In the 18th and early 19th centuries water was frequently contaminated, making barley-based beer and ale safe hydration and an important source of caloric input. Consumption of a gallon a day was not unusual from medieval times through the 18th century. The terms ale and beer can be confusing. Technically ale is a form of beer produced with top fermenting yeasts at warm or room temperatures. Bittering agents added flavor and acted as preservatives. Prior to the 16th century ales were bittered with gruit, a mixture of herbs and spices. In the 16th century hops began to replace gruit as the standard preservative.

In large part, ales were produced by women (brewsters and alewives) to supplement family income. In 1702 alewives published a guide to brewing and advised the brewers of strong ale:

"Thames-water taken up about Greenwich at Low-water, when it is free from all brackishness of the sea, and has in it all the Fat and Sullage (sewage) from this Great City of London, makes very Strong Drink. It will of itself ferment wonderfully and after its due purgations and three times stinking it will be so strong that several Sea Commanders have told me that it has often fuddled their Murriners." A testament to the fermentation process (unless it also killed them).

Historically, beer was a consistently weaker brew favored for children and drunk from metal or ceramic tankards (1) or straight-sided glasses. Ale varied widely in strength and cost. Stingo, brewed in Edinburgh, Scotland, was strong cask conditioned ale that was over 10% alcohol, cost up to 10 guineas a gallon, and was served from glass decanters. Not all strong ale was decanted—nippitate, or nappy-strong ale was an inexpensive and abundant ale of the 16th through 18th centuries. A 1708 will from Philadelphia references a "pair Nippito glasses". These were probably the short wrythen type now referred to as dwarf or short ales.
The 18th century began with twisted, or wrythen, decorated small volume strong ale glasses holding 2 or 3 ounces. These dwarf or short ale glasses were made in leaded glass with folded or plain feet, with or without a stem and terminated with a funnel-shaped bowl. Prior to the mid-18th century ales were quite turbid and the wrythen work, may have helped to hide the ale’s sediment. Some of these flute-like glasses were probably utilized for champagne, which frequently contained unsightly sediment. Stylistically, the bowls were elongated funnels initially decorated with applied (2), and then later with molded (3) wrythen work. The wrythening often extended to within an inch of the rim and was frequently tooled into the flame-like, or flamiform termini, as seen on the illustrated objects.

By mid-18th century ales were largely clarified and plain clear funnel-shaped bowls gradually replaced the wrythen work. Frequently, these plain flutes were engraved with barley on one side and hop leaves and flowers on the opposite side (4 and 5). The usual height of a short strong ale glass was about 5 inches and a tall ale glass was over 7 inches. The difference between the glasses is the length of the stem as the bowls are of similar volume. Some surmise that the short glasses were largely for daily use, while the more impressive but delicate tall glasses were likely reserved for formal occasions when toasting might be in order. Attempts at precise dating are fraught with error. Wrythen forms, which harken back to 17th century Venetian glass, persisted into the 19th century and modern 20th century copies are common.

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Don’t Drink The Water!