



BEYOND THE BICENTENNIAL – 1788-1838 EXPLORING 50 YEARS OF THE SLAVE TRADE

SUGAR AND THE SLAVE TRADE...

– *The rise of tea drinking in Georgian Times*

The Georgian era spanned the reigns of the kings George I, George II, George III and George IV from 1714 to 1830. It was a time of immense social change in Britain. The expansion of empire brought fame to explorers like Captain Cook, and riches to merchants who risked all on international trading ventures.

Tea was a relative latecomer to British shores. Although it is now the national drink of Britain, the custom of drinking tea dates back to the third millennium BC in China, and it was not until the mid 17th century that tea first appeared in England.

At this time it took up to 16 months for the cargoes of tea to reach England from China, and tea was so expensive that only the rich could afford to drink it.



The tea drinking ceremony

Tea was first drunk in public in coffee houses. These were men-only establishments - the forerunners of the 'Gentlemen's Clubs' which still exist today. By 1700 over 500 coffee houses sold it and by 1750 tea had become the favoured drink of Britain's lower classes.

Afternoon tea is said to have originated with one person; Anna, 7th Duchess of Bedford. In the early 1800's she launched the idea of having tea in the late afternoon to bridge the gap between luncheon and dinner, which in fashionable circles might not be served until 8 o'clock at night. The idea took off and an elaborate tea drinking ceremony developed. Georgian Society was much more formal than today and tea drinking was one of the few times that young men and women could meet each other in a slightly less formal atmosphere. The custom of "afternoon tea" evolved into high tea among the working classes, where it became the main meal of the day.



The rise of the tea pot in Georgian Times

Tea in China was traditionally drunk from cups without handles and early European designs echo this oriental shape. The earliest teapots and tea bowls were imported from China around 1658 together with the tea, which was packed around the china in the cases to prevent breakages. English pottery at the time was coarse, so the fine delicate porcelain Chinese teapots and cups were regarded as very special.

When teapots were first used in Britain they were a symbol of the high status of the tea ceremony host, because tea was so expensive. Tea was kept in locked tea caddies, and only the lady of the house held the key. As tea drinking gained popularity through the 1700's, there was tremendous development in the pottery and porcelain industry. Handles were introduced and tea cups and teapots could be bought in many shapes and sizes.

By around 1800 tea became more affordable. After further experimentation English potters developed a variation of porcelain using bone ash, which was very hard, tough and fine. It became known as "bone china". By the 1820's this type of porcelain had become the standard for teapots and is commonly used today. Companies such as Wedgwood, Spode, and Royal Doulton produced new designs and the English porcelain industry prospered.

These cups and saucers were collected by the Martin brothers of Whittlesey and donated to the Museum around c.1937. The tea pots have been given by various donors over the years.

