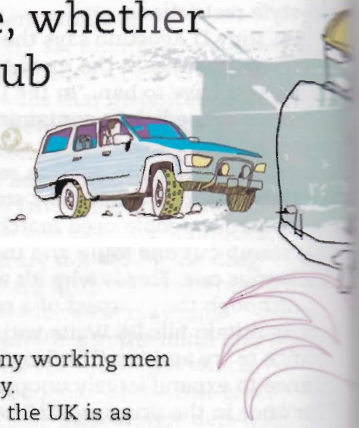


White lines, blue collar

Cocaine is permeating into working class culture, whether it's in the local working men's pub, high street club or building site. Steve Sampson reports on how the drug is breaking traditional barriers to fuel our binge-drinking society



The digital images of Friday night drinkers flick across the CCTV monitor above the bar of a working men's pub in Birmingham. A man in his 20s enters, saunters from the bar to the lounge and back, stopping at tables crowded with labourers, brickies and factory workers still wearing steel toe capped boots and reflective safety jackets.

Within minutes he has delivered some 15 grams of powder cocaine before leaving to reload with merchandise at his home, known as the 'White House'. None of the transactions featured on the CCTV, and before leaving he waves to the landlord who waves back.

The acceptance of powder cocaine among Britain's blue-collar workforce marks one of the greatest shifts in social trends in a decade, according to one drugs worker. Its use has been dubbed the 'hidden mixer' – a substance driving the country's thriving binge drinking culture.

Prices are dropping to record lows at £30 a gram on the streets of Northern cities, with single lines going for as little as £2.50 in night club toilets, according to local drug agencies. Cocaine's mantle as the 'must have' accessory for the rich and famous is long-established and its use among the professional middle classes is widely accepted. In 2005, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair announced a crackdown of the dinner party cocaine set saying: "People are having dinner parties where they drink less wine and snort more cocaine," he said. "I'm not interested in what harm it is doing to them personally," he continued, "but the price of that cocaine is misery on the streets of London's estates and blood on the road to Colombia."

But while City traders and the media brat pack have been left waiting for the knock of the door from the Met, drugs workers and researchers have identified a new community of cocaine users evolving at the opposite end of the social spectrum. Just as the Burberry check became *de rigeur* for young chavs sporting council estate chic, cocaine has become

part of the staple of diet of many working men and women at work and at play.

The average cocaine user in the UK is as likely to be a window cleaner, serviceman or builder on an Olympic construction as a City whiz kid, Fleet Street journalist or member of the idle rich.

"It's the very places where the locals had a zero tolerance to drugs, which now turn a blind eye. In pubs and even working men's clubs across the country, it's the locals who are now using," says Carla Ellis of Crewe 2000, set up three years ago to deal specifically with the problem at street level in Edinburgh.

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"Since we opened we've been swamped. We are seeing an ever-increasing number of tradesmen in their 30s, 40s and 50s with cocaine problems. Cocaine's acceptance among the blue-collar workers is the biggest change in human behaviour in a decade.

"Cocaine has maintained its aspirational image as a party drug, a sign of success. It's as if we're in an age of acceptance, and it's a huge shift in behaviour among ordinary, working people. Users in this community rarely see themselves as having a problem, any more than having a hangover, and they certainly wouldn't approach traditional drug services, so the problem remains hidden."

The changing face of cocaine was evident from the results of an ICM poll carried out in May last year. Among those interviewed in the AB social class – defined as professionals and middle managers – who said they had taken drugs, 26 per



cent said they had used cocaine. But that increased to 46 per cent among members of the C1 social class – defined as office workers and junior managers. There were also marked differences between the regions, with the industrial Midlands topping the cocaine use league, with 41 per cent of drug users saying they had tried it, followed by the South East on 35 per cent.

But its prevalence among blue collar workers on building sites and the factory floor is less well-researched, rarely reaching the national headlines and often kept under wraps by employers reluctant to have their brand name linked with that of a workforce driven on Bolivian marching powder.

But in November last year, Britain's largest privately-owned construction firm, Laing O'Rourke, published the results of its *Human Capital* report, which showed that of 1,511 randomly tested staff some 165 tested positive for cocaine or cannabis. The workers were sacked, with a source at the company conceding it had a serious problem.

Tim Kirkwood, property developer and managing director of TTP Counseling, which offers rehabilitation services

specifically to the construction industry says: "In my opinion construction has the highest use of drugs of any industry I have experienced. The problem is getting worse and it's down to two things: availability and culture. It's seen as cool to take drugs on site. I've noticed dry liners and plasterers are heavily into speed and cocaine, whereas painters tend to be more into cannabis, probably because it's such a boring job."

One building site recruitment specialist said: "It keeps you going and some people use it to kick start the day if they've had a late night out."

Few firms are prepared to be as candid about cocaine use among staff as Laing O'Rourke and some believe that random testing misses many users and merely exposes the tip of the iceberg.

Price, availability and social acceptance have all played a part in repositioning cocaine in the market place, according to former Head of the North East Crime Squad, Paul Johnson, who now investigates drugs in the workplace countrywide.

Johnson describes a timeline from the late 70s when the only cocaine on the street was that knocked off in a chemist



Man chopping out lines on a toilet seat in a Shoreditch bar, London, UK, 2000's

raid, to the present day boom where it can be found in a street, pub or club in nightclub in every town and city in the country.

Johnson says a gradual growth in the availability of cocaine in the early 80s was suddenly swelled as crack became a phenomenon. With the US market at saturation point, global cocaine cartels turned their sights on Europe and specifically the UK. In the 90s and new millennium, as supply swelled, prices spiralled down from £80 a gram to £40 a gram and below. And at the same time, the working man and woman, Johnson says, became a good deal more affluent making the market ripe for development.

"We have an increasing number of industrial and manufacturing firms coming to us for advice about workforce issues around cocaine. The idea that the working classes would shun cocaine is a complete misnomer. It comes down to price, which is falling, and people have become more affluent. It is an attractive drug with a glamorous reputation. It's seen as the drug of successful young professionals, models and footballers, people want to buy into that. The media seems to have double standards; crack and heroin use is demonized while cocaine seems to be an essential part of any celebrity story."

Alan McGauley, senior lecturer at Sheffield University and expert witness, first started researching crack and cocaine use in the mid-80s and is set to launch a survey of cocaine use in Sheffield this summer. He believes the drug is the driver behind modern British binge drinking culture.

"Cocaine is the least gender-specific of the entire drug menu in the UK. Cocaine use is moving towards normalisation as it becomes embedded in our culture and linking in with our binge drinking, 24-hour culture. Cocaine currently occupies a unique place in the drugs field - most users do not see the

drug in the same rank as heroin and crack cocaine, it's seen as occupying a space close to E and cannabis. The vast majority of users will never come into contact with services or the criminal justice system, so it's difficult sector to research."

Fifteen years ago the thought of a local pub being a haven to cocaine dealers or punters having a quick sniff in the toilets was unthinkable. Today it is an ever-present reality for pubs countrywide. "Illegal drugs such as cocaine are everywhere. Any type of on-trade premises, from high street bars to country pubs, can have an issue with drugs," says Melanie Taylor who trains licensees in drugs awareness on behalf of the British Institute of Innkeepers.

Doormen, toilet attendants and CCTV are all in the armoury used by licensees to keep drug use at bay in pubs and clubs, while developers are now seeking to design out the problem, says Melanie. "One new pub I visited in Liverpool recently has been designed specifically to deter drug use. It has full CCTV without blindspots, there is no part of the pub which the staff can't see."

Landlords have for several years been spraying the backs of toilets with WD40 or Vaseline, using mirrors to reflect remote parts of a venue and employing door and toilet attendants in a bid to deter pub snorters.

But while much is being done to deter the use of drugs in pubs and clubs across the country, the positive perception of the drug has remained intact.

"You have to remember, my clients like to party as much as a celebrity would," says one dealer in Birmingham. "They are not crack heads, or drug addicts, they are just working people who like a bit of a sniff."

■ Steve Sampson is a freelance journalist