

COFFEE CULTURE BEGAN IN BRITAIN

An article in the last edition of The Owl highlighted the growth of the American-style coffee culture in our society. Miranda Kaufmann explains that, actually, it all started in 17th century England, and details its fascinating history

The website WeLoveTheIraqiInformationMinister.com is currently selling coffee mugs with the slogan: “No American will ever pour coffee in this mug. Never!” Interviewed by the BBC, the website’s founder added: “And for our British customers, we hope to have ‘No British man will ever pour tea in this mug. Never!’ tea mugs available soon!”

It is often forgotten that, although by the mid-20th century Englishmen were consuming about 5 times as many pounds of tea as coffee while Americans were consuming about 25 times as many pounds of coffee as tea, the English were really the world’s first coffee nation. Indeed, Macaulay in his *History of England* wrote that “Foreigners remarked that the coffee-house was that which especially distinguished London from all other cities...that the coffee-house was the Londoner’s home, and that those who wished to find a gentleman commonly asked not whether he lived in Fleet Street or Chancery Lane, but whether he frequented the Grecian or the Rainbow.”

The very first coffee house in England opened in Oxford in 1650. Shortly afterward, in 1652, London’s first coffee house opened in St Michael’s Alley, Cornhill. The new drink soon became extremely popular, and by 1663 there were 82 coffee houses in London. By 1739 the number had risen to 551.

But these first coffee houses bore little resemblance to the uniform, sanitised, Mochaccino-selling establishments that now crowd our high-streets. Ned Ward described one in the *London Spy* journal, c.1700:

“Come with me, said my friend, and I will show you my favourite coffee house. Since you are a stranger in the town it will amuse you . . . As he was speaking, he reached the door of the coffee-house in question. The entry was dark, so that we were hard put to it not to stumble. Mounting a few steps, we made our way into a big room, which was equipped in an old-fashioned way. There was a rabble going hither and thither, reminding me of a swarm of rats in a ruinous cheese-store. Some came, others went; some were scribbling, others were talking; some were drinking (coffee), some smoking, and some arguing; the whole place stank of tobacco like the cabin of a barge. On the corner of a long table, close by the armchair, was lying a Bible . . . Besides it were earthenware pitchers, long clay pipes, a little fire on the hearth, and over it the large coffee-pot. Beneath a small book-shelf, on which were bottles, cups, and an advertisement for a

beautifier to improve the complexion, was hanging a parliamentary ordinance against drinking and the use of bad language. . . . When I had sat there for a while, and taken in my surroundings, I myself felt inclined for a cup of coffee”

Ward would have had a wider choice of reading material than of beverage, as the coffee was all brewed in the same “large coffee pot”. *Archdale Palmer’s Recipe Book* (1659-72) outlines the following method for preparing coffee:

“Macaulay wrote that the coffee-house was a feature which especially distinguished London from other cities”

“Take a gallon of faire water & boyle it until halfe be waster, and then take of that water one pint, and make it boyle, & then put in one spoonful of the powder of coffee, and let it boyle one quarter of an hour, stiring of it two or three times, for fear of it running over, and drink it as hot as you can, every morning, and fast an hour or two after it”

As coffee was served in dishes, held in the palm of the hand, consuming it seems likely to have been a scalding experience, not alleviated by the taste of coffee that had been boiled for 15 minutes! *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1967) warns: “Coffee should never be boiled. When coffee is boiled, an undesirable flavour change takes place.”

But perhaps, then, coffee was consumed for its vaunted medicinal benefits, taste being a secondary requirement? Pasqua Rosée, the proprietor of London’s first coffee house proclaimed in a handbill that coffee “quickens the spirits, and makes the heart lightsome...is good against sore eyes...excellent to prevent and cure the dropsy, gout and scurvy... neither laxative nor restraining”(1652). Ned Ward scoffs at such claims:

“Women grew suspicious, and claimed that coffee had detrimental physical effects”

“The walls were decorated with gilt frames, much as a smithy is decorated with horseshoes. In the frames were rarities; phials of yellowish elixir, favourite pills and hair tonics, packets of snuff, tooth-powder made of coffee-grounds, caramels and cough lozenges, all vaunted as infallible. These medicaments were supposed to be panaceas. Had not my friend told me that he had brought me to a coffee-house, I would have regarded the place as the big booth of a cheap-jack.”

Women did not frequent 18th century coffee houses, and so grew suspicious of them, and actually claimed that coffee had very detrimental physical effects:

“. . . we find of late a very sensible Decay of that true old English Vigor; our Gallants being every way so Frenchified, that they are become mere Cock-sparrows. . . . but

are not able to stand to it, and in the very first charge fall down flat before us. . . . The Occasion of which Insufferable Disaster. . . we can Attribute to nothing more than the Excessive use of that Newfangled Abominable, Heathenish Liquor called Coffee.” (*The Woman’s Petition Against Coffee*)

Men defended coffee drinking against this attack thus:

“But why must innocent Coffee be the object of your spleen? That harmless and healing Liquor. . . and we wonder you should take these exceptions, since so many of the little Houses, with the Turkish Woman straddling on their signs are but Emblems of what is to be done within for your Conveniences. . . . Coffee collects and settles the Spirits, makes the erection more Vigorous, and the Ejaculation more full, adds spiritualescency to the Sperme. . suitable to the Gusto of the womb, and proportionate to the ardours and expectations too of the female Paramour.” (*The Men’s Answer*)

Such claims for a hot drink may sound ridiculous to modern ears, but we must remember that coffee is still far from “innocent”, and an invitation to join someone of the opposite sex for coffee is still regarded as a come-on. Furthermore, the Starbucks mermaid logo bears much resemblance to the sultanness figures, or “turkish women” that were often found on coffee house signs. In the 18th century, coffee had exotic connotations with the East, whence it came (it was originally imported from Yemen, southern Arabia): “happy Arabia, nature’s spicery, prodigally furnishes the voluptuous world with all kinds of aromatics, and divers other rarities. . .” (*Coffee Houses Vindicated*, 1675). The part of the world which produced harems was associated with lasciviousness.

Modern retailers still sell their coffee with the draw of the exotic. Elaborate Italianate names for all the different combinations of bean, blend and cream have replaced the Turkish flavour of the first coffee shops. Nevertheless, the consumer still needs to be persuaded to consume. Then as now, sex sold, quite literally in some cases: the Rose, Hummum’s and the Shakespeare’s Head in the Russell St/ Covent Garden area were all brothels - those “sordid holes that assume that name [of coffee house] to cloak the practice of debauchery” that the author of *Coffee Houses Vindicated* (1675) disdained to advocate.

As the number of coffee houses swiftly multiplied, proprietors, now in direct competition, thought up gimmicks to attract men to their house and no one else’s. Mr Lloyd displayed a list of ships due to sail, with cargoes on his premises in Lombard St.. Underwriters found it convenient to meet there to arrange insurance. From this practice Lloyds of London was founded. Similarly, Jonathan’s, in Exchange Alley, produced the modern Stock Exchange. William Shipley held the first meeting of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce (the R.S.A) at Rawthmell’s Coffee House in Covent Garden in 1754.

Each coffee house attracted its own particular clientele. Lawyers flocked to Alice’s and Hell’s in Westminster, Booksellers to the Chapter, Paternoster Row, Artists to Old Slaughter’s, St Martin’s Lane. Even the political parties had their favourite haunts: the Tories were to be found in the Cocoa Tree, Whigs at Arthur’s, or St James’. These places were so partisan that the cousin of Sir John Pakington, Tory MP thought himself lucky to “come off with a whole skin” when he rashly “stepped into a Whig coffee house” on the eve of a General Election.

The current trend for bookshops to house a coffee franchise, such as the Coffee Republic in Blackwell’s and Waterstones is but a faint echo of the 18th century relationship between Coffee and Literature. The Scribblers, a literary group including Lord Oxford, John Gay (author of *The Beggar’s Opera*), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver’s Travels*), and Alexander Pope (*The Rape of the Lock*), while the poet John Dryden held court at Will’s, Covent Garden, whose patrons debated such questions as whether Milton’s *Paradise Lost* ought to have been written in verse.

“Men defended coffee by claiming that it ‘collects and settles the spirits, makes the erection more Vigorous, and the Ejaculation more full..’”

The Coffee Shops were also centres for gossip and news - and some even published their own newspapers: “he that comes often, saves two pence a week in Gazettes, and has his news and his coffee for the same charge” (*The Character of A Coffee house*, 1673)

“You that delight in Wit and Mirth, and long to hear such News,

As comes from all parts of the Earth, Dutch, Danes, and Turks and Jews,

I’ll send you a Rendezvous, where it is smoaking new:
Go hear it at a Coffee-house, - it cannot but be true . . .

You shall know, there, what Fashions are; How Perry-wiggs are curl’d;

And for a Penny you shall heare all Novells in the world;
Both Old and Young, and Great and Small, and Rich and Poore you’ll see:

Therefore let ‘s to the Coffee all, Come all away with me.”

(*News from the Coffee-House*, 1667, Thomas Jordan)

The Government feared that Coffee Houses were a focus for unrest. On December 29th 1675 Charles II issued a proclamation that all coffee houses must close permanently by January 10th 1676, as they were the “resort of idle and disaffected persons. . . places where the disaffected met, and spread scandalous reports concerning the conduct of His Majesty and his Ministers.” Whether or not this was the case, they were by this time so popular

that the King was forced to reverse this decision two days before it was to be implemented, due to a public outcry.

Though they avoided closure, the coffee houses were still regulated. Ned Ward refers to a “parliamentary ordinance against drinking and the use of bad language” hanging on the wall of the coffee house he visited. In *The Rules and Orders of the Coffee House*, a 12 pence fine was levied for swearing, and a man who began a quarrel “shall give each man a dish t’atone the sin”. “Maudlin lovers” were forbidden “here in Corners to mourn”, and men should neither “profane Scripture, nor saucily wrong affairs of state with an irreverent tongue”.

Tea was first sold at Garway’s Coffee House in 1657. By the 19th century coffee’s popularity was eclipsed by this “excellent and by all Physicians approved China drink”. This was partly to do with the influence of the East India Company, who had a monopoly on the import of Tea, and partly to do with the wishes of women who preferred

to frequent the fashionable Tea Gardens at Ranelegh and Vauxhall. The smarter coffee houses became exclusive clubs, the others declined into brothels and/or taverns.

At the height of their popularity, 18th century coffee houses were diverse and colourful establishments, open to all who could afford the penny entrance fee. The “well regulated coffee house” was “the sanctuary of health, the nursery of temperance, the delight of frugality, an academy of civility, and free school of ingenuity.”(*Coffee Houses Vindicated*, 1675).

The history of the coffee house in England only emphasises how homogenous and dull our coffee culture, imported from America or otherwise, has become. It would not, perhaps be advisable to advocate that we frequent coffee houses as some did in the 18th century, “in their Night- Gowns to saunter away their Time” (Spectator 49, Steele). Nonetheless, Starbucks and the rest could do worse than to import some character and variety from 300 years ago.



AGRICULTURE: ONE GIANT LEAP FOR MANKIND?

Abigail Laing denies that the step from hunter-gatherer to agricultural society was a result of the inherent superiority of the latter

Humans have blossomed from grunting, ape-like creatures into the most sophisticated and powerful species on earth. It’s no wonder that human history is often viewed as one big ascent to supremacy, with better and better innovations allowing us to shape our environment, dominate other species and improve our lives. This progressivist view, however, can be a deceptive one. For substantial evidence indicates that one of our ‘great leaps forward’ may not have been such a good idea after all...

Around ten thousand years ago, our ancestors abandoned the most successful and long-lasting mode of survival known to man, hunter-gatherer subsistence, in favour of the one which now feeds almost all of us: agriculture. Before this transition, people lived in small nomadic groups, collecting wild plants and hunting wild animals. After it, they led a sedentary lifestyle, sustaining their dense populations with domesticated crops and farm animals.

A variety of evidence suggests that early agriculturists were in fact worse-off than hunter-gatherers. The hunter-gatherer diet provided a better balance of nutrients than the high carbohydrate crops of agriculture, with half the fat and three times the protein. Skeletons found in Greece and Turkey show that the average height of hunter-gatherers towards the end of the ice age was a healthy 5’9” for

men and 5’5” for women. These bodies resembled those of today’s finest athletes; the physical exertions of obtaining food made hunter-gatherers lean and muscular.

Remains of early agriculturists show shorter stature and more signs of malnutrition, reflecting the fact that along with the growth of crops comes the risk of crop failure. A three-fold rise in bone lesions also indicates that infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and leprosy were much more common in agriculturists than in their hunter-gatherer predecessors. Indeed, the densely packed populations of an agricultural society provide just the right conditions for the spread of parasites and diseases.

“Remains of early agriculturists show shorter stature and more signs of malnutrition”

The idea that agriculture gave our ancestors more free time has been challenged by studies of the few surviving hunter-gatherer societies. Modern Kalahari bushmen devote less than three hours a day to obtaining food, despite their harsh desert environment. Agriculture may also be responsible for the creation of deep social class divisions. In a society where everyone lives off the food obtained each day, there can be no stored surpluses and, therefore, no non-producing elite sponging off the spoils of the lower classes.

All this leads us to a big question: if the hunter-gatherer lifestyle was superior in so many ways, why did agriculture take over? Bearing in mind that the transition was not neces-