

# THE LEICESTER COFFEE-HOUSE AND COCOA-HOUSE MOVEMENT

by

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The figure of the reformed drunkard, signing the pledge and leading an upright, moral and sober life to the benefit of his family and society, with corresponding benefit to his own self esteem and economic standing, is familiar in the works of Victorian writers. The platforms of the Temperance Movement furnished many a model of such lost souls redeemed, contrasting their profligate past with the rewards of sobriety. But the social effects of Temperance Movement are not easy to evaluate. In the first place the word became a misnomer with the rise of the "total-abstinence" cause in the 1830s. Prior to this, the campaign against over-indulgence in drink often took the form of refusal to drink wine and spirits as opposed to beer. Temperance to its earlier proponents meant moderation; but as the teetotalers gained control the movement was "launched on its path of extremism . . . the movement's original aim, the prevention of drunkenness, was sub-ordinated to the pursuit of consistency"<sup>1</sup>.

Many factors, as Dr. Harrison has shown in his recent book on *Drink and the Victorians*, combined to modify drinking habits in the nineteenth century. How far the Temperance Movement was responsible for an amelioration of behaviour with regard to beer-drinking and how far this was due to the influence of Licensing Acts, or the improvement in housing conditions which made men less likely to frequent beer shops, or how far it was changing patterns of leisure with the rise of Music Halls and Sports Clubs that explain the decline of drunkenness, is hard to say. As for the Temperance Movement itself, Dr. Harrison concludes, after thirty years of teetotal advocacy, it "had insulated an élite from temptation: it had produced no nationwide temperance reformation"<sup>2</sup>.

One attempt to promote temperance through practical philanthropy was the Coffee-house movement. Coffee-houses were a familiar feature of eighteenth-century life in the larger towns, but they catered for a relatively wealthy clientèle. With the reduction of taxes on tea and coffee the taste for drinking both extended down the social scale. By 1841 London had between 1,600 and 1,800 coffee shops providing coffee at from a penny to threepence a cup, while a pot of beer cost threepence<sup>3</sup>. Early temperance reformers did not view the coffee houses with particular favour. Their ideal was the cultivation of domestic virtue within the home. They did not encourage men to seek relaxation or pleasure away from their families<sup>4</sup>.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a more realistic approach was adopted. With the growth of suburbs on the outskirts of large towns, there was an increasing need for working-men's restaurants. "Instead of carrying their lunch to work and eating it in a public house," comments Dr. Harrison, "working-men began to buy hot meals at mid-day"<sup>5</sup>. Practical philanthropists of the Temperance Movement saw that if the working-man had nowhere to buy refreshments except at the beer shop or public house he would inevitably frequent such places. "Give the working man a public house where he may meet his friends, and talk and smoke and play games with all the freedom to which he has been accustomed, and where good coffee and tea—with stimulus and nourishment in them—take the place of beer and gin, and you set before him for the first time plainly, the choice between sobriety and comfort on the one hand, and dissipation and wretchedness on the other"<sup>6</sup>, so said the writer of a guide to coffee-house management in 1879.

The idea of "public houses" to sell coffee and snacks to working men originated in Dundee in 1853, spread to Manchester and Glasgow, and reached London by 1863. Ten years later, Dr. Barnardo opened the Limehouse *Edinburgh Castle* as the first Coffee Palace in London<sup>7</sup>. In Leicester the promotion of coffee-houses was taken up in 1877, by three prominent citizens, Dr. Marriott, Canon Vaughan and that energetic philanthropist and businessman, Edward Shipley Ellis<sup>8</sup>. Robert Read wrote in 1881 that Ellis, who died in December 1879, "might take less pride in his achievements as Chairman of the Midland Railway, that ever leads the van in railway progress, or in his invaluable services to a cause with which I am not rapturously in love, as Chairman of the Leicester Liberal Association, or even his priceless aid in perfecting the educational system of the Wyggeston Boys' and Girls' School, than he would in pioneering the Tea, Coffee and Cocoa movement in the town of Leicester"<sup>9</sup>. E. S. Ellis does not feature on the list of original shareholders of the Leicester Coffee and Cocoa House Company in 1877, but it was doubtless the sort of practical expression of Quakerism that would have appealed to him.<sup>10</sup>

Joseph Dare had drawn attention to the need for establishments offering an alternative to alcoholic drink in his report to the Unitarian Domestic Mission for 1873. Dare described how after a walk in the country he would often seek some non-alcoholic refreshment but was "almost always refused by the village publican". He was offered "muddy ale, and worse spirits in any quantity, but ask for a cup of tea, and the reply is, "*No, I am not obliged to get it, and I shan't for anybody*". Thus many are tempted to drink who would prefer "the cup that cheers but not inebriates". "Our abstinence friends", Dare adds, "should take this in hand"<sup>11</sup>.

Another prominent citizen who should have applauded the establishment of the coffee-houses was Dr. John Barclay. He was bold enough to reject, in public, the arguments for teetotalism, and so incurred the wrath of the Leicester Temperance Society.<sup>12</sup> But his address to the Literary and Philosophical Society on *Ale, Wine, Spirits and Tobacco* was as much a plea against drunkenness as against the extremism of the Temperance Society.

He called himself "a strenuous and uncompromising advocate of true temperance". After a lengthy discussion of the medical and social effects of totally abstaining from alcohol, Barclay offered a series of positive proposals for "bettering the condition of the working classes and improving their education". "Let us," he urged, "encourage reading rooms, mechanics institutes, free libraries, and museums, coffee-houses, lectures, exhibitions, public parks, recreation grounds for games" adding, as an aside on the sale of the old cricket ground in Wharf Street, "and not sell our cricket ground for building purposes". With a concern for the countryside which modern rambles would applaud he went on to plead, "Let us keep a strict eye on our country privileges, our footroads and rights of way; if you pen people up in a town, shut up all sources of amusement, stop all the railways on Sunday, and close all the public houses, you make Leicester as besotted and as pharisaical as Glasgow"<sup>13</sup>.

Sixteen years after Barclay's lecture, the Leicester Coffee and Cocoa House Company was formed, on 25th July 1877; its primary object was "to establish houses, rooms, coffee carts, stalls and other places" in and around Leicester to provide general refreshment, "No wine, ale or spiritous, or intoxicating liquors shall be sold or provided by the Company, or consumed at any of their houses, rooms, stalls or places"<sup>14</sup>.

The Company was, according to Robert Read, "financially and philanthropically . . . a success, and the most formidable advocate of temperance existing. It combats temptation to imbibe intoxicants by providing nutritious, comforting and healthful beverages at the easy price of a penny a pint"<sup>15</sup>. Read tells us that, "a large basin of nourishing soup can be had at dinner time for two pence, and various solids sold equally cheap; while there is no restriction on, but a positive invitation to, patrons to bring their own solids with them. Airiness, brightness and comfort characterise all the eight houses; papers and amusements are accessible; and everyone who has seen how the accommodation is enjoyed by workers of either sex from five to nine a.m., twelve to two p.m., and again in evening sociability, cannot but bid the Cocoa Company—God speed"<sup>16</sup>.

J. and T. Spencer referred to the "most gratifying results" of the development of the Company and praised the refreshment rooms for their "size, decoration, fittings, cleanliness and order" surpassing "all that was formerly attainable except at high charges"<sup>17</sup>. The duchess of Rutland, opening the *Victoria Coffee House* in 1888, praised the directors for combining commercial profit with the benefit of the townspeople and spoke of "constantly receiving letters from various parts of the country asking how it was the coffee houses in Leicester achieved such an extraordinary amount of success"<sup>18</sup>.

The first of the coffee houses was the *Granby*, located at 5 Granby Street, on the site of the present *Picture House*. Since it was opened in 1877, only three months after the formation of the Company, the *Granby* must have been housed in an existing building. Most of the Company's premises were custom built, and designed by the architect Edward Burgess. Significantly,

Burgess was the brother of Alfred Howard Burgess, the Company's solicitor. Both belonged, like E. S. Ellis, to the Quaker Meeting.

Edward Burgess's style can be seen in several of the public buildings of Victorian Leicester. The Savings Bank in St. Martin's, the Wyggeston Girls' School, now Charles Keene Annexe, and the Liberal Club in Town Hall Square are among his most well-known pieces of work. While we have nothing in Leicester to equal the famous Ossington Coffee House at Newark, a product of the teetotal enthusiasm of a daughter of the duke of Portland in the 1880s, we have in Burgesses coffee houses some of the most typical and interesting examples of late nineteenth-century architecture in Leicester. In four of the coffee houses we see buildings which are characteristically solid and imposing, while the remaining two show an exuberance rarely equalled in the Victorian town. Five of these extant buildings are on prominent corner sites. The *Rutland* Coffee House on the corner of Wharf Street and Humberstone Road (*plate 9*) opened in 1883, demolished in November 1972, the *Albert* in Belgrave Gate, on the corner of New Parliament Street (*plate 10*), and the *Great Northern* (*plate 9*), at the junction of Abbey Park Road and Belgrave Road, are all built of red brick with decorative features in white masonry and have gabled roofs and sturdy columns of stone on the ground floor. *The High Cross* on the corner of High Street, now vacant, but formerly occupied by Action Stores Ltd., is similar in style though without gables and surmounted by a turret (*plate 9*).

The remaining two branches were known as the *East Gates* and the *Victoria*. The *East Gates* near the Clock Tower on the corner of Church Gate was opened by the duchess of Rutland on 15 June 1885. It replaced a former establishment known as the *Haymarket* Coffee House.<sup>19</sup> The *East Gates* was described as "built in the domestic style of the fifteenth century, and both internally and externally much admired"<sup>20</sup>. But the most magnificent of all the coffee houses was the *Victoria*, named in honour of the Queen's jubilee in 1887, and opened the following year (*plate 10*). It stands in Granby Street and is now occupied by the Dolcis Shoe Company. According to the *Leicester Daily Post* it was "in the style of the French Renaissance . . . The front is elaborately carved out of Stanton stone, with polished Aberdeen granite in the entrance, while the walls, staircases, etc., are lined with glazed tiles . . . The central portion of the building has a high pitched cylindrical roof constructed of steel-framed rafters, and covered with Whitland Abbey slates"<sup>21</sup>. Spencer's Guide said it was "considered one of the best in the Kingdom"<sup>22</sup>.

Apart from the *Granby* and these six establishments—since the *Rutland* is no longer—there were seven others; the *Cobden* demolished in 1969, on the corner of Cobden Street and Humberstone Road, the *West Bridge*, now part of Peck's factory, the *St. Margaret's* in Lower Church Gate, the *Midland* in Campbell Street, the *Welford* on the corner of Welford Road and Marlborough Street, the *Windsor Cafe* in the Y.M.C.A. building on the corner of East Street and London Road, and in the summer months, the Pavilion in Victoria Park,<sup>23</sup>



a. *The Great Northern*



b. *The High Cross*



c. *The Rutland*

apparatus consisting of seven radiators and connections thereto throughout the building". The first and second floors contained billiard rooms, with eight billiard tables and accessories.

The lure of the billiard tables and the profit on soup, cocoa, coffee, tea and the unpretentious meals served was evidently not enough to maintain such valuable premises. Doubtless, the more genteel clientèle had been enticed away by the newer cafes like Winns, with branches in the Market Place, Granby Street and Gallowtree Gate. Nevertheless it is to be wondered why the Company did not mend its fortunes. Until 1914 it seems to have been well patronised though it had evidently abandoned the mineral water and bakery departments mentioned in earlier directories.

There does not seem to have been any marked change in consumer demand to explain the failure of the coffee houses. Consumption of tea per head rose steadily from 6.07 lb. in 1900 to 8.70 lb. in 1919. Coffee enjoyed a wartime boom in consumption, rising from 0.63 lb. per head in 1914 to 1.11 lb. in 1918, though it fell back to 0.71 in 1921. As for the rival offerings of the traditional publican, there was a partial recovery in expenditure after the war but the long-run trend appears to have been a fall in consumption.<sup>34</sup>

The Leicester Coffee and Cocoa House movement appears to have been a civilian casualty of the First World War. Many of the regular customers must have been taken away never to return, while labour must have been scarce and costly in the war years. By 1916, the *Albert* had closed and so had the *St. Margaret's* branch. The *Windsor Cafe* had also closed by 1920 leaving only eight establishments open. After the liquidation of the Company, William Henry Joyce, who had been General Manager of the Company since the beginning of the century, continued to manage the *Midland* branch on his own account, and in 1941 he was still manager of the refreshment rooms which later became the railway staff canteen.

A correspondent to the *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle* recalled working in the *East Gates* coffee house from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. as a boy of twelve. He helped peel potatoes, make ice cream, wash up and fetch and carry for the cooks and counter staff; for all this he was paid one shilling. He remembered how "many regulars used to come in at midday bringing their own food, ordering a cup of tea, which I believe was  $\frac{1}{2}d.$ , and asking for a plate for their sandwiches"<sup>35</sup>. Another correspondent recalled how customers "brought their own food, used the pepper and salt, and never spent a penny—and had a good warm against the stove in winter". Services of this sort were evidently not economic but a feeling of regret remains that a compromise was not effected between philanthropy and profitability, so that the coffee houses might have remained to fulfil their earlier promise, to the benefit of posterity.

## NOTES

1. Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians* (Faber and Faber, 1971), 114
2. *ibid.*, 318
3. *ibid.*, 302
4. *ibid.*, 304
5. *ibid.*, 303
6. E. Hepple Hall, *Coffee Taverns, Cocoa Houses and Coffee Palaces: Their Rise, Progress and Prospects* (S. W. Partridge & Co., London, 1879), 16
7. Harrison, *op. cit.*, 304
8. Robert Read *Modern Leicester* (1881), 267-8
9. See *Records of Nineteenth-Century Leicester* by I. C. Ellis (1935), 313, for an account of his attitude to the question of climbing boys.
10. J. Dare *Reports to the Unitarian Great Meeting's Domestic Mission*, 1873, p. 10
11. J. Barclay *Ale, Wine, Spirits and Tobacco* 1861, pamphlet collection in the City Reference Library Number 57
12. *ibid.*
13. *ibid.*, 67
14. Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Company in possession of Toller, Pochin and Wright the Company's solicitors
15. Read, *op. cit.* 267-8
16. *ibid.*
17. Spencer's *New Guide to Leicester* (1889), 140
18. *Leicester Daily Post*, 22nd December 1888
19. *Wright's Directories of Leicester*
20. Spencer *loc. cit.*
21. *Leicester Daily Post loc. cit.*
22. Spencer *loc. cit.*
23. *Wright's Directories*
24. *Leicester Daily Post loc. cit.*
25. Spencer *loc. cit.*
26. *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 13th August 1960
27. *The Midland Jackdaw*, 14th March 1879
28. *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 3rd September 1960
29. Information supplied by Miss M. A. Riley, whose mother was the daughter of Mr. Samuel Ward, Manager of the Rutland Coffee House at the turn of the century
30. *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 20th August 1960
31. *ibid.*, 3rd September 1960
32. *Wright's Directories*
33. According to Mr. Whait of Toller, Pochin and Wright
34. Mitchell and Deane *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (1962), 371 and 357-8
35. *Illustrated Leicester Chronicle*, 3rd September 1960.