



*“Babington’s English Tea Rooms:  
100 years of history”*

From the book:

**BABINGTON'S ENGLISH TEA ROOMS:**  
**100 years of history**

by

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English adaptation

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If, then, Italy, has never been a tea-dreanking country, what is an English Tearoom doing at the very heart of its capital, and how has this survived for a hundred years? To answer this question, we need to look at Rome in the 19th century and at the Piazza di Spagna in particular.

And the American George Stillman Hillard in his valuable “Six Months in Italy”, 1853, goes so far as to warn his readers that, once he or she has reached Piazza di Spagna “he will find himself surrounded by hotels, pensions, caffès, shops”. He goes on: “This is the most active and least Roman part of Rome; being wholly given over to the descendants of those blue-eyed and fair-haired barbarians, who once subdued the Eternal City with steel, as their children now do with gold. Here, the English speech is the predominating sound, and sturdy English forms and rosy English faces the predominating sight. Here, are English shops, an English livery-stable, and an English readingroom, where elderly gentleman in drab gaiters, read the Times newspaper with an air of grim intensity. Here, English grooms flirt with English nursery-maids, and English children present to Italian eyes the living types of the cherub heads of Correggio and Albani. It is, in short, a piece of England dropped upon the soil of Italy”.

In other words, the English community had provided itself with every sort of home comfort except one: the only thing that was missing was a Tea Room.

The turning point came when, in 1892, two young ladies, Miss Anna Maria Babington and Miss Isabel Cargill, arrieved in Eternal City with their little hoard of one hundred pounds and their intention of making a respectable living. Who were these two young ladies? Anna Maria Babington came from a numerous family of Derbyshire origins and counted among her ancestors the Antony Babington who, in 1586, has hanged, drawn and quartered for plotting against Elizabet I. A more mecent ancestor was Thomas Ba-

bington Macaulay, the famous nineteenth century historian and politically motivated execution in the family: Covenanter Donald Cargill as deeply convinced a Calvinist as Antony Babington was a Catholic, had travelled throughout Scotland preaching sermons accusing Charles II of treason, tyranny and lechery. In 1681 he was captured and put to death near Edinburgh.

On the 5th of December, 1893, then, Miss Babington and Miss Cargill opened their Tea-rooms in Via Due Macelli, near the Piazza di Spagne. It was a fine novelty for the city of Rome. A few days before the opening, the English language weekly newspaper, “The Roman Herald” had announced enthusiastically to its readers that “A long-felt want in Rome has at last been supplied, and that is a Tearoom where ladies or gentleman, hard at work sightseeing... could go to refresh themselves with a comforting cup of tea or coffee, with the necessary adjuncts, a quiet read of the best English, Italian and foreign daily newspapers, including the illustrated Xmas number, a tidy up and good warm...”

Clearly, even after so short a time, business was thriving for Miss Babington and Miss Cargill. Do much so that in 1896 they transferred their venture to larger premises in the Piazza di Spagna itself.

A faithful description of the new Rooms has come down to us from Dorothy, Isabel Cargill’s daughter: “Wall to wall coconut matting was laid on the floor and gas chandeliers installed. The walls had a wainscoting of dark green and brown linoleum, - presumably the very latest in tasteful decoration at the time – “It was furnished with square pitch-pine tables for four with larger round tables in the corners. Upholstered seats lined the walls, a big ornamental palm stood in the middle of the first room and two plants of bamboo flanked the steps leading under the arch and gathered into two rings at the sides. The chairs were simple turned wood with green and straw-coloured straw seats. The

tea-pots, made in Britannia metal, had been imported from England, as this commodity was unheard of in Italy... At the head of the three steps leading to the second room, Miss Babington or Miss Cargill sat behind their desk, their little dog at their feet”.

With the outbreak of the First World War, life became very hard for the founders of Babington’s. Giuseppe da Pozzo suffered from heart disease and was increasingly dependent on his wife, but even he wanted to do what he could to keep the business on its feet. He gave himself the job of going by tram to the banks to have the paper money changed into almost unfindable coins. It must have been a hard time indeed. Dorothy remembers: “I was at the window with my mother. It was raining outside and my mother had tears streaming down her face. ‘If only we had an income of even a hundred pounds a year, how different our life would be’”. For a woman known for her optimism this was a serious admission to make.

In the meantime, as the 1930s progressed, the city’s numerous tea rooms, began to disappear one by one from the guide books. This was not surprising. Tea-drinking was “foreign”, and in a society that was becoming increasingly xenophobic and isolationist, tea rooms would be the first thing to go. It is one of the ironies of history that Babington’s, with his name - English Tearooms – in bold bronze characters set in very Roman travertine marble, should continue to thrive throughout the Fascist period. And the high ranking members of the regime who were politely served with tea and scones in the first room never knew that the third room, only a few metres away round the corner, was the chosen meeting place of the anti-fascist intelligentsia.

Every morning throughout the long years of the war, often having to walk from their homes on the far side of the city, Giulia, Anita and Crescenza took down the shutters from the windows and opened for business as usual. The “faithful” clients continued to come,

perhaps recognising the need for some kind of human normality in a world gone mad. As food shortages became acute, new recipes had to be invented to replace traditional ones, and the resourceful Crescenza satisfied clients with nut croquettes, potato-flour bread, chick-pea-flour scones and dried-chestnut-flour cakes.

In his “ A traveller in Rome”, (1957) H.V. Morton points out that “modern tourist in their open necked shirts” now sit next to the “little groups of contesse and marchesi taking tea together” (and he doubted whether Miss Babington would have approved). But the point is that the party of tourists from Japan have no idea that the quite people at the next table are a royal couple in exile or that the two men in deep discussion over the way are government ministers.

The complete version of this book  
is purchasing by Babington's Tea Rooms.

Babington's Tea Rooms  
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