ORIGINS OF THE ENGLISH PUB

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Two 14th century alehouses

From the towns all Inns have been driven: from the villages most.... Change your hearts or you will lose your Inns and you will deserve to have lost them. But when you have lost your Inns drown your empty selves, for you will have lost the last of England.

Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953), *This and That*

Wherever we go in England we find villages without a single pub; and we are told that several hundred are closing each week. In my village alone, there were thirteen in 1914, where now there are three, and they are struggling. The supermarkets seem to be achieving what the Puritans, the coffee-houses, the Temperance movement and Lloyd George's Central Control Board failed to accomplish. If pubs were to disappear altogether, it would be an incalculable loss, since they have long been part of the English way of life. Yet historians disagree as to when their golden age is to be located, and when they originated. This article examines the evidence; but, first, some terms need defining.

We used to distinguish between 'alehouse', 'tavern' and 'inn'. The first was a place where ale (and later, beer) was brewed and sold; the second was a place where wine was available; and the third, a place where shelter and stabling could be found; but the terms were often used interchangeably in different parts of the country. Nevertheless, the threefold system of classification was widely recognised, both in the common law and in statute, from the 16th century. A survey of 1577 listed over 17,000 drinking establishments in 30 counties of England, when alehouses far outnumbered taverns and inns. The term 'public house' was first used in the late 17th century and became common parlance in Georgian times. The tavern, as a separate establishment, had largely ceased to exist by 1800.

The Golden Age

Some think the public house had its golden age in the late 19th century, when many pubs were built or re-built, to new and improved specifications. Others would suggest the age of Dickens and others again, the age of Falstaff (whether we regard that as taking place in the Elizabethan or the Lancastrian period). A case might be made for the late 20th, after pubs started to serve food (other than crisps and pickled eggs) but before the supermarkets began to engage in the aggressive marketing of alcohol. But many would agree that the true golden age was the 18th century.

We can find descriptions in 18ᵗʰ century literature of all those things which we traditionally want to find in a pub: hospitality, good fellowship, homeliness, comfort and cosiness – qualities we do not expect to find in a mere bar, café, hotel or restaurant, at least not in France. Several of the great names of 18ᵗʰ literature wrote about life in pubs: Fielding; Goldsmith; Smollett; above all Dr Johnson, who went to the pub chiefly to engage in conversation. Some quotations from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* make the point very well.

We dined at an excellent inn at Chapel House, where he expatiated on the felicity of England in its taverns and inns, and triumphed over the French for not having, in any perfection, the tavern life. 'There is no private house' said [Johnson] 'in which people can enjoy themselves so well, as at a capital tavern. At a tavern there is a general freedom from anxiety.

There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn.

In contradiction to those, who, having a wife and children, prefer domestic enjoyments to those which a tavern affords, I have heard him assert, that a tavern-chair was the throne of human felicity.—'As soon,' said he, 'as I enter the door of a tavern, I experience an oblivion of care, and a freedom from solicitude

In addition Johnson recited the poet Shenstone 'with great emotion'

Whoe'er has travelled life's dull round,
Where'er his stages may have been,
May sigh to think he still has found
The warmest welcome, at an inn.

Boswell was himself a great frequenter of pubs. He mentions several in his *London Journal* of 1762-3: *The Mitre, The Queen's Head, The Rose, Shakespeare's Head, The Star and Garter*. He also frequented coffee-houses, in particular *The Turk's Head*, where he thought there was better 'entertainment' than at *The Mitre*, but preferred the latter because it was an 'orthodox tavern'. In a tavern he could drink, order a meal and even have the use of a private room. He enjoyed conversation as much as his friend Johnson, but unlike him he was often in search of women. In one famous series of adventures, he meets, dallies with, courts and beds a woman called Louisa (Mrs Lewis); and treats us to a description of their night together at *The Black Lion*, Water Lane, Fleet Street, otherwise known as *Hayward's*. He claims that he was 'five times fairly lost in supreme rapture' with Louisa, though she informs him that 'two times' would have been enough.[1] He also tells us that, when he booked the room, he pretended that Louis was his wife.

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[1] This may have been no more than a boast: compare Gibbon's Roman general Proculus, who wrote that, after capturing 100 maidens in the East, *decem una nocte inivi* ('I mated with ten in a single night').

In the 18th century, alehouses became larger, and became more comfortable, better furnished and better equipped (for example with pewter rather than earthenware drinking vessels. More of them now had signs, rather than the old alepole or stake. In the 1720s porter – a comparatively cheap, strong beer of standardised quality - was produced by the larger breweries, especially in London; and many of the modern British brewing companies were founded. Pubs were now frequented by craftsmen, artisans and gentlemen, rather than the poorer classes only. They were much used at election time. Some critics now vented their spleen on the new ginshops, rather than on the traditional alehouse. On the other hand, many respectable citizens continued to think that pubs were havens for migrants, petty criminals, prostitutes, immoral liaisons, irreligion and sedition.

The Late Medieval Alehouse

In 1983 Peter Clark concluded that the development of the alehouse as a social institution was 'tardy'. He proposed that it was only in the late Middle Ages, that it emerged in its modern form. By 1350 the Black Death had reduced the population but diet improved and with it the consumption of ale. More people now drank in alehouses; and there were even complaints – for example in Kent in 1371 - about the refusal of brewers and tipplers to sell ale to anyone other than those 'sitting in their alehouse'. These folk were compelled to use 'cups, dishes and other unreliable measures', as well as to pay exorbitant prices.

There is certainly an abundance of evidence to support this view, starting with what lawyers call 'real' evidence. Many buildings survive from that period, though they may have been re-built at a later date: *The Old Green Man*, Erdington (1306); *The Saracen's Head*, Newark (1341); *The Seven Stars*, Manchester (1356); *The Bell Inn* Nottingham (1437); *The King's Head* at Aylesbury (1450), to name but a few. There are pubs which claim to have been founded at an earlier date; but it is difficult to substantiate these claims.

Late medieval literature mentions alehouses, taverns and inns which again are recognisably ancestors of the modern institution. At the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer describes the inn called *The Tabard*, which stood on the east side of Borough High Street in Southwark,

> *It befell that in that season on a day,*
> *In Southwark at the Tabard as I lay…*
> *At night was come into that hostelry*
> *Well nine and twenty in a company…*
> *That toward Canterbury would ride;*
> *The chambers and the stables were wide,*
> *And well we were eased at best;*

In William Langland's *Piers the Plowman* we read of an alehouse where the landlord *Betoun* inveigles *Gluttony* into indulging his taste for drink; and of course there are tales of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, where ale and the alehouse are a constant reminder of the continuity of village life, despite the outlaw status of the hero, and his supposed exile to the Greenwood:

O they goes in the alehouse though it being close by,
They cracked bottles by two by three.

The earliest surviving text of a Robin Hood ballad is *Robin Hood and the Monk*, which was written around 1450. The first printed version of the stories is *A Gest of Robyn Hode* which dates from around 1475.

As for art, both illustrations to this article are taken from 14th century manuscripts (reproduced by Hackwood in 1909). The second shows us what is recognisably a pub, with an alepole, the first an alewife serving her customer out of doors. Is that an alehouse behind her? It may seem little more than a hovel but it may well be a house, and ale is clearly being sold here, to the public.

Ale, brewers and alehouses were now a regular feature in the law and in legislation, whether the context was feudal, royal or ecclesiastical. The Assize of Bread and Ale, of 1266-67 had regulated the price, weight and quality of food and drink manufactured and sold in towns, villages and hamlets. At the local level, this resulted in regulatory licensing systems, with fees, fines and punishments for lawbreakers. From 1361 the Justices of the Peace regulated the trade, sitting in quarter and later 'petty' sessions. In 1375 London justices heard a complaint about the nuisance caused by alepoles, to riders passing by on horseback. They ordered that henceforth no pole should project more than 7 feet into the highway.

 Judith Bennett argued that in 1300 the brewing industry was small scale, local and largely controlled by brewsters - women who worked from their homes. By 1600 it was large scale and increasingly done by 'common brewers' – men who brewed ale in a town and supplied it to surrounding communities. There was a major change from around 1400. Until then the ingredients of ale consisted of malted barley, water and yeast: the ale was cloudy but full of protein and carbohydrates, which made it a good source of food. Then hops were introduced, probably from the Low Countries. These added a measure of bitterness and helped preserve the ale. The hopped variety was called beer. The new drink was widely disapproved of at first but by the end of the 15th century, it had almost completely replaced the old, and was even being exported to Europe. Beer was clearer, cheaper and more easily preserved and transported.

Anglo-Saxon Origins?

Can the origins of the pub be traced even further back to the Anglo-Saxons, the original makers of English society? Anglo-Saxon England was a violent age; but there is a vast difference between the first three centuries of the settlement and the later period. In the time of Alfred the Great (849-899) we became in effect a nation state with 'an effective monarchy, uniform institutions, a national language, a national Church, clear frontiers and a strong sense of national identity.'[2] Yet we may speculate that as soon as villages were founded by the Anglo-Saxons, they would have started to brew ale. They were addicted to it, and their culture was based on grain, rather than the grape. It would only be natural for those that produced a surplus to sell this to his (or more likely her) neighbours. Is it too much of a leap of the imagination to conclude that those houses which did this became 'public' houses, in all but name, though the Roman *tavernae*, spread along what was left of the Roman roads, may have been falling into decay? After all, pubs, or at any rate alehouses, are rooted in our language. 'Ale', 'alehouse' [*eala-hus*], 'alewife', 'alepole', 'brewer' (and 'brewster', its feminine form), 'tapster' and 'huckster', are all Anglo-Saxon nouns.

So far, the evidence is circumstantial; and it might be said that there are countervailing circumstances, suggesting that ale-drinking may not have been synonymous with drinking ale in alehouses. In Anglo-Saxon times and later, many people drank their ale in the lord's hall, where they were servants, while day labourers were also provided with food and drink by their employers, for home consumption. The Church provided many kinds of dole, including ale; and much of the business of alehouses may have been conducted by way of off-sales. Moreover, Peter Haydon thought the Anglo-Saxons were poor, ale was a luxury and 'permanent alehouses only started to appear in significant numbers in the 13th century'.

Is there any direct evidence? It is not apparent in art – illuminated manuscripts of the period are concerned with religious themes – or in surviving architecture: if there were alehouses, they were built of wood and plaster and have long since decayed or been replaced. The poetry of the Anglo-Saxons makes numerous references to ale, drunkenness and drinking in halls, but does not mention the alehouse. In *Beowulf,* it is Hrothgar's hall *Heorot* which is the scene of communal drinking. Likewise in the lesser known Judith

> *There were deep bowls*
> *Carried along the benches often,*
> *Son likewise cups and pitchers*
> *Full to the people who were sitting on couches.*

But there may be a reason for the absence of literary evidence. Even when they had settled down, the Anglo-Saxons liked to look back on an heroic age, when they had

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[2] Professor James Campbell (*The Anglo-Saxons*).

been warriors and raiders. As for the main source of English history in the Dark Age, which is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English nation,* written in the early 8th century, it is clear from the title what the writer was principally concerned with. He was a monk, who entered the monastery as a child, spent the rest of his life there, and lived a sheltered and celibate life. In Bede's experience, brewing was something done within the confines of the monastery and in moderate quantities. Moreover, the alewife was not admitted to the cloister, at least not officially.

We do find what we are looking for in the Anglo-Saxon law codes. Ale and alehouses are mentioned from the earliest times in the laws and canons issued by kings and bishops. Thus, in 616 the number of alesellers was restricted by King Ethelbert of Kent. In 680 Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, decreed that a Christian layman who drank too much must do penance for fifteen days'. In 688 King Ine of Wessex made laws specifically about alehouses. In 745 Ecbricht, Archbishop of York, decreed that no priest should eat or drink in a tavern; and in 965 King Edgar of Wessex and England ordered that there be no more than one alehouse per village. Interestingly, Edgar also regulated the size of drinking vessels, by reference to measures which were marked by pegs in the size of the vessel (this is thought to be the origin of expressions such as 'I'll take you down a peg or two'). This must mean that these vessels were used for communal drinking, probably in the alehouse. In 997 King Aethelred II, the Unready issued his third code of laws, concerning breaches of the peace. One of these specifically referred to the kind of troublemaking which is still a common problem today, especially on a Saturdy night in our cities: 'in the case of breach of the peace in an alehouse six half marks shall be paid in compensation if a man is slain and twelve ores if no one is slain'.

In my view, it is safe to conclude that the pub was indeed invented by the Anglo-Saxons hundreds of years before 1300. What will probably never be known is how numerous the Anglo-Saxon alehouses, taverns and inns were, and whether they were comfortable, cosy or 'snug', in the same way as their 18th century successors undoubtedly were.

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