

# 'Common Sense and Ale': Cobbett, Clare, and the 1830 Beer Act

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On 10 October 1830, two pieces of legislation arguably more radical than the Great Reform Act of 1832 came into force, undoing three centuries of state regulation while effectively improving the condition of the labouring classes. The first of these repealed the Beer Tax, a 130 year-old excise duty on the sale of beer, lowering the retail price of beer by approximately twenty percent.<sup>1</sup> The second, so-called 'Duke of Wellington Beerhouse Act' authorized anyone to sell beer or cider upon payment of a two-guinea license, and extended public house opening times from fifteen to eighteen hours a day.<sup>2</sup> The aim of these two bills was to increase competition and to encourage people to drink beer rather than spirits. Unlike the Reform Act, which reminded the majority of Britons that they were still unenfranchised,<sup>3</sup> these reforms had an immediate effect on several million lives across the kingdom. Within five years, 40,000 new licenses were issued, notably in the Midlands and the north where hundreds of new beerhouses (limited to on premise drinking) and 'Tom and Jerry'-type beer shops opened, powerful regional monopolies such as Whitbread were sensibly weakened, and the consumption of beer increased steeply after a century of stagnation.<sup>4</sup> The *Monthly Review* gives us a sense of the elation, if not intoxication, produced by this liberalization of the beer trade, noting that 'there is not a man in England or a friend to his species in any region of the world who if he were to reflect on the consequences which are likely to spring from this measure would not note it down in white characters as among the very highest festivals of humanity'.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that so many people rallied around what historian James Nicholls calls 'a clear victory of free trade capitalism over the political and economic establishment' is not altogether surprising.<sup>6</sup> 'In an era when the public was increasingly enamored of free trade and hostile towards anything resembling a monopoly', Nicholas

Mason explains, 'the supposed collusion between the big brewers and the country's magistrates became a frequent subject of complaint'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, beer, used interchangeably with ale as a generic term by the early nineteenth century, had become England's 'grass-roots national drink',<sup>8</sup> so that the decline in beer consumption from the 1750s onwards 'represented the abandonment of a key component of Englishness'.<sup>9</sup> Associated under the Glorious Revolution with Whiggish, patriotic values such as honesty, unpretentiousness, and Protestantism, beer was frequently opposed to wine, standing for all things Tory and French. By the mid-eighteenth century it was universally represented as the 'happy Produce of our Isle', the caption of William Hogarth's celebrated engraving, *Beer Street* (1751). Britons considered home-brewed ale, in particular, as a second necessity of life after bread and a sign of rural self-sufficiency. Yet the industrialization and commercialization of beer toward the end of the eighteenth century made home brewing the preserve of the landed gentry and the yeomanry, increasing beer's nostalgic and patriotic capital. Ironically, it was Wellington's Tory government that passed the 1830 Beer Act, not Charles Grey's Whigs, reinforcing the notion that the reform was universally popular.<sup>10</sup> As politicians and orators of all stripes regularly stated in support of the new legislation, the 'Duke of Wellington Act' touched the *whole* community and hence could pass off as the result of home-grown common sense rather than any distinct class or party ideology.<sup>11</sup>

The politics of beer in early nineteenth-century Britain did not coincide in any simple way, however, with the shared experiences and practical knowledge usually associated with common sense. What began as a free-trade issue in 1820 became, with the epidemic of gin drinking in cities and growing unrest among the nation's workers, a matter of critical national importance that saw five acts of legislation during the course of that decade, coming to a head on the eve of a general election and amid the Swing riots. The hundreds of local petitions, letters to the editor, and parliamentary speeches leading to the passage of the 1830 Beer Act were in reality debates on the Condition of England. Because the proposed reforms most immediately affected the labouring poor, they also interested two writers deeply engaged with the concerns of that class, William Cobbett and John Clare. Cobbett's and Clare's interventions in the debate on beer in the form of articles but also poetry indicate that both were keenly aware of the Act's practical and ideological ramifications, notably regarding individual freedom,

class distinction, and the responsibility of the state. They also remind us that these authors held more nuanced views on free trade than critics have sometimes led us to believe, and that their Romantic agrarianism was not antithetical to liberal economics. Most surprisingly perhaps, they suggest that in regard to beer at least, Clare held a more radically progressive socio-economic vision than Cobbett, the latter harking back to a sentimental ideal of the organic community symbolized by the class-connotated and almost defunct tradition of home brewing.

### **A Free-Trade *Cause Célèbre***

Thanks to the invention of porter, one of the first mass-produced commodities, as well as to a series of licensing and excise tax laws meant to help fund the wars, beer production by the mid-eighteenth century had become concentrated in the hands of large common brewers, leading to the terminal decline of small alehouses and home brewing. Separate duties were levied on malt, beer, and hops; so-called strong and small beer, also known as 'stingo' and 'swipes', were taxed differently; and magistrates provided licenses in a manner often perceived to be corrupt. To pass the increase in the malt tax onto the consumer, brewers raised their prices or adulterated their product with all sorts of additives, including liquorice, orange peels, treacle but also opium. As Nicholls writes, 'Adulteration made the brewers look guilty of the worst kind of corruption'.<sup>12</sup> In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith criticizes this state of affairs, arguing that 'those taxes [...] have either raised the price, or what comes to the same thing, reduced the quality of those commodities to the consumer'. Noting the uneven effects of the malt and beer duties on the rich and the poor, he stipulates that the latter should never be taxed on necessities, proposing to abolish the beer duty so as to relieve distress among the labouring poor, while tripling the malt tax, which would only affect 'those who brew for their own private use', i.e. the middling and rich classes in the country.<sup>13</sup> Smith also makes the case for keeping the excise tax on spirits high while lowering the price of beer, which he and his contemporaries saw as 'wholesome and invigorating'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the fear of a new gin-drinking epidemic was another factor that contributed to the passage of the Beer Act, reinforcing the stock distinction between ale as the healthy drink of rural Old England, and gin as the source of urban squalor and misery.<sup>15</sup>

Curiously, the father of free trade never addressed the licensing system, which was the main culprit behind beer's notoriously poor quality and high price. This task was left to later reformers, among them the Whig MP Henry Brougham, who pushed for a parliamentary act liberalizing the sale of beer, resulting in an unsatisfactory first bill in 1822. In September 1826, Brougham reviewed a pamphlet on licensing in which he attacked the monopoly of public houses, but also the condescension and hypocrisy of magistrates claiming to protect 'the Morals of the poor'. Like Adam Smith, the reformer realized that the liberalization of beer was not just an economic issue, but also a burning social one. He felt that it was not the government's role to regulate alcohol, however, arguing for a laissez-faire policy by claiming that magistrates could not understand the importance of beer to the people: 'When wine drinkers regulate the liquor and comfort of ale drinkers, it is much as if carnivorous animals should regulate the food of graminivorous animals, as if a lion should cater for an ox, or a coach horse order dinner for a leopard'. Ale and tobacco, Brougham adds, 'are the joy and holidays of millions, the greatest pleasure and relaxation which it is in the power of fortune to bestow', and the only way for a government to protect the 'wants and humble luxuries of the poor', he asserts, is by defending the 'principle of competition'.<sup>16</sup>

Arguments for the liberalization of the beer trade were taken up with increasing urgency toward the end of the decade, notably throughout the winter of 1829 when large, often lively county meetings were organized at inns and other public venues around the nation to petition Parliament. According to the *Norfolk Chronicle*, beer reform was a subject that interested 'the whole community, but more particularly the labouring classes'.<sup>17</sup> A sample of meeting transcripts from the East Midlands nevertheless indicates that it was mainly the yeomanry and the middling classes who participated in these civic forums, and that the absence of the aristocracy was often regretted. Debates usually opened with comments on the widespread distress 'in every part of the country, agricultural as well as commercial',<sup>18</sup> then examined the relative merits of abolishing the licensing system and the malt and beer taxes, notably as a way to allow the labouring poor to drink their 'most natural beverage' rather than water or tea.<sup>19</sup> They then frequently digressed toward more general social problems, including the Corn Laws and the burden of having a standing army or placemen. One question that was invariably asked was whether to repeal only the malt tax,

the beer tax, or both. If the malt tax were repealed, would the poor man start brewing at home again? And if it were the beer tax that disappeared, would lower prices encourage drinking and moral laxity among the labouring classes? Because these beer reforms had the makings of a radical social experiment in laissez-faire capitalism, they left no one indifferent.<sup>20</sup>

### **Apologists for Ale: Cobbett and Clare**

Among the many actors in this nation-wide debate was William Cobbett, himself the son of a tavern keeper. Eight years earlier, he had penned a pamphlet on the merits of home brewing that formed the first chapter of his popular *Cottage Economy*.<sup>21</sup> In December 1829, Cobbett seized the opportunity to reprint extended passages from the chapter in his *Political Register*, presenting himself as an acute prophesier. 'For more than twenty years', the article begins, 'I have been contending for the necessity of repealing the malt tax altogether. I have always deemed it the main instrument in the ruin of England; in ruining the manners and morals, as well as impoverishing and enfeebling the bodies of the people'.<sup>22</sup> Cobbett's hyperbolic attack on the malt tax is premised on his belief that it impedes the traditional activity of home brewing. He defends home brewing upon moral, economic, and medical grounds: it can return Britons to the values of Old England, before the creation of paper money; it is economically more advantageous than buying commercially-made beer; and it is healthier than other beverages, notably that 'weak laudanum' known as tea, a commodified good associated with excessive consumerism and a globalized economy.<sup>23</sup> As Katey Castellano has argued, *Cottage Economy* was addressed to a 'restless and discontent laboring class', and advocated a 'local, social and moral' rather than a laissez-faire economy.<sup>24</sup> By reprinting the chapter in the *Register*, however, Cobbett was redirecting his argument to a national, primarily middle-class and urban audience, extending his organic ideal of rural independence to the economy in general, which he hoped might exist independently of the finance capitalism and trade cartels he distrusted so much.<sup>25</sup> Like the petitioners at the county meetings, Cobbett thus claims that the malt tax repeal will benefit the entire community, appealing to 'jacobins, levellers, democrats, aristocrats, republicans, royalists, priests, lawyers, doctors, fundholders, misers, and old maids [...] dissenters and church people, catholics and methodists: all do so dearly love a draught of good home-brewed beer'.<sup>26</sup>

Tellingly, Cobbett's 1829 article does not cite the virtues of competition as a catalyst for change, nor does he seek to repeal the beer tax or the licensing system. In an earlier piece published in the *Political Register* upon the passage of the first beer reform in 1822, the same author had supported Lord Brougham's proposed liberalization of the beer trade, this despite the fact that he regularly associated Brougham with paper money and Malthusian economics.<sup>27</sup> And in another article published on 27 March 1830, two months before the passage of the 1830 Act, Cobbett again paid lip service to a complete liberalization, writing that 'If the licensing system be at all continued, if the trade in beer be not *quite free*, there will be little more than a putting the amount of the tax into the hands of the monopolizing brewers'. Because of its association with his ideal of the organic rural community, however, it was the malt tax that remained Cobbett's principle target: 'The *malt tax* was the thing to take off; that is the root and the trunk of the burden [...] The taking-off of the beer tax is a sop to the pot-house politicians, and to the sots of great towns'.<sup>28</sup> In this passage, he not only distinguishes himself from the populist arguments aired in 'pot houses' around the country, but also aligns himself with old-style Whigs and High Tory MPs such as Viscount Milton and the Marquis of Chandos who had presented socially conservative, moral arguments in favour of a repeal of the malt tax, their aim being to accommodate rural landowners, the last Englishmen to brew at home.<sup>29</sup> Like these aristocrats, Cobbett worried in particular that the repeal of the beer tax would increase public inebriety; he thus argued that by maintaining it, one kept 'men from the tipping house'.<sup>30</sup> His apology for home-brewed ale, in short, was moral rather than economic, interventionist rather than liberal, and mainly favoured rural property owners.

In a letter to Marianne Marsh most likely written in early 1832, John Clare suggests his awareness of Cobbett's biases, stating that 'I look upon Cobbett as one of the most powerful prose writers of the age—with no principles to make those powers commendable to honest praise'. By this he means that Cobbett's ideas on reform were too influenced by class and party, failing to benefit everyone in society. 'I am no politician but I think reform is wanted [...] a reform that would do good & hurt none', he writes as a way to distinguish himself from his fellow writer.<sup>31</sup> John Lucas suggests that Clare's protest about Cobbett in this letter may lie in the latter's conciliatory response to the 1832 Reform Bill, a law that

excluded Clare's own class from power.<sup>32</sup> But Clare may also have had in mind Cobbett's equally partisan position on beer reform. As Rodney Lives has shown, Clare was a celebrated ale-drinker born next door to the Helpston inn and who developed an early taste for John Barleycorn at Stamford's 'Hole in the Wall'.<sup>33</sup> His most explicitly political text – the various draft manuscripts which make up an unpublished letter to an undisclosed editor entitled the 'Apology for the Poor' – was written in late 1829 or early 1830, when 'the Malt & beer tax is in full cry'.<sup>34</sup> The diction and arguments contained in the letter's various drafts anticipate the letter to Marsh, but also respond to the public debates on beer reform we saw above, those 'free speeches of county meetings' that Clare acknowledges in the beginning of the 'Apology', and which lead him to ask: 'can you find room for mine—or will you hear the voice of a poor man'.<sup>35</sup> Reacting to the numerous interventions made in the name of the poor by representatives of the more polite classes, who hypocritically claim to be speaking for the community as a whole, Clare makes a case for reform that would benefit all of society by targeting the real causes of social injustice: 'I wish to see some one become the advocate of the poor so far in disinterested honesty as to forget his own interests and partial[i]tys [in the anxiety] of bettering himself & his class by attempting some simple plan for bettering the community at large for any thing universally attempted for the benefit of all will benefit the poor man'.<sup>36</sup>

Commenting on the 'Apology for the Poor', Alan Vardy states that Clare's ideological position is 'indistinguishable from Cobbett's'.<sup>37</sup> I wish to suggest, on the contrary, that the 'Apology's' attempt to imagine a reform that would benefit the entire community and not just a certain class marks their difference and casts Clare as the more radically progressive of the two thinkers. One way it does this is by focusing on beer reform. Unlike Cobbett, the poet argues that a complete overhaul of the legislation on beer is necessary in order to benefit everyone in the same manner, not only requiring the repeal of the malt tax, which would only favour the landed interest, but also the beer tax and the licensing system. Clare writes that repealing the malt tax would 'benefit the poor next to nothing' because they would still have to purchase their beer at the pub, the price of malt remaining too prohibitive, and because they could not afford the tools to brew at home: 'Poverty compels him to purchase his quart of common b[r]ewhouse stuff because he cannot purchase a bushel of malt & has no credit with the seller

therefore he is obliged to support knaves in their luxury while he himself is starving'. The only benefit of the repeal would thus go to the farmers and the common brewers.<sup>38</sup> He adds that as long as 'their respective monopolies are sanctioned', the beer industry will continue to cut costs, 'for let times be as they will common brewers & pot house retailers will have their profits or they will not sell'. The poet's radically liberal solution 'to benefit the poor would be to take off the tax on beer & the power from the brewing Magistrates dissolving the spell of the licensing system altogether & leaving every body to sell ale as chose to do so & then the poor would be benefited & not till then'.<sup>39</sup>

Clare's arguments on beer reform in the 'Apology' are rational and progressive, toeing the line of free traders like Adam Smith, or radical Whig parliamentarians such as Brougham and Lord Nugent.<sup>40</sup> They disprove Eric Robinson's claim that Clare's values 'rest on a natural hostility to progressive, modernising economic trends',<sup>41</sup> instead confirming Jonathan Bate's short but insightful analysis of the poet's politics. By seeking to resolve social problems through a more equal tax system and a liberalization of trade, Clare 'proved himself an astute analyst of the contemporary scene'.<sup>42</sup> What annoyed him most was the fact that conservatives throughout the country were all of a sudden clamouring for social change. Calling it a 'country meeting mania' in a letter to William Robertson written in the midst of the beer reform debate on 29 January 1830, he complains of 'out-of-place tory folks becoming radicals & brawling in every corner of the country about reform'.<sup>43</sup> Clare pursues this reflexion in an important letter to John Taylor dated 1 February 1830, complaining that these so-called reformers do not think clearly or have the common good in mind: 'Tho there are many voice mixed up in the cry commonsense is seldom among them for self interests & individual prosperitys are the universal spirits that stir up these assemblages of reformers'. The poet deplores their hypocrisy, complaining of the farmer whose interests are naturally opposed to those of the cottager, the labourer and the mechanic, and of the parson who is 'now stirring up to radicalism (which for some years he cryed down as infidelity) for a reduction of taxes merely because he sees that something must be done & as he wishes to keep his tythes & his immense living untouched he throws the burthen on government'. Clare saw the reform movement of 1830, in other words, as a way for the elites to placate the labouring classes and save their privileges before it was

too late. His own solution or 'political creed', dictated he claims by 'common sense' rather than any radical or 'levelling' ideology, is for a general reform of taxes and tythes, 'all renovated & placed upon a reasonable equality suitable to the present decreased value of money & property is the only way to bring salvation to the country'.<sup>44</sup>

### 'Common Sense and Ale'

If the 1830 debate on beer helped Clare imagine a more democratic society in his prose, what role did it play in his poetry? Like Robert Burns, Clare was never shy about singing the merits of alcohol, and beer (or ale, which conveniently rhymes with tale), regularly surfaces throughout his writing career, including in well-known drinking songs such as the 'Toper's Rant'. Often serving as the poet's muse ('To pint it just at my desire / & drooping muse with ale inspire'),<sup>45</sup> beer strengthens friendships, encourages laughter but also bragging, and helps the labourer forget both life's hardships and his 'scolding wife'.<sup>46</sup> Beer is also used, unsurprisingly, to evoke patriotic and nostalgic themes, while the alehouse, as in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*, is often represented at the centre of the rural community.<sup>47</sup> Clare clearly identifies with the egalitarian social relations of Sweet Auburn, represented by the 'low' house 'where nut-brown draughts inspire', rather than with *To Penshurst's* outdate country-house hospitality, in which 'the same beer and bread, and selfsame wine, / This is his lordship's shall be also mine'.<sup>48</sup> One of his greatest drinking poems, 'Ale', written between 1819 and 1820 in honour of Burns, combines all the above topoi in a 174-line paean to the drink: 'Nick namd 'old stout' & 'nock em down' / Old englands glory / All hail thou stingo of renown / Ale I adore thee'.<sup>49</sup>

While ale is mainly associated in Clare's poetry with domestic life, we do see some economic and political themes more directly transpire, for example in the same poem's apostrophe to ale as a creditor to whom 'us hurkling half stad labouring creatures' are happily indebted, or when the speaker criticizes those who serve 'forg'd ale at cheapnd prices / Or jollop juice or ointment slices'.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, several poems composed around 1830 acknowledge the repeal of the beer duty as a victory for the common man. In a satirical poem on Wellington that he addresses to the Irish, for instance, Clare writes that 'The prince of waterloo / Has gave emancipation / & has kilt some taxes too' and adds further down: 'Old mother excise may go—mad if she will / Hes already set fire to

her tail / & hell raise the siege round the whiskey still / As he's done by the copper of ale'.<sup>51</sup> And in his scathing satirical commentary on the Swing Riots entitled 'The Hue and Cry: A Tale of the Times', published in the radical *Stamford Champion* in January 1831, the poet praises the fact that 'The publican who since the duty was off / Had put his full measures aside— / Now broke his short pints & dandy laced quarts / To be all upon honestys side'.<sup>52</sup>

Clare's most insightful passages on the politics of beer appear, however, in an earlier work, *The Parish*. Composed between 1820 and 1827, or a few years before the debate on beer had reached its apotheosis, his most ambitious political poem helps us better understand how the poet's local conditions may have influenced his advocacy of free trade reform on a national scale in 'Apology for the Poor'. *The Parish* is an unpublished book-length satire on his own village, 'when the prosperity of one class was founded on the adversity & distress of the other' as he writes in the epigraph.<sup>53</sup> One of the representative social types he lampoons is young Brag, an indifferent farmer and so-called new-school politician<sup>54</sup> who 'chimes / Stanzas to Cobbett', and spends his time drinking wine rather than beer while making reform speeches and debating taxes at patriotic dinners

Where every dish on which the knaves regale  
Find places there but common sense & ale  
For common sense is grown too tame to teach  
& ales too low to aid a patriots speech<sup>55</sup>

Brag participates in the same 'country meeting mania' of the late 1820s that Clare deplored in the 'Apology' and in various letters. Despite Lucas's claim that the poem's satire of the patriot farmer sounds inauthentic, we already saw that Clare distrusted these so-called 'pot house' reformers because their interests were opposed to those of the labouring classes.<sup>56</sup> It is very possible that Brag is calling here for the repeal of the malt tax by drawing, like Cobbett, on a romantic vision of Old England, or what the narrator in the same passage calls these reformers' 'hacknied tune'. Like commercial ales weakened because of unjust legislation, their patriotism has been adulterated, and their common sense lacks the sort of critical reasoning or insight that arises from a practical experience of the present rather than from an uncritical, even sentimental acceptance of the past.

What disturbs the *Parish's* narrator is not the fact that Brag calls for reform, but rather that his motives for doing so are self-interested, never transcending his own class interests: he 'views reform in but a selfish light / To make level far as self is right'.<sup>57</sup> Had he looked at the big picture and taken the interests of the poor into account, he may well have realized why 'ales are too low'. While Clare's use of common sense here cannot be equated with the proto-Gramscian sense of revolutionary class-consciousness, it also does not justify P.M.S. Dawson's claim that Clare's use of common sense is fundamentally conservative.<sup>58</sup> Instead, I would argue that Clare's common sense relies on the sort of abstract, universal, and democratically levelling reasoning that radical writers such as Paine, but also liberal thinkers such as Smith, Malthus, and Brougham applied to the entire nation. As Clare writes, Brag 'twists & tears poor common sense to tatters,' replacing his Bible with 'Burdett and Brougham' but 'chock[ing] their wit to pass his narrow brains'.<sup>59</sup> The poet thus condemns him to suffer the most unpatriotic of ignominies: Brag 'sips his wine in fashionable pride / & thrusts in scorn the homely ale aside'.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

Cobbett and Clare's respective positions in regard to the 1830 Beer Act tell us a great deal about their different political views. By endorsing the malt tax repeal while condemning a more general liberalization of the beer trade, Cobbett was in reality defending the landholding classes in the name of a romantic, bygone vision of the countryside in which every man could be his own brewer. Clare, on the other hand, was more keenly aware of home brewing's irrelevance to the labourer and mechanic, and maintained that it would remain too costly for the workingman even after the repeal. The poet's arguments in 'Apology for the Poor' and in poems such as 'The Parish' are grounded in an understanding of common sense rooted in reason as much as experience, resulting in Clare's proposal to completely liberalize the beer trade. Constructed by editors, reviewers, and critics alike as an apolitical 'peasant poet',<sup>61</sup> he proved in the debate on beer to be as sharp in his analysis of the problem and as radically progressive in his proposed solutions as the most sophisticated advocates of *laissez-faire*.

Upon the passage of the 1830 Beer Act, critics almost immediately questioned whether the liberalization of the beer market was such a good idea, indicating that Clare was not simply

following common opinion. As might be expected, the act was attacked on moral grounds, complaining that it encouraged a wave of drunkenness and immoral behaviour, and sometimes even linking the new beer shops to the Swing riots. Others challenged it for practical reasons, pointing out that the reforms increased the consumption of beer without decreasing the consumption of spirits. George Cruikshank produced various cartoons lampooning the inebriated state of customers in these new beerhouses. Always ready to turn a phrase, Sydney Smith commented that 'Everybody is drunk. Those that are not singing are sprawling. The sovereign people are in a beastly state'.<sup>62</sup> Parliament responded swiftly with a series of amendments, requiring a certificate of character and establishing a distinction between on and off premise drinking in 1833, for example. Even Brougham introduced a bill in 1838 to further regulate drinking on premises.<sup>63</sup> The Beer Act, according to Nicholls, was a social experiment that 'seriously undermined the credibility of free trade',<sup>64</sup> and whose lasting legacy, as Mason has argued, was to 'help shape how the rich viewed the poor and, undoubtedly, how the poor came to view themselves'.<sup>65</sup> Yet it was an experiment that John Clare believed, rightly or wrongly, might improve the condition of what he called the 'community at large' and 'the poor man' at the same time, a balancing act that could hardly be labelled as conservative in 1830, and that today's fragile liberal democracies are still trying to get right.

## NOTES

- 1 Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England 1815-1872* (Keele University Press, 1994), p. 80.
- 2 For a history of the 1830 Beer Act, called by the authors 'one of the most extraordinary pieces of all nineteenth-century legislation', see T.R. Gourvish and R.G. Wilson, *The British Beer Industry, 1830-1980* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 3-22. See, also, Harrison, pp. 64-86. For a shorter summary, see Ian Spencer Hornsey, *A History of Beer and Brewing* (London: Royal Society of Chemists, 2003), pp. 473-4.
- 3 John Lucas, 'Clare's Politics', in *John Clare in Context*, p. 166.
- 4 James Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol: A History of the Drink Question in England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 92.
- 5 'Art II. Review of An Act to alter and amend the Laws of on Malt, An Act to repeal certain of the Duties on Cyder in the Kingdom and on Beer and Ale in Great Britain, An Act to permit the general Sale of Beer and Cyder by in England (1 Wm IV c 64) London: G. Eyre and A. Strahan, 1830,' *The Monthly Review*, October 1830, p. 180.
- 6 Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol*, p. 80.
- 7 Nicholas Mason, "'The Sovereign People are in a Beastly State": The Beer Act of 1830 and Victorian Discourse on Working-Class Drunkenness', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29.1 (2001), 111.
- 8 Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol*, p. 31. Ironically, it was the Dutch who had introduced hopped 'beer' to the island nation in the sixteenth century.
- 9 Mason, 'The Sovereign People', p. 112. For a cultural history of beer in the eighteenth century, see also Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol*, pp. 24-31, 80-82; Franz G. Meussdoerffer, 'A Comprehensive History of Beer Brewing', in *A Handbook of Brewing: Processes, Technology, Markets*, ed. by Hans Michael Esslinger, (Wiley Online Library), 6 August 2009, p. 22; Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 135-8.
- 10 Mason notes that the Beer Bill 'received unusually bipartisan support in the House of Commons, where it passed on its second reading by a margin of 245 to 29 votes'. Mason, 'The Sovereign People', p. 113.
- 11 See, for example, the debates in *The Norwich Mercury*, Saturday, 19 December 1829, p. 3; *The Norfolk Chronicle*, Saturday 26 December 1829, p. 3; and *The Suffolk Chronicle*, Saturday 30 January 1830, p. 4. On the meaning of 'common' and 'common sense' in this period, see P.M.S. Dawson, 'Clare and the Ideology of "Common Sense"', *JCSJ*, 16 (1997), 71-7.
- 12 Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol*, pp. 82-8.
- 13 Adam Smith, *The Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. by R.H. Cambell and A.S. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), II, pp. 888-91.
- 14 *Ibid*, p. 891.
- 15 As the *Norwich Mercury* wrote in 1829, 'Even Hogarth's immortal contrasts between a beer-drinking and a gin-swallowing people are faint representations of those real scenes which occur from day to day in London'. 'Repeal of the Malt Tax', *Norwich Mercury*, 19 December 1829, p. 3. See, also, Stephen Piper, 'Letter to the Editor', *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*, 29 January 1830, p. 2. For a gloss of William Hogarth's 1751 diptich, *Beer Street and Gin Lane*, see Bewell, p. 138.

- 16 Henry Brougham, 'Art VII. Review of *A Letter [...] on the Misconduct of Licensing Magistrates and the consequent Degradation of the Magistracy* by Thomas Edwards, London Butterworth 1825', *Edinburgh Review*, September 1826, pp. 441-57.
- 17 'Malt Tax. Requisition for a County Meeting', *Norfolk Chronicle*, 26 December 1829, p. 3. Newspapers reported meetings held to obtain the high sheriff's authorization to produce a petition, and the petitioning meetings themselves. See, also, 'Malt and Beer Duties', *The Suffolk Chronicle; or Weekly General Advertiser & County Express*, 12 December 1829, p. 3; 'Repeal of the Malt Tax', *Norwich Mercury*, 19 December 1829, p. 3; 'Malt and Beer Duties', *Bury and Norwich Post*, 23 December 1829, p. 4; 'Petition to the High Sheriff of Cambridge', *The Suffolk Chronicle; or Weekly General Advertiser & County Express*, 30 January 1830, p. 4; 'Malt Duties', *Bury and Norwich Post*, 27 January 1830, p. 3. ~~Meetings were first held to obtain the high sheriff's authorization for a larger meeting where a petition might be prepared,~~
- 18 *Suffolk Chronicle*, 30 January 1829, p. 4
- 19 *Suffolk Chronicle*, 12 December 1829, p. 3.
- 20 Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol*, p. 80.
- 21 William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), chapter 1.
- 22 William Cobbett, 'Malt Tax', *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 68, 23 (5 December 1829), p. 707.
- 23 Katey Castellano, *The Ecology of British Romantic Conservatism, 1790-1837* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 133. Cobbett famously chastises tea as a 'destroyer of health, an enfeeblers of the frame, an engenderer of effeminacy and laziness, a debaucher of youth, and a maker of misery for old age'. Cobbett, 'Malt Tax,' p. 708.
- 24 Castellano, *Ecology*, pp. 113-15.
- 25 Raymond Williams, *Cobbett* (Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 64-73.
- 26 Cobbett, 'Malt Tax', p. 718.
- 27 William Cobbett, 'Mr. Brougham's Beer Bill', *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 43, 7 (August 7, 1822), pp. 426-48. Cobbett's argument in the latter article rests on moral and nationalistic rather than economic causes. In particular, he attacks the common brewers for 'growing rich as Jews and insolent as Lords in waiting'. For his critique of Brougham, see, for example, William Cobbett, 'From Chilworth, in Surrey to Winchester, 26 October 1825', *Rural Rides* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 248.
- 28 *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 27 March 1830, pp. 7-8
- 29 Speeches of Viscount Milton (Charles William Wentworth Fitzwilliam), March 15, 1830, and of the Marquis of Chandos (Richard Temple Nugent), 19 March 1830. Hansards online. Both refer to the question of whether or not the community as a whole would benefit from these reforms.
- 30 Cobbett, 'Malt Tax', p. 714.
- 31 *Letters*, p. 560.
- 32 Lucas in *John Clare in Context*, p. 173.
- 33 Rodney Lives, 'John Clare's Pubs', *Peterborough Pub History Journal*, 1997. See also Pete Bunten, 'John Clare', *Literary Drinkers*, <[http://www.literaryconnections.co.uk/resources/drinkers\\_clare.html](http://www.literaryconnections.co.uk/resources/drinkers_clare.html)>, [accessed 14 July 2017].

- 34 John Clare, *A Champion for the Poor*, *Political Verse and Prose*, ed. by P. M. S. Dawson, Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: MidNAG/Carc Janet, 2000), p. 267. For the dating of the manuscript, see John Clare, *Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 501, and *A Champion for the Poor*, p. xxxvii. The letter was possibly published in the *Stamford Champion*. See *Letters*, p. 490.
- 35 Clare, *A Champion for the Poor*, p. 267.
- 36 Clare, *A Champion for the Poor*, p. 273.
- 37 Alan Vardy, *John Clare: Politics and Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 175-8.
- 38 Clare, *A Champion for the Poor*, pp. 272-3.
- 39 Clare, *A Champion for the Poor*, p. 274.
- 40 In a speech on 16 March 1830, the day after Parliament voted to repeal the beer but not the malt tax, Nugent expressed his confidence that 'it would be productive of very considerable relief in the part of the country [Buckinghamshire] with which he was connected.' Lord Nugent (George Nugent Grenville), 16 March 1830, Hansards online.
- 41 Robinson, Introduction, in Clare, *Champion for the Poor*, p. xxxiii. Robinson's claim that Clare's politics are essentially local does not work here either, given that this was a national debate.
- 42 *Biography*, p. 356.
- 43 *Letters*, p. 497.
- 44 *Letters*, pp. 498-499.
- 45 John Clare, 'The Poet's Wish', *Early Poems*, I, p. 491, ll. 56-7.
- 46 Cf. 'The Wish', *Early Poems*, I, p. 44, l. 26-27; 'Song', *ibid.*, p. 99, l. 10; 'The Eagle and the Crow', *ibid.*, p. 132, l. 3; 'Untitled', *Early Poems*, II, p. 511, ll. 1-4.
- 47 Cf. Clare, 'The Travellers', *Early Poems*, I, p. 254, ll. 98-9.
- 48 Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village: A Poem* (London: W. Griffin, 1770), l. 221; Ben Jonson, *Complete Poems*, ed. by George Parfitt (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 97, ll. 62-4. My thanks to the anonymous reader for pointing my attention to Jonson's poem.
- 49 Clare, 'Ale,' *Early Poems*, II, p. 280, ll. 3-6.
- 50 *Early Poems*, II, ~~p. 280, ll. 61-2, 121-2.~~
- 51 Clare, 'Och by jesus hes a irish lad', *Middle Period*, II, pp. 156-7, ll. 26-8, 41-4.
- 52 Clare, 'The Hue and Cry: A Tale of the Times', *Middle Period*, II, p. 536, ll. 387-90.
- 53 Clare, 'The Parish,' *Early Poems*, II, p. 698.
- 54 *Early Poems*, II, p. 797.
- 55 *Early Poems*, II, p. 727, ll. 769-70, ll. 776-80; p. 732, l. 936.
- 56 Lucas in *John Clare in Context*, p. 153.
- 57 *Early Poems*, II, p. 733, ~~ll. 51-2.~~
- 58 Dawson, 'Clare and the Ideology of "Common Sense"', pp. 73, 80.
- 59 *Early Poems*, II, p. ~~734, ll. 908-9.~~
- 60 *Early Poems*, II, p. 731, ll. 887-8. ~~In contrast, the honest and unassuming local vicar is apotheosised through his hospitality offered to 'plain old farmers' who come to 'taste his ale'.~~
- 61 Lucas, in *John Clare in Context*, pp. 148-9.
- 62 Cited in Mason, 'The Sovereign People', p. 111.
- 63 *Annual Register for 1838* (London: 1839), p. 212.
- 64 Nicholls, *Politics*, p. 92.
- 65 Mason, 'The Sovereign People', p. 124.

