Coffee houses and correspondence Rosemary Bennett

ACCORDING to legend, a weary 9th century goat-herd named Khalid saw that his charges became frisky after eating coffee berries. He tried some himself and, much refreshed, took his discovery to the nearby monastery. The abbot, fearing the effect might be sinful, threw the berries on a fire, releasing a delicious aroma. Changing his mind, he retrieved the berries and put them into water. Drinking this liquid, his monks thought it a miracle which would keep them alert during prayers. Soon, the fame of the new drink began to spread.

Running a business in London in the middle of the 17th century was far more difficult than today. Not only were the telephone, calculator and computers yet to be invented, but there was no national postal delivery service to private and business addresses. But things were about to change, thanks to a drink which was just becoming popular – coffee.

The first coffee house It was about the year 1600 when coffee reached Europe, and 1650 when the first English coffee house opened in Oxford. Even though the country was recovering from the Civil War, this was so popular that another was opened in London in 1652. The proprietor was Pasqua Rosee, a native of Turkey, where the drink had long been popular. Pasqua's master, a London merchant, liked this new drink so much that he allowed the young man to set up in business in St Michael's Alley, Cornhill.

The popularity of coffee quickly swept the capital, and many more coffee houses were opened, some of which also became receiving houses. Even those which were not could be used as mailing addresses, so it was not long before local businessmen realized that this was an ideal place to collect and read their mail, much better than the hustle and bustle of an inn or other commercial establishment. Also, when visiting an inn, there was the temptation to consume alcohol, which dulled the senses, but this new drink actually perked one up, making it easier to return to work afterwards. As an added advantage, they could use their favourite coffee house as an informal office, where their local clients could find them at certain regular hours. Besides all this, coffee houses kept a supply of news-sheets (the forerunners of newspapers) which could be read while enjoying a coffee, and displayed notices of forthcoming sales, auctions, and the movement of shipping.

Soon a 'coffee house culture' had developed, with strict rules of conduct. Admission was only one penny, so a wide variety of people could afford entrance. Inside, all men (the clientele were all male) were considered equal, and no-one was expected to give up his place to a more important man. Swearing was punished by the offender having to buy a round of coffee for all the company, and in many establishments gambling was banned.

News and gossip Journalism was in its infancy, but enterprising reporters soon realized that coffee houses were ideal places to pick up news and gossip. Businessmen, in their turn, availed themselves of the chance to find out all sorts of information from reporters, so it was mutually beneficial.

on the history of a popular partnership

Some London coffee houses remained open in the Great Fire of 1666. (St Helena SG 214).

But it was not only businessmen who used the coffee houses. Samuel Pepys was a regular at these new establishments, and makes frequent mention of them in his diaries. For example, on 25 February 1662 he went with a Mr Moore to a coffee house (probably Wills), where the talk was of a terrible wind which had swept the south of England a week before. This had caused many deaths in London and elsewhere, and by the 25th they had received letters from the Forest of Dean telling them that thousands of oaks and beeches had been blown down there, and Samuel's father had written to say that twenty trees had been lost at Bampton. Even during the Plague in 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666, some coffee houses managed to stay open, although clients took sensible precautions against infection, such as being wary of approaching strangers.

The popularity of coffee houses continued to increase so that, by the year 1700, it is estimated that there were over 500 of them in London. But besides being useful 'offices' for businessmen and convenient meeting places, coffee houses appealed to people from many occupations and interests, and soon some establishments developed a specialized clientele. Those situated in Westminster attracted politicians, those near St Paul's Cathedral were frequented by clergymen, and those near the law courts by lawyers.

Colonial mail As overseas mail increased, some coffee houses became associated with mail from, or to, the colonies. Letters from Jamaica for instance were taken by the captains of incoming ships to the Jamaican Coffee House in St Michael's Alley, Cornhill, where West Indian merchants gathered and captains could bargain for the transport of cargo. While there, they would collect mail sacks for the return journey. In the early 18th century, the likelihood of a letter reaching its destination was slight, owing to pirates, storms and other perils, so people often sent several copies; many bore a handstamp noting its point of origin, and 'WGP' (which God preserve). ▶
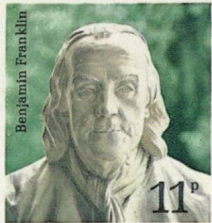
A contemporary illustration of a meeting taking place in a 17th century London coffee house.

The Bicentennial
of American
Independence
1776-1976

Benjamin Franklin

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This page: Benjamin Franklin (American Independence set, 1976); a scene at Jonathan's Coffee House in Change Alley, London, venue for commercial transactions that became the London Stock Exchange; and a letter sent to the Jamaica Coffee House.

The form of address used for coffee house letters was simply; 'Mr Smith, at Andertons Coffee House, Fleet Street, London'. When leaving America for London in April 1757, Benjamin Franklin requested his sister and friends to 'direct your letters to be left for me at the Pensilvania (sic) Coffee House in Birchin Lane, London'. However, some years later, with the revolutionary era in full swing in America, Benjamin had reason to suspect that a spy from Pennsylvania had obtained access to his coffee house letters, and asked his correspondents to 'write no more to me by that course'.

As the years passed, and newspapers took over from the simple newssheet, coffee houses were used to advantage by newspaper proprietors such as Joseph Addison. In his paper, *The Guardian*, he announced that he intended to erect a letter-box in the shape of a lion's head in Button's Coffee House, and invited readers to place in it their contributions for his newspaper. This was a great success, and also ensured the success of Button's, where he had set up Daniel Button as the proprietor.

Coffee houses also played an important part, albeit in an indirect way, in another publication, *The Tatler*, which announced that it would divide its contents under headings relating to the specialization of the named coffee house. For example, 'learning' was to appear under the title 'Grecian', as this was the meeting place of the 'Learned Club', formed by Fellows of the Royal Society, one of whom was Edmond Halley, the astronomer of comet fame. Foreign and domestic news would be under St James Coffee House, poetry under Will's, and entertainment and pleasure under White's Chocolate House, which in spite of its name sold mainly coffee.

Above and left: Lloyd's Coffee House, Tower Street, London, 1688 (1988 Ascension Island issue, SG 474). Illustration at left reproduced by courtesy of Lloyd's of London.

Lloyd's of London Besides their general importance to businesses, coffee houses were the basis of two institutions which are still part of our national life: Lloyd's of London and the Stock Exchange. In 1697, merchants at the Royal Exchange objected to the presence of stock-jobbers, and had them removed. Finding themselves without a base, the latter moved to the near-by coffee houses, which were the haunt of shippers and underwriters, and until 1773 stock exchange transactions took place in coffee houses. For this reason, the attendants at the Stock Exchange became known as 'waiters'.

At about the same time, Edward Lloyd's coffee house in Lombard Street was becoming the site of auctions of ships and cargoes, and also the haunt of maritime underwriters. Strictly speaking, underwriting was supposed to be carried out in the Royal Exchange, but increasingly it began to take place in Lloyds and, in 1727, it was moved there. A society was formed between the underwriters, which became known as 'Lloyd's of London'.

As the 18th century drew to an end, the popularity of coffee houses began to wane. Some lost their refined atmosphere, and were often the scene of quarrels or worse. A few had even become brothels. Those who valued the type of establishment which they had originally been began calling for a selection of clientele to be made, and some of the coffee houses became exclusive clubs. However, coffee houses as such existed well into the 19th century, although they had lost their importance and influence. They left us a small legacy: the word 'tip'. This came about because in the coffee houses there was a small box into which gratuities could be placed. This box was inscribed with the letters 'TIP' – 'To Insure Promptness' ●

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