

## **Tales from the coffee shop**

By Tom Geoghegan  
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**A new campaign hopes coffee shops will be the vehicle for community action, in a project encouraging people to meet and tackle local problems. But the precedent for this was set 300 years ago, when coffee houses were places of intellect, scientific discovery and debate.**

It may seem like there's a Starbucks on every High Street, but Britain is still regarded as home of the pint and the cup of tea.

Yet it's coffee that a new campaign hopes will encourage people to get together locally to do something about issues facing their communities. BBC iCan and the Royal Society of Arts have launched the Coffee Shop Challenge, with public events around the country to mark it.

This choice of venue may have been made with an informed glance at the past, because although the names Costa, Caffè Nero and Starbucks have made coffee shops more visible in the past decade, the coffee house has played a vital role in the nation's social history.

Coffee was first introduced to England in 1610 and the first coffee houses were in Oxford in 1650 before spreading to London.

This mirrored a new culture that was developing across European cities like Paris, Venice and Amsterdam. By 1663, there were 82 in London, rising to more than 500 by 1700.

Entry to London's coffee houses cost a penny and they became a hotbed of ideas shared between writers, politicians, businessmen and scientists. They discussed news and spread it, with the larger coffee houses publishing their own newsletters.

In his book *My Trade*, Andrew Marr says the country's first newspapers, in the 1700s, were kept in coffee houses and read out loud.

"The arrival of a coffee house culture, where party politics, Whigs against Tories, began to be played out, marks the real start of informed public opinion. And for public opinion there must be journalists too," he writes.

### **Genteel only**

Coffee houses offered an antidote to the rowdy gin and beer houses, both in décor and in atmosphere. They had bookshelves, mirrors and good furniture, and the mood was calm and disciplined.

The popularity of coffee was partly due to the demand of the new middle class, the clerks and merchants who needed their brains, rather than their limbs, to be alert.

But it was expensive, which meant it was only the genteel and educated who were visitors, says Professor Allan Chapman, a historian at Oxford University.

"When it said on the door 'Open to all', it meant 'open to all like us'. If you were doing back-breaking work in the dockyards, you didn't want a coffee, you wanted a few pints of very strong ale."

Different professions became associated with coffee houses in particular areas. Will's in Covent Garden was popular for the literary-minded such as John Dryden, who regularly led a discussion of the latest poems. Westminster had the politicians and Lincoln's Inn the lawyers.

Isaac Newton, Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke held a series of coffee house meetings to discuss the motion of the Earth, and the first time the notion of flying to the moon was mooted was by Dr John Wilkins over coffee, says Professor Chapman.

### **Sleaze**

The intellectual strength of this scene also contributed to its reputation for political dissent, and King Charles II tried and failed in 1675 to thwart their power by closing or levying fees on the houses.

But the decline of the coffee house was well under way by the 19th Century, when many shed their open door policy and turned into gentlemen's clubs serving tea, coffee and alcohol. And their role as a communication centre was eclipsed by an improved press, transport and postal system.

The coffee houses that remained took on a slightly sleazy nature, associated with gambling and prostitution and characterised in the novels of Dickens and Trollope, says Professor Chapman. Mass production, driven by the East India Company, also meant swigs of coffee could be bought at street stalls and tea could be drunk at home.

Long before modern coffee shops arrived, there were popular chains such as Lyons Corner Houses which thrived in the inter-war period, then the classic Italian-run Formica cafes emerged in the 1950s.

But in the past 10 years, there has been an explosion of coffee shops on the High Street. Despite the success of Starbucks, Costa and others, commentators say the unique atmosphere of the 17th Century houses is gone.

"In the sanitised, lactified form of the branded chain, the coffee-house is no longer oppositional, rebellious and dissident. This is their profit, but our loss," says Markman Ellis, in his book *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*.

Organisers of the Coffee House Challenge hope the passionate debate of old, at least, will be reignited.