

It's hip to be (in a) square



Stephen Moss

My heart sinks as I approach Birmingham New Street station, on a quest to find “cafe society” in the heart of England. The clouds are thunderous, rain is falling, the temperature is dropping. Convinced that I would be spending the day eating and drinking in the sunshine, I have brought sunglasses but no jacket. My first stop will have to be Primark.

It had all seemed so different a couple of days earlier, having dinner on the pavement in London's Ferrari-filled South Kensington: a hearty French meal served in warm evening sunshine by a perfectly turned out middle-aged waiter in a street full of elegant women walking small dogs. It could have been Nice, Britain, I was sure, had finally become truly European, and we were now fully-fledged members of cafe society.

Was a damp day in Birmingham about to explode my hypothesis?

Happily, an hour later, the storm has abated, the sun is shining and Philip Singleton, assistant director of city centre development and design, is standing beside the canal in the trendy Westside area hymning the new Birmingham.

“Birmingham's always been a very

interesting, vibrant place,” he says, “but it was very different 18 years ago when I arrived here. It's a much more civilised place now, and you civilise a place via its streets and squares, widening pavements, pedestrianising streets, and encouraging good, active shops.”

The aim is to create a “liveable city”. Birmingham is twinned with Lyon and, as it embarks on a 20-year regeneration programme called the Big City Plan, it is consciously trying to emulate its French sibling. Singleton points out a bridge with shops over the canal which, a trifle ambitiously, he thinks resembles the Ponte Vecchio in Florence.

“Bars, cafes, shops and clubs. It's verging on a 24-hour economy, and the benefit is more people, so you get natural policing,” he says. This “natural policing” is what the government was after when it introduced 24-hour drinking in 2005, though figures suggest the hoped for decline in binge drinking and associated violence has failed to materialise.

But in truth not much natural policing is needed this lunchtime in Birmingham as the canalside bars are fairly empty. UK-style cafe society is less well rooted than its continental counterpart; we Anglo-Saxons still have a mental block about lunch.

Outside Costa coffee, five BT marketing executives are having a meeting. They bear out one of Singleton's points: execs are mobile now, Wi-Fied up, freed from their offices and animating city centres. “Cafes are now their offices,” he says. “You don't even have to buy a coffee.” These BT execs have come from all over the UK, preferring to meet rather than video conference, and doing so in Birmingham because it's a convenient midpoint. Do they think we are moving to a cafe society? Is Birmingham the new

Lyon? “Well, the crime rates are similar,” says Russell Cartwright, tapping away on a laptop. “Cafe culture is not going to bite in this country because it rains all the time. Also, we work harder than the French and we haven't got the same palate, so we don't really appreciate the coffee. It's a facade.”

“The UK doing cafe culture is a bit like watching your dad dance,” he says. “We're never really going to carry it off with any aplomb and sophistication like the French. The cafe culture in France is different from the one here. In the UK, it is very much the Starbucks culture. It's been transmitted from America, rather than trying to replicate the French version, which is much more relaxed.”

The irony of us trying to decide whether we want American-style or French-style coffee shops is that, as Markman Ellis, author of *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History*, says – we had them first. “The continental notion of the cafe was inspired by a British idea. When the first coffee houses opened in Rome in the late 17th century, they were very much thought of as an imitation of a British model,” he says.

Cafe culture, English-style, began in the 17th century and was associated with radical politics, but its Johnsonian heyday came in the 18th century. “Coffee houses then were very different to what we now think of as ‘cafe culture,’” says Ellis. “They were indoors, for a start, usually on the first floor of a town-house; egalitarian, but you'd rarely find women there. It was more like a club, and they were closely associated with news and debate – two aspects which seem a long way from the Starbucks experience.”

Another chronicler of cafe life, Adrian Maddox, author of *Classic Cafes*, has written lovingly of the generation of

Top 10 outside tables

Tresanton, St Mawes, Cornwall
Fantastic location, beautiful hotel and the food is properly tasty

The Trout, Oxford
Come on a summer evening, perch on a table overlooking the Cherwell, live the Oxford dream

Electric, Portobello Road, London
Come on a Saturday morning to read the papers next to Portobello market

Edgware Road, London
You'll never believe you're not in Lebanon

Petersham Nurseries, Surrey
Pretty setting, and the food, by chef Skye Gyngell, is in a league of its own

Ye Olde Bell Inn, Hurley, Berks
Yummy food, huge garden – what more could an Englishwoman desire?

Royal Botanic Garden Cafe, Edinburgh
Londoners wish Kew Gardens was like this

Felin Fach Griffin, between Brecon and Hay-on-Wye
Simply delicious, weather permitting

Sharpham Vineyard, Devon
Sprawling hills; wine and cheese made on site – idyllic

Trawlers on the Quay, East Looe, Cornwall
Watch the catch come in
Hadley Freeman

cafes, many of them run by Italians and Greeks, that sprang up in the UK in the 1950s, almost all of which have now disappeared with the corporatisation of the high street. He argues that those unpretentious, but often beautiful, establishments were a key agent of social change.

“Classic cafes were vital to the sub-cultural life of postwar Britain,” says Maddox. “Throughout the 60s London dictated youth culture to the rest of the world, and the origins of this ascendancy can be traced back directly to the activities in the cafes of the 1950s. Music, fashion, film, advertising, photography, sex, crime, the avant garde ... The cafes were the creative enclaves where it was all honed. They added an impassioned European vibrancy to Britain's deflated postwar social, artistic and commercial scene.”

He believes these caffs had a life which the new wave of high-street cafes lack.

“What we have now is just a pale imitation of the culture that's been going on in Europe for a century,” he says.

“On the continent, they have little cafes which sell simple food and cheap wine, and connect to street life and the *passaggiatta*, that evening walk families make together. Here it's just a leisure opportunity for big corporations.

“They're selling you a lifestyle offering on the pavement, a chance to eat beside some British dogshit.”



Continued on page 32 »