

Seventeenth century tavern gossip

Comparative studies suggest that illiterate day-labourers and husbandmen had easy access to news in the village alehouse, which served as a general meeting place and information exchange. Margaret Spufford has found evidence to suggest that ballads and chapbooks were freely handed round, read aloud and discussed by alehouse patrons. Taverns and gossip were synonymous; as one contemporary writer observes, 'every man hath his penny to spend at a pinte in the one, and every man his eare open to receive the sound of the other' The alehouse was also a popular meeting place for itinerant travellers, chapmen and general carriers - the carriers of information - who met with the farming population and exchanged news picked up in their travels. Strong drink and profane company might easily loosen a man's tongue to sedition.

However, the alehouses were not the 'nests of Satan' and hotbeds of conspiracy and impiety that the puritans imagined them to be. In an illuminating article, Peter Clark suggests that alehouses nurtured rather more conservative and parochial attitudes. Although there were occasionally seditious outbursts, they never became 'the command centres of popular revolution'. Their failure to fulfil this role has been ascribed to three factors: the absence of political awareness among their various patrons, the gradual tightening of control over alehouses by the authorities using statutory licensing provisions, and the ambiguous position of the alehouse-keeper who had to keep on the right side of the authorities.

The Austrey villagers were certainly no more isolated from the centre of events than Rous's parishioners or the inhabitants of East Anglian market towns. Like their East Anglian counterparts, they probably frequented taverns and alehouses in the village and in the local market towns, where they might obtain first hand news from the capital from wayfarers and carriers. A 1598 Leicestershire archdeaconry court case describes a noisy gathering of local farmers including inhabitants from Swebston and Appleby at an alehouse in Atherstone during the annual fair. Some Austrey inhabitants may have attended radical sermons and discussed them among themselves, like the Cambridgeshire villagers at Wisbech mentioned earlier. However, the villagers' receptiveness to ideas which challenged the status quo, both here and in Cambridgeshire, was governed to a large extent by familiarity with the written as opposed to the spoken word. The alehouse was the focus for the ignorant and irreligious, rather than a place of serious thought or debate. Serious opposition, based upon informed opinion, was more likely to take place among those who had already been admitted to the ruling elite: men and women who had access to ideas in print.