Tea culture in Britain, 1660-1800

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Summary
The introduction and widespread adoption of tea revolutionised the diet, drinking habits, manners and etiquette, and ceramic production of 18th century Britain.

At the start of the century tea was hugely expensive, heavily taxed and confined to the wealthy, who generally drank it without milk and saw it as one of the marks of gentility. By the end of the century, after import duties were radically reduced, tea (now milky and heavily sweetened) had replaced beer as the staple drink of the poor.

The foundations of both the internationally important pottery industry of Staffordshire and the British porcelain trade were laid in response to this demand, and the service of tea in fine pottery or porcelain became one of the key rituals of 18th century social life. This British 'tea ceremony' was instrumental in spreading the values of politeness and gentility throughout the land.

Keywords
Importation, consumption, service, utensils, additives

Introduction
Tea-drinking became fashionable in London around 1660. During the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the British developed a tea ceremony, and many of the customs introduced then survive today. During the 18th century tea replaced beer and ale as the national drink of the British. Britain's passion for tea is in stark contrast to practice elsewhere in Europe: tea is drunk in France and the Netherlands, but less so than in Britain, and elsewhere coffee became much more popular than tea.

Tea was drunk and described by European travellers to the East during the 16th and early 17th centuries. Many early documents praise tea for its medicinal qualities; and it was as an exotic and very expensive medical infusion that tea was first drunk in Britain; soon after it became popular as a thirst quenching drink that was enjoyed socially. It has long been believed that was the result of Catherine of Braganza's passion for tea. Catherine, who married King Charles II in 1662, was from Portugal, a country that had long controlled trade routes between Europe and the East. According to this tradition, on first arriving in England Catherine called for a drink of tea, but could only be offered beer. If true, this event marks the start of tea's gradual replacement of beer and ale as the nation's beverage of choice.

The British Tea Ceremony and its utensils

The British East India company, which held the monopoly of British trade with the East, did not import tea on a commercial scale until 1678, after which it was shipped in ever increasing quantities. At this time tea was a very costly luxury: a pound of tea (approximately 0.45 kilogram) usually cost more than a skilled craftsman might earn in a week. Tea therefore became something to show off; and so began the British tea ceremony, which allowed a host to display his wealth, command of etiquette and worldly know-how, at the same time as extending hospitality to guests.

During the 18th century, tea was usually prepared by the lady of the house. Women also drank tea after dinner, while men continued to drink alcohol. Tea was served in doors, or in tea gardens, and men also drank it in coffee-houses. The utensils required for the domestic service of tea were many and expensive. At the very least, a silver teapot, teakettle and canisters, together with porcelain tea-bowls or cups, were required; and many tea equipages included a milk jug, a hot-water pot or urn, a slop basin, a sugar bowl and tongs, a tray, teaspoons, plates and other items. Canisters were often fitted with a lock to prevent servants stealing their contents, and the kettle was usually made of silver, as it was used in front of guests. Only after about 1800-20 -- by which date tea had slipped down the social scale -- were the kettle and canisters confined to the kitchen, where tea was now generally prepared. For much of the 18th century handleless tea-bowls of the type imported from China were preferred to handled-cups. Satires occasionally show tea being drunk from the saucer, but this was not done in polite company. Guests indicated that they had drunk enough by turning the cup over or placing a teaspoon in the bowl. Until this was done it was considered bad manners to refuse more tea when offered.

Until the 1740s, almost all porcelain used in Britain was imported from China. Few of the newly established mid-18th century English porcelain factories were commercially successful. But Britain's passion for tea prompted a complete reorganisation of the Staffordshire Potteries, leading eventually to this region's emergence as a major international production centre for ceramics.

Paintings show that tea-bowls could be held in a number of ways, all of which were difficult to maintain, and it is clear that being able to hold a tea-bowl with elegance and ease was an important social distinction. There are quite a number of paintings of families drinking tea, and it is indicative of the importance of tea in the lives of the wealthy that they chose to be commemorated in this way.

One of the reasons why tea came to play such a major role in British social life was that, unlike food, it could be offered to anyone at anytime without breaking the rules of decorum. Its service provided a focal point for social activities, enabling people of differing rank to meet and converse, and helped spread the values of 'polite' values of refinement, sociability and gentility up and down the country.

Green and black teas, milk, sugar and alcohol

Both green and black teas were drunk in 17th and 18th century Britain, the black varieties being much cheaper. Until the 1840s, when tea plants were first successfully cultivated in India, all Britain's tea came from China. The most popular black tea was bohea, but varieties of pekoe, souchong and congou were also imported. Green teas included imperial hyson, gunpowder, and singlo or twankay. Europeans felt that green teas had a more subtle flavour than black, but that black teas tasted better with milk. This was added to tea counteract tea's bitter taste, much as with coffee and chocolate, and it may have been from these drinks that the habit of adding milk spread to tea. Although used as early as the 1660s, milk was probably not commonly drunk with tea in Britain before the 1720s. It was about this date that black teas overtook green varieties in popularity, and the two developments were no doubt connected. By the mid-18th century strong black teas were being imported in far greater quantities than green. It was not until the 1830s that merchants began creating flavoured blends such as Earl Grey, which is still enormously popular today.

Sugar was also often added to tea from its earliest use in England. The earliest viable process for refining sugar dates from the 1650s, thus paving the way for the West's adoption of tea, coffee and chocolate, all of which were considered bitter in taste. Britain's sugar came from cane plantations in the West Indies, which lead many to boycott sugar in protest against the slave trade during the years around 1800. Spirits such as rum and brandy and cordials (alcoholic drinks made from fruit) were often served with tea. This may seem strange, although it is perhaps no odder than drinking brandy with after-dinner coffee, as often done in the West today.

Importation, taxation and adulteration

Early in the 18th century tea could be enormously expensive, although it fell in price as imports increased. Figures increased steadily: £14,000 worth was imported in 1700; £179,000 in 1730; £969,000 in 1760; and £1,777,000 in 1790. By the second half of the century tea had come to form the single largest component in value of European trade with China. As early as 1698 the British government who introduced a specific tax on dry tea. Urged on by breweries, this was increased every few years. Eventually the duty stood at nearly 100% the cost of the tea when sold at auction. The celebrated Boston Tea Party of 1773, when three shiploads of tea were dumped into Boston harbour, was triggered by the British government's attempts to impose its high duties on the tea re-exported to its American colonies.

Given these high import duties, it is hardly surprising that smuggling was rife: indeed, it has been estimated that nearly half the tea drunk in Britain was smuggled in. High prices also encouraged adulteration by unscrupulous merchants. Some cheap black teas offered for sale were actually made from used or mouldy tea leaves; others were made from leaves

from the sloe tree stained brown with liquorice, or, worse still, from hawthorn or ash tree leaves boiled in sheep' dung. Some green teas contained elder buds and others were dyed with copper verdigris.

The widening market for tea

Despite high prices, by the middle of the 18th century the market for tea was widening, and tea drinking was no longer confined to the rich. Servants, for example, often expected an allowance of tea. The spread of the habit to the lower ranks was widely criticised at that time, and for three separate reasons: firstly because of the expense, as it took funds away from more pressing needs; secondly, many felt that it was inappropriate for the lower ranks to be adopting the privileges of their masters; and thirdly, because many were drinking it in preference to beer or ale, which were an important source of nutrition for the poor.

Tea was certainly seen as one of the privileges of the idle and wealthy. For the lexicographer Samuel Johnson tea was not a proper drink for the lower classes. Rather, its 'proper use' was 'to amuse the idle, and relax the studious, and dilute the full meals of those who cannot use exercise, and will not use abstinence'. In 1743 another critic complained that tea had become 'so common, that the meanest families, even of labouring people ... make their morning's meal of it, and thereby wholly disuse the ale, which heretofore was their accustomed drink.' From today's perspective it is strange to find that moralists might condemn tea drinking as improper behaviour for the lower orders and champion alcoholic beverages instead.

Matters came to a crisis in the 1780s, when a series of bad harvests pushed the price of beer and ale beyond the reach of the poor, leading to the Commutation Act of 1784. This reduced the import duties from around 100% to a mere 12%. Prices immediately fell dramatically, and within a decade imports had quadrupled. Writing in the year of the Act, a French visitor noted 'The drinking of tea is general throughout England ... even the humblest peasant will take his tea twice a day.' By the end of the century vast quantities of tea were being drunk by rich and poor alike.

During early and middle of the 18th century, wealthy Britons often started dinner, the main meal of the day, around 2:00. By the end of the century, with improvements in artificial lighting, dinner was often eaten much later. In order to bridge the growing gap between breakfast and dinner, a small and light meal of bread and butter or toast, or biscuits or cakes, was sometimes served with mid-afternoon tea. However, by this date the combination of bread and tea was also a staple meal of the poor. If they were lucky this might be accompanied with a little bacon or cheese, but very often the tea and bread went unaccompanied. The British institution of afternoon 'high tea' – a meal in its own right, in which ham-, cheese- or egg-sandwiches are served together with tea and biscuits and cake – seems to derive from both dining practices. This was firmly established by 1840, and the tradition survives today.