

This Week 1908 Licensing Bill

The 1908 demonstration against the Licensing Bill of the same year shows what can be achieved when an industry unites under one banner and takes a stand. So why have we never seen the like of it in the licensed trade since, asks Phil Mellows

A lesson from the past?

HERBERT ASQUITH was not the likeliest politician to drive through legislation aimed at tempering the nation's drinking habits. Often observed swaying at the dispatch box he once nodded off in the middle of a parliamentary debate. And where do you think the term 'squiffy' comes from?

Yet one of the first things he did on taking over as prime minister in April 1908 was to argue passionately for a law that if passed would, within 14 years, have closed some 30,000 out of the 96,000 pubs in England and Wales and nationalised the rest.

It was an argument he eventually lost. By Novem-

ber the Conservative-dominated House of Lords had kicked out the 1908 Licensing Bill. But it wasn't just the votes of Tories that won the day. It was also a triumph for solidarity in action by the brewing and pub trades.

At the high point of the struggle – Sunday September 27, 1908 – 250,000 people massed in Hyde Park to protest against the bill. According to *The Times*, which reported the demonstration thoroughly, “every town of any importance in England and Wales sent a contingent”.

Wearing hops in their buttonholes and badges

proclaiming “honesty and liberty”, publicans, barstaff, brewers and their suppliers – accompanied by no fewer than 85 brass bands – arrived in London on 166 chartered trains.

They joined seven different marches taking them from the railway terminals to the park where they met “many hundreds of licensed victuallers in the metropolis, quite a number accompanied by ladies,” noted *The Times*, with eyebrows raised.

These were the days before PA systems and the speeches were made from 20 stages to give everyone a chance to hear the denouncements.

The Barmaids Political Defence League

Hidden away in the 1908 bill, as a sub-clause of clause 20, lay a bid to abolish barmaids – or at least give magistrates the power to abolish them by making a licence conditional on not employing women.

It was a genuine threat. Earlier that year a conference had pressed for the same aim – barmaids to be banned. “The nation ought not to allow the natural attractions of a young girl to be used for trading purposes,” said the Bishop of Southwark, while pioneer brain surgeon Sir Victor Horsley was on hand to deal with “the hygienic side of the question”, whatever that meant.

The clause might have been missed had it not been for Eva Gore-Booth, suffragette, social worker, labour activist, poet and sister of Countess Markiewicz who, as any pub quizzer knows, was the first woman elected to parliament (she didn't take her seat).

Together with her lover, fellow suffragette Esther Roper, she launched the Barmaids Political Defence League. While, as Gore-Booth admitted, the organisation didn't involve any of the country's estimated 100,000 barmaids – they were all too busy, she said – it drew attention to the plan and won the support of key figures who otherwise supported the bill.

Lord Winterton, for instance, described the clause as “a discreditable innuendo against a large number of respectable persons”, the innuendo being that ‘young girls’ would be tempted to ‘go wrong’ if exposed to the company of working men.

Realising it had gone too far, the government ditched the clause before the bill reached the Lords.

Finest hour

It was the industry's finest hour. Such a concerted effort, drawing in the whole of the trade as well as winning over public opinion, had not been seen before – and has not been seen since. A century later, the pub industry can only dream of such unity, such clarity of purpose. So how did they do it?

The trade in 1908 was actually more fragmented than today. There was a plethora of licensed victuallers' associations, plus local brewers and suppliers' guilds. But two umbrella organisations had by then emerged.

The National Trade Defence Association, which called the Hyde Park demonstration, was created around the turn of the century and



1908 Licensing Bill **This Week**

The 1908 demonstrations were the first – and perhaps the last – time the licensed trade galvanised its collective power



What was 'Squiffy' up to?

The Licensing Bill of 1908 was in large part a joint venture between the Liberal government elected by landslide in 1906 and the temperance movement, which by then had expanded its base beyond religious zealots into the business community, which feared that drink was hitting productivity.

Asquith's Chancellor, David Lloyd-George, had reported employers telling him that 75 per cent of their workforce were failing to turn up on Monday mornings because of a hangover and, indeed, a reduction in Sunday hours was also part of the legislation.

But Asquith's speech at the second reading of the bill made it clear it was not merely a temperance measure.

"The second great and governing purpose... is the recovery for the State of complete and unfettered control over this monopoly," he said, the monopoly being pub licences, 90 per cent of which were tied to brewers.

Asquith was the first lawyer prime minister and reasoned legalistically that the state 'owned' the liquor licences it generously granted and was therefore entitled to 'recover' them whenever it liked. His speech accused brewers of inflating prices, of "suicidal" competition to expand their tied estates and of producing poor quality watered-down beer.

This was a government that, seeking to create a healthier nation following the shocking failures of the Boer War and, no doubt, having an eye on a newly formed Labour Party that was looking to poach its working class voters, introduced some of the first elements of the welfare state – old age pensions, national insurance and free school meals.

Having a go at brewers might well have fitted in with these reforms but Herbert Asquith – or Squiffy – underestimated the power of a trade with its act together.

initially lobbied on taxation. It was a uniquely broad-based organisation. A delegation in 1900, for instance, included representatives from the Brewers Society, the Licensed Victuallers Central Protection Society, the Licensed Victuallers National Defence League and the Wine & Spirits Association among others.

The Allied Brewery Traders Association (ABTA) – which still prospers as the British Food & Beverage

demonstrators it was no more than a cheap, boozy day out. "Possibly nothing of the kind has ever had so much money spent on it," it complained.

Galvanising power

Writing nearly 100 years later in *History Today* magazine, historian Luci Gosling describes the significance of 1908 as moment which saw "a group traditionally divided by sectionalism and regional-

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Institute – was formed in 1907 and brought together hundreds of suppliers, from maltsters to bottle and cork-makers, who depended on the pub industry for their business.

Both organisations built the demonstration with countless local meetings and rallies in the weeks leading up to the big day and, crucially, they also provided plenty of cash.

Forty tons of campaign literature was distributed by brewers alone, including 10 million leaflets, 409,000 posters and 780,000 cartoons that graphically warned of the impact the law would have on the working man's pint.

Tickets for the chartered trains were heavily subsidised, too, causing the *Manchester Guardian*, a Liberal paper, to cynically speculate that for the

ism galvanise its power effectively for the first time".

It also seems to have been the last time. Gosling finds it "strange" that the brewers had not shown more coherence before 1908 in fending off the temperance lobby, as the industry feels frustrated now that it can't come together to put its case more effectively. The divisions, miraculously healed in 1908, have now re-opened.

The Peel Commission report of 1896, from which the 1908 Licensing Bill drew inspiration, declared "the evils of liquor traffic are a great bundle of sticks, more easily broken one by one". The mistake of Asquith's government, perhaps, was to try to break too many sticks at a time – and the sticks, for once, stuck together. ■