

At the beginning of the 18th century, the English were well known for their love of alcohol. One Swiss visitor wrote, “Would you believe it, though water is to be had in abundance in London, and of fairly good quality, absolutely none is drunk? The lower classes, even the paupers, do not know what it is to quench their thirst with water.”¹ Though Londoners drank hard, the perception of their drunkenness was mostly red noses and good cheer. But by the 1720s a new pattern of drinking, associated with gin, had emerged.

As a result of the Glorious Revolution (1688) the catholic King James II was ousted and the Dutch protestant, William of Orange, was placed on the throne of England. England had a glut of grain at the time, and the new king needed to please the landowners who put him on the throne. William had already seen how gin production had boosted the grain market in his home country of Holland. So he passed legislation encouraging the production of gin. Stills sprang up everywhere. This drove the price of gin down and the availability up. Tobias Smollet, a physician, wrote that gin

was sold so cheap that the lowest class of the people could afford to indulge themselves in one continued state of intoxication, to the destruction of all morals, industry and order. Such a shameful degree of profligacy prevailed that the retailers of this poisonous compound set up painted boards in public, inviting people to be drunk for the small expense of one penny; assuring them they might be dead drunk for two-pence, and have straw for nothing.²



The situation was made worse by the squalid living conditions in the slums. People were packed, ten per room, into dirty tenement houses. The only recreation or relief they could afford was gin. As one woman in 1725 said, “We market women are up early and late, and work hard for what we have” and if it were not for gin, “we should never be able to ... keep body and soul together.”¹ Between 1730 and 1749, 75 percent of all children born in London died before the age of five.

Many noted the increase in production and use of gin played a direct role in the increase of crime, prostitution, madness, death rates and falling birth rates. The magistrate and writer, Henry Fielding, feared that men were unable to work for their addiction, were destroying their families, and modelling their bad behaviour to their children. Fielding, and even Parliament, came to view gin as a threat to the future of the nation.

From 1729 to 1751, responding to numerous public outcries and various competing interests, Parliament implemented a series of Gin Acts. Some increased prices and led to bootlegging while others lowered prices and increased consumption. After many attempts of gaining control, the Gin Act of 1751 established a number of pragmatic regulations to decrease the fees for licences and encourage distillers to only sell to licensed retailers. This along with decreases in grain harvests, increases in food prices, decreases in wages, focused propaganda campaigns and the Methodist revivals and social work resulted in the decline of the gin craze.

¹ Gately, I. (2008). Drink: A cultural history of alcohol. New York: Gotham Books.

² Courtwright, D.T. (2001). Forces of habit: Drugs and the making of the modern world. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.