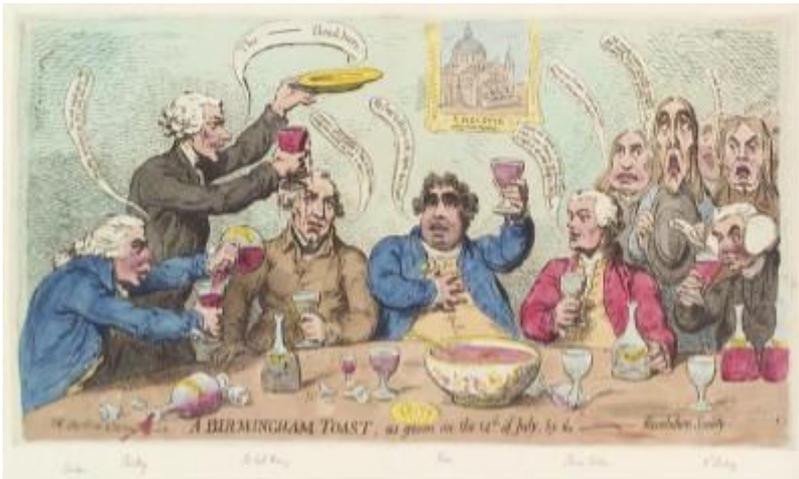# DIGIT.EN.S

The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Taverns

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Keywords

Celebration

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Abstract

A concise history of the eighteenth-century tavern, including its reputation for bawdy and licentious behaviour in the early decades of the century, and efforts to clean up taverns in the mid-century, resulting in large, elegant metropolitan taverns, which could house large balls, public meetings, and political dinners. A description of the contested reputation of taverns in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

Taverns provided important locations for middle-class male convivial gathering in eighteenth-century cities, emerging alongside coffeehouses as important multi-use venues for a variety of forms of sociability. Distinct from alehouses, which predominantly sold beer and ale, and inns, which offered accommodation for travellers and their horses, taverns were primarily an urban phenomenon that retailed wine and food to relatively affluent men. Foreign visitors were often surprised at the ubiquity of taverns in England. When the Marquis

of Caraccilio visited London in 1777, he was shocked to find the English aristocracy dining in taverns. 'Country houses aside, their lodgings are poor, and nowhere can they find better food than at a tavern, to which they commonly invite foreign friends' the Marquis wrote. 'Is this what it means to live like a lord?'[1] But taverns provided locations for a large variety of activities beyond eating and drinking, including meetings of clubs and societies, political meetings, balls and assemblies, celebratory dinners, and concert performances. They also functioned as auction houses, collectors of signatures for petitions, theatre box offices, and brothels. Many of these activities also included the consumption of wine and food. London taverns such as the Crown and Anchor, the St. Albans Tavern, and the St. James's Tavern, became important predecessors of the restaurant, with the London Tavern in Bishopsgate Street especially celebrated for its magnificent banquets, celebratory feasts, and turtle dinners beginning in the eighteenth century and continuing well into the Victorian period.

Unlike the relatively recent coffee and chocolate houses, taverns had a much longer history, dating back to Roman times, so their origins are harder to trace. In the early modern period a strict hierarchy of spaces for public drinking evolved with inns offering good quality food and lodging to wealthy locals and travellers, alehouses offering inexpensive beer and ale to locals, and taverns occupying the middle ground. This hierarchy remained in place after the restoration and informs much of the reputation of the three spaces until the nineteenth century, when the 'pub' (short for 'public house') developed, a hybrid form consisting of elements of inns, taverns, and alehouses as well as coffeehouses and gin palaces.

Early eighteenth-century taverns were marked by a reputation for debauchery and vice. Most often when they appear in the art and literature of the period they are associated with prostitution, gambling, drinking, and theft. While Addison and Steele's theorization of polite urban sociability included taverns as well as coffeehouse,[2] their ideas became more strongly associated with coffeehouses, while the tavern's popular reputation for vice and profligacy was encouraged in works by writers such as Ned Ward[3] and by artists such as William Hogarth. Hogarth's *The Rake's Progress* sets its third scene, known as the orgy scene, in the Rose Tavern, a tavern whose proximity to the Drury Lane theatre made it a popular site of resort for those attending a play. Hogarth associates the tavern not with polite sociability, but with chaotic depraved behaviour and the sex trade.

Representations of taverns in the first half of the eighteenth century frequently drew on similar associations, and there is much historical evidence to support the impression that eighteenth-century taverns frequently operated as centres for the sex trade. The notorious *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies,*[4] which listed the physical appearance and sexual specialties of London prostitutes along with addresses and prices, may have originated as a list compiled by John Harrison (aka Jack Harris), a waiter at the Shakespeare Head Tavern in Covent Garden. The Shakespeare Head was attached to the Covent Garden theatre and the Bedford Coffee House, and like the Rose Tavern in Drury Lane was particularly associated with the sex trade. In his *London Journal,* James Boswell records how he visited the tavern with two prostitutes. 'I solaced my existence with them one after the other, according to their Seniority. I was quite *raised,* as the phrase is. Thought I was in a London Tavern, the Shakespear's head, enjoying high debauchery after my sober winter'.[5] In the 1740 and 1750s

the second floor of the Cheshire Cheese on Fleet Street, meanwhile, boasted a number of plaster panels depicting various novel and agile penetrative acts, now in the Museum of London.[6]

In the mid-eighteenth century, however, a concerted effort to clean up the reputation of taverns was begun, especially in London where the larger population exacerbated the tavern's reputation for vice. London taverns began to include large open spaces that could hold elegant banquets, large public meetings and balls. The London Tavern in Bishopsgate Street, the largest of this new breed of taverns opened in 1768. It contained a large upper floor ball-room measuring 73' (l) x 33' (w) x 36' (h) with ornate interior mouldings in neo-classical style, and featured a pipe organ and a balcony where musicians might play when balls were held. The London Tavern proved hugely influential and in the remaining decades of the eighteenth century many older taverns were considerably expanded and refashioned to conform to the new taste for taverns as sites of respectable, public meetings. The Thatched House Tavern on St James's Street, the Crown and Anchor in the Strand, and the Star and Garter in Pall Mall, all underwent considerable expansion in order to accommodate large gatherings. The Half Moon Tavern on Cheapside was renovated and reopened as 'Lewis's New London Tavern and Coffeehouse' and, later, the City of London Tavern, which stood opposite the London Tavern on Bishopsgate Street, was designed on a similar scale.

Outside of London, taverns tended to be more mixed in their functions. The Leicester Arms, on Bell Street in Birmingham, better known as Freeth's Coffee House, operated somewhere in between a London tavern and an alehouse. It had been held in the Freeth family for much of the eighteenth century, and when John Freeth took over its management in 1768 it became associated in particular with political debate, initially in support of John Wilkes and then for various radical political causes, including housing a Jacobin Club in the 1790s. John Freeth himself was a well-known ballad writer and poet, and would write poems, printed in letterpress on small cards as invitations to 'feasts' held at his public house.[7] Not far from Freeth's Coffee House, was the Birmingham 'Hotel' on Temple Row, which was built in 1772 and catered to a more up-market clientele, closer to that of London taverns. Like the larger London taverns, the Birmingham Hotel had a large assembly room, and prided itself on the elegance of its dining. The designation 'hotel' was new in the 1770s, and suggested something that combined the accommodations of an inn with the elegance of a tavern. On the second anniversary of the French Revolution a dinner was held there, which sparked a loyalist protest, leading to the Church and King riots that destroyed Joseph Priestley's home.

Each of these venues in London and elsewhere was able to accommodate a large variety of events and meetings, many of which (including balls, musical concerts and debating societies) were designed to attract women. But at their heart was an emerging culture of masculine conviviality, which had begun to move away from Addison and Steele's ideal of informed and witty conversation towards a form of sociability that emphasized shared experience through more ritualized forms of entertainment such as collective singing, toasting, and speech-making. This went hand-in-hand with a substantial print industry dedicated to publishing the words to songs sung at convivial meetings, and suggestions of toasts, as well as the proceedings of tavern-based societies, such as those of Richard Price's

Revolution Society decried in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.8 Newspapers became an important medium for publicizing the activities of tavern-based societies, and in the final decades of the eighteenth century they frequently carried reports of 'public meetings' and listed the toasts, which were increasingly seen as a shorthand for the principles upon which a society operated.

Particularly in the 1790s, when taverns became embroiled in debates about the French Revolution, these published proceedings, toasts, and songs became highly contentious, and associated in particular with the radical movement. In fact, counter-revolutionary groups such as John Reeves's Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers (also known as the Crown and Anchor Society) also met in taverns, and James Gillray's print 'The Chancellor of the Inquisition Marking the Incorrigibles' plays on the tavern's reputation for being simultaneously a hotbed of radicalism and a bastion of zealous loyalism, showing an 'anonymous letter box' on the tavern's exterior where informants could report seditious behavior to Reeves's Association. Nevertheless, as the decade wore on taverns gained a particular reputation for subversive and seditious behaviour, and tavern-based political meetings began to be understood as a form of political gathering that sought to undermine the authority of the crown. As groups of plebeian and working class radicals such as the London Corresponding Society began to meet in alehouses to discuss the rights of man, counter-revolutionary propaganda frequently associated the tavern with the alehouse, seeing both as uniformly seditious and scurrilous. In this atmosphere, even elite tavern groups such as the Society for Constitutional Information and the Whig Club, were attacked by loyalist publications such as the *True Briton* and *Anti-Jacobin*, which depicted reform-minded political tavern meetings as radical drunken routs which threatened the stability of the nation. 9

Those more sympathetic to the ideals of the French Revolution argued that it was every Englishman's right to gather together, drink, and sing and enjoy the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution without fear of being reported to the government by spies and informers who were imagined – correctly in some cases – to have infiltrated reform-minded political groups. Thomas Erskine, in particular, mounted a robust defence of the right to freely discuss political ideas in a series of speeches given at trials for treason and sedition, and at meetings of the Friends of the Liberty of the Press, which met at the Crown and Anchor tavern. His attempts to depict the right to convivial assembly as being guaranteed by the English constitution achieved short-term success, most notably with the acquittal of each of the men charged in the Treason Trials of 1794. However, these successes were undermined in 1795 with the passing of the Seditious Meetings Act (one of the two so-called Gagging Acts) which restricted the number of people who might gather to fifty. These measures were robustly protested in parliament by Charles James Fox who inspired a number of intentionally symbolic meetings, including a huge celebration of Fox's birthday in January 1796, which was held simultaneously in London's two largest taverns, the London Tavern and the Crown and Anchor, with all of the rooms packed out. But with Pitt's stranglehold on parliament the Bills were passed, thus effectively bringing to an end the tavern, whose importance slowly declined in the early years of the nineteenth century, its functions being taken over by restaurants and by the emergence of the Victorian 'pub'.

1. Quoted in Jean Louis Flandrin, Massimo Montanari, and Albert Sonnenfeld, Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 473.

2. See for example The Spectator No. 49, Thursday April 26, 1711.

3. Edward Ward, The London-Spy Compleat. In Eighteen Parts 3rd ed. (London, 1700), see for example the first part, November 1698, p. 1-16.

4. Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies: or, Man of Pleasure's Kalender, for the year 1773. Containing an exact description of the most celebrated Ladies of Pleasure who frequent Covent Garden, and other parts of this Metropolis (London: H: Ranger, 1771).

5. James Boswell, London Journal 1762-3 ed. Gordon Turnbull (London: Penguin 2010), p. 225-226.

6. See Dan Cruickshank, Secret History of Georgian London, (London: Random House, 2009), p. 173-177.

7. For more on John Freeth, including images of his prints, see Jenni Dixon's blog (http://mappingbirmingham. blogspot.com/2016/10/freeths-coffee-house-society-feasts.html).

8. See Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 86-89, p. 93-117.

9. See, for example, the report on the celebration of Charles James Fox's birth-day in The Anti-Jacobin, Or, Weekly Examiner, 22 January 1798.

Cite this article

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