

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE *Ladette?*

After girl power came the Ladette, but living-it-large turned sour, with drunkenness and violence on the rise in Britain's city centres, **Louise Hall** asks, where did it all go wrong?

It's a typical Saturday night in London's Leicester Square and 18-year-old finance secretary Nicola is lining up vodka shots to celebrate a friend's 19th birthday. 'We've been doing the rounds of bars,' she says. 'We're wasted, but we just want to attract lots of men and get as drunk as possible.' Outside the club, two drunken girls hurl insults at a bouncer who has refused them entry. Further down the street, there's another flare-up as a woman launches herself at her boyfriend, screaming a string of expletives.

For many young women, getting as drunk as possible at the weekend has become the highlight of their week. Women are closing the gap on men when it comes to drinking too much, according to research from the Women and Equality Unit of at the Department of Trade and Industry. The number of women aged 16 to 24 drinking more than 35 units of alcohol per week has more than tripled in the past 15 years, to 33 per cent. On average, this age group consumes 35 or more units a week – equivalent to over five bottles of wine. This 'high-risk' drinking represents over double the weekly

safe level of 14 units recommended by health authorities. However, it's the weekend binge drinking which is turning our streets into battle-grounds.

While this new trend is very worrying, it's hardly surprising, given the number of female celebrities who seem determined to live life in the fast lane, and be photographed doing it. Gone are the innocent beer-swilling 'ladettes' of the 90s, epitomised by DJs Zoë Ball and Sara Cox. Today, we need only switch on the television to see boozed-up women in programmes like *Casualty* and *Coronation Street*, or open a newspaper to see far-gone celebs toppling out of bars and clubs.

Research from the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London has found that drinking too much in one session is a more female trait than a male one: nearly one in five women is a binge-drinker, compared to almost one in seven men. A shocking 36 per cent of women in their 20s regularly drink to excess, compared with 33 per cent men. Richard Williamson, who conducted the five-year study into the drinking habits of more than 20,000 adults aged 20 to 60, says it's the



BRISTOL, ENGLAND – 5 FEBRUARY: Revellers on the last weekend before pubs and clubs could apply for extended licences. Critics fear this will lead to increased binge-drinking, crime, disorder and city centres becoming no-go areas



ABOVE Revellers in Ibiza dressed as policewomen typify the Saturday night crowds of British women here and abroad who are determined to have a good time
BELOW Women are encouraged by pubs and clubs to drink more with free entry and cheap booze

TOP LEFT Ex-Eastender's star **Michelle Collins** happily tumbles out of a club in front of the paparazzi
LEFT **Charlotte Church's** evenings are often scarred by a press scrum desperate to catch her out of control
BELOW **Sadie Frost** and pal **Pearl Lowe** looking a little worse for wear after a night out on the town



first time that the number of binge-drinking women has outstripped men.

In the world of celebrity, of course, there was that late-night drunken spat between Sadie Frost and estranged hubby Jude Law in genteel Notting Hill in April last year. Predictably, the papers revelled in reports that Sadie, accompanied by toy-boy lover Jackson Scott, hammered on the door 'shouting and screaming', demanding to be let in. Nor was it the first time the pair's split has triggered angry late-night episodes; in June 2003, the police were called to the same London house to investigate another furious argument.

While public displays of drunken behaviour like this may seem innocuous enough, other events can have devastating consequences. In May 2002 schoolgirl Kirsty Nesbit, 15, was repeatedly slashed in the face with a craft knife by her friend Jennifer Moffat following a trivial row in an Edinburgh street. Kirsty needed 89 stitches to repair her damaged face and the horrific attack has left her scarred for life. The court heard that Moffat, who was 14 at the time, had been drinking large quantities of vodka.

In January, Judge David Maddison promised to crack down on the tide of drink-fuelled violence sweeping British streets after jailing two girl thugs, aged 19 and 21, for eight months each, after they assaulted two women at a taxi rank outside a nightclub

in Manchester last August. One of the victims was punched and kicked in the head and body, the other was then dragged by her hair and stamped on as she lay helpless on the ground.

In February in Manchester city centre, a young girl led a six-strong gang in kicking credit controller Mark Gull, 25, unconscious in the head after he mistakenly went to the front of a taxi queue.

Incidents of lipstick louts starting fights with other partygoers are now depressingly commonplace, report nightclub security and police officers. Seventy-nine per cent of female sentenced prisoners in this country admitted to hazardous drinking prior to imprisonment – 16 per cent more than men, reports Alcohol Concern.

Experts have highlighted the social reasons behind the increase in women's drinking. Young women are now much more financially independent and socially active than any other generation. They are also waiting longer to take on the responsibilities of children until their 30s and 40s, leaving much longer to indulge themselves with similarly unmarried, unencumbered friends. There has been a huge growth in female-friendly wine bars and clubs that are much more inviting to the fairer sex as places to hangout than old-style pubs, as are the many number of alcopops, alcoholic fruit drinks, shots and designer beers ➤

“WE'RE WASTED BUT WE JUST WANT TO ATTRACT LOTS OF MEN AND GET AS DRUNK AS POSSIBLE”

INVESTIGATOR

available at knock-down prices. Many of the new breed of drinks are over five per cent volume of alcohol, so two bottles could exceed the advised daily limit. It's hardly surprising getting drunk is so easy for many women.

Eric Appleby, chief executive of Alcohol Concern, the national agency for alcohol misuse, sees the assault of advertising as a major contributing factor. He says the 'disproportionate' increase of money spent on alcohol advertising encouraging women to drink and higher female incomes has created an atmosphere of acceptance. 'In the past, women were settling down and getting married in their early 20s,' he says. 'Now women are more financially independent right the way through their 20s, so there's a longer period of "the hedonistic" lifestyle.'

Professor Moira Plant from the Alcohol and Health Research Trust at the University of the West of England in Bristol puts the rise in young women's excessive drinking down to 'habit'. It's this, she points out, that leads to weekend drinking. She says, 'In general, pattern predicts problem. The problem lies in weekend-drinking; women are now clearly binge-drinking in the manner of men, with more women getting drunk, arguing and misbehaving.'

The question still remains as to why women are increasingly drinking themselves into such horrific, and sometimes violent, states? Some drink to indulge, others to combat stress, some to socialise, others to ease social pressure, while a few mean to have 'one or two' and find themselves unable to stop.

According to Alcohol Concern, laboratory studies show that people who have drunk alcohol are more likely than those who have not to react aggressively when provoked. It found that the aggression is greater among those of an aggressive disposition. Professor Plant agrees. 'The most powerful thing about alcohol is your expectation of it,' she says. 'It manifests your feelings; if you're angry it'll lead you to argue, if you're sad it'll lead you to sit in the corner and cry and if you're happy, it will make you feel high-as-a-kite.'

'For example, alcohol will not make people violent who would normally never go into town and get into a fight, but if a person has a predisposition to do this, then it will enhance the urge to do so,' she continues.

However, despite the fact that women are increasingly adopting a typically male 'work-hard, play-hard' philosophy, this group are still not yet drinking identical quantities as men, nor are they committing the same level of alcohol-related violence.

'What is different is that drunk women are more visible today,' says Professor Plant, who explains that the troublemakers of today won't necessarily be the lawbreakers of tomorrow. 'It's inaccurate to say that this age group will carry on drinking to excess. In general, they will settle down when they start a family.'



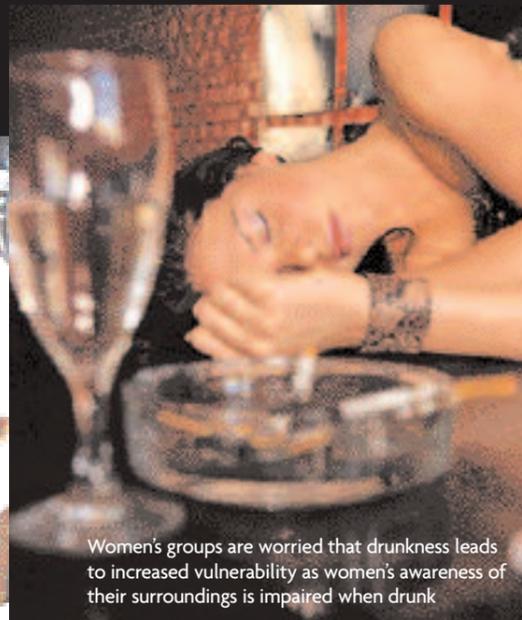
LEFT High levels of drinking can lead to death and serious illness such as cirrhosis of the liver, heart disease and strokes, as well as mental and behavioural problems



Mother-of-two Jade Goody went from stripping in front of millions on *Big Brother*, to regular appearances in the tabloids



BELOW Violence erupted in 2004s *Big Brother 5* after a drink-fuelled clash between Emma Greenwood and Victor Ebuwa



Women's groups are worried that drunkenness leads to increased vulnerability as women's awareness of their surroundings is impaired when drunk



Girls Aloud's Cheryl Tweedy was found guilty in October 2003 of assault after an incident in a club with another woman



RIGHT Did the good-hearted rabble-rousing of 90s ladettes like Sara Cox unintentionally inspire the trend towards binge drinking?

I WAS A CHRONIC ALCOHOLIC AT 13

Victoria Wallis, 26, conquered her drinking problem after it ruined her teenage years



Victoria has replaced drinking with running marathons, which is how she met her fiancé Dan

My problem with alcohol began at boarding school when I was 13. At the time I thought everyone was drinking. I'd mainly swig neat vodka, drinking alone until I passed out. By the time I was 16, I'd get through one or two bottles a day.

For years I managed to hide it – my parents worked abroad, but when they moved back to Surrey, they were horrified to see the state I was in. At 16, to avoid being expelled from school, my mother put me on a detox programme. I was seriously ill; my stomach lining had been eaten away, I had a bleeding ulcer and my skin had turned yellow.

I stopped drinking long enough to get two A levels because I was told to, but it didn't last – I thought I was way too young to stop. What was the problem?

When I was 19, I badly cut my finger while drunk. In the hospital I overheard a doctor saying that I was 'just a drunk'. It was my wake-up call to give up.

This time I went into a rehab clinic for almost four months and despite the shakes and hallucinations, I got through it and began to recover. I remember thinking how nice it was to sleep, not just pass out.

Last November, I had my seven-year anniversary of being sober and my life has changed unrecognisably. I have a wonderful partner and great relationship with my family, all of which I wouldn't have if I had kept on drinking.



ABOVE Tara's injuries



RIGHT Tara is starting a career in childcare following the attack

A GIRL'S NIGHT OUT LEFT ME SCARRED FOR LIFE

Tara Jeffries, 16, was glassed in the face on April 24 last year

My friend Claire and I had only been out for about half an hour, so it was relatively early on in the evening. We'd just gone into this bar, bought a drink and started to dance, when a girl started bumping into and pushing Claire. We decided to swap places, but the next thing I knew, she'd shoved into me really hard. Instinctively I turned around to see who it was. As I did, she grabbed my hair and then viciously smashed a pint glass in my face.

Even then she wouldn't let go of me. She pinned my head to the floor as one of her friends laid into me, repeatedly kicking me in the face with her stiletto.

An ambulance was called, but at first I didn't realise what damage she'd done, so I didn't feel any pain. In shock, I just sat down. It was only when I saw the blood that I started to panic.

I had a cut near my ear, a chunk missing from the right side of my neck and a two-inch gash to my forehead, but the doctors couldn't give me any painkillers because I'd been drinking. My injuries were x-rayed to check that there was no glass in the cuts, especially the deep slash on my neck. I was very lucky that it had just missed my jugular... Eventually I was sent home.

Early the next day I went back to the hospital to be

stitched up by a plastic surgeon. I had eight stitches to my forehead and a very large one on my neck to close the wound and minimise scarring. It hurt a lot – the mixture of pain and alcohol had left me feeling very sick and distressed.

It took about three weeks for the bruising to go down but the scar on my neck is still bright red and I've been left with a permanent two-inch scar.

The police traced the girl who attacked me on CCTV footage. They say she's between 18 and 21 but have yet to make an arrest.

The attack has ruined my life – it has totally changed everything. When it happened, I was following my dream, training to be a backing pop dancer. I was in my final year of a national diploma in dance and had been dancing since I was seven but I gave up after the attack.

I don't go out now and have lost all my confidence. I'm scared that I'll bump into my attacker as I know she's out there. I also hate people staring at my scars... I feel like I can't go out and enjoy myself anymore.

My mum says I'm a more angry person now, but my boyfriend has been very supportive. Despite all that's happened, I'm determined to move on with my life.

“73 PER CENT OF ASSAULT VICTIMS' INJURIES LAST YEAR WERE ALCOHOL-RELATED