ENEMY BEHIND THE LINES
Beer in the First World War

'Drink is doing us more damage in the war than all the German submarines put together,' declared Minister of Munitions David Lloyd George in 1915. 'We are fighting Germany, Austria and drink; and as far as I can see the greatest of these three deadly foes is drink.'

It was no idle comment. The powerful politician, who was to become Prime Minister in 1916, was one of two avowed teetotallers in the five-man war cabinet. Lloyd George believed beer was an evil influence. He was as determined to break the brewers' grip on Britain as he was to defeat Germany on the battlefield.

'This traffic, having sown destruction and death, must reap for itself a fruitful harvest of desolation and ruin.' He spoke like a pulpit preacher dedicated to his cause. A leader of Welsh nonconformism, he had supported complete prohibition in Wales since the 1880s. But Bills to introduce such measures had been repeatedly blocked in the House of Commons by what Lloyd George described as 'the brewers' ring which seems to govern England.' Now, in the emergency of war, he gained his revenge.

DORA, the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914, was a formidable piece of legislation with sweeping powers, which were repeatedly strengthened throughout the conflict. The licensed trade felt the full force of its measures.

In 1915 a Central Control Board (Liquor Traffic) was established to impose strict licensing hours in areas deemed militarily important. Eventually these covered virtually all heavily populated regions. Opening times were restricted to five-and-a-half hours a day. Pubs could only sell beer from 12–2.30pm at lunchtime and from 6–9pm in the evening on weekdays. On Saturdays the landlord had to put the towels over the pumps an hour earlier at 8pm. On Sunday drinkers barely had time to knock back a half. These were crushing changes. Previously customers had been used to being served from 5.30 in the morning until late at night.

Prices shot up as a huge burden of taxation was imposed on beer. The cost of a pint doubled from 2d to 4d between 1914 and 1916, later increasing to 5d before the Government imposed a measure of

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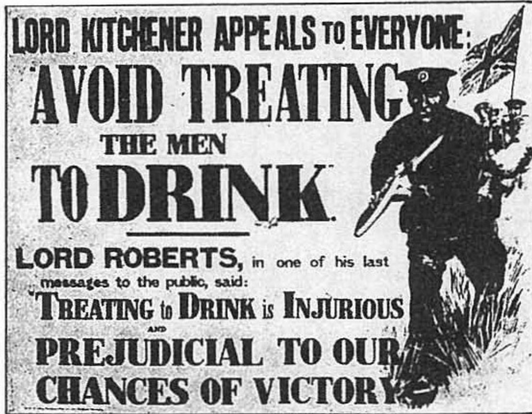

THE ENEMY WITHIN: Drink was regarded by the Government as a danger to the war effort in the First World War.

price control. At the same time the strength of beer was slashed, dropping like a stone from an average gravity of 1052 in 1914 to 1030 in 1918. Production was drastically cut back from over 37 million bulk barrels in 1913 to 19 million in 1917.

In some places where vital munition works were in operation like Carlisle, breweries were taken over and closed down, the pubs falling under State control. Lloyd George favoured the nationalisation of the whole brewing industry, which was seriously considered in 1915 and again in 1917.

The dry hand of the State even extended to slapping down the happy habit of buying your friends a drink. Treating was prohibited.

It was not just the harsh restrictions which alarmed the brewers – some were to be expected in war-time – as the atmosphere of official hostility. Beer was regarded as a danger, an intoxicating beverage which could undermine the war effort. The brewers were in the opposite trench, along with the enemy.

The industry knew they were not in favour – and fought back. DORA was depicted as a wicked witch, a gaunt and mean old lady snatching away John Bull's precious freedom. Many were convinced there was a conspiracy. One brewer from South Wales, George Westlake, blamed the new orders on 'fanatical teetotallers' who were using the war to push their 'fiendish propaganda for the purpose of wiping out the trade.'

This was not far from the mark as the temperance activists pursued their own agenda. One leader, Sir Thomas Whittaker, believed the war provided them with a great opportunity to strike 'whilst the overshadowing issues of the war are accustoming the people to restricted liberties.'

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Their high point came in 1917 when the United States started to twist the Government's arm. Food Administrator Herbert Hoover issued veiled threats that an increase in vital American grain exports to Britain would be difficult to secure without an end to brewing in Britain.

The United States was moving rapidly towards total prohibition and expected Britain to follow. The Americans were climbing onto the moral high ground from where they could look down on their debauched allies, who were continuing to brew while the German submarines sank grain-carrying ships in the Atlantic.

The United States stopped brewing beer in December 1917, ostensibly because of the food shortage in Europe though more because of the overwhelming power of the teetotal lobby across the country. By the time national prohibition was introduced in January 1920 through the Volstead Enforcement Act, 33 of the 48 states had already adopted prohibition, covering more than two-thirds of the population.

The British cabinet considered the question carefully. It was dangerous to offend a powerful ally, but eventually the ministers drew back from taking the final measure because of fear of industrial unrest. In March 1917 Britain's Food Controller, Lord Davenport, had moved to meet the Americans, issuing an order limiting brewing to 28 per cent of its pre-war level, a mere 10 million standard barrels. This target figure was never reached. Ministers came to realise they had squeezed the public's pint too far. Sir George Cave, the Home Secretary, told the House of Commons in July 1917:

> The beer shortage is causing considerable unrest, and is interfering with the output of munitions and with the position of the country in this war. There is unrest, discontent, loss of time, loss of work and in some cases even strikes are threatened and indeed caused by the very fact that there is a shortage of beer.

Beer was no longer a problem. Shortage of beer was. Restrictions were relaxed and output rose to 23 million bulk barrels in 1918.

The Great War had given Britain's brewers a great fright. Talk of prohibition or nationalisation continued into the 1920s – but ironically the emergency measures taken during the war saved the industry from more drastic action.

When the Central Control Board was abolished in 1921, many of its restrictions were continued in the 1921 Licensing Act, notably the limitations on pub hours. Bars continued to close in the afternoon

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with last orders in the evening at 10.30pm or earlier. There was no return to all-day drinking.

Similarly the heavy duty on beer remained. This ensured prices never reverted to their pre-war level – and more significantly ale never regained its stupefying strength of 1914 when the average gravity had been 1052. In 1920 the average gravity was 1039 and by 1939 had barely edged upwards to 1040. The drunk, a familiar feature of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, staggered off the streets. Convictions for drunkenness in England and Wales fell by three-quarters from 188,877 in 1914 to 46,757 in 1937.

This new sober nation did hold some drawbacks for the brewing industry. The amount of beer drunk dropped so much it pushed the brewers into joint action. At the height of the Depression in 1933, consumption had collapsed to 17.7 million bulk barrels, lower than the worst year during the war and less than half the 1914 figure. In a bid to boost demand, the industry launched a 'Beer is Best' campaign with posters and adverts stressing the goodness in a glass.

Even the Carlisle State Brewery continued – and showed the way to the rest of the trade between the wars by pursuing a vigorous policy of building fewer but better pubs. Leading companies like Mitchell's & Butler's of Birmingham and Whitbread in London took great pride in their new, light, airy houses, offering such novelties as food and ladies' toilets. The number of pubs in England and Wales declined by more than 4,000 from 60,331 in 1918 to 56,173 in 1938.

When the war clouds gathered again in 1939, conditions were very different from what they had been 25 years before. One temperance supporter, Sir Harold Bellman, conceded:

> Looking back over the lifetime of a generation, there has been an astonishing growth in general sobriety. . . . At the beginning of the present century the problem of alcoholism was menacing, both in extent and intensity; today, on any reasonable view, there has been a transformation which amounts almost to a social revolution.

The Brewers' Journal added in September 1939:

> The last war accustomed the people to all kinds of restraints and restrictions. Some of them were proved by time to be good and they have been embodied in our national life. Others, when hostilities had ended, were seen for what they were – opportunist attempts to thrust on the masses the inclinations of the few.
>
> In the present conflict the nation comes first and service

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and devotion to its cause are paramount. But guard must be set at our gates lest the licensed trade becomes, as in the last war, the target of teetotal attacks guised under the cloak of patriotism.

The brewing industry had won most of the skirmishes between the wars, but now that full-blooded battle was joined again, it could not be sure that the Government would not buckle before the demands of its enemies.

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