

## Drinking, sex and geometry

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Is it bad to do it standing up? It seems like this question has bothered us for getting on for 200 years now, going back to when public concern focused on gin shops as sites of 'perpendicular drinking'.

Today, of course, licensing authorities have it in for what they call 'vertical drinking', which amounts to the same thing – wet-led pubs and bars with little in the way of seating. In cumulative impact zones it's often hard to get a licence if food isn't part of your offer, and that means installing tables and chairs.

These historical parallels were called to mind at the rather splendid conference on Public Drinking in the 19th Century held at Bristol University at the weekend. Paul Jennings, author of *The Local* (arguably the best history of the pub), opened the proceedings with a talk on the gin palace, a grand evolution of the gin shop with added furniture.

It still wasn't good enough for those who favoured traditional inns and taverns and saw it as too 'standardised', much like branded pubs. It wasn't quite "legitimate English drinking" as Jennings put it, but at least it was possible to do it sitting down.

What was a moral objection to perpendicular drinking has now been given a scientific spin in that you're probably going to drink more if you're standing up with a glass, or bottle, in your hand. It's closely associated with the crime of drinking to get drunk.

But that's only one reason why vertical drinking took off. For one thing pub companies had to pay extraordinarily high rents for prime high street sites and had to really pack them in on a Friday and Saturday night to make a profit. And from the consumer's point of view it was a matter of sex. Groups of young men and women needed to mingle to make the world go round, and sitting at separate tables makes that difficult.

There are other circumstances, too, when doing it standing up is legitimate. At the end of the conference there was a wine (and only wine) reception where everyone was vertically drinking in order to socialise, if not necessarily to have sex (though you never know your luck at these things).

It's an occasion that seems compulsory at conferences of all sorts, including those conducted among a public health community that can be quite hostile to drink. So I can reassure you that if it's wine you're drinking, and if you're a serious person, it's absolutely fine to do it standing up.

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