

The English and Tea Drinking

Joseph P. Macadam

1. Introduction

The English fondness for a good cup of tea is well known. This has led Englishmen to introduce their way of taking tea, and particularly the custom of afternoon tea, to those peoples with whom they have established close links around the world. The present paper traces briefly the development of tea drinking in England, in the context of the eating and drinking habits and also of the fluctuating mealtimes through the ages.

2. Up to the Seventeenth Century

Drinks in mediaeval England consisted of ale, cider, perry, metheglin (a kind of mead, made from honey) or wine. All except the wine, which came from the monasteries, were made on the estates, and well-to-do villagers also brewed their own ale, as did tenant farmers. The owners of inns and hostelries had their special brews ; but the end of the Tudor period saw the decline of the monastery vineyards and most wine was thereafter imported. Thus beer or wine were normally drunk for breakfast, to wash down bread, herring or sprats, boiled beef or mutton. Supper was much the same.

3. The Seventeenth Century

The rise of a new class in England marked the arrival of the seventeenth century. Many had made their fortunes in such great trading ventures as the East India Company and these now spent their funds on country estates, often buying old houses from ruined nobles. One change introduced by them into these vast and rafty houses was the single-story drawing rooms and dining rooms, where the family ate in greater privacy. Breakfast, taken at

6 or 7 am, was made up of cold meats, fish, cheese, and ale or beer, with dinner, the main meal of the day, being taken around midday.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the times of dinner gradually began to change. The introduction, in mid-century, of tea, coffee, and chocolate provided for those who could afford them a new kind of social entertainment that both sexes could enjoy. A late breakfast, at about 9 or 10 am, of coffee or chocolate and rolls became fashionable ; and that meant a later dinner hour.

Tea, greatly encouraged by the support of an enthusiastic drinker in the person of none other than the Queen herself, the former Portuguese princess, Catharine of Braganza, was at first expensive and drunk in the Chinese fashion, without milk, and out of small handleless cups. It would not become a cheap drink until the eighteenth century, by which time it had virtually become the national drink.

During the seventeenth century, the man in the street still drank ale or beer, except in the West Country where cider was the thing. It was still the custom to brew beer at home in the country, though more often it was provided by the brewers. The average beer is calculated to have contained a reasonable amount of calories and even some vitamins, making it a worthwhile part of a youngster's diet at home. It was the loss of this food value that caused a furore among the nutrition-conscious when tea, drunk without milk and thus without any calories, replaced beer and ale in the daily lives of working people a century later.

Other hard drinks that made their appearance in England in the seventeenth century were Aquavita, a crude gin probably first imported from Holland, and an Irish drink called Usquebagh, later known as Whiskey. Soft drinks included coffee, imported in turn from Arabia, Jamaica, Brazil and Africa and a smash success from the start ; chocolate, brought over from Mexico and fashionable as a breakfast drink among the rich, but which remained a luxury drink as long as the price of sugar was high and never did reach the popularity of coffee and tea ; and, of course, tea.

By the early part of the eighteenth century, tea had become a very sedate, conservative element in the lives of Englishmen, especially at the domestic

level. William Cowper has left the best known tea quotation, about 'cups which cheer but not inebriate'. The lines form part of Book IV, 'The Winter Evening', in *The Task*, a long poem written in 1783 :

Now stir the fire and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round
And while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups
That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.

This poem sums up rather well what a great many Englishmen, living on those chilly rainy isles, have come to think and feel about their national drink. It also suggests the central idea of tea as an element of civility and therefore more valuable than a mere beverage, an idea that persisted well into Victorian times.

Tea, as a sociable beverage, owes much to the tea gardens mentioned earlier. The coffee houses, where the business started, eventually went into a social decline because they were a male preserve, and partly because their literary and political function was taken over by the clubs. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the tea gardens, abounding already in London and being rapidly imitated elsewhere, served the needs of both sexes and all classes, both young and old. Those near the centre -Ranelagh, Vauxhall and Marleybone in particular- attempted to attract the more fashionable sector of society, but people of more humble means could find something to suit their taste in Bermondsey, Islington, or Kilburn (Bramah (1972 : 128)). Still, few of the gardens lasted very long (it was difficult to make them pay), and by roughly 1850 the vogue was over.

4. The Eighteenth Century

The eighteenth century saw a dramatic shift in the drinking habits of Englishmen. While the sale of ale and beer was controlled, there were no restrictions on spirits, which besides were absurdely cheap. Gin shops

abounded, and large quantities of wine were imported, alongside French brandy, a favourite of the middle and upper classes, and West Indian rum. Tea, by the middle of the century, was being imported at the rate of five million pounds a year. Despite being very expensive, it was brewed throughout the land, with not a leaf being left to waste : once the gentlefolk had drunk the first brew, their servants would make tea for themselves from the used leaves, and then in turn sell the twice used leaves at the back door (Simpson (1986 : 13)). Toward the end of the century, tea had replaced both chocolate and coffee, and many of the famous coffee houses had disappeared.

The arrival of the eighteenth century also coincided with major changes in drinking habits within the home, the drink most notably affected being ale, which began to disappear from many households as the first drink of the morning. Breakfast in the country house of coffee, tea, or chocolate with rusks or cakes now came at 9 or 10 am, followed at 11 am by a glass of sherry and a biscuit. This postponed the dinner to about 2 pm early in the century. But meal times fluctuated. In time, the leisured classes came to having a light breakfast at 10 or 11 am, met their friends at a coffee house an hour later, and dined at 5 or 6 pm. This was followed by tea later in the evening. As the century progressed, dinner time got later, so that by the late eighteenth century it was generally at 6 or 7 pm. This left a long gap before dinner, and it was in order to fill this gap that the new development of afternoon tea appeared on the scene.

Tea drinking in England was restricted to the Chinese type for more than a century. But once the East India Company had lost its monopoly in tea trading (1833), the door was opened wide to other possibilities. Tea had earlier been found growing wild in India and experiments conducted in growing it, and in 1839 tea from India was, for the first time, auctioned in London. It was no cheaper than China tea, its flavour was unfamiliar, there was nothing about it to attract the public, and for a long time 'China' continued to be a synonym for tea.

Besides, for as long as the prices remained high, tea-drinking was destined to remain the preserve of the well-to-do. Successive governments had found

in this drink an ideal way of collecting additional taxes, and duties were levied which obliged even the rich to use the leaves in small quantities and in addition encouraged a flourishing smugglers' trade for which every boy in England who enjoys reading a good yarn must be forever grateful.

Finally, in 1846 Free Trade triumphed and tea duties were slashed to one quarter of their former amount. The annual consumption of tea rose from 1.22 lb per head of the population to 3.29 lb in the course of thirteen years (Palmer (1952 : 100)), and soon the little tea-caddies, miniature tea-pots and cups to match all disappeared. Tea became increasingly a means for socializing, both at home and outside, Tea houses sprang up, and with them the popular tea gardens.

5. The Nineteenth Century

To gain a better view of the circumstances in which afternoon tea first made its appearance in the country, it will help to recall another very British achievement, ushered in at the arrival of the nineteenth century, namely 'the typical English breakfast'. The leisured people of the time were content with coffee and rolls or toast for their breakfast, following the Continental custom much in vogue at the time. Some old-fashioned people stuck to the eighteenth-century meal of cold meat, cheese and beer. But the majority of Englishmen adopted the copious meal of porridge, fish, bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade that was to appear on English breakfast tables for the next hundred years.

Dinner settled at about 7 pm, adopting early in the century another foreign fashion, namely the taking of an aperitif before the meal, in imitation of the Russian or Scandinavian habit of taking a little vodka or aquavit before meals. Champagne became popular with the rich, leading the French to develop dry champagne in response to the English taste and generally resulting in the increased popularity of all carbonated drinks. The old supper disappeared, to be replaced by luncheon in the middle of the day, which began as a glass of wine and a biscuit and developed into a full meal. Late supper at 9 or 10 pm became tea or coffee with cakes or a punch or light wine.

It was in this setting that the innovative idea of taking afternoon tea in

the drawing room made its appearance. Tea parties were already in vogue at the time, bosted by the Bluestocking ladies and others, but customarily after dinner. These were rather formal affairs, that provided the hostess with an opportunity to show off her fine porcelains and silverware. From a purely practical point of view, they were open only to those with ample leisure time on their hands ; as a meal in themselves, however, coming as they did on top of dinner, they were of little importance.

As we have seen, in those days it was customary to eat a huge breakfast, lunch was of little account and dinner was at 8 pm or thereabouts. It is not surprising, therefore, that around 4 pm people should feel in their stomach a somewhat empty feeling, or, as the Duchess of Bedford described it, 'a sinking feeling' (Bramah (1972 : 129)). It was this same Duchess of Bedford who, one day in 1840, plucked up courage and asked for a tray of tea, bread and butter, and cake to be brought to her room at about that hour. The experiment must have proved satisfactory, for her afternoon tea soon became a daily routine. Once she had formed the habit, she found she could not break it, and so instead spread it among her friends, who, prone to the same sinking feeling as herself, were quick to adopt it.

As the century progressed, afternoon tea became increasingly elaborate, so that by the 1880s ladies were changing into long gowns for the occasion. Tea services also kept pace, with side plates, bread and butter plates, cake stands and every conceivable accompinament finding its way into the drawing room. China, too, took on a new look, mainly thanks to Josiah Spode who at the turn of the century had invented bone china, a form of porcelain that was both beautiful and inexpensive and easily kept the tea hot.

6. The Twentieth Century

By Edwardian times, the smart hour for afternoon tea was five o'clock or later, and what had started as a short pause for refreshment had become a full-blown social occasion, with hot dishes, footmen handing round the tea-cups, and even professional musicians. Etiquette books full of advice appeared. Conversation on such occasions was kept sweet and lightweight. In Saki's short story, "Tea," the hero imagines his intended wife with

something approaching horror :

His Mediterranean musings were interrupted by the sound of a clock striking the half-hour. Half-past four. A frown of dissatisfaction settled on his face. He would arrive at the Sebastable mansion just at the hour of afternoon tea. Joan would be seated at a low table, spread with an array of silver kettles and cream-jugs and delicate porcelain teacups, behind which her voice would tinkle pleasantly in a series of little friendly questions about weak or strong tea, how much, if any, sugar, milk, cream, and so forth. "Is it one lump? I forgot. You do take milk, don't you? Would you like some more hot water, if it's too strong?"

Cushat-Prinkly had read of such things in scores of novels, and hundreds of actual experiences had told him that they were true to life. Thousands of women, at this solemn afternoon hour, were sitting behind dainty porcelain and silver fittings, with their voices tinkling pleasantly in a cascade of solicitous little questions. Cushat-Prinkly detested the whole system of afternoon tea. (Saki (1982 : 403))

It was only a matter of time before the newly acquired custom of taking afternoon tea had spread throughout society. By the early years of this century the demand for afternoon tea 'out' reached its peak and all hotels and department stores served it. Very exclusive tea shops made their appearance, and in the fashionable hotels, which often enough had orchestras, *thé dansant* became popular among young men and debutantes (surviving until the 1939 war). Further down the social scale came the tea shops as we still know them, the places where the majority of people could go for a good cup of tea without a lot of fuss.

If afternoon tea in its heyday provided an occasion for ladies of means to show off their finery while indulging in some pleasant socializing, it also came gradually to occupy an important part in the more intimate setting of the average family life, particularly in the nursery. It created the right atmosphere for being dull and comfortable by one's own fire, while at the same time presenting mothers with the ideal solution to the needs of younger members in the family. For those just arrived back from school in the afternoon, hungry and eager to recount their day's exploits in the

classroom and on the playground, afternoon tea was the perfect homecoming. For younger children it provided a suitable meal prior to their being sent off to the nursery as the serious business of the evening set in. In many English families today, it is in this particular setting that afternoon tea continues to show itself off at its best.

One testimony of the part played by tea in a well-to-do English family in the latter half of the nineteenth century, shortly before tea-drinking reached its prime, is found in the following excerpt from a letter, quoted by Palmer (1952 : 102-103), written on 10 January 1944 by a lady who was then eighty-eight :

I know that, when I was ten, I always had nursery tea after coming home from school. I had had my dinner there. This would bring the date to 1867, and I can remember our Mother coming up to the nursery for a cup of tea very often ; so that it looks as if she did not think it was right to have it made for herself alone, or it may have been that the staff was small - much was sacrificed for the nursery department in those days in many families. I remember her breakfast at 8, bacon & eggs. I have heard her say that she had quite a light lunch brought in on a small tray. There was a hot meal at 6-7, three courses, when Father returned from the City.

As the family grew the four eldest came down to breakfast by 8 to the minute, and then lunch was laid in the dining room for 1 pm. But still I cannot recollect seeing teatrays about except when friends came or visitors were staying in the house.

Sunday was a great day. Breakfast 8.45 for the breadwinner's sake. At 1.30, hot dinner-joint, fruit tart and custard, and (best of all) dessert after. Dessert was invariable, I am sure, for Sunday. I know two old women who still cannot think it is Sunday without the table being cleared and finger-bowls put on, with apples, nuts or oranges according to season. Poor dears, they have to forgo them now! Then came afternoon tea in the dining-room at 4.30 and cold supper at 8. This ended Sunday.

The invitations to dinner parties were not later than 7.30, and very often 7. The old maid who now looks after me went out to service when she was twelve years of age. Her recollections are a good breakfast at 8, High Tea with fish or meat at 5, and cake and cocoa at 9. This was only 54 years ago, but in a country house. She asked me if I had ever heard of Donkey Tea. Tea was so expensive that her father's mother made it for her children to drink - toasted bread out in a Jug and boiling water poured on it, then left for some time before straining off.

7. Conclusion

Afternoon tea has suffered something of a decline since the Second World War. Life has speeded up so that it is no longer easy to pause at four for tea. More women now go out to work, which means that they are no longer at home in the afternoon drinking tea. Working hours for men have tended to become shorter, so that they come home for an evening meal and tea with the family. Children coming home from their school for tea drink less tea with it, mostly due to the increasing popularity of soft drinks and milk. Most people, too, are today accustomed to an adequate meal in the middle of the day and another fairly early in the evening, so that they do not feel, as did the Duchess of Bedford, any sort of sinking feeling around 4 pm. Added to this is the growing popularity of coffee, particularly among younger people.

But while afternoon tea may no longer occupy the place it once did in Britain, it still remains a useful meal for entertaining one's friends with the minimum of effort. Children still love it, and it continues to be one of the accepted ways of breaking the ice with new acquaintances on the way, perhaps, to a deeper friendship. Tea itself is a comforting and familiar drink for the British. Its popularity may rise and fall with the changing fashions, but it is hard to imagine a British home without it.

References

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