

# The London Gin Craze, c. 1700-1760

## Introduction

During the early eighteenth century, the production and consumption of gin increased rapidly, especially among the lower classes. By 1720 London was experiencing a gin epidemic and contemporaries were horrified by the rise in crime, poverty and immorality. During the gin craze (1720-1751) there were approximately 6,000 sellers of gin and its estimated consumption per capita in 1743 was 2.2 gallons.<sup>1</sup> Eight Acts of Parliament were passed between 1729-1751 in order to control the production and consumption of gin, with only the final Act of 1751 bringing the craze to an end. What most concerned critics of gin was the apparent rise in crime. This study aims to interpret the actual levels of criminality and argues that contemporary concerns were unfounded and part of a 'moral panic'.

Rising from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1666, London had, by 1700, expanded to become the largest city in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The population surged as thousands flocked to the capital with the lure of employment, anonymity and the pleasures of London. While the figures can never be exact, historians have estimated the population of London in 1700 to be 650,000, which was over 10 per cent of the entire population of England.<sup>3</sup>

## Rationale

The history of crime has provided scholars with a diverse framework with which to interpret wider social issues, including class and gender. The literature surrounding London's history is the most significant for any British city, with many publications examining the relationship between criminality, urbanisation and the formation of the lower classes. The existing historiography for the gin craze, however, is limited with only a few historians exploring its fundamental issues in any depth. These publications are limited further by their narrow approach, which predominantly focuses on the spirit trade, alcohol consumption, and the legislative attempts to control the epidemic.

This project is filling a crucial gap in the historiography, which has so far failed to examine the influence of gin on crime. No other study has attempted to explain contemporary anxieties as a moral panic and, further, no one has sought to examine court records to establish the actual levels of criminal activity. It is hoped this study will provide a new dimension to the interpretation of the gin craze, which would benefit greatly from a criminal history perspective.

## Sources and Methodology

The study incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data, so as to firstly explore the contemporary perception of criminality and drunkenness, and secondly to determine the actual crime levels and thus the presence of a moral panic.

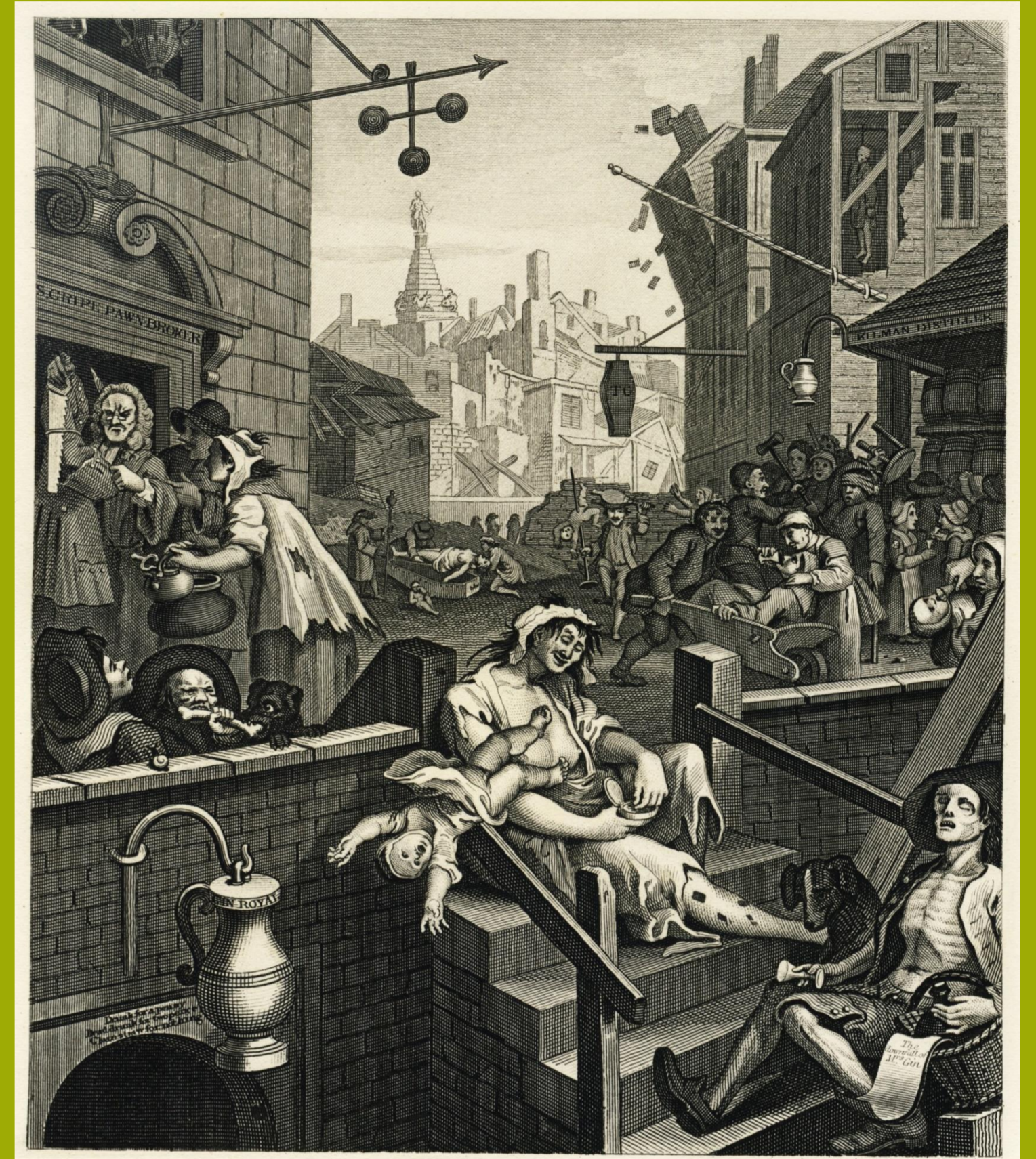
The qualitative primary sources include pamphlets and newspapers which highlight contemporary anxieties. An examination of pamphlets, including Henry Fielding's *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* and Thomas Wilson's *Distilled Spirituous Liquors the Bane of the Nation*, has revealed a profound concern for the welfare of the poor and also an awareness of the increasingly threatening criminal underclass.

"Gin-shops are the nurseries of all manner of vice and wickedness"<sup>4</sup>

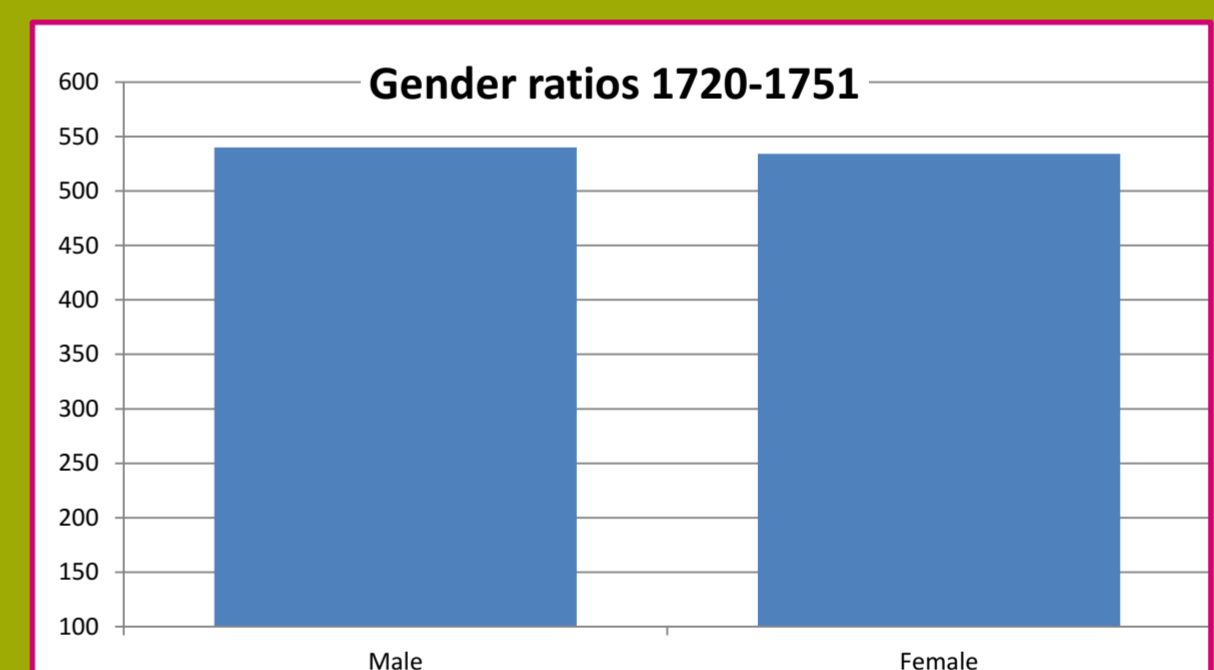
To assess the impact of increased alcohol consumption on crime, a study of quantitative data was required. As drinkers of gin, the London poor were more likely to commit petty offences such as theft, assault and prostitution rather than serious felonies such as murder. Initial research indicated that gin was widely consumed in all three areas under investigation (City of London, old county of Middlesex, and Westminster), although it would be infeasible to conduct an effective study using records from all three. The *London Lives* project has digitised a large volume of court records relating to the City of London, including those of Bridewell House of Correction which provides a complete dataset of court proceedings for 1700-1760. Due to the volume of data, a sampling method was adopted to process the statistics, with five months of each year selected.

## Conclusions

The qualitative sources have confirmed the considerable opposition and outcry towards gin, suggesting contemporaries were concerned with a growing criminal underclass which engaged in both petty and serious offences. The records of Bridewell court have provided a dataset of over 3,700 individual cases, which allows for many original conclusions to be offered to the historiography. While contemporaries were convinced of a rise in crime, the Bridewell records suggest anxieties were wholly unfounded and that the number of offences committed during the gin craze (1720-1751) were lower than the two decades preceding the period. The data also suggests that while women committed a significantly higher proportion of crimes than men before 1720, the gender ration had evened out during the craze. This would, for the first time, disprove the contemporary perception of women being more criminal drinkers of gin than men. While the levels of crime did not increase, it can be further concluded that the nature of the offences changed during the gin craze. More crimes were detailed as occurring at night, more cases were associated with alcohol, and more offenders were labelled as disorderly.



**Above:** William Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, 1751. Published alongside *Beer Street*, *Gin Lane* intended to highlight the moral and social degradation caused by Madam Geneva. With the characters dying, fighting, pawning their possessions, and even feeding babies gin, this image of lawless society represents everything contemporaries so greatly feared and attempted to control.



**Above:** Graph showing the number of male/female offences during the gin craze using statistics taken from Bridewell court records. With a total of only 1,074 offences during the period it supports this study's theory that there was indeed a decrease in criminal activity between 1720-1751.

**Below:** William Hogarth's *The Harlot's Progress* plate four, a scene in Bridewell House of Correction.



## References

1. Jessica Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 3.
2. Jerry White, *London in the Eighteenth Century: A Great and Monstrous Thing* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 1-3.
3. Liza Picard, *Dr. Johnson's London* (London: Phoenix, 2003), 3.
4. Anon, *A Dissertation on Mr. Hogarth's Six Prints Lately publish'd, viz. Gin-Lane, Beer-Street, and the Four Stages of Cruelty* (London: B. Dickinson, 1751).

## Further reading...

- Thea Bennett. *London Gin: The Gin Craze*. London: Golden Guides Press, 2013.
- Peter Clark. "The 'Mother Gin' Controversy in the Early Eighteenth Century." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 38 (1988): 63-84.
- Patrick Dillon. *Gin: The Much Lamented Death of Madam Geneva, the Eighteenth-Century Gin Craze*. London: Thistle, 2013.
- Giles Emerson. *Sin City: London in Pursuit of Pleasure*. London: Granada, 2002.