

THE RISE AND FALL OF ENGLISH COFFEE HOUSES

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COFFEE shops are now springing up all over Britain. This is not the first time that coffee houses have been so popular. The seventeenth-century coffee house contributed to England's rise to global greatness.

The first documented mention of coffee comes in the 10th century, from an Arabian doctor Rhazes. Its original purpose was medicinal. Ethiopia was the centre for the spread of coffee throughout Arabia and Africa. It was in the Yemen where the practice of roasting beans began in about 1200. The Muslims spread the custom of coffee throughout the Islamic world. The world's first coffee shop was opened in 1475 at Constantinople (present-day Istanbul).

The first English coffee house was opened in 1652 by a Greek Orthodox servant from western Turkey, Pasqua Rosee, in the City of London, already England's financial capital. He worked for a Turkish merchant named Edwards. His coffee house was sponsored by merchants from the Levant Company, the trading house that organized trade with the Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey). Levant Company officials had become accustomed to drinking coffee – the coffee bean was called the 'Mahometan berry' – during their extended trips across the Ottoman Empire and wished to have coffee when back in London.

The idea soon caught on. By 1708, the square mile of the City of London and the Borough of Westminster (the centre of England's political power) soon had 500 or 600 such coffee shops. In London overall, there were well over 2,000 coffee houses, or one for every 300 inhabitants (probably more than there are now). Coffee shops were also springing up in the provincial cities. Coffee shops both reflected the specific character of their locality and reinforced it: such as business, the church, politics or the arts.

There were many reasons for their popularity. Coffee was seen as a healthy drink. It stimulated the brain's creativity and gave people energy. It was also a healthier and cheaper alternative to the alcohol (such as gin) that dominated much of England's life and contributed to so many social problems (such as drunken mothers rolling over in their sleep and suffocating their babies).

Coffee houses were very sociable places. Foreign visitors to London said that the coffee houses were the most agreeable feature in London. All men were made welcome (women tended not to be customers). The coffee houses did not have the noise and occasional drunken violence of the inns. Coffee houses were a reflection of the emerging middle class, with its emphasis on discussion, exploration of ideas, sobriety and refined sociability. Continued coffee consumption in one session (it was argued) led to a sharper mind and keener discussion, while in the inn, continued alcoholic consumption only led to a greater risk of violence. Coffee kept consumers awake, while alcohol made them drowsy. There was little risk of a 'hangover' with coffee. At a time when the purity of cold water was suspect, the water had to be heated (and so made safer) for the preparation of coffee.

The coffee shops were often run by a 'coffee woman', such as a widow. She took care of the management and made sure that the place was a pleasant place to meet. The coffee shop opposite the Houses of Parliament was called 'Alice's' after the proprietor. Women were also on the serving staff and so the coffee houses were not exclusively male preserves.

Coffee houses were a good place for men to conduct their business. Travel across London was difficult and occasionally dangerous because of the risk of robbery. Therefore people could carry out their negotiations and finalize deals in the relaxed and neutral environment of the coffee shop rather than risk a hazardous journey across town to meet. A businessman would advise his clients at which coffee house he could be found on a regular basis.

There was no pressure to buy additional cups of coffee. A person could buy one cup of coffee and make it last all day. The shop was a warm place on a cold day. It was a comfortable place to smoke a pipe, either alone or with company. There was none of the enforced bonhomie of the inn if a person wished simply to sit alone, drink coffee and ruminate on the state of the world.

The coffee houses were sometimes called 'penny universities' because for the price of a penny a person could buy a cup of coffee and participate in discussions on a variety of topics. A person could mix with all sorts of people in these popular meeting places. There was no limit on what topics could be discussed and so the coffee houses played a useful role in developing England's greater political freedom.

Indeed, there were too many ideas in circulation for the government's taste. In 1675, King Charles II issued a 'Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee Houses' to reduce the free flow of ideas. Coffee house patrons from all ends of the political spectrum rebelled and eleven days later the coffee houses were reopened and their numbers continued to increase. (The 1773 Boston Tea Party – that helped trigger the American War of Independence – was planned in the Green Dragon coffee house in Boston).

The Whigs and Tories each had their own favourite coffee houses. They were locations for politicking and intrigue. Religious intrigue was conducted at the coffee houses near cathedrals, such as the St Paul's coffee house.

In the days of unorganized mail delivery, the coffee houses worked in conjunction with the Post Office to convey letters and newspapers. Patrons would collect their mailed items from the coffee houses. They were also the place to which 'runners' would convey news of the major events of the day, such as political upheavals and military battles. The coffee houses were the news outlets of their day.

One of the world's most famous coffee houses was opened by Edward Lloyd in the City of London. This became a meeting place for merchants, ship owners, ship captains, insurance brokers and others involved in overseas trade. Because so many of his customers came to hear the latest business news, Lloyd began publishing the news in his own newsletter. Soon he was making more money from the newsletter than from the coffee. Insurance brokers in particular found his

services so useful that they began meeting their clients at his coffee shop, and they rented booths in his shop to conduct their business. Even after Lloyds's death in 1713, insurance brokers continued to meet at the coffee house. By 1774, Lloyd's had become a corporation owned by brokers and it is now one of the world's most famous insurance companies: Lloyds of London.

But the coffee houses also had their critics. The earliest critics were Christian authorities who saw them as an Islamic plot to somehow poison the Christian world. Priests were worried that consumers were made happy by the drink, and priests preferred people to be serious. Pope Clement VIII in the sixteenth century eventually lifted the ban after drinking a cup of coffee to judge for himself. He loved it and blessed it on the spot.

Because all the coffee had to be imported from the Ottoman Empire, there were fears that coffee would undermine the sale of English ale, which would mean a lowering of demand for English grain (the chief ingredient of ale and beer). There were also complaints that people were spending too much time drinking coffee and talking – and not enough time back in their places of work actually working. Wives complained that their husbands wasted too much time in coffee houses.

The era of English coffee houses started to decline by around 1780 and many had gone by 1830. England had begun its industrial revolution – some of the thinking behind it had been discussed in the coffee houses – and so the increased wealth meant another change in social patterns. Some of the coffee houses became elite clubs for the wealthy few. The most elite of the clubs – The Athenaeum, on Pall Mall – was established in 1824. A person could only enter the premises by becoming a formal member of the club. Meanwhile the growing working class preferred beer and gin and so went to the public houses.

The additional services provided by coffee houses were now being provided by specialist service providers. The postal system began delivering direct to homes; newspapers were being produced on a regular basis; and insurance companies were wealthy enough to build their own offices.

Most importantly, perhaps, the English had fallen in love with tea. The English East India Company imported both coffee and tea and it decided that it could make more money out of the sale of tea. English people could make their own tea at home. They did not need coffee houses. More to the point they could be encouraged to drink far more of it than coffee.

The widespread consumption of tea was accompanied by far less controversy than the introduction of coffee houses. Perhaps this was due to the way that tea was consumed at home, with the family, rather than in a setting at which male conspirators might get together to plot. Wives were pleased to be able to keep an eye on their husbands at home. Tea also has a less enervating effect on the heart and brain than coffee and so pacified people for sleep rather than kept them awake and debating. In 1717 the first tea shop was opened by Twinings to cater for ladies of fashion. It allowed women to mix shopping and socializing.

Although English coffee houses did not entirely die out, by the end of the nineteenth century, the distinctive coffee house culture as a popular English culture icon had gone. (Ironically, they continued to flourish on the Continent). A few were retained in the nineteenth century in the more 'artistic' locations in cities as a meeting place for the cultural elite. The temperance movement (such as the Salvation Army) opened a few coffee houses to provide alcohol-free meeting places.

Another revival took place in the 1950s when they became a meeting place for young people. The economic and social recovery from the war meant that young people were gradually getting a higher level of disposable income. They wanted their own 'space' away from their parents for socializing. They could afford to congregate at coffee shops. The coffee shops sold espresso coffee and played pop music from juke boxes. They also became a news outlet and discussion point for all the emerging music and clothing trends of young people. Additionally, the anti-war movement of the 1950s and 1960s, spearheaded by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), was partly conceived in coffee houses.

Thus, the current surge of coffee houses, which some denounce as an American idea of the 1990s, has a long history. The high point of the English coffee house was from 1652 to 1780. Coffee houses contributed to the transformation of England into a superpower because of the Industrial Revolution. Some of the regular coffee house patrons included the fathers of the Industrial Revolution, such as Joseph Priestley, Richard Kerwin, William Nicholson and James Watt. It will be interesting to see what revolutions flow from the current global surge of coffee houses. Some historians of the information technology revolution are already claiming that caffeine helped fuel the computer revolution.

If any of those seventeenth or eighteenth-century English customers were to come back to life, they would certainly notice a few changes. Women are often the majority of customers. Tobacco smoking is now banned. But hopefully the quality of sociability, comfort and the friendly exchange of ideas all remain. Additionally, the modern mobile workforce of white collar workers – like their seventeenth and eighteenth-century forebears – treat the coffee house as a place of work, with cellular telephones, personal organizers and laptop computers.

Coffee is the only addictive psycho-active substance that has overcome all resistance to its consumption. In many countries, alcohol, tobacco and narcotics are increasingly banned completely or at least highly regulated. Coffee has escaped that limitation. It may also be served to children (which all those other substances cannot be).

Coffee is a major global commodity. More than 400 billion cups are consumed each year. It is the world's second most traded commodity (after oil). But whereas some technologists are now speculating about the end of the petrol era and the onset of the hydrogen era (or other energy sources), no one is predicting the end of the coffee era.

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