

Gin and the Gin Craze

HAWLEY Judith



Keywords

Alcohol

Crime

Friendship

Poverty

Abstract

The juniper-flavoured spirit, gin, was highly popular in the eighteenth century. The ‘Gin Craze’ swept through the poorer districts of London in particular, leading to widespread concern that its deleterious effects on the health of the labouring classes could precipitate a national decline. It gained a reputation as a solitary not a sociable drink as gin shops were the antithesis of new-style coffee shops and old-style ale houses. Yet it has a sociable dimension. It was frequently included in punch, the archetypal drink of clubs and friendly societies, and was the bond that lubricated many criminal associations.

Gin, the colourless spirit flavoured with juniper, can be classed as an object. ‘The Gin Craze’, the phenomenon of widespread and destructive addiction to gin among the metropolitan poor especially in London – or at least the moral panic surrounding it - can be classed as a concept. King William III is credited with introducing the taste for the Dutch spirit – genever - when he ascended to the throne of Britain in 1688. In [*The Fable of the Bees*](#), one of the earliest

references to gin in print, Bernard Mandeville explains the origins of the name and indicates that already in 1714 it was associated with the poor: ‘Nothing is more destructive, either in regard to the Health or the Vigilance and Industry of the Poor than the infamous Liquor, the name of which, deriv’d from Juniper in Dutch [...] shrunk into a Monosyllable, Intoxicating Gin’.¹ The low price and ready availability of this potent spirit were largely the result of government policy. Successive governments introduced heavy duties on French alcoholic drinks and lowered restrictions on the distillation of spirits in England in order to harm French trade and generate the support of grain-producing land landowners in Britain. Consumption of gin increased exponentially in the first half of the century. Jessica Warner summarises the available data:

‘In 1700, the average adult drank slightly more than a third of the gallon of cheap spirits over the course of a year; by 1720 that amount had nearly doubled; and by 1729, year when the first act restricting sales of gin was passed, the number had nearly doubled again, to slightly more than 1.3 gallons per capita [...] In 1743 annual consumption peaked at 2.2 gallons per capita, after which the craze at long last started to abate. By 1752, the year after the passage of the final gin act, annual per capita consumption had fallen by nearly one half, to 1.2 gallons, only to drop by half again by 1757. From this point on annual consumption remained fairly constant for the next two decades, at about 0.6 gallons per capita.’²

The Gin Craze is generally dated 1720-51, though the available statistics on the per capita consumption of gin do not quite match the peaks in the moral panic about it. Periodically, the government attempted to bring gin to heel. Between 1729 and 1751, Parliament passed a total of eight ‘Gin Acts’ designed to curb consumption (while protecting government revenue).

The British have always had a reputation as heavy drinkers so why was gin different? And how is it related to sociability? *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane*, the iconic pair of engravings published by William Hogarth as part of the campaign against the Craze which precipitated the Act of 1751 provide part of an answer to both questions.

Image



Legend

William Hogarth, 'Gin Lane and Beer Street', Royal Academy of Arts, 12/457 & 12/456, 1751.

Beer Street, set in the thriving middle class area around Saint Martin's-in-the-Fields, depicts a prosperous scene of industrious trade and friendly intimacy among a group of people who carry on their daily work while downing foaming tankards of apparently health-giving beer. In contrast, *Gin Lane*, located in the slums of St. Giles, depicts poverty, squalor and human degradation. Moreover, at the heart of the image are two figures who symbolise the breakdown of social relations. At the bottom right sits a ballad seller, someone who usually brings cheer and fosters convivial singing. He seems to have pawned his clothes and starved himself to feed his gin addiction and is now insensible, if not actually dead. In the centre sprawls an iconic anti-Madonna. Her exposed body marked with syphilitic sores, she stimulates herself with a pinch of snuff, unconcerned while her child tumbles from her arms. The parabola of his descent directs the eye to the legend over the cavernous entrance to a subterranean gin-shop: 'Drunk for a penny. Dead drunk for two pence. Straw for nothing.' Together the images suggest that the gin craze has reduced the poor of Britain to brute beasts without understanding, while beer fosters prosperity and cheerful social relations.³

The ways in which gin was sold also provoked alarm. Women and servants could pick up a bottle at a Chandler's shop with their groceries or from street vendors - often women who sold individual drams as well as quatern bottles. So, gin was often consumed by solitary tipplers. It was also sold in gin shops, though some were more salubrious than the hellhole depicted by Hogarth. The gin shop was a small single room where spirits were sold from behind the

counter to a transient socially mixed clientele. Beer, on the other hand, was sold in inns, taverns or alehouses where sociability and social hierarchy were enshrined in the architecture. Alehouses were the simplest, catering for the poor. Inns and taverns also accommodated social elites but they had different kinds of rooms for different kinds of customers. Crucially, customers were served in their seats. Lee Jackson explains: 'There were [...] roving staff to take orders, ferrying drinks hither and thither.' While some public houses were disreputable, 'the ideal ale house was a model of segregated social harmony. The tradesman sat happily in a slightly more select and expensive parlour, the humble labourer frequented the taproom; and they both formed part of a temporary fellowship under the watch full eye of a convivial, respected publican.'⁴ They encouraged drinkers to linger over their pints by serving food and providing pipes and newspapers, while gin shops only sold liquor.

In the 1820s, social elites and law enforcers were put in a further panic by the development of a much more luxurious style of gin shop, dubbed the gin palace. The problem was partly the flashy luxury of the style of the gin palace – deemed to be too good for the quality of the clientele – but also other aspects of the design and furnishings that facilitated speedy solitary drinking. They usually comprised a single room that could be entered directly from the street, allowing direct access from the street to a long bar, adapted from the new-style [West End](#) shops. This was particularly thought to encourage female customers who might be reluctant to run the gauntlet of the regulars ensconced in the taproom. They also often had more than one door which, critics complained, swung on hinges specially designed so that a customer could slip in at one door, down a quick dram of gin and then speedily exit at the other. *The Times* reported on 14 December 1829 that 'a correspondent states, that he watched one shop in Holborn, of great business, and saw, on average, six individuals enter per minute, being equal to 360 in an hour'. This shop is thought to be Thompson and Fearon on Holborn Hill whose proprietor disputed such claims. The gin palace was like a machine which enabled people to get drunk in industrial quantities. A *Select Committee on Drunkenness*, set up by Sheffield MP James Silk Buckingham, heard testimony to this effect in the summer of 1834.

And yet, despite its reputation as a drink for the solitary (whether a discrete nip of cordial sipped by a lady at her toilette, or the poison that hastened a pauper's death), gin was also drunk in company and could be a drink that brought people together. It figured in recipes for that most sociable of beverages: punch which, as Karen Harvey has pointed out, was often served at club meetings.⁵ It was common for people too to share a quart pint of gin between them. Gin drinking often went on in the workplace thus in group contexts.

Ironically, much of the evidence of social gin drinking is of debauchery and criminality. In the background of Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, there are groups of people pouring gin down each other's throats and a pair of schoolgirls drinking together. The newspapers reported accounts of casual sexual liaisons between people who met in gin shops. In 1736, for example, *Read's Weekly Journal* described how a maid called Jane Andrews went to one of her regular gin shops one morning where she picked up a drummer of the guards, a chimney sweep and a woman traveller. After inviting them back to her master's house, they carried on drinking till 4 pm when, at Jane's suggestion, they all stripped and got into bed together. Somehow, a mob found out about their entertainment and caused a rumpus outside the door (Warner 1).

One of the most notorious crimes linked to gin led to a public outcry that helped precipitate the Gin Act of 1736. Judith Defour (alias Leford, or Defoy), aged about 30, was employed in winding silk, being herself the daughter of a French weaver. On 29 January 1734, she spent the day in company with a rather shiftless young woman called Sukey or Susannah. Sukey accompanied her when she went to fetch her illegitimate two-year-old child, Mary, from the Workhouse in Bethnal Green. She persuaded her to sell this poor little girl's new clothes. Accordingly, they stripped her naked, strangled her and threw her in a ditch. Once they had sold the clothes for 16 d., they split the money and spent some of it on gin. Defour then went to work at 7 o'clock that evening at a Throwster's, twisting silk into threads. She carried on drinking till eventually in the small hours she broke down and confessed that 'she had done something that deserved Newgate'. The judge and jury agreed and she was executed for her crime in 1734. Defour destroyed her key social relation, the mother-daughter bond, but in favour of her relationship with a friend.⁶ Gin perhaps, then, is a marker of modernity and the shift from older familial bonds to the elective relationships of the new sociability.

1. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Publick [sic] Benefits* (London: printed for J. Rorerts, 1714), remark G.

2. Jessica Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p. 3.

3. William Hogarth, *Gin Lane and Beer Street*, Published 1751. See Mark Hallett and Christine Riding, *Hogarth* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 190-192.

4. Lee Jackson, 'The Gin Palace; or, The Abodes of Suicide', in *Palaces of Pleasure: From Music Halls to the Seaside to Football, How the Victorians Invented Mass Entertainment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 9. See also Mark Girouard, *Victorian Pubs* (London: Studio Vista, 1975) and Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830* (London & New York: Longman, 1983).

5. Karen Harvey, 'Punchbowls', *The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century*. <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/punch-bowls.html>

6. 'Judith Defour', *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, ref. t17340227-32, 27 February 1734. The fullest account is given in 'The Ordinary of Newgate, His Account of The Behaviour, Confessions, and Dying Words, of The Malefactors, Who Were Executed at Tyburn, on Friday the 8th of this Instant March', *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, ref. OA17340308, 1734. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>

Cite this article

HAWLEY Judith, "Gin and the Gin Craze", *The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century* [online], ISSN 2803-2845, Accessed on 04/13/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/gin-and-gin-craze.html>

Further Reading

Clark, Peter, 'The "Mother Gin" Controversy in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (vol. 38, 1988), p. 63–84.

Clark, Peter, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830* (London & New York: Longman, 1983).

Dillon, Patrick, *Gin: The Much-Lamented Death of Madam Geneva: The Eighteenth-Century Gin Craze* (London: Thistle Publishing, 2013).

Jennings, Paul, *A History of Drink and the English, 1500-2000* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Smyth, Adam (ed.), *A Pleasing Sinne: Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

Warner, Jessica & Ivis, Frank, 'Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-century London', *Eighteenth-Century Life* (vol. 24, n° 2, 2000), p. 85-105.

White, Jonathan, 'The "Slow but Sure Poyson": The Representation of Gin and Its Drinkers, 1736–1751', *Journal of British Studies* (vol. 42, n° 1, 2003), p. 35–64.

[Judith Defour Case, 1734](#)