

## Brewers, Drink and Politics in Victorian Norwich

The population of Norwich in 1837 was around 60,000. By 1901, that figure had nearly doubled and there were around 112,000 citizens. Throughout the Victorian period, the working classes comprised around three-quarters of this population and they nearly all drank, some to excess. Brewers had become wealthy and powerful members of the urban elite through meeting this demand for alcohol. In Norwich more than six hundred pubs and beerhouses were supplied in the main by four family firms of brewers – Steward and Patteson, Bullard, Youngs, and Morgan – who also owned the great majority of these drinking places. Brewers like these – and the drink they produced - played a significant part in the transformation that delivered, to quote F.M.L. Thompson: ‘a social order at least roughly appropriate to an urban, industrial, capitalist society’.

Drink had a political importance. Local and parliamentary elections provided the elite with an opportunity to channel the energy of the urban masses through manipulation, using the two most powerful currencies of the times: money and drink. In doing so, the social fabric was drawn tighter; society became more cohesive. Progressives within the elite, however, began to demand in the name of a new public morality that such corrupt practices cease. Legislation from Westminster in the form of the Ballot Act of 1872 and the Corrupt Practices Act of 1883 eventually led to their demise, but Norwich was one of ten constituencies still, according to H.J. Hanham: ‘more or less corrupt after 1885’.

Norwich was the subject of two Royal Commissions, first in 1870 and then in 1876. It was disenfranchised between 1876 and 1880, and between 1885 and 1890 the city lost the representation of one of its two Members of Parliament after Sir Harry Bullard, the brewer, was unseated following an 1885 election petition. Yet corruption had worked to the advantage of many, rich and poor, as it does today in less developed countries in Africa. Brewers would not have been blind to the increased profitability of their retail outlets at election time. The 1870 Commissioners reported the corrupt practice of ‘treating’. A publican, Samuel Fletcher, the landlord of the ‘Anchor’ public house adjacent to and owned by the Pockthorpe brewery of Steward, Patteson, and Finch, had spoken to Mr. Lamb, a clerk in the employment of H.S. Patteson, a supporter of the Conservative candidate, Sir Henry Stracey, before buying thirty voters for a 10s payment that Lamb subsequently repaid. A chain of collusion seems to exist that stretched from parliamentary candidate to supporters within the city elite like the brewer Patteson - and then through the brewery, enveloping employees and publicans, and ending in the purchased votes of the recently enfranchised but still needy working class.

The 1876 Commissioners made public the scandal of the ‘setting on’ system in which over three thousand of the electorate in 1875, nearly one third of those who voted, were illegally paid for token work to secure their votes by both Conservative and Liberal parties. The committee rooms of the two political parties, forty-seven rooms in the case of the Conservatives and fifty-nine for the Liberals, were all within public houses. Brewers remained vital figures at the interface between the urban elite and the masses, and must therefore have played key roles, albeit discreetly, within this collusive system.

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