

DRUNKENNESS IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

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Introduction

The second of two peaks in United Kingdom liquor consumption embraced the years from the mid-1890s through to the early 1900s. During this period beer was being produced in quantities never equalled before or since, and in 1899 annual *per capita* beer consumption was at its highest for over twenty years. In 1900 the consumption of wine reached levels not seen for eighteen years and the amount of spirits drunk per head of population was back up to that of twenty-two years earlier. Liquor consumption was also reflected in mortality statistics: deaths certified as due to chronic alcoholism, delirium tremens etc. reached a record 80 per million in the period 1900-1904 and deaths due to cirrhosis of the liver peaked at 130 per million between 1895 and 1899.¹ Drunkenness also became the subject of public scrutiny, with local politicians looking to the police to deal with drunkenness. It is with this aspect of the drink problem in one city, Newcastle upon Tyne, and the light it may throw upon wider social and demographic issues that this paper is concerned.

The extent of the problem in Newcastle

Court proceedings for drunkenness in England and Wales, which had shown some recent improvement, rose again after the turn of the century to reach 69 per 10,000 of the population in 1903. In Newcastle the problem was significantly worse than the nationwide average. In the period 1896-1900 the number of proceedings per 10,000 persons averaged 62 across England, but stood at 207 for Newcastle. In 1901, when the average rate for ten similar 'seaports' was 88 proceedings per 10,000, Newcastle's equivalent rate was 225. By 1908 Newcastle had reduced its rate to 116 per 10,000, but it was the sixth worst amongst the seventy-five county boroughs that together averaged only 67 per 10,000.² Such figures were regularly cited to suggest that Newcastle had a severe drink problem. It is possible, of course, that the degree of vigour with which the city's constabulary and justices pursued their tasks contributed in some way to the large number of charges brought for drunkenness.³ This may have had some marginal effect on the statistics, but Newcastle's unenviable, if consistent record on drunkenness was much more likely a reflection of its citizens' greater propensity to drink and to drink to excess. To what extent this reflected social conditions and demographic pressures is a difficult question.

By examining references to drunkenness in the chief constables' annual reports to the city's watch committees, further light can be shed on drunkenness in

Table 1 Proceedings for drunkenness in Newcastle, 1896-1905

Year	Males	Females	Total
1896	3595	1293	4888
1897	3424	1170	4594
1898	3070	1185	4255
1899	3290	1360	4650
1900	3313	1383	4696
1901	3655	1191	4846
1902	3268	1172	4440
1903	2769	1035	3804
1904	2590	986	3576
1905	2840	886	3726

Source: City and county of Newcastle upon Tyne, report of the police establishment and state of crime, chief constable's report [hereafter CCR], 29 Jan 1897, 11 Feb 1898, 24 Feb 1899, 6 Feb 1900, 8 Feb 1901, 6 Feb 1902, 6 Feb 1903, 5 Feb 1904, 20 Jan 1905, 19 Jan 1906.

Newcastle around the turn of the century. Unfortunately, the degree of detail and the particular aspect of drunkenness considered varied from year to year; a reflection, it would seem, of the city fathers' specific concerns at any one time and the chief constables' obligations to respond. Nonetheless, police reports do reveal much more about the nature of the problem than aggregate figures on convictions.

In the ten-year period from 1896-1905 the number of proceedings brought for drunkenness in Newcastle average 4,348 *per annum*. Table 1 shows the number of cases brought before the court each year. In the period under review, male prosecutions always accounted for more than 70 per cent of any year's total and averaged 73 per cent. Although there was a fall of 24 per cent in drunkenness proceedings between 1896 and 1905, this overall decline was not at a steady rate and was sharper amongst females.⁴

The chief constables of Newcastle tended towards a primarily economic view of what determined the level of drunkenness. The decrease after 1896, for example, was initially ascribed to the long engineering strike and consequent fall in disposable incomes, and the rise in 1899 was put down to prosperous times and the 'constant and remunerative employment obtainable in all branches of industry'.⁵ The continued increase in drunkenness into the new century was again seen as a by-product of prosperity and 'high rates of wages', and the subsequent reduction was mainly due to 'slackness' or 'depression in trade'.⁶ It is probable, however, that more complex factors were at work and the chief constable acknowledged these to some extent, but in seeking to explain the 1896 fall, for example, he appears to contradict himself. Firstly, for the duration of the engineering strike he observed an increase in drunkenness amongst those trade groups most directly affected by the dispute and therefore least able to purchase drink. Secondly, there was an unusually mild winter which allowed many who would normally have expected to be laid-off to enjoy continuous employment and thereby to continue to earn funds for drink.⁷ These two features point, if anything, to an inverse relationship between income and

drunkenness. This would suggest that it is too simplistic to regard the only determinant of intemperance as the possession or otherwise of the financial wherewithal to drink excessively, and that more complex social and demographic pressures may have been at work.

The chief constable's tentative explanation of the post-1900 rise in male drunkenness is based on the belief that 'the labouring classes attracted to the city by tramway and railway extensions'⁸ were responsible. Likewise, the completion of these transport schemes may help explain 1902's decrease. Conventional wisdom amongst the city fathers was that drunkenness in the city was not a general problem but a consequence of the high propensities to over indulge within certain trades; trades which tended to attract a high proportion of itinerant workers. This view is supported to some extent (see Table 5 and discussion below). The pattern of female drunkenness in 1900 and 1901, when it reached its highest level in 1900 and then fell as male drunkenness rose, was said to reflect the decision to take the worst female offenders out of circulation.⁹ Measures taken to prevent habitual drunkards obtaining liquor were thought by the chief constable to have had some impact on the figures for 1903.¹⁰ The jump in male drunkenness from 1904 to 1905 is misleading: city boundaries were extended that year and the former area showed a fall.

To the specific explanations offered by chief constables we can add some more general considerations. It could be argued that the reasons for drunkenness were the reasons for drinking writ large, and in this context it would be a mistake to represent consumption of alcoholic drink, be it moderate or excessive, as exclusively a function of the more obvious economic factors. The view is best summed by Dingle who says that there was 'a significant degree of autonomous consumption...a manifestation of a deep rooted complex of social and cultural patterns of which drinking was an integral part'.¹¹ Similarly, Harrison, in his study of drink in the Victorian era, concludes that 'most drunkenness in nineteenth-century England resulted from a social situation'.¹² This argument could equally well apply to turn-of-the-century Newcastle. Housing conditions, for example, may have persuaded many to spend time in the public houses and enjoy warmth and comforts not available in their tenement homes. Housing and population statistics from the 1901 Census suggest that the average number of persons per Newcastle household was eight, but rising to over ten in some city-centre wards. The results of a later inspection by the Medical Officer of Health indicate that around 40 per cent of the city's housing stock was in tenemented buildings and about 88 per cent of these tenemented homes were only one- or two-roomed.¹³

Apprehensions, proceedings and prosecutions

The chief constables' reports allow a distinction to be made between the figure for proceedings, which was the usual published statistic by which drunkenness was expressed, and the level of convictions and the number of arrests. Inevitably, a fraction of those charged were not convicted and where information was published for Newcastle, convictions averaged out at about 83 per cent of those charged.¹⁴ Similarly, there was always a small proportion of 'apprehensions for drunkenness' which did not result in court proceedings. The

Table 2 Numbers apprehended for drunkenness in Newcastle and not prosecuted, 1896 and 1897

Reason for non-prosecution	1896	1897
Donations to poor box	18	18
Soldiers handed over to military authorities for punishment	8	7
Cautioned by police on account of old age, or some other palliating circumstance	16	21
Given false addresses	59	47

Source: CCR 20 Jan 1897, 11 Feb 1898.

police produced details for only two years, but they point to a rate of non-prosecution of about 2 per cent of arrests. The explanation for this can be seen in Table 2.

Habitual drunkards

The chief constables' reports for Newcastle show that the level of proceedings for drunkenness exceeded the number of people prosecuted in any one year. It can be calculated that, on average, a male drunkard was charged with 1.08 offences *per annum*, whilst the female drunkard was charged 1.34 times.¹⁵ There was, however, an improvement in the numbers of re-offenders over the period under review.¹⁶ For the years when the police provided details, we can summarise the individual records of those charged in four specific years (Table 3). Other information occasionally made available by chief constables shows the roles of the most spectacularly persistent offenders to be virtually monopolised by women. For example, in 1899 only four of the twenty-two offenders charged more than six times were male and in 1900, only two of the forty-five offenders charged more than four times were men.¹⁷

The Newcastle authorities adopted two methods to deal with the problem of habitual drunkards. In 1900 arrangements were introduced which enabled magistrates to commit habitual drunkards to 'inebriate reformatories', and in 1901 sixteen of the worst female drunkards were sent to the Royal Victoria Homes, Bentry. That year's decrease in female drunkenness prompted the chief constable to claim it as a result of the new policy, but he subsequently reported that most had relapsed into drunkenness on their discharge.¹⁸ A second policy was the introduction of the 'black list', by which it was hoped, perhaps rather naively, to prevent habitual drunkards from acquiring drink by stopping them from being served with drink in public-houses. In its first year of operation, thirty of the forty-eight people on the black list were convicted of drunkenness, seventeen having multiple convictions. In 1903, forty from the black list of fifty-six were convicted. Of the fifteen female habitual drunkards discharged after spending up to two years at the Bentry inebriates' home, eight quickly graduated to the black list.¹⁹ However, if we look at Table 3, it is clear that by 1905 the 20 per cent overall fall in the number of drunkards contained within it a disproportionately larger fall amongst the regular offenders.²⁰

Table 3 Number of persons charged and the number of proceedings for drunkenness in Newcastle, 1896-1905

Number of times charged	Number of persons charged			
	1896	1899	1902	1905
Once	3339	3565	3537	3010
Twice	349	234	212	182
Thrice	126	61	76	72
Four times	52	23	22	19
Five times	13	16	12	6
Six times	6	10	7	5
Seven times	10	7	5	
Eight times	4	3	1	
Nine times	3	5	2	
Ten times	1	2		
Eleven times		1		
Twelve times	1	1		
Thirteen times	1	2		
Fourteen times				
Fifteen times		1		
	3905	3931	3874	3294

Source: CCR, 29 Jan 1897, 6 Feb 1900, 6 Feb 1903, 19 Jan 1906.

Who were the drunkards?

For the years between 1896 and 1902, the chief constables' reports contained age profiles of offenders. These have been summarised in Table 4 and show that two-thirds of all those charged with drunkenness were between the ages of twenty and forty years. For only one year, 1896, was a return published giving the occupations of those charged. Table 5, based on this information, details the categories of main offenders and their share of the total of almost 5,000 charges. With one-third of all proceedings being brought against labourers, Table 5 would seem to confirm the view that it was the drinking habits of the unskilled which had most impact upon the level of drunkenness. However, without information on the relative size of each occupational group within the city's total workforce, we cannot truly judge a particular trade's propensity to get drunk. For example, in 1896 three charges of drunkenness were taken out against veterinary surgeons;²¹ an insignificant number in the context of the total convictions that year, but perhaps of some note in the city's veterinary circles. Equally, the poor representation or absence of some professions in the drunkenness figures (for example, architects) is not evidence of sobriety within a particular occupational group. The statistics offer only positive evidence of over-indulgence in public places: intemperance of a more discreet nature presumably went on, but unpunished and unnoticed. Another noteworthy feature of Table 5 is the high number of proceedings against prostitutes, which amounted to almost half of that year's charges against females. The extent of prostitution goes some way to explaining not only female drunkenness but also the greater incidence of persistent offenders amongst women. It may be of course that arresting females for drunkenness was part of a policy which was aimed at curbing prostitution rather than drunkenness.

Table 4 Male and female offenders for drunkenness in Newcastle, as percentages of total proceedings in each age range, 1896-1902

Age range (years)	Male %	Female %
Under 20	3.0	0.5
20-29	27.5	9.2
30-39	20.7	8.6
40-49	13.0	5.2
50-59	6.0	2.2
Over 60	2.9	1.2

Source: CCR, 29 Jan 1897, 11 Feb 1898, 24 Feb 1899, 6 Feb 1900, 8 Feb 1901, 6 Feb 1902, 6 Feb 1903.

Table 5 Trades or occupations with most proceedings for drunkenness in Newcastle, 1896

Trade/occupation	Number of proceedings	Percentage of total (4888) proceedings
Labourers	1642	33.6
Prostitutes	574	11.7
Miners	227	4.6
Fitters	119	2.4
Hawkers	104	2.1
Sailors	86	1.8
Cartmen	84	1.7

Source: CCR 29 Jan 1897

Statistics also indicate that Newcastle's record on drunkenness was a direct result of its reputation as the chief centre on Tyneside for leisure, which for many meant drinking or drinking-related activities. Police reports covering the period 1897-1905, show 38 per cent of all proceedings for drunkenness were against non-residents.²² The city was well served by licensed houses, a point frequently made by temperance reformers who argued that it was the temptation offered by so many public-houses that was a root cause of the drink problem. Figures produced in 1899 by Rowntree and Sherwell,²³ for example, showed that Newcastle's 691 licensed premises represented a ratio of 1 for every 307 of the population and every 43 dwelling houses in the city. Another approach popular amongst temperance agitators was to assert that drunkards were inadequate with serious psychological disorders, that their mental illness was itself caused by drink and that the country's lunatic asylums were largely populated by the victims of drink.²⁴ An insight into the relationship between drunkenness and mental condition can be gleaned from a report prepared by an inspector appointed under the Inebriates Act.²⁵ The study of almost two thousand habitual drunkards committed to reformatories in 1905 were classified as follows:

Insane (certified and sent to asylums) 48
Very Defective (imbeciles, degenerates, epileptics) 271
Defective (eccentric, silly, dull, senile, or subject to periodic paroxysms
of ungovernable temper) 857
Of Average Mental Ability 697

For the first three groups, accounting for around 60 per cent of all cases, the inspector's conclusion was that mental defects were probably present before drunkenness such that 'the offences resulting therefrom, are merely the natural result of inability to direct seriously and control thoughts, wishes and actions'.²⁶ In the remaining 40 per cent of cases with average mental ability, it was felt that one reason for their condition may have been environmental factors, but that other causes were ill-health, accident and old age. In these latter circumstances, drink offered some temporary relief of pain and distress which then became habitual. Whilst the foregoing analysis by the inspector is based on a sample of habitual drunkards, it may well be the case that the causes identified, particularly those connected with those of average mental ability, applied to a similar or lesser degree to all drunkards.

Drunkenness, death and illness

The heavy drinking among many of its citizenry, reflected in Newcastle's drunkenness record, must have had an impact on the city's patterns of mortality and disease. To what extent insobriety influenced health and death in Newcastle is a matter of conjecture. What can be firmly established are the deaths directly attributable to alcohol (Table 6). But such statistics overlook the important role of alcohol consumption as a contributory factor in other illnesses. In the late nineteenth century there was no shortage of medical advice as to the true costs of alcohol abuse, much of it essentially propagandist. For example, one prominent temperance doctor declared that it was the physician's 'painful task, day by day, to treat the most terrible and fatal diseases, for the origin of which we can assign no other cause than the use of alcohol' and that 'whatever way he turns his attention to determine the persistent effects of alcohol he sees nothing but disease and death'.²⁷ Other attempts were made to quantify the contribution of alcohol to illness, with one senior physician asserting that in his hospital 'in seven out of every ten cases they owed their ill-health to alcohol'.²⁸ Another doctor put a figure of 50 per cent on 'those who lost their lives sooner or later by indulgence in alcohol', but also accepted that it was 'impossible...to arrive at a true estimate of the mortality due to drink'.²⁹ And so it was for Newcastle. Amongst the 4,000 or so deaths every year in the city, many would have been from illnesses caused or exacerbated by heavy drinking, but we will never know the true extent. Nor do we know in how many of the deaths (653 in 1895³⁰) attributed to 'violence' and 'non-specific causes' did alcohol play some part.

Conclusion

Although the national trend in drunkenness was followed in Newcastle, the size of the problem was much greater in the city and Newcastle consistently appeared near the top of the country's drunkenness league. The nature of the

Table 6 Deaths from chronic alcoholism, acute alcoholism, delirium tremens and cirrhosis of the liver, in Newcastle, 1896-1905

Year	Deaths due to acute & chronic alcoholism and delirium tremens	Deaths due to cirrhosis of the liver
1896	5	39
1897	18	30
1898	15	36
1899	10	36
1900	12	48
1901	19	50
1902	21	43
1903	12	31
1904	11	39
1905	14	25

Source: City and county of Newcastle upon Tyne, annual report of the medical officer of health, 1896-1905.

problem in Newcastle was well-documented in police reports, but the rather simplistic, immediate economic explanations proffered by those who collected and reported the statistics seem inadequate. Drunkenness in Newcastle was surely the result of the same complex of environmental and cultural factors that encouraged people to drink and to drink excessively elsewhere, except that such factors were more prevalent in urban centres like Newcastle. For example, the concentration in turn-of-the-century Newcastle of particular occupational groups, many connected with heavy drinking, was an important determinant. Similarly, Newcastle's abundance and variety of licensed premises had a magnetic effect on surrounding areas and its extensive transport network facilitated the taking of advantage of such opportunities. In this latter respect, the city could be absolved of part of the blame for its drunkenness problem: two out of five drunkards picked up by the city's police were not strictly Novocastrian. It is clear that the Newcastle authorities were concerned, and that magistrates and the police tried to deal with the problem. But it is questionable, given their initial diagnosis, whether their limited direct action was responsible for the decrease in drunkenness after the turn of the century. It is more likely that the environmental improvements, social changes and the development of counter-attractions, being experienced nationally and contributing to a decline in liquor consumption, were also being felt on Tyneside.

NOTES

1. G.B. Wilson, *Alcohol and the nation*, (London, 1940), Appendix F, Tables 1, 32, 34, pp.331-3, 424-7, 430-3.
2. Calculations based upon Wilson, Appendix F, Tables 34, 36, pp.430-3, 437-9 and *Statistics on the operation and administration of the laws relating to the sale of intoxicating liquor 1908*, Cmnd 4612, (London, 1909).
3. There was a belief amongst some temperance workers that the Newcastle police tended to be more diligent than other forces. For example, C. Roberts, 'Drink, crime and pauperism', in G. Haylor ed., *Papers and proceedings of the national convention for the prohibition of the*

- liquor traffic, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1897), 154-61, states that 'the Licensing Commission has made quite clear that the police only arrest the drunk and disorderly and the drunk and incapable. That is the rule nearly everywhere, though you are stricter in Newcastle'.
4. The overall fall of 24 per cent involved a 31 per cent drop in the number of proceedings against women and a 21 per cent decrease for men.
 5. **City and county of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, report of the police establishment and state of crime, chief constable's report** [hereafter CCR], 6 Feb. 1900. There was a widespread acceptance within the brewing trade of a correlation between beer consumption and the general state of the economy. For example, the **Brewery Manual** for 1897 stated that 'the brewing industry is one of the first to participate in the benefits attending a trade revival, just as it is the first to feel the brunt of a trade depression'.
 6. CCR 8 Feb 1901, 6 Feb 1903, 5 Feb 1904.
 7. CCR 11 Feb 1898.
 8. CCR 6 Feb 1902.
 9. CCR 6 Feb 1902.
 10. CCR 5 Feb 1904.
 11. A.E. Dingle, 'Drink and working class living standards in Britain, 1870-1914', **Economic History Review**, 2nd series, XXV (1972), 608-22.
 12. B. Harrison, **Drink and the Victorians. The temperance question in England, 1815-1872**, (London, 1971), 355.
 13. **Census of England and Wales 1901, County of Northumberland**, Cmnd 1294, 1902, Table 9, p.10 and **City and county of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, annual report of the medical officer of health, 1910**.
 14. CCR 29 Jan 1897, 11 Feb 1898, 24 Feb 1899.
 15. Based on CCR 6 Feb 1900, 8 Feb 1901, 6 Feb 1902, 6 Feb 1903, 5 Feb 1904, 20 Jan 1905, 19 Jan 1906.
 16. The number of re-offenders within any year fell from 15 per cent of all those charged in 1896 to 9 per cent in 1905.
 17. CCR 6 Feb 1900, 8 Feb 1901.
 18. CCR 6 Feb 1902, 5 Feb 1904.
 19. CCR 5 Feb 1904.
 20. For example, between 1896 and 1905 the number of persons charged once fell by less than 10 per cent, but the falls for those charged twice and those charged more than twice were 48 per cent and 53 per cent respectively.
 21. CCR 21 Jan 1897.
 22. CCR 11 Feb 1898, 24 Feb 1899, 6 Feb 1900, 8 Feb 1901, 6 Feb 1902, 6 Feb 1903, 5 Feb 1904, 20 Jan 1905, 19 Jan 1906.
 23. J. Rowntree and A. Sherwell, **The temperance problem and social reform**, (London, 1899), 491.
 24. For a brief discussion of the way in which drunkenness and drink was 'made the convenient scapegoat for all the troubles of society' see L. Shiman, **Crusade against drink in Victorian England**, (Basingstoke, 1988), 94-95. On Tyneside, the magazine of the North of England Temperance League regularly blamed the region's social and health problems on drunkenness. For example, excessive drinking was said to be 'reaping the harvest of the lunatic asylum', having 'a maddening influence' and being responsible for 'the creation of a vast amount of pauperism, crime, lunacy and destitution', (**Temperance Witness** Dec 1903, Mar 1904, June 1904).
 25. **Report of the inspector of certified reformatories under the Inebriates Act 1899**, Cmnd 3246, 1906, quoted in E.A. Pratt, **The licensed trade: an independent survey**, (London, 1907), 55.
 26. **Inebriates Act 1899**.
 27. B.W. Richardson, **Diseases of modern life**, (London, 1876), 209-10.
 28. Quoted in K. Mitchell, **The drink question**, (London, 1891), 114.
 29. Mitchell, **Drink question**, 115-16.
 30. **City and county of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, annual report of the medical officer of health, 1896**.