

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Tony Diamond, The History of Chocolate

Tony Diamond opened his talk to the February meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall with the statement that everyone loves chocolate. No one disagreed! He then explained the origins of this confection.

Europeans first encountered chocolate when the Spanish arrived in Central America in 1519. The Mayans used chocolate, which they called *coacatl*, in a variety of ways. It was offered as a gift to their sun god, Ra, in addition it was a currency for trade and provided a medicine. The Mayan process of making chocolate by roasting ripened cocoa beans is still employed today. The Spanish became very rich because of the gold taken from the Americas but also introduced cocoa to Europe, but they kept it a secret. It became a drink for the wealthy when mixed with milk and sugar, and it was also used in cakes.

During the 17th Century, the Spanish monopoly of chocolate was increasingly challenged by the English who gained colonies in West Indies. The first cocoa house was established in England in 1657 and was open to both men and women as it was a non-alcoholic beverage. The popularity of cocoa houses spread. White's in Pall Mall later became an exclusive gentleman's club and the origins of the Stock Exchange can be traced back to cocoa houses.

Cocoa was expensive because of the high import tax placed on the beans. It became a drink of the aristocracy who called it *choco-au-lait*. Queen Victoria loved chocolate sauce and was soon converted to chocolate bars when they were invented by Fry's of Bristol in 1847. Prince Albert gave her a model of Braemar Castle made from chocolate as a gift. It has been preserved as the high quantity of salt used to make it rendered it inedible! Cadbury's received a Royal Warrant in 1854 as a supplier of chocolate to Queen Victoria.

During the 1850s, the chocolate industry received a boost as the tax on cocoa was reduced by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Gladstone. Chocolate products were now affordable to many more people and were exported by companies like Cadbury's, Fry's and Rowntree's to many parts of the world. These companies became major employers in Britain. In the late 19th Century Cadbury's built a factory and model village at Bourneville, near Birmingham, for its workers. Chocolate was sent in tins to British soldiers during the Boer War (1899-1902). Fry's was one of many sponsors of the Scott expedition to the Antarctic in 1914. During the First World War it became common practice to give soldiers cocoa as a drink because it was believed to have medicinal properties. After the First World War Cadbury's and Fry's merged into one company.

The talk concluded with Tony Diamond identifying a number of the benefits of chocolate. Chocolate is believed to aid sleep. It assists the circulatory system and regulates blood pressure. It is thought to enhance cognitive abilities, especially perception. It may lower cholesterol and can soothe coughing. It contains a number of minerals and vitamins, and can be used as part of a diet. However, it is very bad for diabetics as it has a high percentage of sugar. It can cause gross obesity and is very addictive. It may lead to mood swings for some people. It poisons cats and dogs. However, it remains a huge part of the British economy and is loved by many people.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 25 March at Rickinghall Village Hall when Ivor Murrell will give a talk entitled *The Maltster's Tale*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information is available at www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net.