

How we became the heaviest drinkers in a century

October 27 2015, by Chrissie Giles

I first met alcohol in the late 1980s. It was the morning after one of my parents' parties. My sister and I, aged nine or ten, were up alone. We trawled the lounge for abandoned cans. I remember being methodical: pick one up, give it a shake to see if there's anything inside and, if there is, drink! I can still taste the stale, warm metallic tang of Heineken (lager; 5% alcohol by volume) on my tongue. Just mind the ones with cigarette butts in.

Other times we'd sneak a sip of Dad's Rémy Martin VSOP (cognac; 40%) when he wasn't looking, even though we didn't like the taste. It came in a heavy glass bottle that he kept in the sideboard. He'd pour himself a glass at night, the ice cubes clinking as he walked to his small office to make phone calls. On special occasions – family birthdays, Christmas lunch – we even got to drink legitimately: usually half a glass of Asti Spumanti (sparkling wine; around 7.5%), served in the best glasses.

In my mid-teens I started to drink drink. It was easy enough to get our hands on booze, even though it's illegal in the UK to sell alcohol to anyone younger than 18. The bigger chain pubs checked IDs, so we stuck to the ones we knew to be less stringent. My older boyfriend would buy me Archers (schnapps; 21%) and lemonade in the pub opposite the supermarket where I worked on Saturdays. Trips to music festivals and birthday parties always involved booze, invariably in violently flavoured and oddly coloured forms. Standouts include Apple Sourz, a neon-green fruit liqueur with an ABV of 15%, and Hooch, a classic alcopop that

looked and tasted like lemonade but was stronger than many beers.

Yet it wasn't until university that booze and I became properly acquainted. My memory of my first week is of social anxiety offset by cheap alcohol. It was a harbinger of the next four years. On Friday and Saturday nights, the air in Flat G4, Devonshire Hall, University of Leeds would be heavy with perfume and hair products vaporising from hair straighteners. The five of us girls who lived there would sit on the plastic-tiled floor of our kitchen, backs against cupboard doors, drinking from mismatched glasses and mugs. We were pre-loading: priming ourselves for the cheap spirits and pints that lay ahead with even cheaper vodka and red wine.

I found that drinking made being a human easier. It wasn't that alcohol made my social anxiety disappear; that feeling would show up again the next morning, accompanied by a headache and bottom-of-a-bird's-cage mouth. But drinking meant I could talk to people more easily, sometimes even dance. Still, there was always that one last drink that tipped me over the edge. At one ball I drank so much free wine that I vomited the stud out of my nose and down the sink. My diary entry that night consisted of four oversized words scrawled in turquoise biro: "drunk + sick / Freshers' Ball". But that was how it was: sometimes you were the one bundling people into a taxi, sometimes you were the one being bundled. We'd always make it home eventually, armed with a greasy box of Hawaiian pizza, carrying our shoes, our hair stinking of cigarette smoke.

After I graduated, I found myself in a new city but with the same habits. I ended one night by tripping over my own feet and grating my face along a north London pavement. The next morning I had a black eye and a need for a tetanus injection. Getting into a serious relationship didn't change things, either. I started seeing my now-husband in 2003 – a courtship unofficially sponsored by Stella Artois (lager; 4.8%) and Smirnoff (vodka; 37.5%). We'd go to a pub near one of our houses, get

drunk on lager and then, when we should have been calling it quits, switch to spirits.

None of this seemed particularly remarkable. I didn't feel that I had a problem with alcohol, nor did any of my friends. We got drunk, sometimes too drunk, and then suffered the consequences. We were just doing what young people did. But recently, with getting on for 20 years of drinking under my belt, I started to wonder if my generation's relationship with alcohol was abnormal. When I looked into the numbers I realised that it was. I discovered that 2004 was Peak Booze: the year when Brits drank more than they had done for a century, and more than they have done in the decade since. Leading the way to this alcoholic apogee were those of us born around 1980. No other generation drank so much in their early twenties. Why us?

Everyone in alcohol research knows the graph. It plots the change in annual consumption of alcohol in the UK, calculated in litres of pure alcohol per person. (None of us drinks pure alcohol, thankfully; one litre of pure alcohol is equivalent to 35 pints of strong beer.) In 1950, Brits drank an average of 3.9 litres per person. Look to the right and at first the line barely rises. Then, in 1960, it begins to creep upward. The climb becomes more steady during the 1970s. The upward trajectory ends in 1980, but that turns out to be temporary. By the late 1990s consumption is rising rapidly again. Come Peak Booze, in 2004, we were drinking 9.5 litres of alcohol per person – the equivalent of more than 100 bottles of wine.

It's impossible to untangle the forces behind the graph's every rise and fall, but I've talked to researchers who have studied our relationship with alcohol. They told me how everything from recessions to marketing to sexism has shaped the way Brits drink. This is the story of that research, and of what it tells us about the ascent to Peak Booze. In many ways it is not a story about how much we drink, but about who drinks what, and

where. It begins well over half a century ago, in the pub.

During the late 1930s, a group of observers set out to record what went on in British pubs. The result was a book called *The Pub and the People*. The part of the pub where working-class men gathered was known as the vault: "Along the base of the bar counter, whose top is of well worn, well wiped mahogany, runs a line of scattered sawdust, about six inches wide, on to which people spit, throw fag ends, matches and empty cigarette packets." The authors list the activities that took place there and elsewhere in the pub: talking, thinking, smoking, spitting, playing games, betting, singing, playing the piano, the buying and selling of goods, including hot pies and bootlaces.

And drinking, of course. In postwar Britain, much of the drinking took place in pubs. It was mainly men that drank there, and they generally drank beer. Relatively little changed in the two decades after *The Pub and the People* was published. It wasn't until the 1960s that British drinking culture began to shift in more fundamental ways, and the beginnings of the era of Peak Booze can be seen.

Part of this change was about Brits learning – or being persuaded – to enjoy a drink they had long shunned. Josef Groll made the first batch of Pilsner, the light, golden beer we know as lager, in the Czech town of Pilsen in 1842. Word spread and, thanks to Europe's developing train network, so did the drink. Soon brewers from Germany started to make their own Pils, and 'Pilsner' no longer meant just a beer from Pilsen, but a new type of beer.

Lager spread around the world, but British drinkers of the time stuck to their home-brewed pale ales. These drinks were weaker than the 5% alcohol content of many lagers, and suited British drinking habits. "Mild [a type of beer] was about 3%," says beer writer Pete Brown. "Men who worked in factories and mines would drink pints and pints of it after

work, partially to rehydrate without getting hammered." It also suited the UK tax system, under which beer is taxed in proportion to its strength. Even Prince Albert enthusing about lager after a trip to Germany wasn't enough to get British drinkers to switch.

But you can't keep the drinks industry down. The brewers promoted lager intensively after World War II. In the generation that came of age in the late 1960s – one thirsty for change – they finally found an audience. "Lager suddenly exploded, very quickly, after years of unsuccessful marketing," says Brown. What changed? "We were still doing most of our drinking in pubs, they were still male-dominated environments, the beers were still the same strength. But [Dutch brewer] Heineken in its advertising used 'refreshment' as a key benefit for the very first time in British beer advertising." When the ads first aired in 1974, the campaign was doing "okay", says Brown. But when Britain experienced unusually hot summers in 1975 and 1976, the refreshment angle gelled with consumers. Suddenly lager started selling.

Heineken's television ads are now seen as game-changers. They promised a lager that "refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach". In one, a man sits in an armchair reading a newspaper, surrounded by furniture covered in sheets. Hearing someone approach, he leaps up and pretends to study the wallpaper. Enter his wife, angry. The decorating must be done by the time she's back. The man waits until he hears the car door shut, then sits back down and lifts a small dustsheet to reveal a tankard of foaming Heineken. Off to his side, we see his pet dog whistling, roller in paw, painting the wall. A Scandinavian-sounding voiceover says, "So you see, Heineken even refreshes the pets other beers cannot reach." It's bizarre but distinctly British: the nagging wife and recalcitrant husband, and the absurd painting pet, which references the "Dulux dog", an Old English Sheepdog used in the UK to advertise a popular brand of paint.

Decades later I can still recall the slogans from other lager ads of the time: "I bet he drinks Carling Black Label" and "Australians wouldn't give a Castlemaine XXXX for anything else". On holiday with my cousins, some time in the late 1980s, I remember one of the older boys emulating the swaggering walk of the bear used to promote Hofmeister.

The ads paid off. Between 1971 and 1985, annual sales of ale and stout fell by 10 million barrels, while sales of lager grew by nearly 12 million barrels. Lager now accounts for some three-quarters of total UK beer sales. Indeed, the drink is firmly lodged in the British identity: it's the pint of choice for banter-loving, football-watching blokes. And that helped the alcohol industry realise the extent to which it could reshape drinking traditions – something it has been doing ever since.

Around the same time that pub-goers were sipping their first pints of lager, many British drinkers were also developing a taste for another foreign import: wine. In 1960, wine accounted for less than a tenth of British alcohol consumption. But a few years later the government made it easier for British supermarkets to sell wine. The amount drunk nearly quadrupled by 1980, and then nearly doubled again between 1980 and 2000. In a survey published early this year, 60% of 4,000 UK adults said they chose wine over other alcoholic drinks.

This extra drinking helped push us to Peak Booze, but wine is also important because it's mostly drunk at home. It's one reason why the pub is no longer the sole focus of British drinking. "The popularization of wine represents one of the most significant developments in British drinking cultures over the last half-century – and it has been driven primarily by sales in off-licenses and supermarkets," writes James Nicholls, Director of Research and Policy Development at Alcohol Research UK.

The story of wine in Britain is also the story of women drinkers. Pubs

were traditionally not particularly welcoming to women. As the authors of *The Pub and the People* noted, women were excluded from certain rooms: "Vault and taproom are for men only, [taboo] to women, who drink in the parlour. And beer is a penny a pint more in the parlour." Another custom was that women didn't stand at the bar. Even the researchers who compiled the report used language we'd now consider sexist. One observer described a pub waitress as "a plump piece well painted". The book also features a "dossier on some of the pub whores".

"Drinking spaces always excluded women, until fairly recently," Clare Herrick, a geographer at King's College London, told me. There was also the idea that "women should drink sweet sherry, or have a half-pint, not a pint." This, she argues, came from the fear of women becoming more masculine than men, competing with men, drinking the same drinks as men. I remember experiencing the tail-end of this culture when ordering beers as a student. The barman pulled a pint for my male friend and then reached, without asking, for a half-pint glass for me.

Today, the fact that a woman can walk into a pub in the UK and order whatever she wants is something we take for granted. It's largely the result of the profound change in women's financial and social status over the past half-century. It's also a big part of why my generation drank so much. Alcohol consumption by women almost doubled in the three decades leading up to *Peak Booze*. Researchers who looked at the data a few years ago identified that change as one of the "key drivers" of the increased consumption seen in the UK.

The 1980s were an unusual time for the drinks industry. After 30 years of near-continuous increases, British drinking pretty much levelled out between 1980 and 1995 – the nation's thirst reined in, perhaps, by the high unemployment that gripped the country. But the alcohol industry had not pressed pause. It was preparing to target a new generation of drinkers, and would go on to transform the places Brits drank in. These

changes would set the scene for one of the most rapid increases in alcohol consumption seen in the last century.

One of the industry's initiatives was the introduction of a new category of drink – a drink that had origins in a culture that originally posed a threat to alcohol companies.

I didn't go to raves: as a Kentish schoolgirl I had limited desire, and even more limited means, to buy illegal drugs and dance all night in a dark field. Still, rave culture was part of my generation's adolescence, even if the closest we got was buying glow-in-the-dark bracelets and smiley-face T-shirts. I read the newspaper stories about illegal parties in warehouses and watched the news footage of people gurning on ecstasy. I remember the Shamen's number-one hit, with its "Es are good" chorus. My friends and I sang along, even if we didn't know for ourselves.

There wouldn't have been many smileys in the boardrooms of the drinks companies, because ravers didn't want beer when they had ecstasy. That's probably part of the reason pub attendance fell 11% between 1987 and 1992. The industry's solution wasn't long in coming, however. It began when the government used new legislation to force rave entrepreneurs into what Phil Hadfield, an alcohol policy consultant, calls a stark choice: "work within the system... or be closed down". Some chose the latter option, but the more successful started licensed indoor dance venues, such as the Ministry of Sound in London.

The drinks industry wasn't going to miss an opportunity like that. It saw a chance "to reposition alcohol as a consumer product which could compete in the psychoactive night time drugs economies," according to alcohol researchers Fiona Measham and Kevin Brain. The industry launched new and stronger drinks, which it targeted at a young and culturally diverse crowd. First were strong bottled lagers, beers and ciders. Then came alcopops, including Hooch, in the mid-1990s. A few

years later, drinks containing stimulants such as caffeine and guarana arrived. It was all part of the industry's desire to recast alcohol from a bloating depressant into a pleasant-tasting, stimulating drink that fitted the youth culture. The dance scene, say Measham and Brain, helped bring about a "revolution in the 1990s alcohol industry".

The industry was also hard at work transforming British pubs. We still use the phrase "spit and sawdust" to describe pubs that are old, rundown and rough, but the pubs of the 1940s are long gone. One of the most dramatic stages in this evolution took place soon after alcopops were introduced, when pub chains such as the Firkin Brewery decided to convert old buildings – banks, theatres, even factories – into new drinking warehouses, often in city centres. Expanses of glass replaced external brick walls. This overhaul, argue Measham and Brain, was designed to attract "a new customer base... whose leisure sites were to be found in dance clubs, gyms, shopping centres". Not just old men, in other words.

Shots were popular in these new pubs. Whisky chasers had accompanied beer in Scotland for years, but shots for shots' sake were new to the rest of the UK. Also new were members of bar staff coming to tables to sell the shots, which they sometimes dispensed from guns or holsters. I remember waiting excitedly in the queue outside the Leeds branch of a new bar called Vodka Revolution. We drank shot after shot of flavoured vodka that night, from cherry to watermelon to chilli. I didn't find one that I actually liked.

What the industry calls "vertical drinking" was the norm in these new venues. Smaller, higher tables replaced lower ones surrounded by seats, because drinkers are thought to consume more when they stand rather than sit. The loss of surfaces forced punters to hold onto drinks, which made them drink faster. Noisy surroundings made chatting harder, so people drank instead. "Most bars have cleared out their interior walls and

furniture to accommodate more of what the industry names 'mass volume vertical drinkers' (with the heart-warming humanistic touch for which it is famous)," write Simon Winlow and Steve Hall, a sociologist and a criminologist who have studied Britain's night-time economy.

Marketing practices in pubs, bars and clubs, including happy hours and other drinks deals, encouraged us to drink more. In 2005, when changes in the law allowed pubs to stay open for longer, managers at some large vertical-drinking pubs were reportedly offered bonuses of up to £20,000 if they used sales techniques – upselling singles to doubles, for instance – to exceed revenue targets. All this was happening as the real cost of purchasing alcohol, allowing for inflation and changes in disposable income, fell every year from 1984 to 2007. As one liver consultant put it to me: "My patient who's drinking 100–120 units per week can afford to buy three times as much alcohol now as they did in the mid-1980s."

These changes, from the falling price of alcohol to the marketing of stronger, more easily consumed drinks, are thought to be behind the rise of what researchers call "determined drunkenness". Fortysomethings might get drunk on a night out, but it wouldn't be their explicit aim. It increasingly was for those in their twenties. Young people "regard alcohol itself as crucial to a 'good night'," say the authors of *Alcohol, Drinking, Drunkenness: (Dis)orderly spaces*. They deliberately try to accelerate their drunkenness by preloading at home before they go out, playing drinking games and mixing drinks.

As the new century began, alcohol was easier to access, cheaper to buy and more enthusiastically forced into our consciousness than it had been for decades. By 2004, Brits were drinking well over twice as much as they had been half a century earlier. The nation stood atop Peak Booze, and my generation was drinking the most. Most of us were too busy having a good time to notice.

Gemma died young. We'd been in the same year at school and, like me, she'd gone to university afterwards. One night in 2001, my sister told me that Gemma had been killed. The car she was in was hit by a van that crossed onto the wrong side of the motorway. The driver was reportedly more than four times over the legal alcohol limit. I remember thinking that it seemed impossible that someone our age was gone. She wasn't alone, of course: more than 500 people were killed by drunk drivers on British roads that year. Young drivers were most likely to have drink-drive accidents, and while a large majority of those drivers were men, women made up nearly a third of the casualties.

Drinkers do all sorts of other damage. Alcohol makes many of us unpleasant: verbally abusive, angry, destructive. Minor disagreements can become violent – part of the reason why around half of violent offenders are thought by their victims to be under the influence of alcohol. There's a horrifying scene in the 1996 film *Trainspotting* where one of the characters, Begbie, attacks a man in a pub by thrusting a full pint glass straight into his face. It's called "glassing" and it's a common enough problem that some pubs have started using pint glasses made from plastic or strengthened glass that are very hard to smash. (It says something about British drinking culture that images from *Trainspotting* were used in the tenth anniversary press campaign for Revolution Vodka bars.) "Alcohol intoxication is a powerful driver both of violence-related injury and violent offending," say the authors of a 2014 study from Cardiff University.

It's tempting to link the amount we drink with the frequency of alcohol-related harm, but it's hard to do so definitively because many factors are involved. Drink-driving casualties have been falling since the 1970s, for example, probably due to better education for offenders and media campaigns. British roads might also be safer because more of our drinking now takes place at home. Still, the steady decline in drink-driving fatalities of the last 40 years was temporarily reversed between

1999 and 2004 – a period that closely matches the rapid rise in alcohol consumption that led to Peak Booze. We just don't know if this is coincidence or causation.

Crime statistics suggest a similar link to alcohol consumption. The authors of the Cardiff study attribute a fall in the number of assault victims treated in emergency departments in England and Wales to a number of factors, including the recent decrease in overall alcohol consumption and pubs using plastic glasses.

The members of generation Peak Booze may well have harmed themselves, too. Our bodies don't help us much on this front: there are no pain fibres in the liver, so we can't feel the harm that we may be doing there. But the statistics roughly track consumption: annual alcohol-related liver deaths in England and Wales climbed steadily until around 2008, when the numbers levelled off. Several experts told me that changes – since reversed – in alcohol policy that made booze less affordable were having a positive effect on liver deaths. The incidence of alcohol-related deaths, which includes nervous system degeneration and poisoning as well as liver disease, also began falling a few years after Peak Booze. Again, we don't know if these are linked or not.

Things seem to be different in the generation that followed mine. Not so long ago, I gave a careers talk at a university for a lecturer friend. There was wine on offer afterwards, but the undergraduate students left, declining the free drinks. We five panellists felt the only decent thing to do was to drink all of it, and then go out to drink more. I remember trying several different beers at the first pub. We moved on, and that's when things start to go hazy. At some point we got food; I remember a chilli-eating contest that I lost, painfully. My final memory is of a prohibition-themed cocktail bar, and of being handed a jam jar with rum in it. The next morning I crawled into university with my friend, to watch her give her 9am taxonomy lecture. The students filed in and,

while not exactly bright-eyed, seemed in better condition than me.

This generational difference isn't just anecdotal. Young people are drinking less frequently, and more of them are teetotal. We don't know why: it could be financial hardship, an increase in the proportion that don't drink for religious reasons, or increased time spent online. Nor do we know whether the decline will continue. Still, this generation's relative reluctance to drink is part of the reason UK alcohol consumption in 2013 was only 7.7 litres per person, the lowest since 1996 and nearly 2 litres lower than Peak Booze.

For many of us in the Peak Booze generation, it's still normal to go to the bar after work on Friday. The weekend starting on Thursday is normal. Drinking because you're happy, because you're sad, because there's a random beer in the fridge – all normal. Even in our thirties, with partners and babies and jobs and mortgages, we understand when someone loses their purse while drunk, pukes in a taxi, or sleeps in their clothes and crawls into work with a hangover. In fact, drinking isn't just normal to our generation. In some ways, it defines us. It's hard not to think that this isn't partly because we grew up watching alcohol adverts on the TV, surrounded by plentiful, cheap booze in the supermarket. Today the drinks commercials are more tightly regulated, but the wine-sponsored TV cookery contest and beer-branded football shirt are here, reminding us that alcohol is a normal part of everyday life.

Beyond the health risks and potential harm from drink-fuelled crime, that's the more insidious aspect of Peak Booze: the mental baggage it has left us with. I wouldn't say any of my close friends are alcoholic, but a fair few of us are more dependent than we'd like on that cold glass of white wine or cheeky gin and tonic at the end of the day. It's important to me to know that drinking is a choice, not a need. I want to be in control of what I do. Yet if I choose not to drink for one night out, I find myself rambling an explanation, assuring people that, no, I'm not

pregnant. The fact that staying sober for a month is seen as a feat of willpower, and the subject of charity campaigns such as Dry January, shows just how embedded [alcohol](#) is in our lives. It's the grease that keeps many of our days moving. This would be fine if we chose to be part of the [drinking](#) culture. Sometimes it feels like it chose us.

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