

Parliamentary intoxication:

The uses and abuses of alcohol from the Restoration to the death of Anne

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While it might be too much to suggest that alcohol was the life-blood of Restoration and Augustan parliamentary society, it seems fair enough to suggest that it was a significant element that helped sway opinion, was a source of much needed tax-raising potential and, of course, helped keep members well-lubricated during lengthy sessions. One need only perform a cursory search on British History Online to see that this is so. A search for the term “beer” limited to Parliament and to the 17th century results in 751 hits, for the 18th century 233 hits; a similar search on “ale” results in 690 hits for the 17th century and 212 for the 18th; while “wine” in the 17th century produces 1,472 hits and for the 18th (a rather modest) 268: in all, then, 3,626 mentions – and these comprising just three varieties of alcohol.¹ It may be a blunt instrument, but as an indicator of the time given over by Parliament to matters related to beers and wines it is at least suggestive that this was a topic that kept many a parliamentarian busy during the period.

Numerous themes might be developed from a study of parliament and intoxication and one should bear in mind, too, the changing fashions associated with the consumption and regulation of alcohol across the period. As Angela McShane and Charles Ludington have pointed out previously, there was a factional dimension to all this – with clear links existing between types of alcohol and political allegiance: claret for the Tories, while port was the

¹ www.british-history.ac.uk.

tipple of the Whig.² Others had more specific associations, Tokay, for example, being it seems a favourite of the duumvirs, Marlborough and Godolphin.³ As for beer, if in the late 17th century it might be associated at times with disloyalty – by the 18th century nothing could be as healthy, honest and British as a mug of beer – accompanied one would hope with a manly slice of beef. Thinness – whether in drink, food or appearance – these were the traits of the oppressed foreigner. Bad quality liquor too might be thought of as a foreign curse. In the winter of 1671 when writing to Archbishop Sheldon to excuse his failure to attend Parliament, Bishop Creighton⁴ explained his inability to appear as being on the grounds of an infirmity (which he shared with Bishop Earle⁵) resulting from a period they had both spent at Cologne with the king (during the interregnum) ‘where we found no other liquor to drink but strong old Rhenish rinco, whose heavy tartar maleficated us both to our ends’.⁶ Similarly, when the earl of Mulgrave’s tutor sought an excuse for returning to England early from their tour abroad, one of the excuses he communicated to the young earl’s guardians was that where they were in Paris ‘the beer was not fit to be drunk’.⁷

For the purpose of this brief paper, however, I wish to confine my thoughts to two main areas. First, I will attempt to consider the role of alcohol both within the parliamentary estate

² Angela McShane, ‘Roaring royalists and ranting brewers: the politics of drink and drunkenness in political broadside ballads from 1640-1689’ and Charles Ludington, “‘Be Sometimes to your country true’”: The politics of wine in England, 1660-1714’, in Adam Smyth, ed., A pleasing sinne: drink and conviviality in seventeenth-century England, (Cambridge, 2004).

³ BL, Add. MS 61140, ff. 135-8. John Churchill, duke of Marlborough, and Sidney Godolphin, earl of Godolphin, were the mainstays of the administration that dominated for much of the reign of Queen Anne. For their parliamentary significance see History of Parliament: the Lords 1660-1715, ed. R. Paley, 5 vols. (Cambridge, 2016), ii. 564-613; iii. 68-120.

⁴ Robert Creighton, bishop of Bath and Wells. History of Parliament: the Lords 1660-1715, v. 95-6.

⁵ John Earle, successively bishop of Worcester and Salisbury. History of Parliament: the Lords 1660-1715, v. 128-9.

⁶ Bod. Lib. Add. MS c305, f. 27.

⁷ Chatsworth House, Cork MS 33/7.

and in the political life of the nation. Westminster was a veritable labyrinth of houses, apartments, cellars and temporary structures, and within these could be found a number of hostelries where busy parliamentarians and others visiting Parliament or the courts could find themselves a sociable drink to quaff. Away from the palace, prospective candidates for Commons seats might choose to treat potential voters with gifts of beer and ale. Second, I will turn my attention briefly to the impact of alcohol on parliamentarians as consumers. One way or another, though, alcohol was hard for members of the Lords and Commons to avoid.

I

Within and beyond the confines of the Palace of Westminster, alcohol was if not omnipresent a frequent feature of political life. Beer and wine were the currency of elections, the sweetener to many a hard-achieved act of parliament, ways of securing votes by hard-pressed members under investigation, and they flowed freely too at times of celebration. Treating in beer was acceptable in a way that handing over hard cash was not though even the most liberal donor could not be sure that his gift would have the desired effect. Thus Dr William King, Principal of St Mary Hall Oxford, intending to stand against Dr George Clarke of All Souls for one of the university seats in the spring of 1722, even though he made a point of ladling out quantities of French wine, burgundy and champagne far in advance of the poll was doomed, so thought one commentator, not to attract the interest of any of his fellow heads of house. They proved right and King finished third.⁸ Some years previously, George Lucy convinced himself that his gifts of ale and tickets had done enough to convince Lord Brooke⁹ not to dispute both seats at Warwick and to let one of them go to Lucy's chosen candidate, Sir John Burgoyne, but Lucy too proved unfortunate with both seats going to

⁸ Christ Church, Oxford, Wake MS 16/327; History of Parliament: the Commons 1715-54, ed. Romney Sedgwick, 2 vols, (London, 1970), i. 305-7.

⁹ Fulke Greville, 5th Baron Brooke.

members of Brooke's family.¹⁰ Such uncertain prospects of the value of a good treat (or perhaps, who knows, even high-mindedness) led to some doubting the wisdom of wooing potential backers with gifts of beer. Thus, when Alderman Richard Booth undertook to stand for Warwick early in 1678, he insisted that he would not 'make the commons my friends with strong beer, yet shall do that I hope that will be a real kindness to the town, and be of more good use then all the hogsheads of beer in the Towne.' In the event Booth failed to stand on this occasion, but he was returned just over a year later at the second poll of 1679.¹¹

Booth may have doubted its efficacy, but many were clearly convinced of the benefits of treating and elections were far from being the only occasions when potential backers were wooed with food and drink. When Sir Robert Paston was engaged with securing the passage of the Yarmouth Harbour bill early in 1665, he himself entertained 'thirteen lords and earls', while his kinsman the earl of Lindsey took 'a great many' others home with him, thereby ensuring that come the afternoon session they were able to deliver over 30 peers to the relevant committee, who were by then extremely well-disposed to nodding through Paston's bill.¹² Three decades later, when the duke of Leeds¹³ was being probed for corruption, he too responded with a generous treat, keeping it was said 'open house at Hell' – one of the taverns of the Westminster palace complex – 'to debauch Lord Morley, Hunsdon, Colepeper and the rest of the Mumpers'.¹⁴ In the event, though, Leeds did not need to call in the favour

¹⁰ BL, Add. MS 61496, Lucy to [Sute], 25 Feb. 1705.

¹¹ History of Parliament: the Commons 1660-1690, ed. B.D. Henning, 3 vols, (London, 1983), i. 432, 682.

¹² BL, Add. MS 27447, f. 338.

¹³ Thomas Osborne, earl of Danby, marquess of Carmarthen and (ultimately) duke of Leeds. Lord treasurer under Charles II and Lord President under William III.

¹⁴ HMC Portland, ii. 173.

as he was let off the hook by a fortunately timed prorogation that left the Commons unable to put together the anticipated impeachment.¹⁵

Treating within parliament was facilitated by the range of taverns and coffee-houses to be found close to the Commons and Lords chambers. The most famous of them was the triumvirate of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell. Hell was to be found on the western side of Westminster Hall, with Heaven not a stone's throw away in the south-western corner.¹⁶ Purgatory (otherwise known after its proprietor as Alice's) was on the eastern side of Old Palace yard. Other well-established eateries included Waghorne's which was close to the House of Lords, and whose mid-18th century proprietor, Sarah Butler, was at pains to petition for the right to keep her doors open during the trials of Lords Ferrers and Byron in 1760 and 1765 respectively, eager to make the most of the regular passage of attendants to and from the hearings.¹⁷ And this is perhaps an important point to bear in mind too. Along with a small number of official positions within the palace such as housekeeper and necessary woman, the owning and running of taverns and other places of refreshment was open to women, giving them an important role in the life of the palace which is often overlooked.

Outside of the palace proper, there were a number of other venues where hard-working parliamentarians might find refreshment, or entertain those they wished to influence. In January 1667, for example, one of the agents of the countess of Rutland reported how in combination with the attorney general and George Montagu he had managed to drag 46 MPs to the Dog Tavern in Palace yard, where they were entertained to a dinner, following which

¹⁵ A. Browning, Thomas Osborne, earl of Danby and duke of Leeds 1632-1712, 3 vols, (Glasgow, 1951), i. 517-522.

¹⁶ Clyve Jones, ed., A Short History of Parliament: England, Great Britain, the United Kingdom, Ireland & Scotland, (Woodbridge, 2009), 122.

¹⁷ Parliamentary Archives (PA), LGC/5/1, f. 262.

they were escorted back into the Commons to add their voices to those passing the bill illegitimizing the children of Lady Rutland's daughter-in-law.¹⁸

II

It is hard to picture Restoration or Augustan society without calling to mind an array of more or less caricatured sots of the Sir Fopling Flutter ilk. Undoubtedly both Houses of Parliament had their fair share of inebriates but alcohol was to parliamentarians more than just an enjoyable tipples. Like those of former generations, the post-Restoration regimes sought to regulate the production, importation and consumption of alcohol and to make the most of the revenue-raising potential of this most useful of substances. As the abbé Montagu reported in a letter to Cardinal Mazarin towards the end of 1660, the year of Restoration, Parliament had been hard at work settling the details of the king's revenue, a sizeable proportion of which was to come from levies on beer.¹⁹ Two years later, the duke of York was granted revenues from the licensing of retailed wine and in 1663 the French agent Comminges reported that despite the reluctance of nobles and those brewing beers merely for their own consumption (mostly one would assume in great houses) to accede to plans to tax all beers and alcoholic drinks, they would probably give way 'because today the English are in the mood to agree to the most difficult things, just as in other times they were to withdraw and oppose the most just and reasonable'.²⁰ At the opening of the following decade Lord Arlington²¹ was able to report to Lord Fauconberg, with some surprise, how those attending the recent meeting of Parliament had been 'in the best humour that could be' when they proceeded to exceed 'our expectations in their first votes for an addition of seven years more upon the wine act, which

¹⁸ HMC Rutland, ii. 8.

¹⁹ TNA, PRO 31/3/108, p. 107.

²⁰ TNA, PRO 31/3/113, pp. 124-30.

²¹ Henry Bennet, earl of Arlington, secretary of state and later lord chamberlain. History of Parliament: the Lords 1660-1715, i. 127-148.

together with peace for one year longer, will put his Majesty at much ease'.²² Arlington may have been surprised, but for Henry Yelverton imposition on wines was an entirely uncontroversial measure, arguing that it would 'cost the people nothing but what they please. Since to drink wine is in all our choice.'²³

Clearly, too, it was a choice that other ministers considered that the people were more than happy to commit to. When the earl of Danby resolved to close down all the coffee shops at the close of 1675 as seed-beds of political unrest, his response to criticism that this would result in a steep decline in the king's income was no, for if people were denied coffee they would turn instead to beer and ale. This was a society willing to exploit alcohol consumption rather than necessarily seeking always to limit it. Of course, not everyone saw it Danby's way, with those engaged in moral reform eager to see access to alcohol curbed, if not outlawed altogether. At the close of the century one William Willis reporting to Archbishop Tenison²⁴ advised that no programme for suppressing prophaneness would be successful:

Till all care be taken for the utter suppressing of all the Alehouses, alias Hell Houses, in the nation for whilst these stinking puddles remain, toads and frogs will still be a croaking, swearing & cursing drinking & whoring, robbing & stealing will never be at an end & these too are the inlets of beggary w[hi]ch drain the wealth of the labouring man & then leave his family to beg, steal or starve...²⁵

Willis may have been particularly strident, but he was not alone in recognizing the influence of alcohol. Some newsletter writers noted the extent to which consumers could have an active

²² HMC Var. Coll. ii. 133.

²³ Bod. Lib. MS Eng. Let. C 210, f. 133.

²⁴ Thomas Tenison, successively bishop of Lincoln and archbishop of Canterbury. History of Parliament: the Lords 1660-1715, v. 497-514.

²⁵ Lambeth Palace Library, MS 942, [no.] 153.

influence on what measures succeeded or failed within Parliament itself. Thus in early 1711 a session of the committee of ways and means heard a proposal for raising one and a half million pounds through a lottery raised on exported coal and on stamped paper. This was opposed by a handful of members who proposed instead a tax on imported French wines. The premier minister, Robert Harley, though, opposed this in turn and backed the first scheme. As the reporter put it ‘Wine-bibbers in the House would have produced a majority if it had come to a vote but Harley artfully moved to adjourn consideration’.²⁶ Alcohol continued to feature in Harley’s career. When, by then promoted earl of Oxford, he was finally dismissed by Queen Anne from the lord treasurership only days before the queen’s own demise, one of the signal complaints levelled against him was his frequent drunkenness. As Erasmus Lewis told Jonathan Swift, the summary of accusations against Oxford were that, ‘he neglected all business, that he was seldom to be understood, that when he did explain himself she could not depend upon the truth of what he said; that he never came to her at the time she appointed, that he often came drunk’ and that he behaved towards her ‘with ill manner, indecency, & disrespect’.²⁷

Oxford’s descent into drunkenness had much to do with personal tragedy in the form of the loss of a much loved daughter, but like many other prominent politicians over the ages (one need only think of the perhaps apocryphal tales of Pitt the Younger throwing up behind the Speaker’s chair) he also seems to have been driven to drink by the pressures of office. For some parliamentarians, though, resort to the bottle had little of politics in it and was merely a symptom of their unimpeded lifestyles.

²⁶ National Library of Scotland, Advocates MSS, Wodrow pprs, letters quarto, v. f. 107-8.

²⁷ E. Gregg, *Queen Anne*, (2nd edn., Yale, 2001), 391.

Among the roll-call of the least upstanding members of the Lords in the late 17th century were men like the 3rd Lord Lovelace²⁸, said never to have been sober since a student at Wadham College, Oxford, and the unstable 7th earl of Pembroke,²⁹ who was a particularly extreme example of a potentially influential man with a deep and fundamental flaw. In 1675 (in advance of Danby's assault on the coffee houses) Pembroke had been engaged in late night drunken pranks in Covent Garden in the company of two associates. Their excesses were said to have frightened the local market women and resulted in Pembroke and one of his companions being knocked to the ground by the beadle, while the other was taken on by a local posse. Pembroke was badly hurt and forced to take to his bed with a suspected cracked skull and limited to a diet of small beer and one glass of cider a day.³⁰ Such minimal alcoholic intake must have stretched the poor man to his limits. Having recovered from this, Pembroke's career continued along its alarming trajectory and following his acquittal for murder three years later³¹ Pembroke was reported to have celebrated by downing 22 beer glasses of wine. He then tried to bribe some linkboys to assault anyone they could find. The linkboys had more discretion than Pembroke and declined the invitation.³²

If claret was the food of the Tory and port the Whig's staple, both classes were subject to occasional alarmist reports of illness resulting from bad wine as well as simple excess. Thus

²⁸ John Lovelace, 3rd Baron Lovelace, a prominent Whig politician who was involved in one of the few skirmishes of the Revolution of 1688 while trying to win through to the invading army of William of Orange. For more see R. Eagles, 'John, 3rd Baron Lovelace', *History Today*, 53: 11 (2003).

²⁹ Philip Herbert, 7th earl of Pembroke, a man with a serious psychological disorder made worse by his extreme alcoholism.

³⁰ BL, Verney MS mic. M636/38, Sir Ralph to Edmund Verney, 27 May 1675.

³¹ The killing, of course, occurred during a drunken evening and revealed Pembroke's alarmingly violent tendencies when inebriated.

³² BL, Verney MS mic. M636/38, John to Sir Ralph Verney, 10 Apr. 1678.

in February 1673 Sir Ralph Verney reported that the duke of Monmouth³³ had recently arrived from France, where he had been taken ill drinking wine with ice.³⁴ In 1684 there were various reports of Lord Gerard of Bromley³⁵ expiring following a particularly hard drinking session. One reporter had it that Gerard had been drinking before arriving at the tavern and that the pint of burnt sherry he demanded had merely pushed him over the edge.³⁶ Yet another account suggested that his collapse was the result of ‘a surfeit of buttered eggs, toast and gravy’ as well as taking on board too much mulled sack.³⁷ Over the years bad wine and binge drinking continued to be blamed for the loss of members of the elite. In January 1710 Algernon Capell, 2nd earl of Essex, was carried off having contracted a fever which as supposedly the result of ‘hard drinking of bad wine’.³⁸ Henry Somerset, 2nd duke of Beaufort, too was said to have died after consuming far too much ‘small liquor which made him vomit blood’.³⁹ The duke of Leeds (the former Danby), may have hastened his own demise when he appears to have taken part in a rout lubricated by half a dozen bottles of wine hosted by Sir Arthur Kaye,⁴⁰ following the July 1712 presentation to the queen of a loyal address from the corporation of Leeds.⁴¹ Certainly Leeds did not survive the month. Just under a decade later, both James Stanhope, Earl Stanhope, and at least one other companion were said to have killed themselves through over-indulgence at a ‘great debauch’ at the duke

³³ James Scott, duke of Monmouth, illegitimate son of Charles II.

³⁴ BL, Verney MS mic. M636/25, Sir Ralph to Edmund Verney, 24 Feb. 1673.

³⁵ Digby Gerard, 5th Baron Gerard of Gerard’s Bromley.

³⁶ BL, Verney MS mic. M636/38, Sir Ralph to John Verney, 10 Oct. 1684.

³⁷ National Archives of Scotland, GD 406/1/3256.

³⁸ History of Parliament: the Lords 1660-1715, i. 441.

³⁹ BL, Add. MS 22221, ff. 119-20.

⁴⁰ Sir Arthur Kaye, 3rd bt., knight of the shire for Yorkshire from 1710-1726.

⁴¹ Bod. Lib. Rawlinson letters 17, f. 4.

of Newcastle's, where they were said to have consumed 'excessively of New Tokay, Champagne, Visney and Barba Water' – the whole affair lasted a reputed 13 hours.⁴²

Not all such reports could be taken literally, of course. In January 1694 Cary Stewkeley informed Sir Ralph Verney that three peers: the earls of Lichfield, Warrington and Essex had all been taken ill from drinking bad wine and 'all three quickly died'.⁴³ The report was not true, Essex surviving this encounter only to succumb to bad wine 16 years later. However, beyond amusing material for the gossip sheets, what was the broader impression created by this apparent roll-call of foolish, inebriated legislators who dominated the newsletters in the period? As is so often the case, balance was the key. In a society in which drinking healths to express loyalty was required, some mild inebriation was only to be expected, but occasions such as that when the earl of Rochester and Lord Chancellor Jeffreys⁴⁴ became so drunk that they stripped naked and attempted to clamber up a sign post to drink the king's health were probably thought to be taking loyalty too far.⁴⁵ As for dangerous drunks like Pembroke, he was to be treated with caution. One of his neighbours, Thomas Thynne, Viscount Weymouth, recounted how he had waited on him at his seat at Wilton, 'where he was very ceremonious, but when the wine is in, his jealousy breaks out'.⁴⁶

By the reign of Anne at the heart of political drinking was an array of clubs established for more or less sensible reasons. When Henry St John, future Viscount Bolingbroke, resolved to establish a new Tory society in the summer of 1711 he explained that it was to have 'None of

⁴² HMC Portland, v. 615-16.

⁴³ BL, Verney MS mic. M636/47, Cary Stewkeley to Sir Ralph Verney, 28 Jan. 1694.

⁴⁴ Laurence Hyde, earl of Rochester, and George Jeffreys, Baron Jeffreys – the latter notorious as the hanging judge of the assizes that followed the unsuccessful Monmouth Rebellion of 1685.

⁴⁵ Grant Tapsell, 'The life and career of Laurence Hyde, earl of Rochester, c.1681-c.1686' (Cambs. M.Phil, 1996), 7. On health drinking see Angela McShane, 'Material Culture and 'Political Drinking' in Seventeenth-Century England', *Past & Present* (2014) 222 (suppl_9): 247-276.

⁴⁶ BL, Add. MS 75353, Weymouth to Halifax, 4 Aug. 1683.

the extravagance of the Kitt Cat, None of the Drunkenness of the Beef Stakes'. It was, rather, to aim for 'the Improvement of Friendship, & the Encouragement of Letters'.⁴⁷ As such it stood in marked contrast to another Tory club, the Board of Brothers, which was very much a drinking outfit with none of the ambition of St John's new group. Most famous of all, though, was the Kit Cat, and I will conclude with a brief extract from Swift's 1712 satire addressed to the uber-sober 'Dismal' earl of Nottingham⁴⁸, "Toland's invitation to Dismal, to dine with the Calves Head club", in which he set out only too clearly the relationship between wine and some of the most prominent of the club's parliamentary members:

Who by disgraces or ill fortune sunk,

Feels not his soul enliven'd when he's drunk?

Wine can clear up Godolphin's cloudy face,

And fill Jack Smyth with hopes to keep his place.

By Force of Wine ev'n Scarborough is Brave

Halifax grows more Pert, and Sommers not so grave

Wine can give Portland wit, and Cleveland sense

Montagu learning, Bolton eloquence

Cholmondeley, when drunk, can never lose his wand

And Lincoln then imagines he has Land.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Bod. Lib. MS Eng. Misc. e. 180, ff. 85-6.

⁴⁸ Daniel Finch, 2nd earl of Nottingham.

⁴⁹ The Works of Jonathan Swift..., ed. Walter Scott, (Edinburgh, 1814), x. 386-7.