The Problems of being a Publican in 18th century England

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Running a drinking house in early modern England was fraught with difficulty. For much of the period competition was fierce, suppliers were unreliable, customers got drunk and violent and broke up the premises or assaulted the staff, respectable neighbours complained, the authorities were always liable to prosecute the landlord and close down his house, while on Sundays preachers denounced drinking places as dens of disorder, drunkenness and debauchery, disrupting the godly community. Landlords went bankrupt, and there was considerable mobility in the trade. Admittedly, the intensity of the problems varied between types of establishment. Most vulnerable were the numerous, small alehouses (up to 60,000 about 1700), often in the 17th century rudimentary premises, kept by poor craftsmen, labourers or widows, often as a way of escaping poverty, and selling cheap drink to the itinerant poor and neighbours. Less affected were the more limited contingent of larger respectable inns (about 6000 about 1700) and taverns (2-3,000), mainly run by better-off landlords, and catering for merchants, gentlemen, professional men, both travellers and local residents. In general such premises were less susceptible to crisis and closure, more accepted in the community, but still their landlords experienced considerable challenges in running their businesses. Towards the end of the period, however, some of the problems and pressures on landlords may have abated, due in part at least to changes in the institutional framework for the trade.

In this paper I want to discuss the broad problems facing the drink trader, taking the story back to the 16th and 17th centuries, and then in the last section I will focus on some of the key elements in what might be seen as the modernisation of the trade during the long 18th century.

Three or four main clusters of problems can be identified as confronting the English public drinking house and its landlord. The first concerns relations with
the authorities, including the state, local magistrates, fiscal agencies, and the Church. Though local, regulations on the drink trade had already appeared by the late medieval period. Tudor and early Stuart Parliaments increasingly sought to control the number and activity of drinking houses. In 1552 Parliament required all alehouses to have licenses and the following year legislation fixed the number of taverns per town (40 in London, 8 in York and so on); during the early 17th century there were royal attempts to bring inns into a regulatory framework as well. After 1600 a series of laws sought to regulate the customers, drunkenness, and supply of drink in premises. By the late 17th century the state legislative framework was largely fixed for drinking houses, and the 18th century saw only minor changes. With the new agenda of central government after the Glorious Revolution (mainly concerned to raise taxes to pay for foreign wars), state intervention in domestic issues including the drink trade became sporadic— for instance, the royal proclamations against vice and debauchery in the 1690s and 1780s.

However, for landlords the main threat came not from the state but from local magistrates concerned about the impact of drinking houses, especially poorer ones, on crime and disorder, on the spread of sedition, and the pauperisation of the lower orders. Another underlying concern of magistrates was how drinking house activities confused the boundaries of public and private space, with drunken disorder for instance cascading into the street. In the earlier period licensing laws were implemented in a lax and ineffectual fashion and probably as many premises were unlicensed as licensed. At the same time, there were sporadic large-scale purges of drinking houses, with many houses suppressed at one time, though almost certainly they reappeared soon after. From the mid 17th century however magisterial controls, implemented through regular petty sessions were increasingly bureaucratic and effective. After 1700 unlicensed and very small premises largely disappeared and the number of drinking houses started to stabilise or decline.

Magisterial controls restricted access to the drink trade, threatened the business security of the publican, increased his costs, and involved a growing level of interference in the way he ran his business. Magisterial effectiveness was increasingly underpinned by the growing power and activity of excise officials. The excise on ale and beer was levied first in England in 1643, and by the early 18th century the excise service was increasingly vigilant and efficient, the levy on the drink trade yielding a quarter of national tax revenue. Increasingly excisemen cooperated with local
magistrates to close down illicit or out of the way houses (which might evade taxation) and to create a network of more respectable premises which could be monitored and compelled to pay their taxes on time. Small brewing victuallers complained bitterly that the excise officers overestimated the amounts they paid; duties also had to be paid in advance of sales which again caused difficulties for the smaller landlord brewing his own. Even for larger premises, excise inspections were extremely thorough and the few surviving records suggest they must have involved the landlord in a large amount of time. No doubt modest bribes could lubricate the process, though by 18th century standards the excise service was relatively free of corruption.

By comparison, the Church and religious opponents of the drink trade caused fewer direct problems for landlords, though the verbal attack and vituperation must have been deafening on occasion. Drinking houses were a main target of Puritan preachers and writers in the late 16th and early 17th century, who lambasted them as 'nurseries of all riot, excess and idleness', places of drunken disorder, crime, sedition, prostitution, irreligion, spilling out from the alehouse itself into the street and the community. Up to mid 17th century ecclesiastical courts prosecuted landlords for opening during church services, for traditional games and entertainments there, and also for dissenting conventicles. But by the early 18th century such ecclesiastical prosecutions had largely ceased, through the religious and moral reform societies of the 1690s sometimes targeted drinking houses for disorder and prostitution. Ministers increasingly operated against publicans by protesting to magistrates against them, and trying to mobilise local residents to complain to courts as well. In the late 18th century the moral reform movement of Anglican and nonconformist clergy which inspired a new wave of magisterial surveillance and regulation. Preachers and others were also increasingly active in encouraging their congregations not to patronise drinking houses, anticipating the temperance movement of the early 19th century. By 1800 there are signs that upper and middle class men were starting not to imbibe in public drinking places, affecting the business of respectable inns and taverns.

The difficult, problematic relationship of publicans with the authorities was not peculiar to England of course, but was found across Europe in the pre-modern era, as states expanded their controls over society in general and sought to exploit the drink industry for fiscal purposes. This relationship has attracted a great deal of attention, not least from historians concerned with issues of social control and
social discipline. But official surveillance and harassment was by no means the only problem threatening the livelihood of the publican. His chances of survival depended heavily on other factors including matters of commercial management, including drink supply, and the pivotal relationship with customers.

For much of the early modern period the drink trade was highly competitive, with too many publicans chasing too few customers. This was particularly a problem at the popular end of the trade. At the provincial city of Shrewsbury number of drink traders, licensed and unlicensed, rose from about 70 in the 1560s to 220 in the 1620s, so that the density of alehouses per 100 inhabitants nearly trebled. Numbers of drinking houses continued to rise, though less markedly up to about 1700. One of the reasons for this explosion of houses (and competition) was the changing pattern of demand but another was the low cost of entry into the trade, with non existent or ineffectual guild controls and few fixed costs and low running costs. At the top end of the trade the number of premises was smaller, but the potential market was restricted: competition between inns and taverns was often intense. Location therefore was critical. Successful inns and taverns were often situated in a market square or close to the church and guildhall—key civic institutions; or at a cross-roads on a main thoroughfare: all places where elite customers were likely to come and need refreshment. Small alehouses tended to be on the periphery both of town and village, reflecting cheap rents, the low social status of landlords, and the availability of customers. Many migrants and other poorer folk travelling to town stopped first in the suburbs for refreshment after a tiring journey, and also to get news about jobs, lodging and the like.

If location was critical for beating the competition, most alehouses in the 16th and 17th century had little by way of fixtures and fittings to entice in customers: only towards the end of the 17th century do alehouse premises starting to become improved. Services offered by the victualler were no less limited. Travellers wanting to stay overnight might sleep on the floor, a table, or occasionally with the landlord and wife. Premises were often crowded with a lot of activity—drinking and drunkenness, entertainment and games, singing, brawling between customers, spilling out into the public space of the street and the neighbourhood—causing frequent complaints from neighbours and leading to intervention by the authorities.

By comparison, inns and taverns were already well-equipped from the close of the Middle Ages, usually kept in purpose-built premises and their increased
level of comfortable furnishing during the 16th and 17th centuries may have been important for attracting customers. Capital investment by the landlord was considerable. Services were increasingly elaborate. At the same time, inns and taverns shared the same problematic relationship with the neighbourhood and public space. Activity from the house, including drinking and drunkenness, disorder, horses, storage of goods could spill out easily into the street, blocking the thoroughfare. Inn- and tavern keepers faced recurrent complaints about this kind of disruption.

Poorer and respectable drinking houses also experienced problems in the supply of alcohol. Traditionally retailers brewed their own—initially unhopped ale, later hopped beer, but the need to buy the ingredients in advance led to irregular brewing, particularly by poorer victuallers, leaving the house without drink and having to turn away customers. Increasingly in the 17th century smaller retailers, especially in towns in southern England, sought to resolve this problem by buying from increasingly important wholesale brewers. These often sold drink to the retailer on credit, helping cash flow problems. But the brewer's credit was not unlimited and magistrates might pressure brewers to cut off supplies to unlicensed or disorderly houses. For innkeepers and taverns the problem was less the supply of beer, than of wine. Wine prices rose steadily during the 16th and 17th centuries and supplies might be disrupted by war and trade embargoes. In the late 17th century there were repeated complaints over the adulteration of wine.

If the landlord's relationship with drink suppliers was sometimes difficult, that with customers could be disastrous. Poorer customers in the 16th and 17th often sought solace in drink; badly nourished they easily became drunk. In the later period as living standards improved and there was a growing variety of strong beers available, heavy drinking may have become more common. Customers at inns and taverns needed no excuse to become drunk. Buying drinking often on credit, when refused service customers could become abusive and violent. Drunken brawls were common place, either between customer and staff or between customers, leading to injuries and the destruction of furniture and property. As already noted the chances of this leading to disorder outside were high.

No less challenging to the publican, customers complained about the quality of drink, state of the premises, quality of the furnishings, and behaviour of the staff and other customers. In some measure it was a buyer's market: given the fierce competition between premises. Fashionable clubs at the start of the 18th century
holding their meetings in inns or taverns moved quickly from one house to another, criticising the rudeness of the landlord, the noise of other customers, the inconvenience of the rooms, the poor quality and price of the drinks. Thus the Board of Loyal Brotherhood established in London in 1709 shifted in July from its first home at the George in Pall Mall, to the Queen's Arms; by February 1710 it was meeting at Pontack's tavern, before returning soon after to the Queen's Arms. Mobility of this kind almost certainly reflected the wider fickleness of customers. Landlords sought to increase their 'regulars' by extending credit, but this often had fatal financial consequences for the business. Customer debts were a principal cause of insolvency among publicans during the 18th century.

Such tensions and difficult relationships between landlords and the authorities, neighbours, suppliers and customers were not unique to England, but as Beat Kümin, Anne Tlusty and others have shown were probably structural to the drink trade in early modern Europe. Indeed in some measure they can be seen persisting into the contemporary era, but usually in a more controlled and managed way. In fact it is arguable that it was in 18th century England that some of the first steps towards the modern management of the problems of drinking houses evolve and take shape.

Fundamental was the new relationship with the authorities. As we have noted, by the 18th century magisterial controls on the drink were increasingly tight and targeted, focussed on the suppression of smaller, poorer premises, not only unlicensed ones but those which might cause a problem. As we noted, magisterial action was reinforced by the operation of the excise. As a result it was increasingly difficult for putative landlords to start up in business. To get a license they need references from respectable householders in the parish and to give large sureties or guarantees for their good behaviour. Licenses were expensive, costing £1 in London. They had to be annually renewed and at that time excise men and aggrieved residents could petition against the continuation of the landlord. Increasingly, magistrates set standards for the running of the house: premises had to be respectable, in some places stables were required; landlords in some countries had to attend church, and swear various oaths. There was growing control over the way that drinking houses intruded into public space, with their insigns, storage barrels, urinals and the like. From the 1780s there was a wave of new regulations- over closing times at night, Sunday opening, whilst both the façade and interior of premises attracted mounting attention.
One result was that the earlier confusion about the socio-spatial role of the drinking house was clarified. Taxes on drinking houses also increased. In many cities and counties the number of premises that were licensed declined absolutely or relatively, despite the rapid growth of population. Thus industrialising and urbanising Warwickshire had one public house for 109 inhabitants in 1750 and one for over 300 inhabitants by the start of the 19th century. At Bristol, where there was one house for 93 inhabitants in 1760, forty years later the ratio was 1 to 175. All this worked in favour of larger established premises and better off landlords.

Reduced competition improved the profitability of the drink trade, for instance reducing the pressure to tolerate bad debts, and gave landlords greater incentive to invest in their houses. During the 18th century even ordinary alehouses acquired purpose built premises and became increasingly spacious, having specialist rooms, with a good range of fixtures and fittings. The earlier contrast between poor alehouses and large, respectable inns and taverns faded. By the start of the 19th century alehouses start to call themselves inns and taverns, and take on some of the functions of those establishments (such as billeting troops); the term public house was used to cover most types of fashionable drinking house; and large inns remodelled themselves and acquired a new function as hotels. Like inns and taverns alehouses developed a growing range of leisure activities, sponsoring music concerts, plays, clubs, and sports, all of which generated more business for the landlord. Drinking houses in general became anchored into the new respectable social space of Georgian owns.

Helpful too for the development of new modern premises was the support of the new large-scale brewers. These not only opposed the opening of new increasingly invested in the retail trade, buying up houses or lending money on mortgages to publicans, who in return agreed to buy the brewer's beer. Frequently brewers reconstructed houses they owned. Brewers often collaborated closely with magistrates and the excise service. In this way we see start to see the development of a mutually supportive system for the drink trade in which retailers, wholesalers, magistrates and tax authorities worked closely together to keep the industry orderly and beneficial to all the interested parties. Though this alliance of interests broke down in the early 19th century, a similar kind of coalition dominated the British drink trade through the 20th century.
In this new framework being a publican became a less marginal and more stable and respectable activity. Families of landlords start to run a business over several generations. Publicans acquire their own distinctive dress. This is not to deny that there remained a good deal of instability and difficulty at the bottom end of the trade where a minority of less equipped houses in poor locations continued to change hands on a frequent basis. But this no longer the case generally in the popular drink trade, as it had been in the 16th and 17th centuries. Running a public house remained an occupation with a great deal of risk but by the late 18th century the sensible well organized publican could manage that risk with some success. How far similar trends occurred elsewhere in Europe by 1800 may be a fruitful subject for comparative study.

Also the articles by Beat Kümin and Tom Brennan in 'Drinking and Public Place', Contemporary Drug Problems, vol. 32 (1) (Spring, 2005)