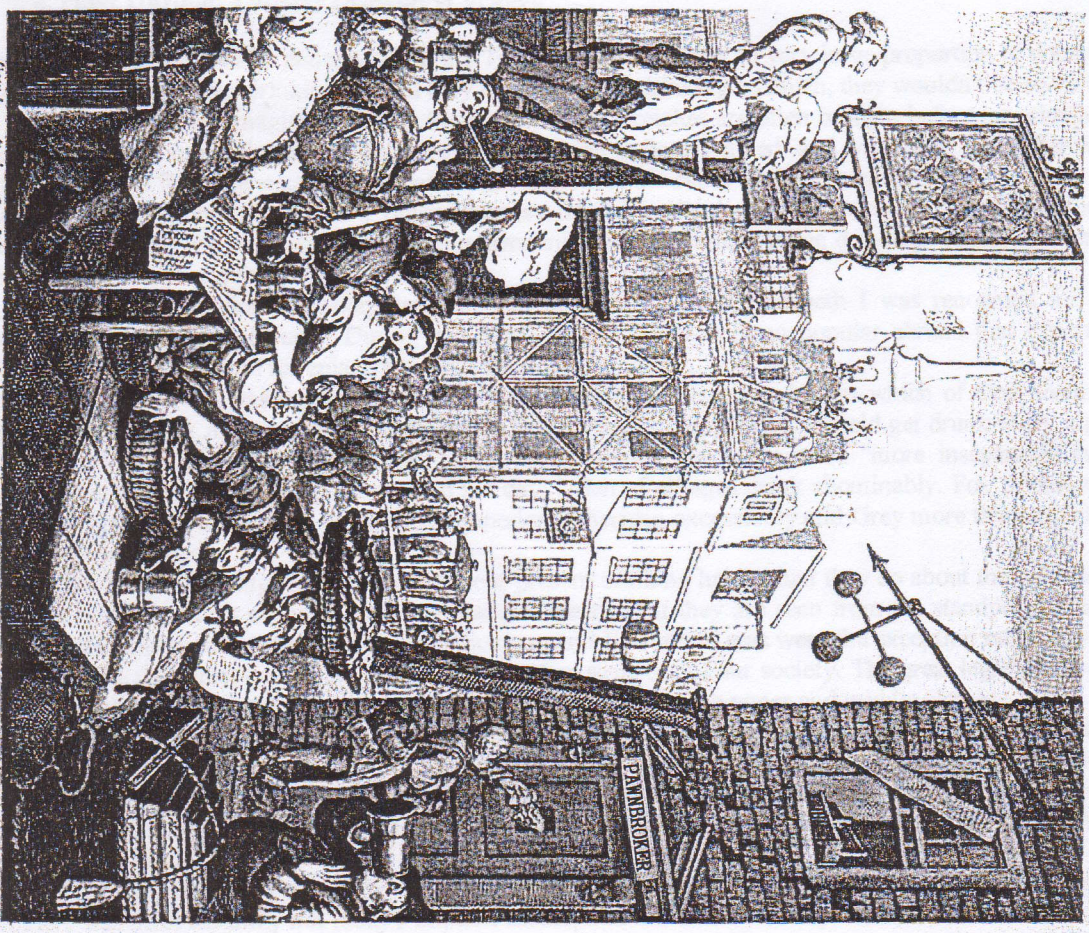


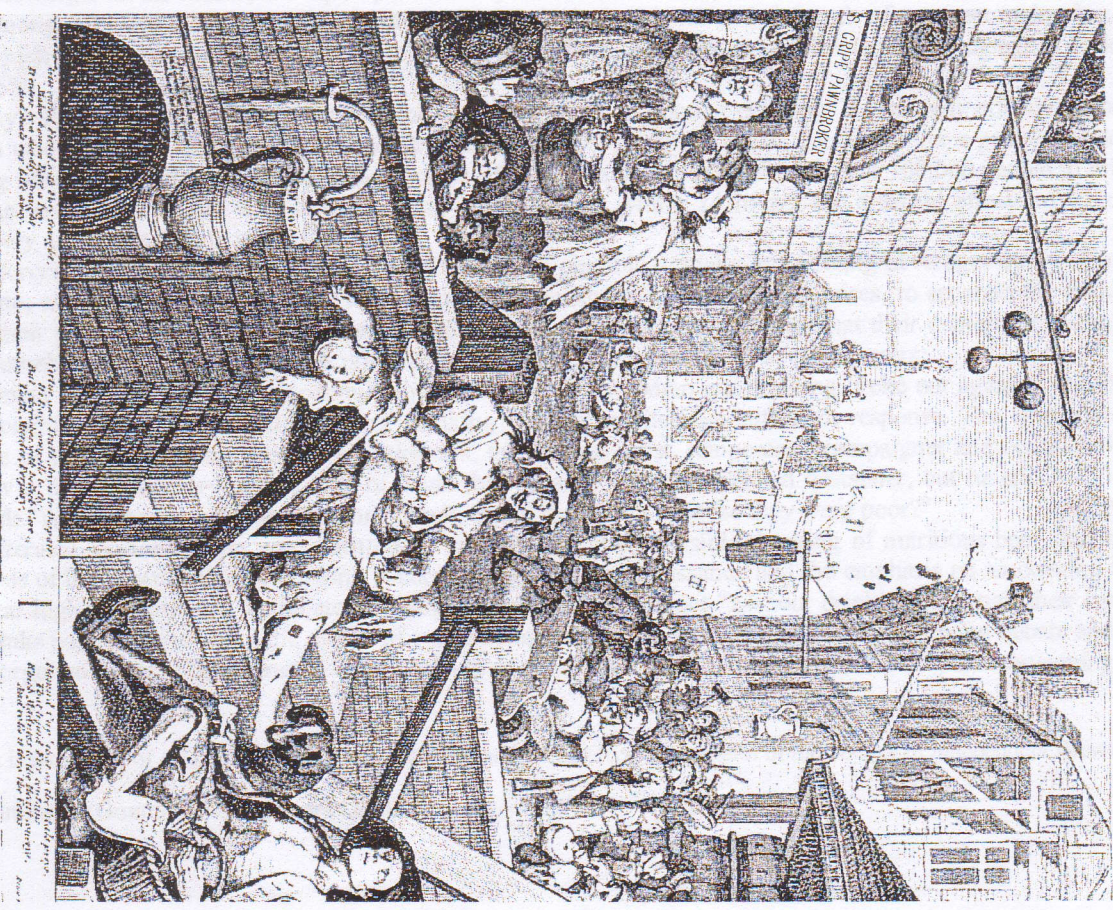
DOCUMENT A : William Hogarth, *Beer Street and Gin Lane*, engravings, 1751



Part of the Dispute of the old and new wine, the old wine is sold for a penny a quart, the new wine for a penny a pint.

Each man with his pipe in his mouth, and his glass in his hand, is drinking the old wine.

Some of the old wine is sold for a penny a quart, the new wine for a penny a pint.



XXIX. GIN LANE. 1751. Engraving. 11 3/4 x 14 in.

Some of the old wine is sold for a penny a quart, the new wine for a penny a pint.

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Guardian Unlimited, Peter Haydon, Tuesday September 6, 2005

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5 Last month, Judge Charles Harris announced on the Today programme that "a very large proportion of domestic violence is committed by people who have been drinking - and if they hadn't been so drinking so much, they wouldn't be so violent". 'Twas ever thus. In 1751, novelist and magistrate Henry Fielding wrote: "Wretches are often brought before me, charged with theft and robbery, whom I am forced to confine before they are in a condition to be examined: and when they have afterwards become sober, I have plainly perceived from the state of case that the gin alone was the cause of the transgression."

The British have always been big drinkers. Indeed ours is a drink-based culture. Our ancestors understood this, even if we have forgotten it. It is something we need to re-learn and understand if the so-called "binge drinking" debate is ever to progress beyond the futile parroting of non-sequiturs.

10 In fact we are rather poor drinkers compared with our ancestors. Queen Elizabeth I was renowned for drinking ale stronger than any of her courtiers could take. During her reign, British beers were so popular abroad that exports were only permitted if sufficient quantities of wood to replace the casks used was imported.

15 In the eighteenth century it was considered a great sport among gentlemen to bet on which of their footmen could be made the most intoxicated, and Dr Johnson once remarked that "all the decent people of Lichfield get drunk every night and were not the worse thought of". His contemporary, Sidney Smith, asked which two ideas were "more inseparable than beer and Britannia", and added this assessment of the politicians of the day: "Men of all ages drink abominably. Fox drinks what I should call a great deal, though he is not reckoned to do so by his superiors. Sheridan excessively and Grey more than any of them ... Pitt I am told drinks as much as anybody."

20 Expressions like "binge drinking" tell us less about our present drinking habits than they do about the neo-Puritan climate we live in. In truth the drinking habits of many have not changed greatly, but they are seen from the standpoint of a society that does not recognise that the values and attitudes of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras were the exception rather than the rule.

The present debate also tells us a great deal about the continuing class structure of our society. The great legacy of the temperance movement of the nineteenth century was its success in reshaping the attitudes of the upper and middle classes.

25 The enormity of this achievement is difficult for contemporary minds to consider. Ale and beer were right at the heart of the nation's way of life. Beer was thought of as having been, since the dawn of time, the single most important nutritional item for the overwhelming majority of the population. It was not seen as hyperbole when Jonas Hanway complained of the "epidemic disease" of tea drinking, and asked "were they the sons of tea-sippers who won the fields of Crecy and Agincourt or dyed the Danube's shores with Gallic blood?"

30 Similarly, attitudes to wine were very different too. Vast amounts were consumed - and smuggled, when we were at war with France - but there was most certainly not today's implicit assumption that wine was superior. As late as 1853 it was possible to maintain that "we may drink champagne in the caves of Epernay; and at Bordeaux, claret unpolluted to the English taste. We may luxuriate in Burgundy at its richest source. We may worship where they grew the fine wines of the Rhone. We may blissfully linger over Stainberger on the Maine; and sip imperial Tokay in the halls of the princely Hungarian. But all these like the blue and red flowers among corn, are merely pleasing to the taste; they lack the vigour and the truth of our own malt wine, that delicate Bitter Beer which cheers but does not over-excite, which exhilarates, but does not inebriate; which though it makes us merry, leaves us wise".

35 Today's alcohol debate is concerned with the where and when of popular drinking, but the only effective debate is the one that considers who, what and why. During the gin fever of the 1740s, when you could get "drunk for a penny and dead drunk for two", Fielding observed: "Gin is the principal sustenance [if it may be so called] for more than 100,000 people in this metropolis. Many of those wretches there are who swallow pints of this poison within 24 hours, the dreadful effects of which I have the misfortune every day to see, and to smell too."

40 Gin forced people to realise for the first time that it was possible to make intoxicating beverages that were not sustaining and wholesome, and from then it was but a short step to demonising alcohol in all its guises, to separate the middle and upper classes from their previous habits and haunts, and to allow them to convince themselves that their domestic consumption of wine and gin was somehow superior. This attitude prevails today, principally perpetuated by newspapers.

45 Attempts to defeat gin were successful, both in the 1750s and when gin drinking broke out again in the 1830s, because the debate recognised that disapproval of others' drinking was not, of itself, a sufficient response. The temperance movement failed because of this shortcoming. George Cruickshank, the famous artist, temperance campaigner and occasional illustrator of Dickens, drew a famous allegory of the evils of drink that became a much reprinted bestseller, but he still had no reply when Dickens asked: "Were the poor poor because they drank, or did they drink because they were poor?"

50 Adulterated, poisonous gin was defeated by encouraging more sensible drinking of nutritious beer, and improving the living standards of the poorest. British brewing is currently enjoying a renaissance and the emphasis on associating beer and food is at a 250-year high. If journalists would stop writing hysterical leaders about "24-hour drinking" and turn their hands instead to thoughtful drinks page features about the merits of our national drink, that would be useful in improving debate and reconnecting us with our forgotten history. Drunkenness is an attribute of those who do not appreciate what they are consuming, not of those who do.

55 · Peter Haydon is the author of *An Inebriated History of Britain*, and former secretary general of the Society of Independent Brewers

40 He felt electric light bulbs shining and burning into the back of his head, and sensed in the opening and closing flash of a second that his mind and body were entirely separate entities inconsiderately intent on going their different ways. For some reason, the loud, cracked voice singing in the room behind
 45 seemed like a signal that he should begin descending at once, so he put one foot forward, watched it turn towards the next step in a hazy fashion, and felt the weight of his body bending towards it until pressure from above became so great that he started rolling down the stairs.

50 A high-octane fuel of seven gins and eleven pints had set him into motion like a machine, and had found its way into him because of a man's boast. A big, loud-mouthed bastard who said he had been a sailor – so Arthur later summed him up – was throwing his weight about and holding dominion over several tables, telling his listeners of all the places he had been to in the
 55 world, each anecdote pointing to the fact that he was a champion boozier and the palliest bloke in the pub. He was forty and in his prime, with a gut not too much gone to fat, wearing a brown waist-coated suit and a shirt with matching stripes whose cuffs came down to the hairs of self-assurance on the back of his
 60 beefy hand.

'Drink?' Brenda's friend exclaimed. 'I'll bet you can't drink like young Arthur Seaton there' – nodding to Arthur's end of the table. 'He's on 'y twenty-one and 'e can tek it in like a fish. I don't know where 'e puts it all. It just goes in and in and you wonder when 'is guts are goin' ter go bust all over the room, but 'e duzn't even get fatter!'

Loudmouth grunted and tried to ignore her eulogy, but at the end of a fiery and vivid description of a brothel in Alexandria he called over to Arthur: 'I hear you drink a lot, matey?'

70 Arthur didn't like being called 'matey'. It put his back up straight away. 'Middlin', he answered modestly. 'Why?'

'What's the most you've ever drunk, then?' Loudmouth wanted to know. 'We used to have boozing matches on shore-leave,' he added with a wide, knowing smile to the aroused group of spectators. He reminded Arthur of a sergeant-major who once put him on a charge.

'I don't know,' Arthur told him. 'I can't count, you see.'

'Well,' Loudmouth rejoined, 'let's see how much you can drink now. Loser pays the bill.'

80 Arthur did not hesitate. Free booze was free booze. Anyway, he begrudged big talkers their unearned glory, and hoped to show him up and take him down to his right size.

1 The rowdy gang of singers who sat at the scattered tables saw Arthur walk unsteadily to the head of the stairs, and though they must all have known that he was dead drunk, and seen the danger he would soon be in, no one attempted to talk to him and lead him back to his seat. With eleven pints of beer and seven small gins playing hide-and-seek inside his stomach, he fell from the top-most stair to the bottom.

5 It was Benefit Night for the White Horse Club, and the pub had burst its contribution box and spread a riot through its rooms and between its four walls. Floors shook and windows rattled, and leaves of aspidistras wilted in the fumes of beer and smoke. Notts County had beaten the visiting team, and the members of the White Horse supporters club were quartered upstairs to receive a flow of victory. Arthur was not a member
 15 of the club, but Brenda was, and so he was drinking the share of her absent husband – as far as it would go – and when the club went bust and the shrewd publican put on the towels for those that couldn't pay, he laid eight half-crowns on the table, intending to fork out for his own.

20 For it was Saturday night, the best and bingiest glad-time of the week, one of the fifty-two holidays in the slow-turning Big Wheel of the year, a violent preamble to a prostrate Sabbath. Piled-up passions were exploded on Saturday night, and the effect of a week's monotonous graft in the factory was swilled out of your system in a burst of goodwill. You followed the motto of 'be drunk and be happy', kept your crafty arms around female waists, and felt the beer going beneficially down into the elastic capacity of your guts.

30 Brenda and two other women sitting at Arthur's table saw him push back his chair and stand up with a clatter, his grey eyes flamed over so that he looked like a tall, thin Druid about to begin a maniacal dance. Instead, he muttered something that they were too tight or far away to understand, and walked unsteadily to the top stair. Many people looked at him as he held on to the rail. He turned his head in a slow stare around the packed room, as if he did not know which foot to move first in order to start his body on the descent, or even know why he wanted to go down the stairs at that particular moment.