

UPTON TEA QUARTERLY

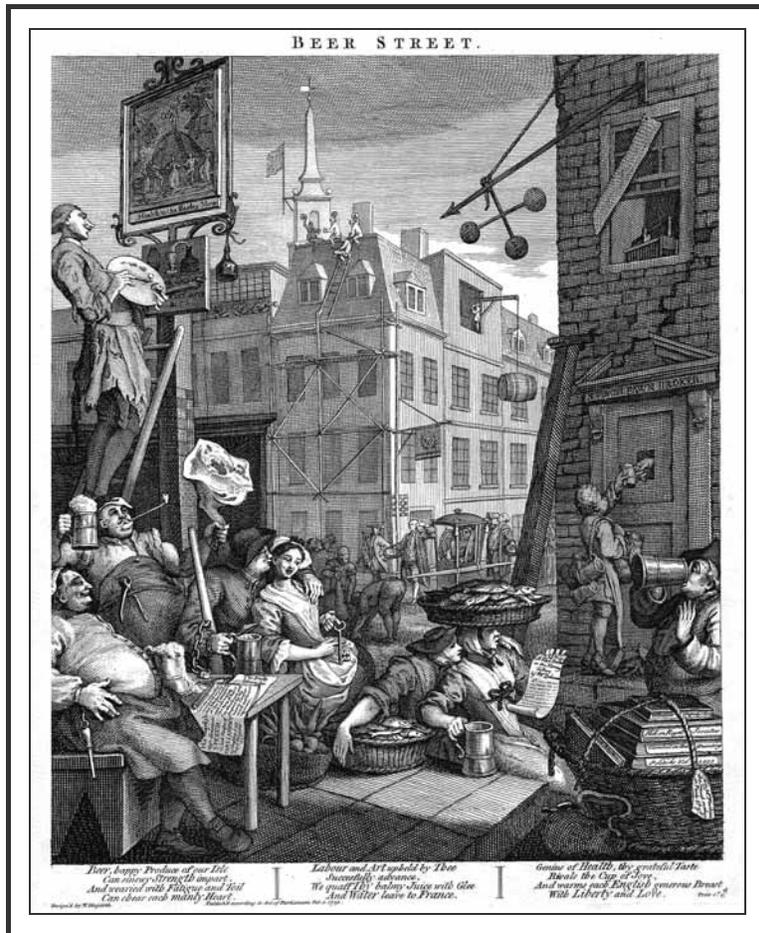
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Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry

Part X: Tea Imports Surge in Great Britain



*“Beer, happy Produce of our Isle
Can sinewy Strength impart,
And wearied with Fatigue and Toil
Can cheer each Manly Heart.*

*Labour and Art upheld by Thee
Successfully advance,
We quaff Thy balmy Juice with Glee
And Water leave to France.*

*Genius of Health, thy grateful Taste
Rivals the Cup of Jove,
And warms each English generous Breast
With Liberty and Love.”*

William Hogarth, *Beer Street*

At the start of the eighteenth century, beer was the predominant beverage of England, Scotland and Wales. It was consumed from breakfast through suppertime by men, women and children. As industrialization and commerce swelled the populations of cities like London, Manchester, and Glasgow, beer and ale were increasingly considered a safer alternative to polluted city water.

By the end of the eighteenth century, tea, made with boiled water, was rapidly gaining popularity as an affordable alternative to beer and ale. Along the path to the tea table, however, the cities’ poor would take a brief stroll down *Gin Lane*.

Please turn to page 46.

Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry, Part X

The *Kingdom of Great Britain* was formed when the *Act of Union* was ratified by Scottish Parliament in 1707. The century that followed would be a remarkable era — one that would witness extraordinary successes and unprecedented losses as British power and influence expanded worldwide. By 1740 the term *British Empire* was in common use. The Dutch Republic, which had dominated trade between Europe and the Far East for nearly a century, was seeing her position threatened on several fronts.

Industrialization and international commerce was transforming Europe, and London would soon find herself at center stage.

As the eighteenth century unfolded, London increasingly attracted the interests of foreign investors, scholars and merchants, just as Amsterdam had done in the 1600s, and Lisbon the century prior. History has shown us that each successive world power has been successful to whatever extent it can build on the strengths, and (perhaps more importantly) avoid the mistakes, of her predecessors. As documented by Jonathan Scott in *England's Troubles*: [p. 488]

From 1689 the migration of Dutch financiers to London had enabled it to develop an Amsterdam-style stock market. By 1723–4 total foreign, mainly Dutch holdings of stock in the Bank of England, the East India Company and the South Sea Company were 9.2 per cent; by 1750 it was 19.2 per cent...

The relative speed of English statebuilding, of Britain's subsequent rise to great power status, may owe a good deal to its lateness in European terms. Accordingly, it benefited not only from the experience of its own earlier failures and deferral but from Dutch experience as well.

One must also credit the inherent talents, creativity, and drive that was unleashed in Great Britain after the monarchy capitulated to public pressures, and a parliamentary republic was empowered. Suddenly the people had influence over their destiny. The

Dutch had developed the first modern economy, and for most of the seventeenth century their successes were the envy of all Europe. But it would be the British who would lead Europe in the next era of commerce and industrialization.

It was during this period that tea became a common staple of the British working class. What is perhaps most intriguing is how a beverage that was first introduced as a luxury for royalty and the rich less than a century earlier would, by the middle of the 1700s, become Great Britain's preferred non-alcoholic beverage. In 1729 Jonathan Swift styled tea as "...the common luxury of every chambermaid, sempstress, and tradesman's wife, both in town and country..."

Tea's path to popularity was strewn with detractors, not the least of which was theologian John Wesley (1703–1791). According to Ukers, Wesley denounced tea as "hurtful to both body and soul ... [and] he denounced tea in much the same terms he employed against strong drink." Wesley was not alone in discouraging the use of infernal tea, but in the end he, along with most of the early doubters, converted to teism.

Just as tea was becoming more accepted in England, a relatively new type of distilled spirits (called gin) was gaining a foothold among the working class of the fledgling Industrial Revolution. Cheaper than beer and ale, gin found a ready market among the poor. By the middle of the eighteenth century, gin flowed freely through the streets of London. It was the beginning of an "epidemic" of solitary drinking as a "cure for cares". According to H. A. Monckton, gin became a "social catastrophe of enormous proportions."

From 1684 to 1737, gin consumption in England increased ten-fold, to 5 million gallons. By 1750 it reached 11 million gallons, or a bit less than two gallons per year for every man, woman, and child in England. Consider



also that most gin consumption was confined to the urban poor. In *Tastes of Paradise*, Wolfgang Schivelbush compares these formidable figures with total liquor consumption in West Germany for the year 1974 of 2.6 liters per capita, “a bare third of England’s in the eighteenth century”.

Schivelbush further states:

Gin struck the typically beer-drinking English populace like a thunderbolt. Its social destructiveness was comparable to the effect whiskey later had upon the North American Indian cultures. ...

Liquor has never lost the stigma of having been involved with this first brutal phase of the Industrial Revolution....

Hogarth’s engraving entitled *Gin Lane* (above) is a classic illustration of this unfortunate state. Note that on Gin Lane, only the shops of the pawn broker and gin sellers are prospering, while other buildings are boarded up and toppling. At center, a stupefied mother fumbles for a pinch of snuff as her child falls over the handrail.

By contrast, on *Beer Street* (front cover) the pawn broker’s shop is in ruins, while in

the rest of the city, “peace, contentedness, and industriousness prevail.”

In an attempt to curtail consumption, British Parliament passed a series of *Gin Acts* in 1729 and 1736. These acts levied various taxes and licensing fees on gin distillers and distributors, attempting to control an industry that was rapidly being seen as a pariah.

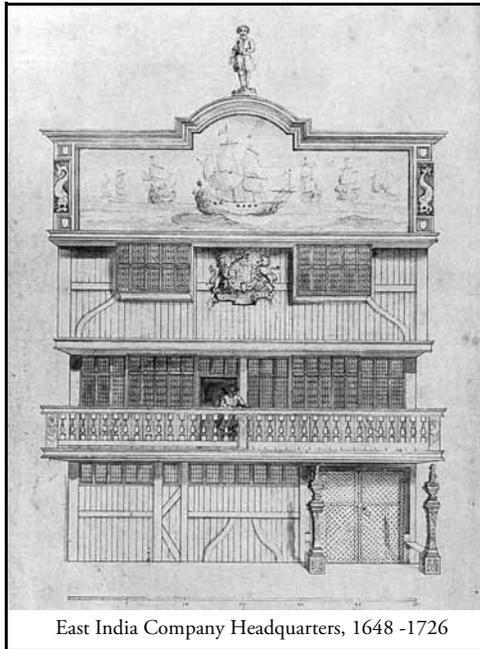
But, according to Schivelbush, the Gin Acts had little or no effect on the general consumption of gin. In fact, the Act of 1736 eventually led to the *Gin Riots*. In response, the taxes were substantially lowered.

At mid-century, yet another Gin Act (1751) was issued. It was an attempt to close down illegitimate (unlicensed) producers who were actively selling tainted gin. Again, the latest Gin Act appeared to have no real impact on consumption, as licensed producers promptly increased production to keep up with demand.

Somehow the “social catastrophe” eventually ran its course. To what degree the Gin Act of 1751 was effective is open to speculation. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century gin consumption trailed off considerably, dropping to what Schivelbush calls a “more normal level”.

One thing is certain. The success of the Industrial Revolution depended on a sober working class, and this required a change in lifestyle. Gin and ale eventually had to give way to tea if Great Britain were to secure her position as the European superpower. It was a gradual change, but import statistics reveal the trend. The following data are gleaned from K. N. Chaudhuri’s *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660–1760*.

In the entire year of 1669, the first year in which English ships carried tea to London, tea imports totalled a mere 222 pounds. Imports were sporadic throughout the rest of the century, with gaps as long as four years with no tea imports. Cumulative imports up



East India Company Headquarters, 1648 -1726

to 1700 totalled less than 130,000 pounds, for an average import of roughly 4,000 pounds per year!

In 1701 over 121,000 pounds were imported, nearly as much as in the prior 32 years combined. For the next five years imports trailed off considerably, to a mere 460 pounds in 1706. No tea was imported on British ships again until 1713, when a record 158,000 pounds were imported.

There is a dramatic increase in imports from 1717 onward. In that year 398,000 pounds were imported, followed by 542,000 pounds in 1718! Within a few years, annual imports of China tea exceeded 1,000,000 pounds!

Taxes on tea were now an important source of revenue, and Parliament was beginning to take note.

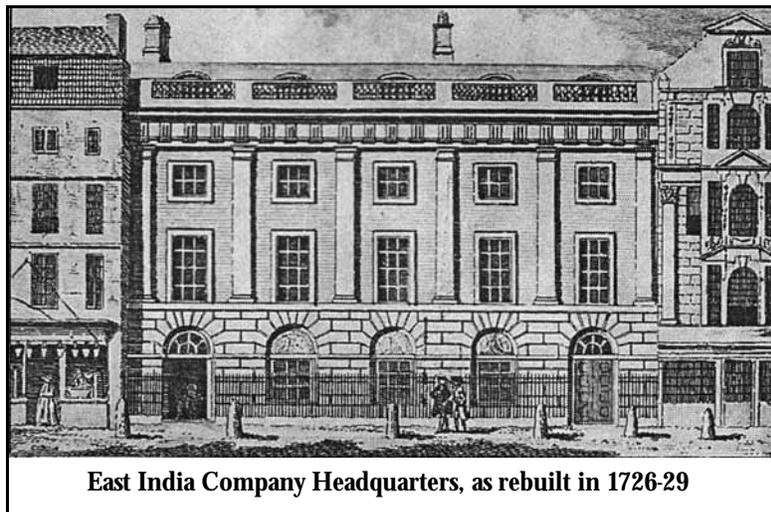
The following table shows the phenomenal increase in tea imports (from China only) between 1721 and 1760, the final year of Chaudhuri's study:

Decade of Imports	Pounds Imported	Per cent Increase
1721-30	8,879,862	
1731-40	11,663,998	31
1741-50	20,214,498	73
1751-60	37,350,002	85

One component of the Gin Act of 1751 was the encouragement of tea consumption as an alternative to alcohol. The data above suggest that, well before 1751, Great Britain was on the way to becoming a nation of tea drinkers. And by 1750 the wholesale cost of tea had dropped to less than £.05 per pound, making "weak tea with sugar" affordable to nearly all of Great Britain. In due time, annual tea imports to the U.K. would reach hundreds of millions of pounds.

Just how important tea was to the sobering of Great Britain is unclear, but by the end of the eighteenth century, tea would become integral to British culture. It may even be possible that tea can take credit for freeing Great Britain from the grip of Hogarth's *Gin Lane*. For those so inclined, it also offered a healthy alternative to Beer Street!

Our series on *Reversals of Fortune in the Tea Industry* will continue in the next issue of the *Upton Tea Quarterly*.



East India Company Headquarters, as rebuilt in 1726-29