

# Up up and away

1977  
ecstasy  
becomes a  
controlled  
drug

## Do the white thing

Powder cocaine is fast rivalling cannabis as the socially acceptable drug of choice. Crack, its rock-form offspring, is giving heroin a run for its money as the socially unacceptable drug of choice. Author of *Cocaine*, **Dominic Stratfeild**, explains how the drug has gripped modern Britain

Here's a puzzler: Thirty years ago a gram of cocaine cost the equivalent of two week's salary; today it's 50 quid. Thirty years ago the drug was taken mainly in recording studios; today it's taken mainly in nightclub lavatories. Yes, we've come a long way from the days when coke was the preserve of the rich and famous. Today, anyone can score a gram and, for as long as it takes to Hoover it up, be rich and famous. Or, at least, feel it.

How did this overpriced, over-rated powder stage such a successful assault on the British drug scene?

Answer? Advertising. In the beginning, the publicity came from the United States. In 1965 the Met reported just 400 cocaine users in the UK. All were confirmed heroin addicts. Within a decade the films *Easy Rider*, *Superfly* and *Annie Hall*, together with any number of songs by bands ranging from Steppenwolf to The Eagles, had changed all that. Coke wasn't a drug for junkies! It was for celebrities! Oh – and by the way – it wasn't addictive.

A vast increase in demand for cocaine in the United States in the late 1970s led to a corresponding increase in supply from Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. The result was more cocaine, more publicity – and more British contact with the drug. Europe became a market.

By the early 1980s, cocaine's demographic appeal in the UK had begun to shift. Champagne status secured by its former elusiveness, the drug moved downmarket. Demand created supply, and more arrived. Prices began dropping.

The one factor that might have applied a brake on British cocaine consumption was the American trend for smoking it in its rock form. It didn't. Crack, the papers told us (when news of the drug arrived in 1988) was almost instantly addictive. It caused extraordinary violence. It destroyed babies in the womb.

What press coverage manifestly *failed* to do was

to warn that cocaine and crack were essentially the same drug. Cocaine was safe; crack was not.

Coverage also failed to warn that there was actually very little crack around. The 'National Task Force' on crack was wound down in 1990 when the predicted epidemic failed to appear. Danger gone.

In the meantime, however, more cocaine *did* appear and eventually, when the price had dropped enough, people did begin smoking it. There were two results. The first was a swathe of police abseiling out of buildings in riot gear. The second was a swathe of journalists waiting to watch them do it.

Simultaneously newspapers that were busy running stories on the horrors of crack, ran stories about powder cocaine. The difference between the coverages was stark. Crack stories, buried somewhere inside the papers, featured black people with guns. Cocaine stories, usually on the cover, featured celebrities. 'Secret Drug Shame of Tara Palmer-Tomkinson/Angus Deayton/Daniella Westbrook' (insert penitent celebrity of

choice), smirked the tabloids. Message? Cocaine is a drug for rich, famous, glamorous people. Naughty. Not dangerous. Nothing to do with crack.

The true mystery is how, despite cocaine's relentless plunge downmarket, it has managed to maintain its champagne image. Perhaps this has something to do with the power of celebrity in modern British culture. Perhaps it's simply that nothing else has emerged to challenge coke's status as the drug of the rich and the famous. Perhaps, on the other hand, a drug capable of making even an estate agent feel like God is a necessary commodity.

The democratisation of cocaine is almost complete. What happens when it does, is yet to be seen.





## Waves of emotion

The rise and fall of ecstasy is a tale of tribal gatherings, Pot Noodle adverts and superclubs, which left the government and media more bewildered than clubbers on a Monday morning. **Viv Craske**, former editor of club bible *Mixmag*, on a drug that changed the face of popular culture and drug politics in Britain

I took my first E in the summer of 1994, at an illegal beach party in Brighton. At the time I was convinced that ecstasy would reshape the world and finish the job the 60s' cultural revolution had begun. Yet by 1994 ecstasy culture was being absorbed by the mainstream: Pot Noodle used club-like visuals for its TV ads.

The ecstasy revolution had got off to a slow start. In the mid-80s there was one dealer in London selling ecstasy. He's now a famous DJ. In 1987 DJs Danny Rampling and Paul Oakenfold went on a lads holiday to Ibiza. They discovered Balearic music. And ecstasy. And brought the legacy of both back to the UK. Rave music blossomed, and the tabloids took notice. In 1989 the *Sun* ran a front page splash that claimed: 'Beheaded pigeons littered the floor of the hanger. Youngsters were so high on ecstasy and cannabis they ripped the birds' heads off.' However, police were powerless to shut down

outdoor raves, which often had the consent of the landowner. In 1992, the largest ever rave took place in the village of Castlemorton in the Malvern Hills. Up to 50,000 people attended the week-long party. Something had to be done to stem the tide. And that something was the Criminal Justice Act. Gatherings of people listening to 'music characterised by a succession of repetitive beats' became illegal.

In November 1995 the red top's front pages were again dominated by ecstasy use. Leah Betts was a happy 18-year-old, a policeman's daughter, and an 'ecstasy victim'. The *Sun* called for the dealer to be hanged. Billboards appeared all over the country proclaiming: 'Sorted. Just one ecstasy tablet killed Leah Betts'. Weeks later it emerged that Leah had not died of ecstasy poisoning, but from drinking too much water.

Licensed superclubs replaced raves, though both had criminal connections and sanctioned dealers. Dance music

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## Cracking the market

Slowly but surely, crack has become part of the scenery among two sections of users in Britain's major cities. But, says **Tim Bottomley**, our love affair with its more glamorous cousin, powder cocaine, could open the way for crack to enter mainstream society

It's been 15 years since special agent Robert Stuttman came over from the States as a modern day prophet of doom to warn that crack could become a drug epidemic like no other. Hysteria followed, but little else. Reports can be found of crack use in Liverpool, London, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Nottingham in the late 1980s. But what crack use there was involved small numbers, infrequent use and minimal impact on society. No sign of the havoc and despair predicted by Stuttman. Read the papers today and it is possible to believe that crack is responsible for every shooting, every street robbery, and every run-down neighbourhood in the country.

The majority of cocaine hydrochloride powder entering the UK works its way down a distribution system to be sold as cocaine powder. But some appears to travel down a very different distribution system, one that already exists, one that distributes another Class A drug across most cities and many towns in the UK - the heroin distribution network.

In the cities and towns where retail crack markets have been established there appears to be some common 'natural history' of who uses it: first up are the established population of heroin users whose dealer now sells 'white' alongside the more familiar

brown. Anecdotal evidence of 'two for one' deals and aggressive marketing of crack to this user group can be found throughout the UK as dealers attempt to unload as much crack as they can on the heroin scene. Those involved in heroin distribution also find themselves with 'privileged' access to crack markets as do the women involved in the commercial sex industry that often sits alongside heroin markets.

There then follows a 'second wave' of crack recruits who tend to be a less obvious and more heterogeneous group: customers of the commercial sex industry, middle-aged businessmen, career minded men, women in their early 30s with histories of recreational ecstasy and cannabis use and the local 'jack the lads' or 'Arthur Daleys' who make good money without ever troubling the inland revenue. This gradual spread of crack use from relatively small homogeneous groups to the wider population has been repeated in towns and cities up and down the country. Now half of crack users we see have a job.

Crack use in the UK appears to be at something of a crossroads. If the crack market remains the same and the image of the drug goes unchallenged then there is likely to be a limit to the spread and impact of crack in the future. Yet this is likely to change if the powder cocaine market started to merge with the crack market. One of the necessary precursors for a crack epidemic, as witnessed in the US, was an existing critical mass of established cocaine powder users - something we did not have in 1989 but certainly do now.

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that if only the image of crack were to improve a significant proportion of current powder users might be very tempted to extend their cocaine binges by switching to a more efficient and immediate method of use - a phenomena made all the more likely if they were able to buy crack from the very same person who supplies the powder.

In Manchester crack use is now less of a 'deep dark secret' for some and appears to be taking on something of a positive macho image in some social circles - the very same social circles which five years ago took great pleasure in bating and beating the local 'rock heads'.

Tim Bottomley is Manager of the Piper Project in Manchester

flourished and ecstasy use soared. Myths - such as dealers cutting pills with heroin, rat poison and ground glass - were propagated by police and Home Office sources.

An estimated half a million ecstasy pills are swallowed every weekend in the UK. Deaths where ecstasy is listed by coroners in England, Wales and Scotland have increased steadily over the last ten years. There were 84 in 2002 - 35 per cent more than 2001. But the most in-depth study of E use finds scant evidence that ecstasy is a killer drug. Of the 81 ecstasy-implicated deaths from 1997 to 2000, experts at St George's Hospital found most had also used heroin or other drugs. Only seven per cent had taken ecstasy alone.

Pills are cheaper than ever before. *Mixmag's* annual drug survey shows the price has dropped from an average of £7.50 in 2000 to £2.78 in 2003. To many teenagers, dropping an E is as ordinary as having a pint. Coke, ketamine and GHB are now often taken alongside ecstasy. According to the Home Office's British Crime Survey, ecstasy use had its peak in 2001/2002 and has declined since.

So what of ecstasy's brave new world? Still, little has been done to ensure safer drug taking. In 2002 DJ Pete Tong provided a voiceover for Mitsubishi (a popular brand of E in the late 90s) cars, urging you to 'contact your dealer', while the tabloid scare stories have disappeared. When 19-year-old Lorna Spinks died in May 2001 after taking two super-strength ecstasy tablets the *Sun* ran the story on page 18. After all, those crazed ecstasy takers are now in their 20s and 30s and respectable members of society.

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## Setting the pace

Amphetamine has been gatecrashing the UK youth culture scene in different guises since the 1950s.

**Russell Newcombe** takes us on a whistle-stop tour of mods, metal, mothers and methamphetamine

*Fourth-day, five-day marathon,  
We're moving like a parallelogram...  
I should be tired and all I am is wired,  
Motorhead, all night.*

Motorhead (Lemmy Kilminster 1980)

In *Waiting for the Man* (1988), Harry Shapiro noted that "speed was the subcultural constant linking 1956, 1966 and 1976" – to which can be added 1986 and 1996. Amphetamine (speed, wiz) was the original all-night, youth culture dance drug. After fuelling rock'n'roll from the 1950s, speed became *the* mod drug in the 1960s ("out of my brain on the 5.15" sang The Who), and *the* punk drug in the 1970s ("just give me speed, it's all I need" demanded the Sex Pistols). From the late 1980s it was necked or snorted with ecstasy by ravers. Because its effects are useful for both work and leisure – increased energy and alertness, reduced hunger – speed has been used by a variety of social groups, from athletes and artists to students and housewives – not to mention prime ministers Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden.

Amphetamine was first made in 1887, but many Brits got their first real taste of it in World War Two, when fatigued soldiers on both sides were given it as a battle drug. Civilians encountered it mainly as Benzedrine, an over-the-counter inhaler. From the 1950s, more people got speed habits through doctors' prescribing of a plethora of amphetamine pills for various conditions, notably dieting and depression (dexies, purple hearts, black bombers – and later Ritalin and Tenuate). In response to growing non-medical use, Britain prohibited amphetamine in 1964 – but by then, it had become the second most popular illicit drug after cannabis.

The late 1960s also witnessed a methylamphetamine mini-epidemic, centred around London. It produced a new media drug fiend: the *speed freak* (or *motorhead*). The outbreak ended when GPs and pharmacies voluntarily agreed to cease prescribing and dispensing Methedrine ampoules. Dexedrine, a purified amphetamine sulphate for narcolepsy and childhood hyperactivity, remains the only amphetamine still prescribed by British doctors.

This led to the emergence in the early 1970s of the illicit amphetamine sulphate market. Sulphate then continued as a key drug of successive youth cultures for another two decades, before splitting into two markets in the mid-1990s: standard speed powder, typically made up of five per cent amphetamine and 95 per cent sugar or caffeine, and speed paste (base) – generally three to four times stronger. Price per gram has remained fairly constant since the late 1970s – about £5-10 for powder, and later £15-25 for paste.

Even so, the latest official indicators all confirm that amphetamine and LSD use are the only types of drug-taking to have waned since 1998, with levels of use dropping below cocaine and ecstasy. Between 1998 and 2003, both the number of offences and treatment cases involving amphetamine more than halved, as did the rate of speed use reported in surveys.

The decline of sulphate has clearly left a gap in the British drugs market for a cheap, longer-acting stimulant – such as methylamphetamine. Somewhere between amphetamine sulphate and MDMA chemically, its superior stimulant effects last up to 24 hours. As a powder, methamphetamine hydrochloride can be sniffed, swallowed or injected; and, when converted to ice – its crystal form – it can be inhaled, typically using a glass pipe.

As with sulphate, occasional use is relatively safe, but heavier use becomes increasingly harmful. Indeed, methamphetamine is becoming the main problem drug in many cities across the USA, Australia, Asia and Eastern Europe. As well as producing a better 'buzz' than sulphate and cocaine, it is relatively cheap and easy to make and lasts longer. The first scattered incidents of ice use have been reported around Britain over 2004 and it looks like the new 'Ice Age' may be about to start; the only thing that puzzles me is why it's taken so long to reach here.



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Dr Russell Newcombe is a senior Drug Use and Addiction lecturer at John Moores University, Liverpool and author of *Wizology* (2002), *Tripology* (2004) and *Potology-2* (2005)