took pride of place. The sociability of British Jacobites linked by kinship bonds, political patronage networks, espionage rings, or support for the Stuart dynasty fell into four general types: clubs and societies; Masonic and related organizations; 'networks formulated round a specific purpose' like smuggling; more open commercial and military networks.⁹ The last of these was transnational in nature. [Conviviality](#) was central to Jacobite meetings. Drinking the right toast in the right way was crucial to manifesting the group's common loyalties and establishing strangers' credentials and trustworthiness. Jacobite glasses were decorated with symbols, including the rose and rosebuds (standing for the king and his heirs), the thistle (the claim to the Scottish throne), sunflowers (restoration) and oak leaves and acorns (Stuart monarchical emblems). Many glasses were also inscribed with Latin mottoes calling for the return of the Stuart kings, or contained coins bearing the image of James II. Some glasses are known as 'Amen Glasses' because they featured parts of the Jacobite anthem, including the word 'Amen'. Magnificent examples of Jacobite glasses are on display at the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and elsewhere.

Scholars of Jacobite material culture have insisted on the connection between the object and ritual in a complex semiotic system that resisted the dominant 'commercial' model of Hanoverian Britain. As part of this system, the toasting glasses functioned as symbols in relation with other objects (souvenir objects, relics, tokens of loyalty) and their designs conformed to the more general Jacobite codes (styles and patterns, colour codes, cant words). They were appropriate vessels for giving Jacobite toasts such as 'the King over the water' or Lord Duff's toast ('ABC' for 'A Blessed Change' and so on until XYZ). Murray Pittock contends that the safety of a Jacobite object 'lay in mobility and/or elusiveness and opacity; its stationary quality was transformed by the need for secrecy or movement'; thus a Jacobite glass could be 'occasionally or ritually smashed as a Jacobite toast was given, to deny 'its use for any less noble toast''.¹⁰

Other movements gave rise to political engravings on toasting glasses. In Ireland many glasses with political engravings (e.g. shamrocks) originated in the Volunteer Movement that started in 1779, both because the movement was instrumental in reviving Irish glassmaking and because glasses were used during regimental dinners. The Volunteers also used the symbolism of drinking vessels to emphasize the Irishness (and anti-English nature) of their movement; at a meeting at the town hall of Londonderry in 1779 '[s]ome drank out of Irish naggins [small cups or mugs], whilst others had the feet of their glasses broken off', thus reclaiming for themselves the old stereotype of 'paddy, poteen and potato'.¹¹

Throughout the eighteenth century (and beyond) a reactive market developed new ranges of glassware to cater for the need of customers, be they individuals, families, clubs and societies, or taverns and venues of public drinking. Glassware sustained forms of sociability inasmuch as it reflected (and reinforced) group identities by its symbolism and by the way it was used. Glasses were to be had in all price ranges, in all shapes and colours, thus reflecting social and economic hierarchies. They were manufactured to order to correspond to the particular identity of a tavern, a club or an aristocratic or gentry family. They could carry mottos and political symbolism. If the decoration and engraving made turned glasses into durable, symbolic objects representing a club's, party's or family's identity, the importance of glassware also lay in the symbolic uses to which it lent itself. Glasses were essential to toasting, which reinforced bonding and reassessed the company's core values; they were raised and, often, thumped on the table; additional Jacobite rituals included passing them over a bowl of water and (possibly) smashing them. Thus glasses functioned as ritual objects and participants had to know how to handle them (e.g. to raise a glass elegantly) in order to fit into the group's ritualized conviviality. While some forms of toasting faded away in the course of the century, especially abrasive Hanoverian toasting and Jacobite toasting, the practice of toasting flourished, and, alongside the publication of toastmasters' guides or the publication of lists of toasts in the newspapers, the multiplication of toastmasters' glasses confirms the buoyancy of this trend.

1. On the use and symbolism of punchbowls, see Karen Harvey, 'Ritual Encounters: Punch Parties and Masculinity in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* 214 (2012), p. 165-203.
 2. On the anxieties associated with drinking out of a common bowl, see Karen Harvey, 'Barbarity in a Teacup? Punch, Domesticity and Gender in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Design History* 21 (2008), p. 205-221.
 3. Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 117-126. An example of a crizzled Ravenscroft glass can be found in the holdings of the Fitzwilliam museum.
 4. Philippa Glanville and Sophie Lee, eds., *The Art of Drinking* (London; New York: V&A Publications, 2007), p. 60, 110, quotation p.60.
 5. On the imperial market and changing customer tastes, see David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine. Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 364-384.
 6. 'Verses Written for the Toasting-Glasses of the Kit-Cat Club', printed in *The Toasters Compleat. With the Last Additions* (London: s.n., 1704), and reprinted in John Dryden, *The fifth part of Miscellany poems. Containing variety of new translations of the ancient poets: Together with Several original poems. By the most eminent hands. Publish'd by Mr. Dryden* (London: printed for Jacob Tonson, 1716), p.71. On the club's verses and its involvement with the opening of the new Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket in 1705, see Robert J. Allen, 'The Kit-Cat Club and the Theatre', *Review of English Studies* 7 (1931), p. 56-61.
 7. David Stevenson, *The Beggar's Benison: Sex Clubs of Enlightenment Scotland and Their Rituals* (East Linton, UK: Tuckwell Press, 2001).
 8. Martyn J. Powell, *The Politics of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Houndmills, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 188.
 9. Murray Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688-1760: Treacherous Objects, Secret Places* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 144.
 10. Murray Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition, 1688-1760: Treacherous Objects, Secret Places* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 23-24.
 11. *Londonderry Journal*, 3 December 1779, quoted in Powell, *Politics of Consumption*, p. 30.
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Cite this article

DUTHILLE Rémy, "Toasting glass", The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century [online], ISSN 2803-2845, Accessed on 06/09/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/toasting-glass.html>

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[Toasting-glasses of the Kit-Cat Club, 1703](#)

[Toasting-glasses of the Kit-Cat Club, 1703 \(2\)](#)

[Toasting-glasses of the Kit-Cat Club, 1703 \(3\)](#)