

The Origins of Tea Drinking in Britain

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On September 25, 1660, the great chronicler, Samuel Pepys, made the following entry in his diary: 'And afterwards did send for a Cupp of Tee (a China drink) of which I had never drank before'. ' Pepys could not have foreseen then the extent to which this new drink would become a part of British life in the years ahead. Nor could he have had knowledge of tea's ancient roots, stretchng backwards into China's misty past, where it had developed slowly, concealed for a lengthy period of time from the eyes of the rest of the world.

Pepys was a forthright, stalwart Englishman typical of his age, and like the vast majority of his countrymen at the time he enjoyed a good drink. Drink for the vast majority of the populace, with little means at their disposal, meant ale. Cheap and easily brewed, it was consumed by men, women and children of all ages. Meanwhile the well-to-do, namely upperclass aristocrats and those who had made a success of their profession, indulged themselves in wines imported from the continent and a variety of other alcoholic drinks. Soft drinks other than tea were, as we shall see, only just starting to gain a foothold on the island. Today, with the hindsight of history, we know that no other country in Europe has been so influenced by the arrival of this leaf as Britain was, and this despite the major European trading nations, Britain's competitors, having had access to it earlier. In this paper I examine the circumstances leading up to and surrounding this event both in Britain and abroad, in an attempt to highlight those aspects of the process that may lend colour and detail to the popular view of Britain as a nation of tea drinkers.

The Long Journey from China

We first encounter tea in China, where its history as a drink stretches back with a fair degree of certainty to the fourth century A.D. and with less certainty beyond that into a world of legend where traditions vary. Tea first gained repute as a medicine, infusions being made from unprocessed green leaves, and in time it also came to be enjoyed purely for the pleasure it afforded. With growing popularity came commercialization, and as early as A.D. 780 a group of merchants commissioned the first book entirely about tea. This was the famous *Ch'a Ching*, or Tea Classic, by a writer called Lu-Yu, clearly aimed at extolling the merits of this wondrous drink. Numerous other works followed in a similar vein, showing China poised to trade its tea wares with whoever might be willing to purchase them. Over a lengthy period of time, however, the only outsiders to come in contact with this drink were a group of visiting Japanese Buddhist monks who, returning to their land after studying in China during the T'ang period (618 to c. 907), took seeds of the plant *Camellia sinensis* home with them to replant in their temple grounds. As Griffiths (1967) comments, 'In view of the considerable intercourse between China and the West during the first millenium after the discovery of tea, it is strange that no knowledge of either the plant or the beverage reached Europe before the sixteenth century.'²

When news finally did get through to Europe, it was, understandably in view of the linguistic and cultural difficulties involved, somewhat confused. Some accounts told how the leaves were barbarously boiled up in an iron kettle, others that they were first pulverized, and that the infusion took place in the bowl from which it was subsequently drunk. These first reports in written form about tea came to the attention of Europeans from various learned works of travel, the earliest dated 1559 and referring to the herb *Chai Catai*, which the people of Szechwan were accustomed to infuse in boiling water, to the great benefit of their stomachs and gout. A somewhat later observer, John Nieuhoff, who visited Pekin with the Dutch East India Company in 1655,

sums up the current impressions about oriental tea-making thus:

There is a very great difference in the manner of preparing and using this liquor between the *Chinese*s and those of *Japan*; for the Japanese beat the leaves into a Powder and mingle it with Boiling Water in a Cup which they afterwards drink off; but the Chinese put the leaves whole into a pot of Boiling Water, which having lain in steep for some time they sip off hot, without swallowing down any of the leaves, but only the Quintessence thereof extracted.¹

From 1559, when printed reference to Chinese tea was first made in Europe, nearly one hundred years were to pass before this drink first made its appearance in Britain. In the intervening period of time, a steady procession of explorers, mariners, merchants and Jesuit priests brought back stories of the tea plant and of the drink reputed to possess remarkable medicinal properties while at the same time being agreeable to the taste. Portuguese and Dutch traders, too, were busy opening routes to the orient. It was the Portuguese, pioneers of oriental traffic, who in 1557 were allowed to set up a trading post at Macao. But while their traders and priests wrote much on the subject of tea, it was a time before the Portuguese actually sent any back. As a result, they were beaten to it by the Dutch, and the first consignment of tea is reputed to have reached Holland in 1610, having been transported from Macao to Java, and from there to Europe.

While Europe as a whole was as yet unconscious of tea at the start of the seventeenth century, a handful of Europeans had already experienced it half a century earlier in Japan, where the refined art of *Chanoyu* had slowly emerged and taken shape from the original handful of seeds carried back by Japanese monks. Here is how one of the early Europeans to set foot in Japan, the Portuguese Jesuit Luis de Almeida, describes in a letter dated October 25, 1565, his experience of the tea ceremony in the house of Ryokei Hibiya, a prominent merchant of Sakai, where he spent a month recovering from an illness:

There is a custom among the noble and wealthy Japanese to show their treasures to an honoured guest at his departure as a token of their esteem. The treasures are made up of the utensils with which they drink a powdered herb, called *cha*, which is a delicious drink once one becomes used to it. To make this drink, they pour half a nutshell of this powdered herb into a porcelain bowl, and then adding very hot water they drink the brew. ⁴

In other words, while the rest of the world remained as yet largely ignorant of the existence and nature of Chinese tea, Japan had already developed a highly refined form of culture around this drink. Back in Europe, awareness of tea spread slowly. In 1618 the first tea reached Russia, and shortly afterwards Germany and France. Britain was not yet in the picture, despite the fact that in 1600 the East India Company had received its charter from Queen Elizabeth I and its ships were already active in Eastern waters. In fact, the East India Company placed no specific order for tea with its Far Eastern agents until 1664, half a century after tea first reached Holland. Furthermore, when it finally did arrive, in 1657, it was not the British themselves who brought it, but their rivals in the trade, the Dutch, who for years to come would continue to transport most of the tea imported by sea.

The Drinking Habits of a Nation

It will now be convenient to examine the circumstances prevailing in Britain before and up to the arrival of tea, so as to gain a clearer picture of the forces that aided or obstructed its progress.

From medieval times, the populace living in towns, villages and hamlets up and down the British Isles had been wont to indulge in more than their fair share of drinking. Wine, originally introduced by the Romans and now imported or produced locally in small amounts, was available for those who could afford it, along with other more expensive drinks such as rum and brandy. The vast majority of the population, however, depended solely on ale, which was drunk by men,

women and children at every meal throughout the day. It could be brewed easily and cheaply in the home, while ale-houses, and later inns, taverns and post houses, abounded. Younger children were given small beer, calculated to have had about 150-200 calories to the pint. This beer even contained a modest amount of calcium and various vitamins, so that two or three pints a day were considered an essential part of a child's diet in the majority of homes in Britain, where nothing more than very simple meals could be afforded. Moreover, anything was preferable to water, which was considered impure and thus to be avoided as a drink. In this way, with no alternatives available, for a lengthy period of time ale reigned supreme.

Ale-houses, and their successors the inns and taverns, were natural gathering places. From early times it had been customary to indicate them with large signs, for the benefit of the immense majority of the population who could not read; hence the often colourful signboards displayed outside taverns and pubs in Britain today. Here the men gathered and drank, all too often to excess, leading to violence of every form. Successive monarchs attempted to stem the tide, but with little success. In the tenth century, for example, king Edgar ruled that the excessive number of ale houses should be cut down, and that there should not be more than one in each village. Such measures, however, had little impact on the population as a whole.⁵

The First Soft Drinks

The improvements in ships and navigational methods led to ever increasing exploration overseas, which in turn created hitherto unknown and undreamt of possibilities of trade. Overseas travel offered new promise, so that not only the large companies but also the individual bent on realizing his own dream played a part, often enough unwittingly, in the commercial and cultural exchange that got under way in the world at this time.

And so it was that coffee arrived in Britain, slightly ahead of tea. It is claimed that the person who first introduced coffee to Britain was

Nathanial Conopios, a Cretan student at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1637, though it is likely that some Englishmen would have tasted it well before that date in their travels to the Middle East. Soon afterwards, Daniel Edwards, a merchant, brought to London from Smyrna a quantity of coffee berries and trained his Greek servant, Pasqua Rosee, to prepare and serve it. The drink became so popular among Edwards' friends in London, that in 1652 he helped Pasqua to set up a coffee house in St Michael's Alley - the first coffee house in London. Coffee houses soon multiplied, and by 1683, barely more than 25 years after the first one had been set up, there were over 2,000 in London alone. From that time on they flourished for a hundred years until their decline, which began late in the eighteenth century.

In London, where it was first offered to the public, coffee provided a welcome relief to the far more rigorous and taxing rounds of wine-, spirit- and ale-drinking to which men, particularly in the large towns, were subjected. Moreover, coffee-house owners were quick to sense the possibilities this new venture offered. Besides coffee they sold chocolate, which was also introduced to Britain in the late seventeenth century, and also brandy, arrack and rum punch, so that the coffee houses were not so very far removed from the taverns. Within a very short time London's coffee houses had become centres of social, cultural and political activity. Moreover, in an interesting development that reflects aspects of the British character, they tended to specialize in a particular type of patron, and from small beginnings there developed some of the best known names in British business today. Thus Garraways, one of the first and best known of London's coffee shops, was the resort of rich merchants, with drugs, timber and wine being sold by candlelight in its large sale rooms. Lloyds, the underwriters, originated with Edward Lloyd, whose establishment was a modest place of refreshment for seafarers, merchants and underwriters, for whose convenience he prepared 'ships' lists'. There was The Chapter Coffee-house, a meeting place for booksellers, Jonathan's, or the Amsterdam, for goldsmiths and bankers, and Tom's Coffee-house for barristers-at-law and their clients,

to name but a few examples. Interestingly, the proprietor of Tom's Coffee-house was none other than Thomas Twining, who would shortly turn his hand with such success to selling tea.

To these numerous coffee shops, then, intent on the pursuit of leisure or business, came men at all hours of the day. For such shops were male preserves, and when, with the passage of time, some of these establishments evolved into the exclusive clubs still existent in Britain today, they remained that way. Women drank at home, as they always had done and would continue to do until the arrival of tea in Britain, which set the scene for profound changes in social mores.

The Arrival of Tea in Britain

As has been seen, coffee found its way into Britain ahead of either of its two rivals, chocolate and tea, becoming a success virtually overnight. It is not surprising, therefore, that when tea finally did make its appearance, it was first served in a coffee house. The place was the aforementioned Garraway's Cophee-house; the date, 1657. One year later the weekly newspaper *Mercurius Politicus*, in the issue of 23-30 September, 1658, published the first dated advertisement for tea in Britain:

That Excellent, and by all Physitians approved, China Drink, called by the Chineans, *Tcha*, by other Nations Tay, alias Tee, is sold at the Sultaness-head, a Cophee-house, in Sweetings Rents by the Royal Exchange, London. ⁶

Who brought in these first supplies? It was not, as might be surmised, the East India Company. That company's first order for tea from China was not placed until seven years later in 1664, and then only for a very small amount, while its importation of tea as a branch of trade did not begin until 1678. In the interim, the pioneers in introducing tea to Britain were almost certainly a few ship's officers, who were allowed to trade privately and who may have bought small parcels at one of

the Chinese outposts, or even in Holland. Following them came the Dutch traders, who despite not delivering very large quantities, ensured that tea continued to reach British ports until such a time as the East India Company became more fully involved in the business.

To the above must also be added the Portuguese, those other pioneers in the Orient, who in a rather different but nonetheless extremely effective way also contributed to raising the popularity and social status of tea as a drink in Britain. In 1660, with the restoration of the Monarchy, Charles II occupied the throne of England. Two years later, in 1662, Catherine of Braganza travelled from Portugal to marry him, bringing with her, along with her dowry, an addiction to tea acquired in her homeland. Upon her arrival, she wasted no time in making tea-drinking a part of her life-style. The Court dutifully followed her example, and from that moment tea, whatever its ups and down elsewhere, was firmly established in English favour.

To the image of tea as a drink conferring a certain class, must be added that of tea as a medicine. Thomas Garraway, in whose coffee-house tea was first served, published a broadsheet entitled *An Exact Description of the Growth, Quality and Vertues of the Leaf TEA*,⁷ which gives a good idea of how tea stood in Britain in the 1650s. In it, among other things, he provides a long list of its medical qualities, which cover among other things, Headache, Stone, Gravel, Dropsy, Liptitude Distillations, Scurvy, Sleepiness, Loss of Memory, Looseness or Gripping of the Guts, Heavy Dreams and Collick proceeding from the Wind. Taken with Virgin's Honey instead of Sugar, Tea cleanses the Kidneys and Ureters, and with Milk and Water it prevents Consumption; if you are of corpulent body it ensures good Appetite, and if you have had a surfeit it is just the thing to give you a gentle Vomit . . .

With these twin images of classiness and good health in its favour, tea gained steadily in popularity. Yet in the early years it was not without its detractors. There were those, like the author of the letter from which the following extract is taken, who found the idea of drinking tea rather distasteful:

Letter CCCXI. Mr. Henry Saville to his uncle Secretary Coventry.
Paris. Aug. 12, 1678.

. . . These I hope are the charms that have prevailed with me to remember (that is to trouble) you oftener than I am apt to do other friends, whose buttery hatch is not so open, and who call for TEA instead of Pipes and Bottles after dinner, a base unworthy Indian practice, and which I must ever admire your most Christian family for not admitting. The truth is, all nations are grown so wicked as to have some of these filthy customs . . . '

Tea would thus take time to become fashionable, but the stage was set in the early years, particularly by the influence exerted by the court on society. The coffee houses, as the taverns before them, were a male preserve. The coffee shops in particular, because of their literary and political function, were later taken over by the clubs. Tea, on the other hand, thanks to the favour bestowed upon it by Catherine of Braganza as well as to the medicinal properties attributed to it, was championed by women of every class, whereby it succeeded in breaking out of the purely man's world and finding its way into every kind of home. There it could be drunk out of exquisite china, for the well-to-do wasted little time in making tea drinking an occasion to show off their finery, or out of the simplest of mugs, or even a dish, when nothing else was to be had. From the start it was drunk sweet, as was coffee, following the custom of sugaring wine, and in time milk was also added to lessen the stimulant effects. But the all-important element was the leaf, and every means was taken to ensure that this was not lacking. Indeed, England owes many of its best tales of smuggling to the determination of its people to acquire tea by whatever means they could, with or without the approval of the authorities.

There were those quick to take advantage of the possibilities tea offered on the market. In 1717 the first Tea Shop for Ladies was opened by Thomas Twining, in imitation of coffee shops for men. Three years later the first tea garden was opened at Vauxhall Gardens in London,

and this soon became a fashion which spread. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the numerous tea gardens which sprang up in and around London, and were quickly imitated elsewhere, served the needs of both sexes and all classes and did not exclude their children. Everyone could find something to suit their taste and pocket, and people flocked to them.

Tea does not have as long a history in Britain as it does in China or Japan. In both these countries the tea industry flourished, and in the case of Japan a philosophical and aesthetic world developed around tea drinking, long before people in Britain were even aware of its existence. Moreover, when tea finally did reach British shores, and the route traversed was a lengthy one indeed, the inhabitants of those islands had already acquired other drinking habits. Among these, the taste for coffee had caught on in such a big way as to make its replacement by any other drink appear a most unlikely possibility. Yet this is precisely what occurred. From the small beginnings outlined in this paper, tea, brought over first from China and later from India and Ceylon, went on to capture a place in the hearts and homes of British people everywhere, so that one hundred years after its introduction it had established its position as the national drink of Britain, and as such it has remained up until the present day.

References

- 1) Latham and Matthews (1970) , Vol. I, pp. lxxiv-v.
- 2) Griffiths (1967), p. 14.
- 3) Forrest (1973), p. 18.
- 4) Cooper (1965), p. 262.
- 5) Burke (1981), see pp. 11-14 and 26 for further reference.
- 6) Forrest, op. cit., p. 22.
- 7) Garraway (undated, attrib. to c. 1660. The British Museum Library).
- 8) Twining (1956), p. 8-9

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