

Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650-1830

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During the long 18th century imported foodstuffs came to play a central role in the everyday experiences of British people. Women sipped tea in parlours and drawing rooms, while men walked out to coffee houses, taking snuff as they strode, before returning home later to enjoy a dinner of savoury dishes and sweet delicacies laced with sugar and spice. It is these 'new' imported products that form the primary focus of Jon Stobart's *Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650–1830*. Rather than the diner or drinker, however, Stobart largely focuses on the people from which contemporaries purchased such goods – the grocers whose increasingly complicated supply networks allowed them to sell a range of imported goods to an ever-widening group of consumers. Stobart tells a global story through a particular lens, in order to demonstrate how the supply of goods such as tobacco, tea, coffee and chocolate shaped the retail practices and spaces of early modern Britain. By focusing upon the particular in the global, Stobart convincingly reasserts the need for more studies which explore the localised processes that lie at the heart of global trade.

Sugar and Spice focuses upon two main research questions. First, it notes how historians have primarily linked the trade in novel food goods to the rise of Britain as a commercial and imperial power. It also recognizes that historians have understood that the consumption of these goods transformed many aspects of British cultural and social life, from meal times to gender identity. In assessing these historiographical trends Stobart seeks to question whether groceries can bear such a heavy explanatory load. Secondly, and perhaps in reaction to the historiographical responsibility given to imported foodstuffs, Stobart asks: what were the everyday practicalities of selling, buying and consuming such goods? Less a business history, than a history of consumption, Stobart's focus on processes allows him to reassess the usefulness of frameworks concerned with novelty, luxury and utility. By focusing on supply chains, selling practices and consumer behaviours, Stobart demonstrates how contemporary ideas of empire and trade complicated the categorization of 'luxury' goods. In his engaging analysis Stobart shows the multiple meanings that goods such as sugar and spice simultaneously claimed.

In his first chapter Stobart outlines the development of the grocery trade prior to 1650. In its early history, the Pepperers' Guild (chartered in 1180) controlled and managed vendors who sold a range of spices and confectionary. Generally selling in gross, by 1373 such sellers had formed a new guild – the Company of

Grossers. Yet the existence of such Guilds and Companies alludes to a greater degree of definition than grocers could claim in the late middle ages and early modern period. Significant to Stobart's investigation, however, is the way in which grocers obtained supplies of imported foodstuffs. Even in the 15th century large provincial grocers could supply their customers with a range of spices. During the 16th and 17th century, specialized London grocers were increasingly able to supply their provincial counterparts with new, non-perishable goods. Sugar, tobacco, spices and dried fruit became items of central importance to the grocery trade. Prior to 1650, Stobart asserts, the grocery trade was a vibrant and widespread entity, which supplied imported goods to customers well before Jan de Vries classic 'industrious revolution' period. Significantly for Stobart then, although not 'modern' the grocery trade in this period ably incorporated new goods into their stock.

Chapter two explores the new goods of the early modern period – sugar, tobacco, coffee, tea and chocolate. By the third quarter of the 18th century tea, sugar and tobacco were central to the lives of a wide range of people. How then did consumers acquire these new goods? Did they do so through grocers or were other retailers better placed to sell such consumables? By analyzing the stock listed in probate inventories and tradesmen's lists for 133 provincial shops selling groceries, Stobart demonstrates that it was only from the second half of the 18th century that the grocer became the dominant supplier of tea and coffee to provincial consumers. Only once prices had fallen and demand had broadened did the grocery trade expand with more shops being set up and more grocers predominantly supplying a variety of goods such as tea, coffee, sugar, spices and tobacco. Before that point other outlets were the natural retailers of these goods. Coffee houses sold tea leaves and coffee beans, while shoppers could also buy coffee and tea from apothecaries, chinaware dealers, milliners, booksellers and even drapers. In buying goods imported from China, Turkey, Virginia, Jamaica and Carolina customers bought into a range of meanings. Stobart highlights how, in the probate inventories he studied such goods are often listed by provenance as well as substance. Although such analysis might have been more suitable for inclusion in chapter seven, Stobart's inclusion of such questions here challenges the reader to begin to understand the complex meaning newly imported goods held in the lives of 18th-century consumers. Stobart highlights the layers of meaning constructed not just through place of provenance but also through place of production and supply. Nevertheless, Stobart's assertion that 18th-century consumers were aware of both provenance and production is open to question. How do we know that consumers were aware and through what means did they become so? I agree with Stobart that goods need to be understood as representing the 'exotic', empire and connections closer to home – how then might consumers have managed such multi-layered meanings?

Chapter three questions how grocers obtained these imported goods. How did individual provincial shopkeepers link into supply chains? In the 17th and early 18th centuries, provincial shopkeepers traded with London dealers, regional wholesalers and manufacturers to procure imported foodstuffs such as tea. As the 18th century moved on and grocers emerged as an increasingly identifiable and prosperous group, they began to benefit from ever-more complicated supply networks. Between 1756 and 1777 for example, Abraham Dent, a grocer operating in Kirkby Stephen, Westmorland dealt with 190 suppliers in 49 different locations. While Dent used a small number of regular suppliers – relationships marked by their longevity – he was also able to negotiate and trade elsewhere as circumstances prescribed. When dealers began to employ printed price lists for commodities such as tea after the Commutation Act of 1784, these networks shifted once more. Substantially lowering the tax on teas, the Act almost stopped smuggling overnight and had a major impact upon the supply chains of provincial grocers. Despite the importance of smuggling in the early 18th century Stobart gives little room to this form of trade and grocer's relationship to it. In reading the chapter I was keen to learn whether grocers became involved in the illicit trade and if so, how they built relationships within it. After 1784, the more transparent system of prices adopted by dealers benefitted provincial shopkeepers, allowing them a stronger negotiating position and a more prominent place in provincial retail markets.

Chapter four questions where grocery shops were located in provincial towns and cities and in doing so *Sugar and Spice* changes its focus from supply to demand, teasing out the customer's relationship to the grocer's trade. Between the 1760s and 1780s, grocers were usually located in the core retail area of urban

centres. By the 1820s, chapter four tells us, grocers had become more dispersed with only one quarter of grocers found on the main retail streets of provincial towns and cities. Increasingly grocers became located on popular arterial routes, which allowed them to sell to shoppers coming into the centre as well as those in the suburban districts. Customers then increasingly shaped how grocers operated.

Like other types of retailers, grocers appealed to shoppers through implementing increasingly sophisticated designs and layouts in their retail spaces, as chapter five explores. By the mid 18th century it became common for grocers to fit out their shops with a counter, shelves and drawers. Working in combination these fittings allowed grocers to separate and store their products, aiding access through organization. They also provided spaces in which to display goods, which until the development of branded packaging in the 19th century, were visually unappealing. Stobart demonstrates how grocers worked around this problem by hanging candles and arranging loaves of sugar, baskets and boxes on counters. Stobart further argues that rather than following London trends, provincial grocers looked to neighbours and direct competitors when developing their displays. The idea of local trends in shop displays seems compelling and I wanted to learn more about how and when localized methods of display developed. Did certain areas have particularly unusual forms of display? What emerges from Stobart's research is the sense, less of innovative display methods and more that grocers were keen to establish ideas of competence in the minds of their customers. As guardians of specialist knowledge and 'gatekeepers' to a world of goods, shopkeepers needed to establish customer trust. They did this, Stobart reveals, not only through organized displays and ordered stocks but also through sociability. Tea could be tasted and parlours would be open – customers visited not only to purchase but also to make use of the social space of the grocery shop.

In chapter six of the book Stobart explores ideas of service and trust further. He examines when and if grocers moved from a traditional 'service-oriented' model of business based on trust and credit to 'new' practices based on cash sales and fixed prices. In doing so, Stobart explores one of the major research questions at the heart of this book: did new global goods change retail practices? Stobart begins his exploration by examining the practices that grocers enacted within the shop. To do this Stobart is forced to retrace some of the themes explored in chapter five and an amalgamation of the two chapters would perhaps have been useful. Grocers employed their skills in directing consumers through a range of choices, advising and recommending were necessary and making products such as tea available for tasting by having a kettle in the shop. Trust and confidence were important when questions of purity and weight were entered upon. They were also of significance for credit. Stobart demonstrates, however, that rather than a linear change from a traditional regime based on service and credit to one based on fixed prices and ready money, changes to grocers' practices were patchy and contingent. Credit regimes continued, even as fixed prices emerged and ready money was part of the system from the 17th century. Significantly, questions of integrity and trust remained important throughout the period.

Alongside marketing goods and themselves within shop spaces, retailers also relied upon printed forms of advertisements – newspaper notices and more frequently trade cards. How then, chapter seven asks, did grocers choose to depict imported foodstuffs in these forms? In contrast to Troy Bickham, who argued for the importance of examining grocers' trade cards to illuminate how 18th-century consumers related to empire, Stobart reminds historians of the need to explore the multiple cues contained in these visually-arresting printed forms. At the same time Stobart asserts the importance of reading the rich visual images included on trade cards alongside the typical mundane notices that made up newspaper advertisements. In doing so he demonstrates the importance of reading products such as tea as simultaneously everyday and exotic in the 18th century. Stobart suggests that as tea became increasingly familiar and prevalent during the 18th century, grocers used images of distant lands, ships and ports to reaffirm the exotic and valuable nature of such goods. In contrast newspaper notices were much more mundane, focusing on questions of supply, quality, price and retailer location.

Who then were such advertising strategies aimed at? Who purchased groceries? When and how? Despite containing no mention of labourers, daybooks belonging to provincial grocers reveal that a wide variety of people bought groceries from fixed shops including both the wealthy and relatively poor. These consumers

tended to buy a range of goods of different qualities, with even those lower down the social scale purchasing small quantities of high grade tea. The purchase of occasional ‘treats’ suggests that shoppers valued high-grade goods for their physical qualities. Regular shopping also took place, particularly where freshness was of concern, with tea bought at frequent intervals to guarantee fresh supplies. Stobart reveals that different members of the household shared in these shopping tasks, with husbands, wives, children, neighbours and servants all involved. The purchase of certain products was liable to gender preferences, with female account holders more likely to purchase tea and sugar while their male counterparts focused on tobacco and to a lesser extent coffee (which they often consumed in coffee houses rather than the home). What becomes clear through Stobart’s research is that although less shaped by the browse-bargain model of shopping, purchasing groceries did involve skill, with consumers buying particular goods from certain providers in order to maximize on value and quality.

Once purchased, households consumed groceries within the home. In chapter nine Stobart uses English recipe books to explore how such consumption took place. How were groceries used in the production of meals? Were certain goods viewed and consumed as novelties and luxuries? How were certain groceries interrelated within domestic routines? Using English recipe books, Stobart tracks the introduction of ‘new’ groceries into the culinary lexicon. In his analysis Stobart finds that recipe books do reveal changes in tastes. In the 17th and 18th century pepper grew as a general and specific seasoning. Similarly, nutmeg emerged as a central feature of English cooking and sugar remained in frequent and enduring use. Nevertheless, despite the increased use of new groceries, recipes with explicit links to imperial spaces such as India formed a small percentage of those contained in the books Stobart studied. Other geographical and cultural reference points were of much greater importance, with France continuing to hold much ground in culinary terms.

Stobart’s final chapter explores the material culture linked to new foodstuffs. Rather than re-treading the well-worn ground of tea cups Stobart chooses instead to explore the ownership of a wider set of items linked to the consumption of groceries within the home: tea tables, sugar bowls, pepper boxes, casters and snuff boxes. Stobart seeks to reveal more about the public use of such objects by using probate inventories to find where items such as salt, pepper and spice boxes, tea kettles and coffee pots were placed within the home. Can probate inventories allow historians to convincingly situate mobile items within the geography of the home? Little appears to be revealed by such an analysis – spice boxes are in kitchens alongside tea kettles, while coffee and chocolate pots are more widely dispersed in different rooms. What is revealed though is how old and new goods placed alongside each other. Homes were amalgamations of both old and new.

Stobart’s book explores many different aspects of the grocery trade and in taking such a broad view of its significance to cultural, social and economic life during the long eighteenth century, *Sugar and Spice* makes a considerable contribution to our understanding of the everyday practicalities of selling, buying and consuming such goods. We learn from whom grocers obtained supplies, where they were located, what they sold and how, the skills they developed and those they expected from consumers, how they presented themselves and their goods through their shop displays and trade cards, what consumers consumed, when and why. Although ostensibly outside the bounds of this far-reaching survey, I was keen to learn more about the resources that retailers and consumers had at their disposal to understand how products such as tea, coffee, tobacco and sugar were grown and harvested. Stobart states that consumers ‘knew where sugar and tobacco were grown and they were aware of the production systems that operated in the colonies; but other intervening places and processes layered additional meanings onto goods’ (p. 61). Did all consumers know? How did they know about such systems? In what terms were such production systems described and how did this change over time? Exploring these sources may also have added to Stobart’s later discussion around descriptions of certain goods and their representation upon trade cards.

Alongside wanting to learn more about the production of new groceries, I was also keen to understand in greater depth the ways in which grocers operated as businesses. Who set up as grocers? Did they tend to have links to importers? Did they tend to have knowledge of imported foodstuffs, perhaps from previous involvements in global and imperial trade? How did grocers conceive of these goods? Did they use them in their own households? Who worked in grocery shops? What was the role of the grocer’s family? Although

not central to Stobart's explicit focus, much could have been learned about their place in supply networks and how this effected the goods they sold and how they sold them.

Production, supply networks, retail practices and spaces, advertising and consumption all shaped what goods such as tea, tobacco and spices were and could be. By situating these goods within complex and overlapping networks of meaning and practice, Stobart demonstrates how rather than just understood as new and novel, luxury or useful necessity, imported foodstuffs were often simultaneously regarded as exotic and mundane. In addition, Stobart argues that buying and selling new groceries alongside established goods tempered their impact, integrating them into other regimes of value and meaning. At times this engaging book is overly preoccupied with answering the historiographical questions laid by others rather than breaking new ground, nevertheless it becomes clear that Stobart offers an important contribution to the field of consumption history through his insistence that goods can only be understood within the complex processes that supplied, sold and purchased them. Stobart ably demonstrates that only when understanding these processes as interlinking and mutually dependent can such rich histories of consumption and retailing emerge.

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