

Opinion Articles

The highs and lows of drinking in Britain

James Nicholls | 30 April 2014

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Recently, researchers at Cardiff University announced serious violence had fallen by 12% between 2012 and 2013. In reporting their findings, they suggested a decline in alcohol consumption since the mid-2000s may also have been a factor. Predictably, the news media responded enthusiastically to this intriguing speculation: could the era of “Binge Britain” be ending, bringing with it a fall in violent behaviour?

Overall alcohol consumption has been dropping for almost ten years across England and Wales (though violent crime has been in decline since the mid-1990s). But why have trends shifted, and what impact might this have on harms associated with alcohol? There is never a simple explanation for the way drinking behaviours lurch. That they do is certain and contrary to the lazy history of Britain as a nation of incorrigible boozers that characterises much media reporting. In reality, British drinking levels rise and fall, often dramatically.

Of course, there have been upswings in drinking. After distillation was deregulated in 1690, gin consumption soared, triggering widespread political concern. Gin was effectively prohibited in 1736 – though this just encouraged a black market and disregard for the law. In 1743, more moderately restrictive legislation, combined with a decline in grain harvests, saw gin consumption trail off. However, it was in support of a further push for legislation in 1751 that Hogarth produced 'Gin Lane' and 'Beer Street' – both of which served political, not merely documentary purposes – thereby sealing in the popular memory an impression of British drinking which remains disproportionately influential.

The deregulatory Beer Act of 1830 also produced much anxiety at the time. However, while 40,000 new beer shops opened over the following five years, sales figures for beer show a brief increase followed by a 10-year decline. Throughout the 19th century consumption broadly, followed economic trends: when money was scarce, consumption fell; when the economy boomed so did drinking.

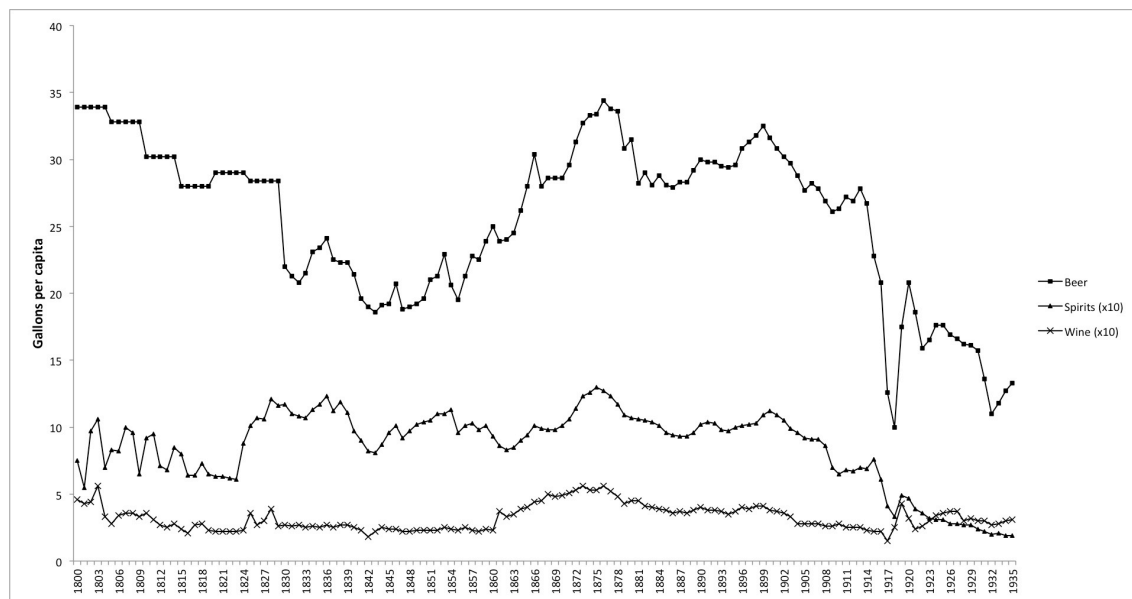


Table 1
Estimated per capita consumption 1800-1935

Source: Wilson, G., *Alcohol and the Nation* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1940)

The late Victorian peak was followed by a decline in the early 20th century, which steepened with the outbreak of World War I. Various explanations have been offered for this: the 1910 Budget increased taxes on brewers; the creation of a Central Control Board in 1915 led to reduced opening hours, a ban on the buying of rounds and nationalisation of the trade in some areas; and – obviously – millions of young men were sent to war, many of whom never returned.

Strikingly, however, this decline was sustained for decades despite attempts by brewers to claw back customers through retail innovations and marketing campaigns. Indeed, despite a small upswing in the early 1920s, drinking in the UK remained low from the 1910s right through to the 1960s.

Numerous possible factors contributed to an increase in alcohol sales from the 1960s onwards. New drinks, such as lager, were introduced; wine producers began to target affluent baby boomers; from 1964 supermarkets could sell wine without the restrictions of

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Resale Price Maintenance; and, of course, the weakening of patriarchal taboos on women's drinking increased the size of the alcohol market. Furthermore, as alcohol problems fell from the political radar, the premises of alcohol policy changed. Licensing policy had long been grounded on the principle that its key role was to reduce harms as far as possible; following the 1961 Licensing Act this shifted towards the more liberal principle that legislation should facilitate responsible drinking and allow a competitive market to develop.

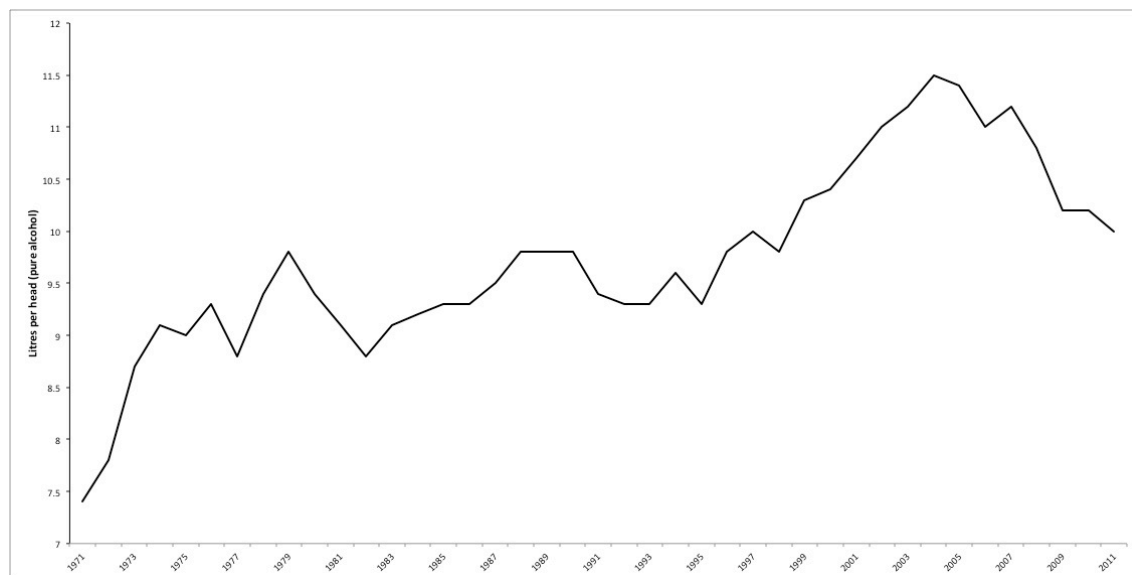


Table 2
Estimated per capita consumption (15+ years) 1971-2012

Source: British Beer and Pub Association, Statistical Handbooks 2007 and 2013 (London: BBPA)

The impact of this on crime is hard to pin down precisely. Police data on alcohol-related crime has often been a poor indicator of trends since it often reflects police practice as much as behaviour on the ground. Nevertheless, concerns over drunken hooliganism and the emergence of 'lager louts' in the 1980s were not without foundation. Around 2003, as new licensing legislation raised the possibility of '24-hour licensing', many senior police officers argued that drunken violence was again on the rise in city centres. In reality, this was linked to changes in retail practice that preceded the 2003 Licensing Act – and, as we have seen, violence has declined subsequently (though, importantly, the proportion of violence associated with alcohol has not). However, relaxed licensing shifted violent incidents later into the night causing serious problems in terms of police logistics and actual rates of late-night violence vary significantly by area.

As regards health, falling alcohol consumption from the 1900s was followed by a steep fall in alcohol mortality. Furthermore, since the 1970s liver disease – for which alcohol is the primary determinant – has risen dramatically in England (and especially Scotland) as it has fallen elsewhere in Europe. Across the UK, alcohol-related mortality doubled between 1992 and 2006, justifiably pushing alcohol up the political agenda. However, recent falls in consumption seem to be having an impact: deaths fell by around 13% between 2008 and 2012 and continue to decline, albeit with important regional variations. Nevertheless, they remain around 70% higher than twenty years ago.

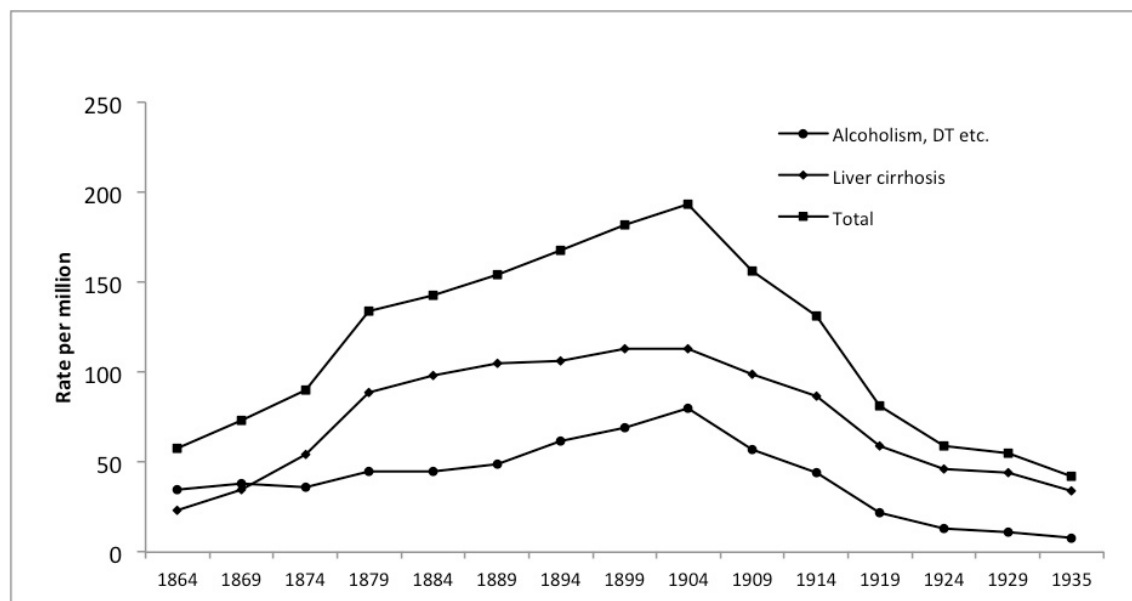


Table 3
Alcohol mortality 1864-1935

Source: Wilson, G., Alcohol and the Nation (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1940)

Higher levels of alcohol consumption across the population are associated with increasing alcohol-related harm, but also with falling profits for the alcohol industry. Therein lies a problem that has dogged British governments for centuries: how are the interests of public health and order to be squared with the financial interests, and immense political clout, of the drinks trade. The recent dip in consumption, like that of the interwar years, is clearly a problem for the drinks business: the recent abandonment of minimum unit pricing by the Coalition Government followed intense lobbying by an industry keen to stem the decline. As David Lloyd George once ruefully observed: 'Every government that has ever touched alcohol has burnt its fingers in its lurid flames'.

Behavioural trends rarely follow single causes and correlations between consumption and harms are similarly complex. However, if we are indeed entering an era of sustained decline to match the period from 1910 to 1960, then we can expect associated harms to fall as well. If, on the other hand, consumption starts to rise again this trend could well be reversed.

April 2014

About the author

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