

LEICESTER CAFES

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When Birch's in Loseby Lane closed in 1977, it looked as if Leicester had lost the last of its older-type cafés. Since the early 1950's they had suffered the same fate as many of the old, locally owned shops in the city centre, forced out by rising overheads, changing tastes and the advent of new competitors.

Most of the local cafés and restaurants which became household names like Winn's, the Mikado, Moreton's and Kunzle's - dated from the periods just before or just after the First World War. Before then the main places offering refreshments had been hotels and public houses, dining rooms or eating houses, the chain of establishments owned by the Leicester Coffee & Cocoa House Company, founded in 1877 (1), and one or two confectioners.

For much of the nineteenth century eating out was mainly a male pursuit; it was not respectable for women to dine publicly in mixed company, and they were not welcome in hotel restaurants (2). Eating houses and dining rooms also tended to be male preserves. The coffee-houses, it is true, did not discriminate, but they were really meant for the working-classes. In towns like Leicester the only establishments middle-class women could patronise with impunity were the few confectioners or pastry cooks who also served refreshments.

Two very well known ones who did this were Crane's at 61 Market Place and Bills' at 1½ Hotel Street. John Crane first appears in directories as a confectioner in 1846, when he was in High Street, but by 1863 he was established in the Market Place. After his death his daughter, Miss Louisa Crane, carried on the business in the Georgian bow-fronted premises where ladies were served with a glass of madeira and a biscuit, discreetly consumed in little curtained alcoves. Crane's disappeared in the nineties to make way for an extension to Adderly's premises (3). James Bills, in Hotel Street, who was well established by the 1870's as one of the town's leading confectioners, was recalled with much affection in later years. His specialities included beefsteak-and-oyster pies, 'yellow tarts' (i.e. lemon cheese cakes), green gooseberry tarts and big, warm Chelsea penny buns (4).

Times, however, were changing, and by 1890 it had become acceptable

for women to eat out in mixed company. In addition the reduction of duty on both tea and coffee had stimulated demand. The moment was right for the introduction of the English version of the continental café.

It was John Shepard Winn, a tea merchant, who in 1892 opened what appears to have been Leicester's first example, the Oriental Café, in existing premises at 18 Market Place. The new undertaking aimed at a more middle-class clientele than the coffee-houses, was a success, and by 1911 had expanded into three of the adjacent shops. Rebuilt between the wars to include the Oriental Hall, scene of 'select' dinner dances, the Oriental was renowned for its three piece orchestra, consisting of piano, cello and violin, playing traditional café music like 'The Indian Love Lyrics' and 'Salut d'Amour' (5). It closed in 1955; the building became a Woolworth's store, and was demolished about five years ago. The Turkey Café, at 24 Granby Street, was Mr Winn's next venture. It was built in 1900 to the design of Arthur Wakerley, with coloured Doulton tiles and *art nouveau* lettering. It was really an architectural pun, illustrating the theme 'Turkey' both in style and in the actual birds, of which there were originally three (6). In the middle 1960's it was bought by Brucciani Limited, and is now a coffee shop and soda fountain. The Café Royal at 44 London Road was opened about 1911 in part of the block, also designed by Arthur Wakerley, which included the Wyvern Hotel of 1895. Like the Turkey Café this too was purchased by Brucciani Ltd, but was demolished in 1974. In the mid-thirties the Kenya Café was opened at 21 Market Street, followed shortly afterwards by the Sunset Café at 7 Haymarket. The Kenya had a fairly short life, and had closed by 1947 (7), but the Sunset survived until it was demolished in 1964 for the Haymarket redevelopment. Winn's cafés once had a high reputation for their cakes, made in their bakery in Bath Lane. Unfortunately standards declined during the Second World War and never really recovered.

Moreton's Café in Hotel Street was a successor to Bills'. George Moreton, a pastrycook who took over the business in the mid nineties, kept the premises much as they had been. His successor, William Moreton, had a more spacious establishment on two floors, with a band (8). Moreton's, famous for its pork pies and sausages, closed in the early 1950's when the premises were demolished for the building of a bank.

Less well known, but of remarkable longevity, was Mrs Sarah Ann Hooper of 20 King Street. She is listed as a confectioner (and also a servants' registry) in the 1888 directory. Sixty-three years later, in 1951, Mrs

CRANE,
Cook * and * Confectioner,

61 MARKET PLACE, LEICESTER.

Wedding Breakfasts, Luncheons, Dinners,
Suppers, &c.,

WITH OR WITHOUT HIRE.

GAME, PERIGORD AND OTHER PIES,
OR ANY SEPARATE DISH SUPPLIED.

BRIDE CAKES ALWAYS READY.

Tea and Coffee in Perfection.

High-Class Refreshments
AT POPULAR PRICES.

WINN'S
ORIENTAL CAFE,

18 MARKET PLACE, LEICESTER.

Two advertisements from Spencer's *Illustrated Leicester Almanack*, 1895

Hooper was still there, by which time her shop was known as Jean's Café. A long, narrow building at the junction of King Street and New Walk, with entrances in both streets, it finally closed in the middle fifties (5).

Pole's Café at 15 Haymarket had also started as a confectioner's, run by Clara Pole at least as early as 1912. The Café occupied part of a large Georgian house, which still retained much of its original decoration on the upper floors. Pole's Café was demolished in 1970.

Another of the new-style cafés was the Mikado at 67 Market Place. It was owned by a London firm, Nelson & Co, and dated from the turn of the century. In spite of its name, the decor, with its murals of coloured tiles, was definitely Turkish. A common sight was a man in a chef's hat roasting coffee beans in the window, the aroma drifting across the Market Place. In its later years an attempt was made to modernize the downstairs part, which was in three sections, with the intrusion of plastic and formica, but the upstairs dining room, with its wicker furniture, remained unchanged. The Mikado Café was closed and the premises sold in 1966 (9). It is described by William Cooper in his novel *Scenes from Provincial Life*, published in 1950.

In spite of the proliferation of the café, the older type of eating house lingered on. Wright's in Granby Street, a survival from the Edwardian era, lasted until the mid 1920's. James Hartopp's Albion Restaurant in Gallowtree Gate, which did not close until about 1955, occupied premises which had been used as dining rooms at least as far back as the 1870's. Olorenshaw's 'dining, grill, oyster and supper rooms' in Humberstone Gate, though they had a twenties look about them, were really in the 19th century tradition. They survived until about 1952.

The Eastern theme, seen already in the Oriental, Turkey and Mikado Cafés, was again repeated in the Egyptian Café at 15 and 16 Silver Arcade. This dated from the early 1920's, had several owners, and closed shortly after 1960. It had a slightly dubious reputation.

Another café which opened in the twenties was Kunzle's. Christian Kunzle was a confectioner who had had a shop in Market Street before the First World War. About 1927 he opened a café at 52 Granby Street in premises formerly occupied by Wright's eating house. Kunzle's, noted for their chocolate-covered Kunzle cakes, survived until the mid-1950's.

J.S. Winn & Co. Ltd. Cafés



Oriental Café Turkey Café
12-20 Market Place 24-26 Granby St
Café Royal Wolsey Café
44 London Road 28 Belgrave Road
Tel. 4104
LEICESTER

Advertisement from *Burrow's Guide to Leicester*, c 1925

Some time in the middle forties, what had previously been Riley's Café at 17 Loseby Lane was taken over by Allen Birch. For thirty years or so it was a popular rendezvous, with its small tables crowded close together on two floors, its steep and narrow stairs, and a market town cosiness increasingly hard to find in post-war Leicester. Its closure in 1977 seemed sad but somehow inevitable, and it was all the more remarkable when early in 1978 it reopened, under a different ownership, but otherwise apparently unchanged.

References:

1. The coffee-houses are described by Malcolm Elliott in 'The Leicester Coffee-House and Cocoa-House Movement', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, XLVII, 1971-2, pp 55-60.
2. The newer, larger hotels solved this problem by having segregated coffee rooms for guests who did not wish to dine in their own rooms.
3. I C Ellis, *Records of Nineteenth Century Leicester*, p 121
4. *Ibid*, p 172
5. Information from Eric Swift
6. P Atterbury and L Irvine, *The Doulton Story*, pp 98-9: Leicester City Planning Department, *Leicester's Architectural Heritage*, p 56; this shews the original façade.
7. It is now a jeweller's shop.
8. I C Ellis, *op cit*, p 172
9. It is now a chemist's shop.



Advertisement from *Leicester: a guide to places of interest in the city*,
c 1945