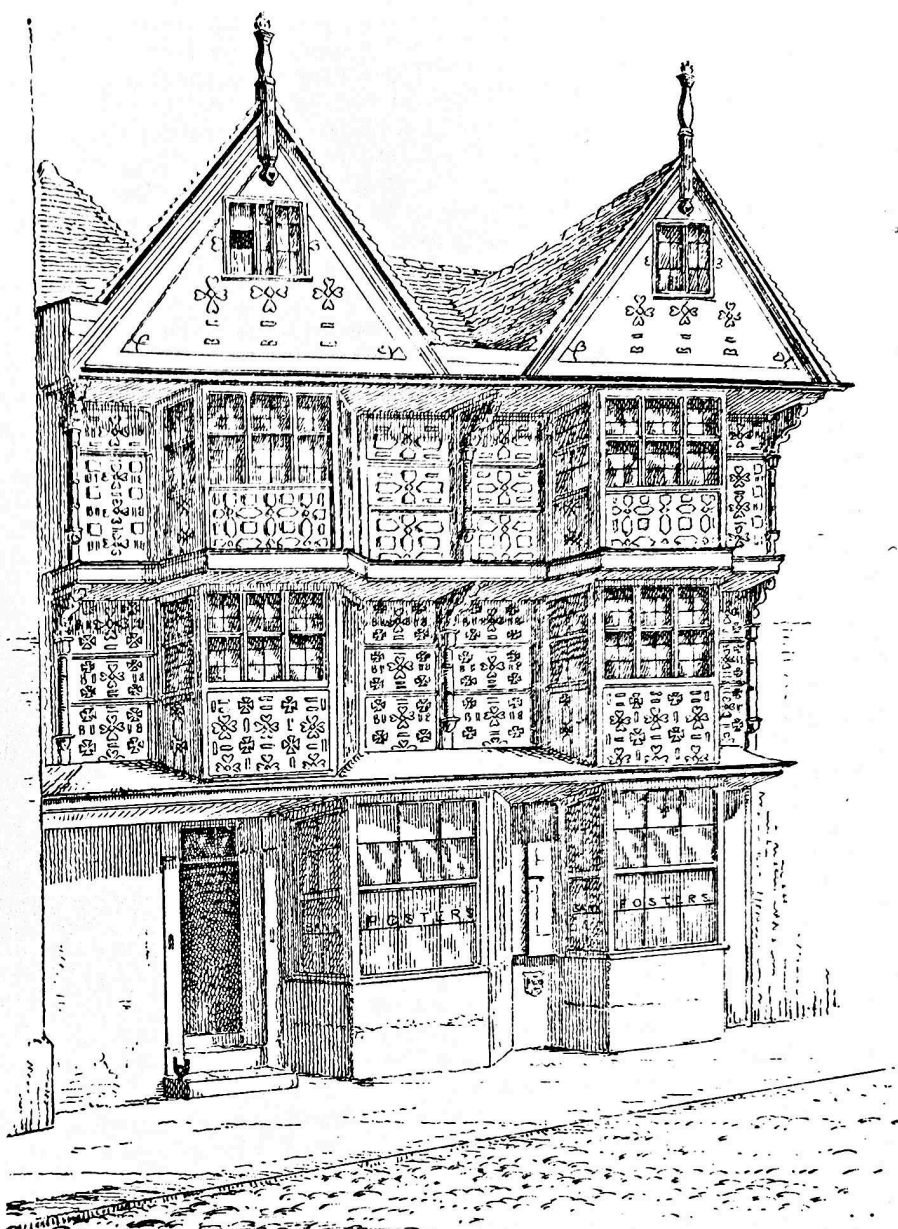


# EIGHTEENTH & NINETEENTH CENTURY Coffee Houses of Cambridge

by Enid Porter



*The Turk's Head, the 18th Century Coffee House in Trinity Street. The premises are now occupied by the Turk's Head Grill. From 1836 to 1898 they were used by Foster's Bank and later by Matthew's Cafe.*

COFFEE was introduced into England in the 17th century, mainly through travellers coming back from the East with reports of how the Turks and Arabs infused the powdered berries of a plant then flourishing in Arabia. English doctors welcomed the new beverage for they were greatly concerned at the heavy consumption of alcohol in the country. It was, at first, thought of only as a medicine which stimulated the heart and brain, sobered the intoxicated and aided the digestion — one doctor even claimed that it could cure gout and smallpox — but it soon became very popular and many coffee houses and, later, coffee clubs appeared upon the scene. The first of these houses was established at the *Angel* in Oxford in 1650 by a man named Jacob who later moved to London and opened a similar business in Holborn.

Coffee houses catered only for men and they supplied not only coffee but chocolate, tea and sherbert together with copies of daily and weekly newspapers, reviews and periodicals to be read on the premises. The houses thus became popular meeting places where the news of the day could be discussed, politics argued over and even, especially

in London, political intrigues plotted. This last-named activity caused the government to view the houses with suspicion and in 1675 a Royal Proclamation was signed ordering that they "be put down and suppressed" because in them "divers false . . . and scandalous Reports are devised and spread abroad to the Defamation of His Majesty's Government and to the Disturbance of the Peace and Quiet of the Realm." There was so much opposition, however, to the Proclamation that the government had to withdraw it and issue another which, with certain restrictions, allowed the houses to continue. Their numbers steadily increased throughout the 18th century.

The first coffee house known to have existed in Cambridge was *Kirk's*, named after its proprietor. We do not know where it stood but we do know from the biography of Dr John North, who entered Jesus College in 1660, that at that date and for some time afterwards it was the only one in the town. Another 17th century house may have been kept in Trumpington Street by a John Marston who, in common with many tradesmen between 1651 and 1671, found the prevailing shortage of small coinage a hindrance

in business. He issued a halfpenny token which bears on one side a hand pouring coffee into one of four cups on a table, and on the other the design of a rose. Nothing is known of John Marston and it may be that he was merely a grocer who specialised in the sale of coffee beans.

In the 18th century, however, a number of coffee houses were established in Cambridge, notably the *Greek's* and *Dockerell's*. The Greek — his name is not known — first set up a "coffee tent" at Stourbridge Fair in 1709 before opening a permanent business in the following year somewhere in the centre of the town. A German visitor wrote in 1710 of going to the *Greek's* where

... we read all the journals, and other news, which may be seen there . . . In this coffee house, particularly in the morning and after 3 o'clock in the afternoon, you meet the chief professors and doctors, who read the papers over a cup of coffee and a pipe of tobacco, and converse on all subjects . . .

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**SPEECH OR SONG,**

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From known effects, can trace the secret cause."      *DAVIDEN.*

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Many old coffee houses apart from providing magazines and newspapers for their Patrons, also staged entertainment. This reproduction of an old advertisement of the Nelson Coffee House indicates the way in which business was attracted. The Nelson Coffee House may later have been the Lord Nelson Inn which stood at the corner of Hobson Street and St. Andrew Street.

Also in 18th century Cambridge were to be found the *Union Coffee House* opposite the Round Church, the *Johnian* in All Saints Passage, the *Turk's Head* in Trinity Street, the *Rose* in part of the Rose Inn facing Market Hill, *Dockerell's* in Trumpington Street, *Delaport's* in St. Andrew's Street and the *Master of Arts* and the *Tower* whose exact locations are not known. *Dockerell*, like the *Greek*, had begun by opening a coffee tent at Stourbridge Fair in 1770. He continued in business in Trumpington Street for

some years, his coffee house being especially patronised by Fellows and senior members of the University who sat in the upper part of the room, the lower part being reserved for undergraduates. Suppers and dinners were served at *Dockerell's* and at many of the other coffee houses, and in addition to newspapers, chess boards and chess men were also provided for the entertainment of customers. The *Turk's Head*, with its fine Elizabethan frontage to Trinity Street, has of recent years resumed its old name, being now the *Turk's Head Grill*. Many people will remember that it was once *Matthew's Cafe*, while from 1836 until 1898 the premises were used by *Foster's Bank*.

Undergraduates quickly acquired the habit of frequenting the coffee houses, a habit which did not meet with the approval of the University authorities who considered that far too much time was wasted in them in idle gossip and the reading of newspapers and books which could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered an essential part of the students' curriculum. As early as 1664 the Vice-Chancellor and the Heads of the Colleges decreed that any undergraduate going to a coffee house without permission from his tutor should be punished "according to the statute for the haunters of taverns and alehouses". In 1750 the Senate passed a number of orders and regulations regarding the conduct and discipline of students and among them were several relating to coffee houses. No undergraduate, for example, was to go to any coffee house, tennis court, cricket ground or "other place of public diversion" between 9 a.m. and mid-day under pain of a fine of 10/-. Proprietors of coffee houses and taverns were forbidden to serve students with "wine punch or any other strong liquor" after 11 p.m. or supply anyone with cards or dice.

But the undergraduates continued to go to the coffee houses to spend there, as a writer complained in 1742.

... hours . . . in talking and less profitable reading of newspapers, of which swarms are continually supplied from London. And the scholars are so greedy after News (which is none of their business) that they neglect all for it . . . a vast loss of time grown out of a pure Novelty; for who can apply close to a subject with his head full of the din of a Coffee House?

Even existing Cambridge inns were forced to provide coffee rooms to cater for the new craze — *The Cardinal's Cap*, which stood on the site of the Pitt Press buildings in Trumpington Street, for example, advertised its new Cap Coffee Room in 1797. As *William Cole*, the 18th century antiquary, recorded in his diary:

Few people go to taverns but rather to coffee houses, so that the *Tuns Tavern* has broke two or three people since *Whish* had it, and the *Mitre Tavern* is actually annihilated, and turned into a large, new coffee house.

## John Delaport's Coffee House in St. Andrew's Street

One of the most entertaining of the Cambridge coffee houses must have been *Delaport's*, opened by a French wig-maker and barber of that name in St. Andrew's Street in 1763. It stood next to Emmanuel College and on its site, in the 1860's, was built a manse for the Baptist Chapel opposite.

*John Delaport* announced the opening of his new venture in a long advertisement in the *Cambridge Chronicle* of June 4th, 1763. His Coffee Room "in a pleasant garden" was designed, he said

For the entertainment of such Gentlemen as are

desirous of mixing Amusement with useful knowledge, and promoting Improvement in all Arts and Sciences. Customers would have the opportunity of "descanting on each and every Subject which his Talents or Genius "leads him to", but only the "free, generous, debonnaire and gay" would be really welcome.

No "spiritous Liquors" would be admitted unless "duly authorised according to the Law", but "harmless Tea, Lacedemonian Broth, and invigorating Chocolate, comforting Cakes, with cooling Tarts and Jellies, &c." would be served. The broth, we assume, was a thin, not over-nourishing soup. A library was provided and it was planned to provide instruments too, for "such Gentlemen as are musically inclined". Languages, especially French, could be studied and "made easy and familiar by Conversation". A further service to be given by Mr Delaport and "proper assistants" was that of free advice for all those who, through "ill-designing people" had got into "Scrapes and Difficulties" and become "harrassed with Law-Suits and Hardship".

Mr. Delaport had to insert a second announcement in the *Cambridge Chronicle* on July 2nd because he found that people were using his garden as a public thoroughfare. He let it be known, therefore, that in future

No Person will be admitted into the Garden who doth not take a Ticket at the Gate, which will that Day be taken as Cash for either Coffee, Tea, Chocolate, Jellies, Sillabubs, Tarts, Cakes, &c. or any of the Produce of the Garden; a Person will attend to gather the Fruit, Pease or Beans . . .

He also took the opportunity of further advertising the services he offered to his customers. On Monday evenings

there would be "Vocal and Instrumental Music", while any undergraduate who wished to learn French "shall be taught it for a trifle." Those who took supper in the coffee house could have wine, punch or ale sent in from a tavern, and "any person fond of Fishing, may divert themselves with catching the Fish, and have them drest in the best manner.

Delaport's was not the only coffee house at which entertainments were given. An undated advertisement, probably of the late 18th century, announced the exhibition at the *Nelson Coffee House*, Cambridge of "The Accoustic Apparatus, and Astonishing Invisible Lady." The exhibition, it was claimed, was "founded upon real Philosophical Principles, without the aid of Ventriloquism". The lady, the public were assured, performed "in the Air by some unknown power of enchantment." The Nelson Coffee house may have become later the Lord Nelson Inn which stood, from the 1830's until c. 1872, at the corner of Hobson Street and St. Andrew's Street where Christ's College gardens now are.

## The 19th Century Coffee Houses

The typical 18th century coffee houses with their supplies of reading matter and their lively customers meeting for discussion and gossip began to disappear in the 19th century. Those that did continue for a while ceased, in many cases, to serve dinners and suppers, while more and more coffee rooms where only cups of coffee could be obtained came to be established. In Cambridge at 19 Bridge Street, in 1847 for example, one Henry Bailey owned Coffee Rooms and a Robert Shippey a similar business at 26 St. Andrew's Street.

In the 1880's the *Victoria Coffee Tavern* opened in Searle Street, the *George and Dragon Coffee House* in Newmarket Road, the *St. Giles Coffee Rooms* in Castle, while in Norfolk Street, among others in Cambridge at that time, was to be found the *Empress Coffee Tavern* and in New Street the *Eagle Coffee House*. All these catered mainly for working men. Indeed, the provision of coffee rooms became the concern of local social workers anxious to entice men away from the many public houses which existed in Cambridge in the last century. In 1878 the *Barnwell Coffee Palace* under a special committee, was opened in East Road with a lodging house attached. The Palace continued for many years, being run later by the British Women's Temperance Association, who re-named it the *White Ribbon*, and finally by the Salvation Army as the White Ribbon Temperance Hotel.

But such places were a far cry from *Delaport's*, the *Turk's Head*, *Dockerell's*, the *Johnian* and the rest. They were not patronised by the University and no longer could it be said of such coffee houses, as a Cambridge professor had once declared of the earlier ones, that in them "a man might pick up more useful knowledge than if he could apply himself to his books for a whole month."

In our present century, when the "elevenses" habit has become a part of national and student life, the wheel may, perhaps, be said to have come full circle. Over their mid-morning cups of coffee the 20th century undergraduates talk as endlessly as did their 18th century predecessors, and they would doubtless be in full agreement with the statement made by an early member of the Royal Society that "coffee houses have improved useful knowledge as much as the Universities have."

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