



# RED, WHITE AND BOOZE

The ability to ‘hold your drink’ was once lauded. Now it’s all about celebrating drunkenness. Bill Puddicombe asks ‘what’s happened to our drinking culture?’

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The latest figures for alcohol consumption in England indicate that consumption is falling including among the young, more of whom think it is not acceptable to be drunk even once a week. Yet figures for hospital admissions have soared by 40% since 2002 which suggests that people are drinking more dangerously, as a walk around most city centres at night would appear to confirm.

This is a phenomenon which warrants far more debate than currently happens. Moralistic hectoring about ‘misbehaviour’ which seems to be the subtext of the government’s alcohol strategy or general hand-wringing about public health isn’t enough.

Drinking has always been a highly visible part of our culture. The late Professor Griffith Edwards (see obituary on page 6) in his book *Alcohol – The World’s Favourite Drug* wrote:

“Alcohol is a pervasive fact of life, but an extraordinary fact – pleasurable and destructive, anathematised and adulated, and deeply ambiguous.”

In this book Griff had a chapter called “A short history of drunkenness” in which he describes the changes in British intoxication from the eighth century to the 1920s. This is full of fascinating quotes, particularly Walter Raleigh’s statement that “A drunkard

will never shake off the delight of beastliness...” By the end of the account, mass drunkenness as an accompanying factor of severe poverty had stopped being an urgent social issue and public health concerns had taken over.

Eighty years later and mass intoxication is once again back on the social, cultural and moral agenda. Drinking and intoxication have become a tolerated part of English life in a way that it has not been for many decades.

I was set off thinking about this by Radio 1 breakfast DJs (bear with me on this). In the 1970s and 1980s the men (they were all men, of course) who provided the wake up call for families starting their day were themselves family friendly. Remember such figures of fun as Dave Lee Travis\* (the Hairy Cornflake) and Mike Read? The idea that any of this lot would talk openly on air about being intoxicated was unthinkable. To be drunk was generally considered shameful: definitely not the subject of polite conversation.

Shift forward to the year 2000 and we have Sara Cox in the same chair. In contrast she became notorious for openly discussing her regular experiences with intoxication in graphic detail. Her predecessor, Chris Evans, was fairly open about excessive consumption as well. While this change was taking

place Radio 1 was deliberately shifting their listening age down; the implication is that the pleasure of intoxication had become a reasonable subject for discussion on “family” media. Something had changed in public perception.

The recent government Alcohol Strategy is aimed very much at the perceived problems arising from public behaviour linked to intoxication. It starts with a preface from the Prime Minister that talks almost exclusively about binge drinking and there is very little content about treatment of dependence or harm reduction.

At a local level things are rather different. I worked with some local authorities a couple of years ago and saw the effort that goes into managing mass town centre intoxication (generally referred to as the “night time economy”). I was involved in putting measures in place that protected young people who were intoxicated and might come to harm from other people who were intoxicated. The environment was being managed to make this phenomenon less risky.

One innovation was the introduction of SOS buses (I saw these in operation in town centres in Essex). These provide a place where people who are at risk because of intoxication or who are simply feeling ill can go for support

and basic treatment. One of the most intriguing things about these services, which survived on a mixture of charitable and statutory funding, was the number of volunteers prepared to come forward and work in them on Friday and Saturday nights. People giving up their free time to help other people who had come to harm having a good time.

All of this suggests that we have come to a point where mass intoxication has become a tolerated, expected facet of life right across the country and that the shame that used to attach to being drunk has receded.

## DRINKING AND INTOXICATION HAVE BECOME A TOLERATED PART OF ENGLISH LIFE IN A WAY THAT IT HAS NOT BEEN FOR MANY DECADES

While a large part of the advice available publicly about alcohol use is of the “two-three units” a day variety, there is a considerable amount that assumes large numbers of people will not stick at the recommended safe level (or, for that matter, consider a binge to constitute six units as per the NHS guideline). For example, the Guardian Money section recently contained a guide for new students on how to live on a budget. This had practical hints on how to manage cash “when you are out drinking”, mostly consisting of advice that is unlikely to be heeded after the first couple of hours of WKD.

Back in the day when drinking sessions were generally considered the preserve of young males, one of the unwritten rules was that “holding your drink” was a mark of status. Someone who could walk and talk straight after 6 or 7 pints of Hofmeister or Courage bitter was lauded above the guy who ended up under the pub table. Alcoholic drinks were to be tasted and enjoyed – drinking with the express intention of getting drunk a frowned-upon activity.

Now there is a clear aim to enter an altered state through alcohol. There is a stated intent to access the release and catharsis of intoxication. The consistent tale of Friday and Saturday nights for a lot of young people is of consuming cheap supermarket alcohol before going out so that there is not so much need to splash out on pub and club drinks. Older people are apparently drinking in patterns that

would suggest they are regularly drunk; reference for example the recent BBC Panorama programme, Old Drunk and Disorderly (10th September 2012). While there are some clear geographical and cultural differences, in general there are larger numbers of us for whom regular intoxication has become a fact of life.

Also emerging is a whole set of language that implies an integral understanding that there is an element of self harm in drinking too much. The excellent *Online Slang Dictionary* lists over 200 contemporary words for drunk, from “annihilated” to “zosted”. More than half of these have overtones of damage, (fucked up, slaughtered and trashed are examples). This suggests the “deeply ambiguous” relation with alcohol that Griff Edwards noted.

All of this requires some serious consideration. It requires a public debate about the underlying causes of the change. It has been suggested to me that this a product of the libertarianism of the 60s and succeeding decades. The idea that everything should be tested, tried and enjoyed is at root of the change. The argument for increasing the cost of alcohol to stem drinking suggests that increased prosperity and, especially, reducing real costs of alcoholic drinks may play a part. Some of the most vociferous condemnation of alcohol used to come from organised religion. With the majority of the population no longer listening too hard to religious leaders have we simply reverted to preferred habits?

None of these explanations seem satisfactory to me. The change in attitude and behaviour is a British one and therefore needs a British explanation. The complication we need to avoid is that this is a moral issue. From a humanistic viewpoint there is nothing intrinsically immoral about intoxication.

While the debate rests on political point scoring about “binge drinking” and concerns about liver disease we are missing the opportunity to understand.

■ **Bill Puddicombe** is the Chief Executive of Equinox Care. He writes here in a personal capacity.

\* this article was written before the recent arrest of David Lee Travis

**So do you agree that our drinking culture has undergone a sea change in recent years? If so, why do you think it is happening?**  
Email the *Druglink* editor [harrys@drugscope.org.uk](mailto:harrys@drugscope.org.uk)

## On drinking and drunkenness:

*Noah, a man of the soil, began the planting of vineyards. He drank some of the wine, became drunk and lay naked inside his tent.*

**New English Bible, Genesis 9:20**

*MacDuff: What three things does drink especially provoke?*

*Porter: Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep and urine.*

**MacBeth**

*A man who exposes himself when he is intoxicated, has not the art of getting drunk.*

**Samuel Johnson 1791**

*Like other parties of the kind, it was first silent, then talky, then argumentative, then disputatious, then unintelligible, then altogether, then inarticulate, and then drunk.*

**Lord Byron 1815**

*Heaven protects children, sailors and drunken men.*

**19th Century Proverb**

*An alcoholic is a man you don't like who drinks as much as you do.*

**Dylan Thomas**

*I have taken more out of alcohol than it has taken out of me.*

**Winston Churchill**

*It was my Uncle George who discovered that alcohol was a food well in advance of medical thought.*

**P.G.Wodehouse – The Bertie Wooster stories**

*Humanity I love you because when you're hard up you pawn your intelligence to buy a drink.*

**E.E.Cummings**

*Sobriety is a real turn-on for me. You can see what you're doing.*

**Peter O'Toole**