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Policing Public Houses in Victorian England



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Abstract

This article examines the policing of that most important site for leisure and pleasure among the Victorian working-classes – the pub. It begins with an examination of how changes in policing arrangements from the late-eighteenth century into Victoria's reign both reflected growing societal anxiety over the conduct of drinking places and led to increased action against them. It provides analyses of the overall incidence of prosecution of publicans in the period up to the important licensing legislation of 1869 and 1872. It examines that legislation and its effects and then turns its attention to the offences of permitting drunkenness and serving a drunken person as particularly indicative of the broader question of the conduct of public houses and of customers' behaviour within them, setting out trends in their prosecution. It then analyses what underlay the trends revealed, taking in the key variables of the law, the practicalities of its enforcement by the police, the attitudes of the magistracy and the actual conduct of individual publicans and drinkers, within the context of economic, social and cultural changes. By the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is argued, pubs were more orderly places, but the achievement of that end was the product of a much more complex set of variables than simply policing arrangements.

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