

The Rechabite Temperance Movement

By Mike James



The nation’s alcohol intake has notably declined in recent decades (you may be surprised to hear!), but some readers will remember that lunchtime alcohol, especially on Fridays, was a routine part of the working day. Fleet Street (and probably other) journalists were notorious for their boozy lunches. Even in the 1980s, jurors at St Albans Crown Court were warned off over-indulgence during the lunch recess. ‘Gin Lane’, a famous engraving (1751) by William Hogarth, shows a baby falling from her drunken mother’s arms into the basement below, but ‘Beer Street’, a companion illustration, suggests a street scene of (relative) enterprise and commercial activity, making a political point (gin, originally a Dutch import, compared with beer, an excellent British product).

Anxiety about the depredations of cheap alcohol led in 1751 to the Gin Act which first prohibited gin distillers (but not brewers) from selling their wares to unlicensed merchants. Liquor licensing finally became

general in 1914 with the onset of World War 1, ensuring sobriety in munitions workers. But the Temperance movement had slowly expanded from the turn of the 18th century, and Bishop’s Stortford, well-supplied with pubs, had a Temperance Hotel in South Street so guests should not feel at risk of the demon drink. Nevertheless, Speechly & Milbank, a chemist on North Street, was an agent for Gilbey’s Wines; wine was seen as having a medicinal virtue.

In 1835 the Independent Order of Rechabites (IoR), a temperance movement, was first formed in Salford. The Rechabite reference is biblical and recalls a tribe who forswore alcohol, migrated from Egypt with the Israelites and stayed in tents when their travels halted (Jeremiah 35:5-7). Accordingly, the IoR formed groups called ‘Tents’, and their meetings, incorporating much ritual, moved between locations to spread the temperance word. Tent Officers had solemn titles like High Chief Ruler, Guardian and Levite. The 30th IoR branch in the London District, the ‘Hope of Stortford’ Tent, admitted Brother John Crisp Jnr (of Sawbridgeworth) in 1901. His Certificate of Admission, a donation by his grand-daughter to Bishop’s Stortford Museum, is colourful and is designed with much watery symbolism (Noah’s Ark, rescue at sea, fountains, the all-seeing eye, etc). We also have

his book of Tent Ritual, and a ceremonial embroidered sash. Joseph Day, the Stortford brickmaker and monumental mason, was probably also a member. We know Mr Crisp was strongly teetotal: his granddaughter remembered him refusing to provide anything alcoholic at Christmas, although he did not prevent his family from providing their own. Public houses are a declining presence today. The modern-day work ethic, and health concerns, nowadays continue the Temperance Movement's work.

The Bishop's Stortford Museum is your first choice for discovering the history of the town. With a mix of local history displays, holiday activities and themed walks and talks, we have something to offer the whole family. Admission to the museum is free and is open Monday –Friday 10am to 5pm and from 10am – 4pm on Saturday's.

Researched and Written by Mike James.

Mike has volunteered at the museum since 2009, helping to catalogue the collection among many other things. He has written articles about local history for the Herts and Essex Observer, contributed to the book 'Stortford Histories' published in 2012, and most recently helped to revise the Town Trails available from the Tourist Information Centre in Market Square.