

Bottles of ‘Cham’ and Tureens of Turtle: Luxury, Power and Politics in the Long Nineteenth Century

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In 1862, Richard Cobden argued in a speech in Rochdale that ‘it would be cheaper to keep the whole population of the cotton districts [...] on turtle, champagne and venison than to send to America to obtain cotton by force of arms’. As he knew well, consuming such luxury foods would have been unthinkable to the great majority of his election audience. Turtle, champagne and venison were three of the five consumables that dominate discourses of luxury in the mass media of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The other two, as this cartoon from *Punch* (Figure 1) indicates, were cigars and pineapples.¹

This paper focuses on luxury consumables and their functional and symbolic power in the discourse of British food in the long nineteenth century, from around 1820 to 1914. I look first at the representation of this set of products in the Victorian mass media before showing how these products were used and abused in the municipal politics of the period. As the volume and vehemence of the periodical and daily press coverage of municipal politics of the period shows, this was a topic of great importance to much of the Victorian populace. It has been argued that the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 was a far more significant move in the democratisation of England than the Great Reform Bill of 1832.² Local government and local politics mattered.

As you see from the cartoon, there is a clear contrast between the luxury of the moneymen and the frugal care with which the depositor is dressed. The clear inference is that the moneymen are abusing the trust of the honest working man by using his hard-earned deposits to satisfy their personal appetites. This is a point to which I will

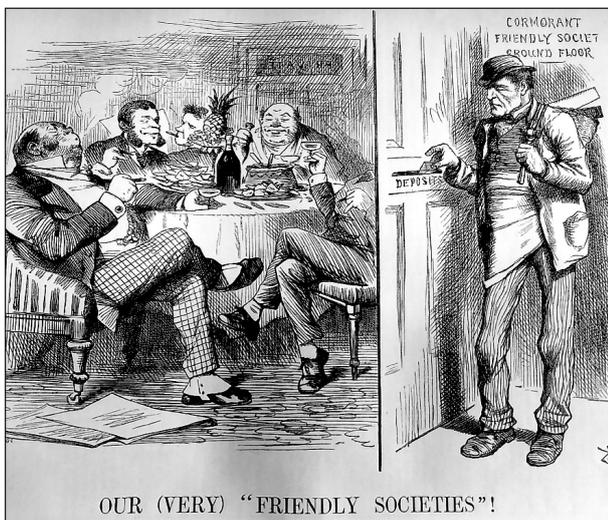


Figure 1. Our (Very) ‘Friendly Societies’!, *Punch*, 20 March 1886, p. 139.

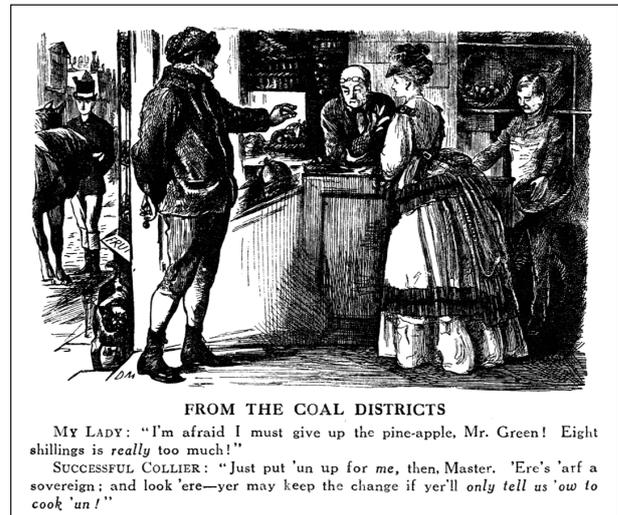


Figure 2. ‘From the Coal Districts’, *Punch*, 25 October 1873, p. 164.

return in order to show how the symbolic power of such consumables was created and perpetuated by the mass media but first I will justify my contention that these five consumables are key symbols of nineteenth-century luxury.

This group shared a number of attributes. First, they were all highly-priced. Champagne from the 1820s

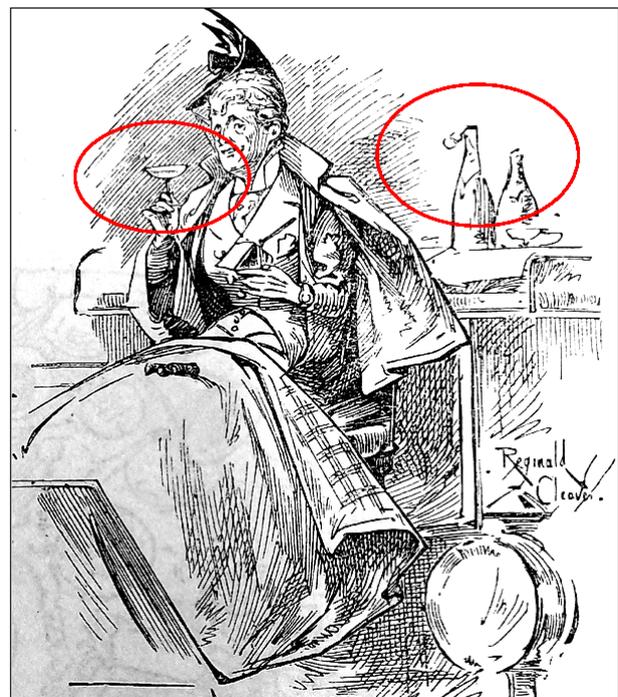


Figure 3. ‘Frisky Grandmother’, *Punch*, 5 March 1892, p. 120.

Product	Number of Advertisements
Cigars	320,000
Champagne	230,00
Turtle	36,000
Venison	12,000
Pineapple	6000

Figure 4. The advertising of luxury products in the British press, 1850-1900. Source: British Newspaper Archive (January 2018)

onwards was the most expensive wine in the market, and unlike all other wines and most spirits in the British market, was able consistently to raise rather than drop prices throughout the period.³ Venison was a long-established luxury food.⁴ Champagne was most often paired with turtle as *the* delicacy of corporations such as the City of London.⁵ The habit of pairing champagne and turtle at city feasts was well established early in the century and was still an effective trope in the 1890s when the *Pall Mall Gazette* said of the 'city fathers' that, unlike members of the London School Boards, they represented nothing but turtle and champagne.⁶ Though the price of venison was seasonal it was usually represented, like champagne, as 'unattainable to the working man'.⁷ So too cigars, described in 1860 as 'an expensive luxury which few can indulge in', given that six cigars a day, apparently a normal consumption, cost as much as the average wage of a day labourer.⁸ Lastly, pineapples. In 1880, an article in *Punch* claimed they were 'half a guinea each', so expensive, went their squib, that only well-paid colliers could afford them, even though they didn't know how to 'cook 'un' (Figure 2).⁹ Pineapples, like turtle, needed knowledge to prepare and eat. In this at least, champagne, cigars and venison posed few challenges.

All these products were advertised in the British press but at very different levels of exposure (Figure 5). The British Newspaper Archive records over 300,000 adverts for cigars between 1850 and 1900; and over 200,000 for champagne. By contrast turtle, venison and pineapples together totalled only 50,000.¹⁰

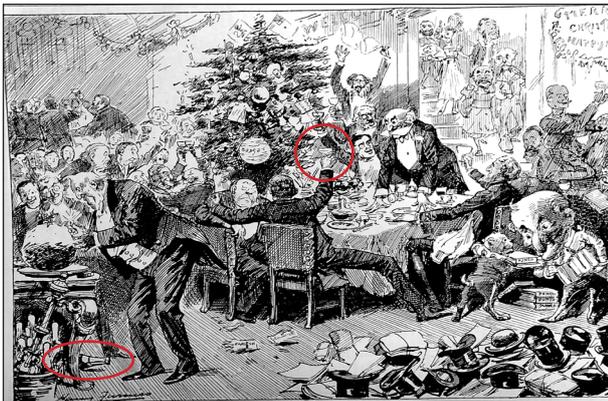


Figure 5. Christmas celebrations, *Punch*, 30 December 1893, p. 303.



Figure 6. Builder and surveyor, *Punch*, 11 October 1890, p. 172.

But there was a further factor that gave champagne and pineapples the advantage as a symbol in the mass media. Both were highly visible on the table. Of the two, pineapples occur rarely in the pages of *Punch* but always associated with figures of wealth and power. Champagne, on the other hand, dominates the pages of *Punch* in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Over 150 images between 1875 and 1913 include champagne bottles or glasses; nearly 50% of all the images of alcoholic drinks in total. As the images below demonstrate, the shape of bottle, the angle of the neck foil and the shape of the glass were utterly distinctive.¹¹ (Figures 3, 5, 6)

More than that, champagne was consistently portrayed in *Punch* and other periodicals as the wine of the powerful, as these images of Disraeli, (Figure 7) Gladstone (Figure 8)

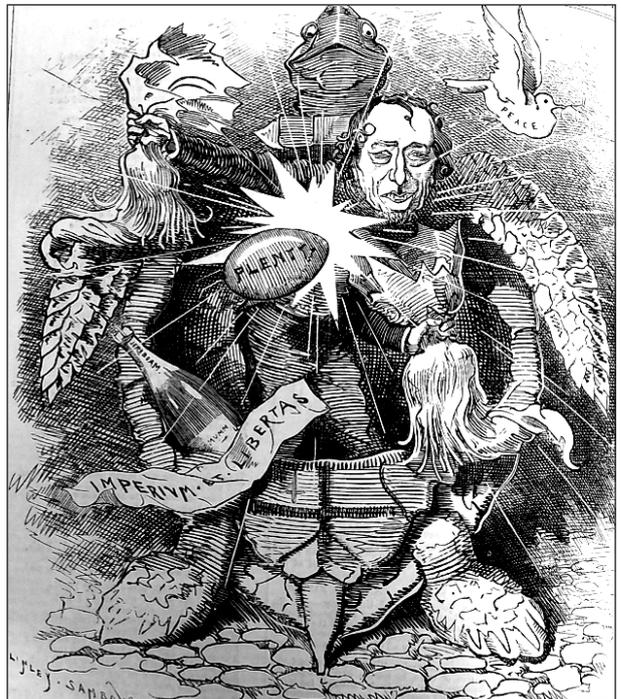


Figure 7. Disraeli, *Punch*, 22 November 1879, p. 230.



Figure 8. Gladstone, *St. Stephen's Review*, 12 February 1887, p. 13.

and Balfour (Figure 9) clearly show.¹² And there are many others I've not shown including Lord Salisbury, Randolph Churchill, and lesser lights such as Speaker Brand, who was personified as a bottle of champagne.¹³ (Figure 10) From early in the century, well before the launch of *Punch*, champagne was associated with elite celebration and any reader of a daily paper of any stamp would see this. Two-thirds of the 95 articles referring to 'champagne' in the British press in the randomly chosen month of July 1855 alone dealt with elite celebrations of some form: evening balls, civic dinners and events, high-stakes wagers, commercial celebrations of all forms from the opening of new chemical works in Tredegar to the arrival of SS Caradoc in Bristol.¹⁴ Repasts with champagne were typically 'sumptuous' or 'elegant'; the guests usually 'distinguished', 'aristocratic', and sometimes even 'royal'.

This image and the linkage with the British elite was promoted assiduously by the champagne producers and their agents from the 1860s onwards. The agent for the

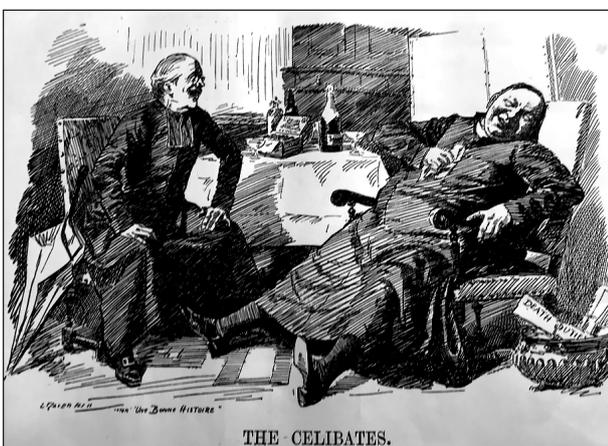


Figure 9. 'The Celibates' (Balfour and Haldane), *Punch*, 22 September 1909, p. 201.

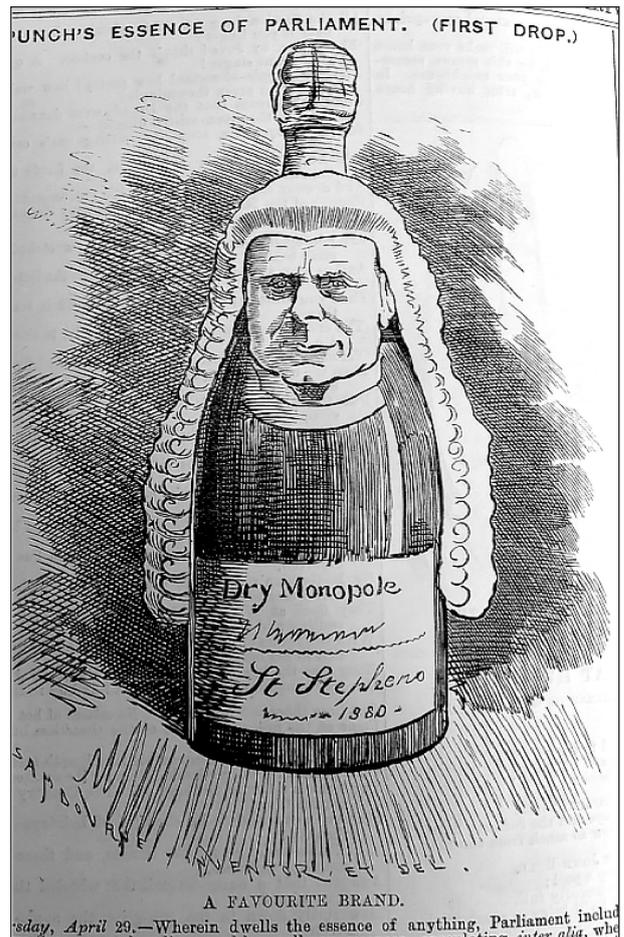


Figure 10. Mr Speaker Brand, *Punch*, 8 May 1880, p. 214.

highly successful brand of Pommery and Greno, Adolphe Hubinet, worked hard behind the scenes to get his wine on the tables of such men as the Duke of Wellington and the Prince of Wales and made sure that these successes were publicised in the press. In May 1867, he wrote to his principals of his plan to get a 'petit entrefilet' noting the Prince of Wales' patronage published in the provincial press.¹⁵ Lesser brands did the same, boasting, however tenuously, of their link to royalty, as this puff for the Goldlack brand demonstrates.

There is a fashion in champagne as there is in coats and hats, and just now the fashion seems to be Deutz and Geldermann's 'Goldlack'. They swear by it at the St. Stephen's, among other clubs, and I am afraid to say how much of the capital tippie is got through in the year by the million patrons of the cosmopolitan Spiers and Pond. 'Goldlack' is by no means cheap 'fizz', but it is a brand which you can safely offer to a Royalty whenever he or she accords you the honour of a visit. — *Whitehall Review*.¹⁶

This aristocratic image was boosted not just by association with the elite but by the personification of champagne in the media.¹⁷ In these images, one from 1885,

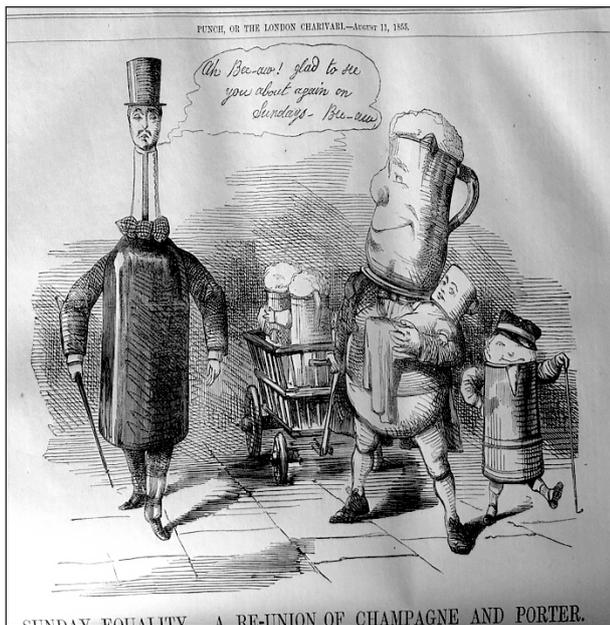


Figure 11. Champagne and porter, *Punch*, 11 August 1855, p. 57.

the other from 1904, champagne is represented as a well-dressed, drawling aristocrat whereas porter or beer are plebeian, even distressed. (Figures 11, 12)

But champagne did not just have image benefits. Functionally, it did what the other luxury consumables could not. It opened purses; broke down British reserve and ensured that dinners went with a swing. As Sheriff Campbell Smith observed in a letter published in the *Dundee Courier*



Figure 12. Champagne and beer, *Punch*, 11 September 1894, p. 144.

in 1890, champagne was a 'wonderful solvent of the starch and buckram that superabound in all the professions'.¹⁸ Henry Vizetelly, who established a profitable niche in books about champagne in the 1880s, called it 'that great unloosener not merely of tongues but of purse-strings', adding that this was 'well-known to those secretaries of charitable institutions which set the wine flowing earliest'.¹⁹

That ability to loosen both purse strings and tongues made champagne a fixture at the civic and associational dinners that held a central place in British society in the second half of the century. As the *London Standard* declared in 1880, 'everything, indeed, is an excuse for a dinner. [...] A dinner celebrates the downfall of a Ministry, the discovery of a new planet, or a previously unknown sea; it welcomes a Monarch and does honour to the election of a parish beadle'.²⁰ At such dinners, if one is to believe press reports, the champagne flowed 'ad libitum' or 'like spring water'.²¹

Though brand names were mentioned in connection with dinners from early on in the century, the right to supply such events became increasingly sought after and brands used them to raise their own profile. For example, in the mid-1880s, Moët & Chandon donated magnums of their newly launched 'Dry Imperial' to a dinner commemorating the return of the Guards from Egypt and this gesture was reported in identical terms by dozens of newspapers.²² Although cigars were doubtless part of the evening these do not appear to have been supplied by the hosts, and there are no equivalent puff pieces of advertisements for powerful brands. The cigar market was also much more fragmented and much less strongly branded.²³

From the 1840s onwards, such civic dinners were extensively reported in the local and national press, none more so than the Guildhall dinner given annually by the incoming Lord Mayor of London. The 1826 dinner was slated in the press as 'anything but worthy of civic hospitality' and it was claimed that 'many of the guests were sick from drinking the home-made champagne'.²⁴ It is perhaps not fanciful to imagine that after that particular debacle (which left honoured guests 'disgusted') the mayors did their best to pull out all the stops. The 'bill of fare' in 1828 included among much else '200 tureens of turtle' and '200 pounds of Pine Apples', all washed down with a range of wines including champagne.²⁵ Turtle was a constant at such dinners. In 1860, the incoming mayor, Mr Cubitt (of the building firm) 'let it be known that his reign will be celebrated in the annals of citydom for the slaughter of turtle and the popping of champagne'.²⁶ At another feast in 1877, the 'popping of [champagne] corks reminded one of [...] our Rifle Volunteers on a field day'.²⁷

Dinners and celebrations of this sort played an important role in civic society. They were rituals shared by men with a stake in society. The meets and dinners of the volunteer forces first raised in the 1850s far outlived the perceived threat to England from the French.²⁸ Like the Territorial forces that succeeded them in the twentieth century they were events for forming useful 'connections' with local power-brokers. Champagne fuelled such events.

Champagne opened purses, lubricated the loyal toasts to the Queen and the Prince of Wales which demonstrated loyalty and support to the institutions of the nation. So far so fine.

But champagne was also an instrument of power in the hands of those who provided it or paid for it. As the rest of this paper will show it was used as a tool of patronage, an inducement to electoral malfeasance and an instrument of corruption.

Champagne was a means for men of wealth to demonstrate their power and for politicians to boost their support and bolster their reputation. At its most benign this manifested itself in the supply of champagne for sports club celebrations. Sports club celebrations were Britain's apparently distinctive contribution to the rituals of champagne.²⁹ After the mid-1880s, the ritual of drinking champagne from the winner's cup as it went around the room became a common trope with newspaper reports of the period linking champagne with football, cricket, rifle shooting, cycling, athletics and baseball.³⁰ This practice, which presumably borrowed from the well-established loving cup tradition, was often linked to the exercise of local power. Thus, when a Chelmsford football team won the 'Charity Cup' in 1910 it was the Mayor who paid for it to be filled with champagne.³¹ Suggestions that the champagne was paid for by a local businessman or politician reinforce the argument that such celebrations reflected not just a sense of belonging but also the middle-class desire to impose a level of social control through patronage and sporting discipline (which Simon Gunn has noted in his work on Victorian public culture).³²

Incoming Mayors routinely hosted champagne receptions or dinners for supporters. The issue here was who paid for the champagne? When the controversial, and possibly corrupt, Samuel Elliott, mayor of Islington, was campaigning for a seat on the London County Council, he was challenged at an election meeting over the provision of 'champagne and smokes' to the aldermen and townspeople after his election. 'I can answer that!', he insisted. He had paid for 'everything [because] he did not wish to play second fiddle to my predecessor'.³³ His opponent was unconvinced, suggesting that he was not 'the proper man' for the role. In the mid-1880s, Elliott had made similar allegations about his own opponents on the council, claiming that the Board of Asylum had dispensed over 7000 pints of champagne to those in its care in just one month and that over 200 of these had gone to officers of the council.³⁴

The use and abuse of champagne in local government was a proverbial source of controversy and scandal. In 1870, the Poplar Board of Guardians who were responsible for care of the poor in their London district were accused by the local paper of spending £5 15s on lobsters and champagne, reputedly their 'favourite delicacy'.³⁵ At the wonderfully named Upton Snodsbury's Highway Board in the same year, the 'popping of champagne corks [was] like the quick fire of small arms'.³⁶ And, again in 1870, the Islington Guardians were accused of 'gorging weekly at the expense of the poor rate'. 'Soaking their respectability in champagne', said the *Islington Gazette*.³⁷ Similar allegations



Figure 13. 'Bumbledom "asks for more"', *Punch*, 4 July 1906, p. 3.

can be found for every decade in every area of the country, though boroughs under long-term one-party control were the most vulnerable to corrupt practices.³⁸ A *Punch* cartoon of 1906 summed up their view.³⁹ (Figure 13)

There has been little scholarly attention to corruption in local, as distinct from national government, but as the one book on the subject makes clear, there is no single and unambiguous definition of corruption. At the heart of all the proposed definitions, though, lies the issue of abuse of trust. A low-paid clerk embezzling council funds is a criminal action; a senior official or council member putting business in the way of a relative or friend is corruption, though it may, of course, also be criminal. In parliamentary elections such behaviour would almost certainly have led to a judicial hearing, as at Berwick in the 1860s when there were alleged to be three classes of bribed voters: the first class who received 'champagne without stint', the second class who got sherry and the third class who had to make do on beer and spirits.⁴⁰ Standards of conduct changed during the nineteenth century but by the turn of the century, following various acts dealing with the governance of municipalities, such behaviour could be addressed in the criminal courts as the Mile End Guardians found to their cost when they went on trial in 1908.⁴¹ (Figure 14)

Influence and patronage could, and often did, slide into outright criminality. For example, between 1899 and 1907, James Calcutt, a builder and plumber in the Mile End area of London carried out nearly £25,000 worth of work for the local Board of Guardians. The so-called 'Calcutt Ring' on the Board ensured not only that Calcutt got the work

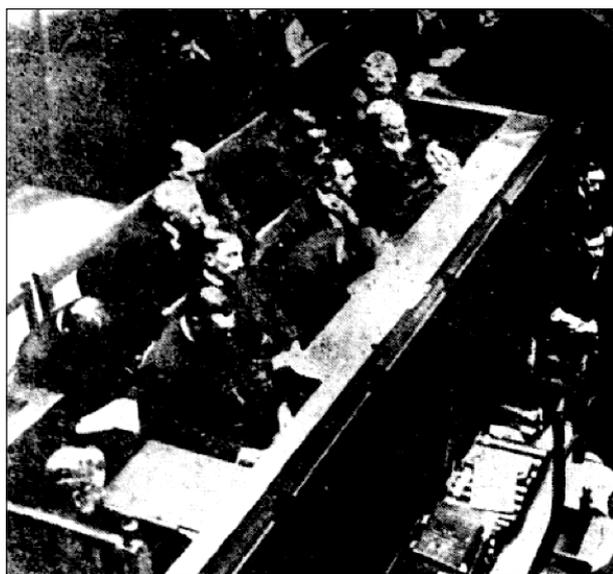


Figure 14. The Mile End Guardians in the dock,
Daily News, 4 August 1908, p. 9.

but that 'his accounts should pass with as little deductions as possible'.⁴² In return, as the accounts in numerous newspapers testified, champagne, cigars, diamond tiepins and gold cigarette cases were provided by Calcutt.⁴³

'Champagne and smokes', Samuel Elliott's preferred form of generosity to his constituents, were never, in and of themselves, indubitably corrupt but they underline the link between food and power and, as this nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century mass media coverage shows, they served as powerful symbols in the long march towards higher public standards and the cause of trust in public life.

About the author

Graham Harding returned to history after building the UK's largest independent marketing and branding agency. He is now attached to St Cross College in the University of Oxford where his recently-submitted doctorate focuses on how nineteenth-century French producers collaborated and competed with English merchants and agents and in so doing created the template for modern champagne. Publications include articles in the *Sage Encyclopedia of Alcohol* (2015) and the *Journal of Retailing and Consumption* (2016), a chapter on champagne in the nineteenth century published in *Devouring: Food, Drink and the Written Word, 1800 - 1945* (Routledge, 2017) and *The Wine Miscellany* (2005), which was published in UK, USA, France and other countries. Chapters on 'Wine Connoisseurship' (OUP) and 'Inventing tradition and terroir: the case of champagne in the late nineteenth century' (Routledge) will be published in 2019.

Notes

1. *Punch*, 20 March 1886, p. 139

2. James Moore, ed. *Corruption in urban politics and society, Britain 1780-1950* (Ashgate, 2007), p. 10
3. G. Harding, 'Advertisements of Every Kind to Bring Their Brand into Notoriety': Branding and 'Brandolatry' in the Nineteenth-Century Champagne Trade in Britain,' *Journal of Wine Economics* 12, no. 4 (2017), pp. 381-2.
4. Venison had been a luxury product since at least the medieval period. For its value as a luxury gift in seventeenth-century England, see L.L. Peck, 'Luxury and War: Reconsidering Luxury Consumption in Seventeenth-Century England,' *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 34, no. 1 (2002), p. 14.
5. For the importance of both turtle and venison in early nineteenth-century epicureanism, see J. Timbs, *Hints for the Table: Or, the Economy of Good Living* (London, 1866), pp. 159-60.
6. The earliest pairing of the two is *Bath Chronicle*, 5 January 1769, p. 3; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 January 1890, p. 1
7. *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 27 February 1880, p. 2
8. *Kentish Independent*, 15 September 1860, p. 3.
9. *Punch*, 25 October 1873, p. 164. For the cultivation and pricing of pineapples in Britain, see R. Levitt, 'A Noble Present of Fruit: A Transatlantic History of Pineapple Cultivation,' *Garden History* 42, no. 1 (2014), p. 16; for a general view of food consumption in London and Paris in the period 1850-early 1870s, see P.J. Atkins, 'A Tale of Two Cities': A Comparison of Food Supply in London and Paris in the 1850s,' in *Food and the City in Europe since 1800*, ed. P. J. Atkins, P. Lummel, and D. J. Oddy (Aldershot, 2007), p. 34. The absence of pineapple from the listing of fruit and vegetable consumption in both cities (table 3.2) shows its rarity.
10. The British Newspaper Archive (BNA) holds a steadily growing range of digitised newspapers from the British Library. Newspapers are searchable by type, date and keyword(s). See <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>. The survey for this article was conducted in January 2018.
11. *Punch*, 15 March 1892, p. 120; 30 December 1893, p. 303; 11 October 1890, p. 172.
12. For Disraeli, see *Punch*, 22 November 1879, p. 230; for Gladstone, *St Stephen's Review*, 12 February 1887, p. 13; for Balfour, *Punch*, 22 September 1909, p. 201.
13. *Punch*, 8 May 1880, p. 214.
14. Analysis of all BNA articles referring to 'champagne' between 1 and 31 July 1855 conducted 22 January 2017. The 'other' category includes references to the quality of parliamentary oratory, place-names or surnames, and the use of champagne by foreign politicians and soldiers.
15. A. Flocquet, *Compilation De La Correspondance De Hubinet* (n.d. [1950s]), 6 May 1867.
16. *John Bull*, 17 May 1880, p. 243.

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17. *Punch*, 11 August 1855, p. 57; *Punch*, 22 September 1894, p. 144.
 18. *Dundee Courier*, 10 February 1890, p. 2.
 19. H. Vizetelly, *Facts About Champagne and Other Sparkling Wines: Collected During Numerous Visits to the Champagne and Other Vinicultural Districts of France, and the Principal Wine-Producing Countries of Europe* (London, 1882), p. 263.
 20. *London Standard*, 10 August 1880, p. 2.
 21. *Leicester Journal*, 19 November 1847, p. 3.
 22. For the puff in the *Hotel Mail*, see Ridley's, 12 January 1885, p. 26; for the Guards dinner advertisement see, for example, the *Northampton Mercury*, 25 November 1885, p. 5. The firm of Perrier-Jouët did the same for the Royal Dublin Fusiliers return home after foreign service in 1903. See *Waterford Standard*, 2 December 1903, p. 2.
 23. There is no worthwhile discussion of branding in one of the few books that deals with cigar labels. See J.B. Davidson, *The Art of the Cigar Label* (Edison, N.J., 1997).
 24. *Bell's Life in London*, 12 November 1826, p. 2.
 25. *Morning Post*, 10 November 1828, p. 3.
 26. *Leeds Mercury*, 8 November 1860, p. 2.
 27. *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 14 December 1877, p. 3.
 28. *Wellington Journal and Shrewsbury News*, 4 February 1899, p. 7.
 29. See J. Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1999), p. 187 for the 'breath-taking speed' at which sports clubs grew.
 30. The earliest reference yet found is for the Sussex Football Association Challenge cup, which was filled with champagne and drunk at a dinner held in April 1884. See the *Mid-Sussex Times*, 15 April 1884, p. 5. For cricket, see the *Sheffield Independent*, 26 January 1880, p. 4; for rifle shooting, the *Portsmouth Evening News*, 30 May 1890, p. 2; for cycling, the *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 20 June 1890, p. 6; for athletics, the *Bury and Norwich Post*, 19 June 1900, p. 7; for baseball, the *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 10 November 1900, p. 4.
 31. *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 6 May 1910, p. 3.
 32. See S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority and the English Industrial City, 1840-1914* (Manchester, 2007), p. 27. The involvement of Tory democrats in popular culture and sport in the 1880s and 1890s supports this analysis. See J. Lawrence, 'Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880-1914,' *English Historical Review* 108, no. 428 (1993), pp. 638-9.
 33. *Islington Daily Gazette*, 27 February 1907, p. 5. The
 34. *Islington Gazette*, 4 February 1882, p. 2. See also *Islington Gazette*, 20 July 1900, p. 2 for Elliott's reputation as a 'bounteous' epicure who was pleased to feed 'busmen, police, paupers, guardians and vestrymen'. *Ibid*, 11 August 1903, p. 4 for a character sketch.
 35. *East London Observer* 30 July 1870, p. 4.
 36. *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 23 July 1870, p. 2
 37. *Islington Gazette*, 2 May 1870, p. 2
 38. See J. Moore, *Corruption in urban politics and society, Britain 180-1950*.
 39. *Punch*, 4 July 1906, p. 3.
 40. *Newcastle Journal*, 14 July 1860, p. 5
 41. *The Daily News*, 6 August 1908, p. 9
 42. *Ballymena Observer*, 17 July 1908, p. 3, and many other papers.
 43. For a summary of the case, see *London Evening Standard*, 8 August 1906, p. 6.
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