



“Happy, happy breakfast!”

Tea in the Morning



Happy, happy breakfast! for Henry had been there, Henry had sat by her and helped her.

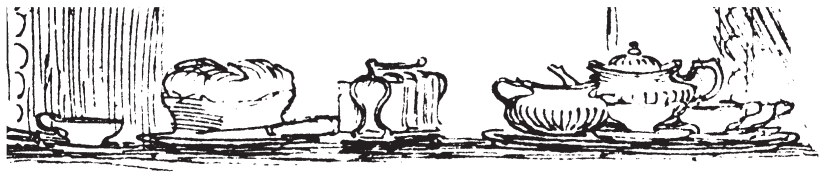
— *Northanger Abbey*

Breakfast with the Austens

Jane Austen was in charge of making her family's breakfast every morning, including that most important part of breakfast: the tea. Producing a really good, hot, steaming pot of fragrant tea requires just the right touch, and Jane, a tea lover, was no doubt pleased to make the family's tea exactly as she liked it. She would have made it much the way we make good tea today, with freshly boiling water poured bubbling over high-quality, loose tea in a nice, fat, warmed teapot. Jane probably would have boiled the water in the Austens' large, copper tea kettle right in the dining room, on the black hob grate set into the fireplace.

She may have used a teapot from a special breakfast set (a friend gave Jane's mother a Wedgwood breakfast set in 1811). China breakfast sets usually included a teapot, cups and saucers, a creamer, a sugar basin, and sometimes a matching tray. Such sets were fragile as well as valuable. Jane's nephew wrote in his memoir of her, "Some ladies liked to wash with their own hands their choice china after breakfast or tea," and Jane may well have preferred to wash the china herself rather than entrust it to the maid.

The tea itself (at that time extremely expensive and therefore prone to pilfering by servants), was kept locked away in a dining room cupboard, to which Jane alone had the keys. The Austens may have kept their tea in a china tea canister, or, more probably, in a locked tea caddy, which seems to have been the most common kind of tea container. Tea caddies were often made of fine inlaid woods or decorated in some other attractive fashion. A popular craft for young ladies was to decorate a tea caddy with filigree work:



rolled strips of paper applied in a fanciful pattern. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy Steele, sly flatterer that she is, makes a filigree basket for Lady Middleton's spoiled daughter and no doubt would have eagerly decorated a tea caddy for Lady Middleton had she been asked.

Caddies were generally divided into two sections to hold two different sorts of tea (usually green and black), and often included a crystal bowl for blending the tea. A small brass or silver scoop, called a tea ladle, was used to measure out the tea leaves. In 1808 Jane Austen recorded her mother's purchase of a "silver Tea-Ladle" and "six whole Teaspoons, which makes our sideboard border on the Magnificent."

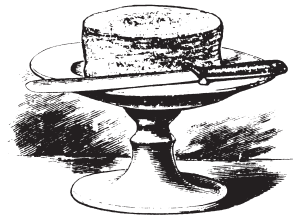
Jane most likely took sugar in her tea—most English people did in her time—but I don't think she took milk or cream. Writing to her sister, Cassandra, about a young lady of their acquaintance, she said, "There are two Traits in her Character which are pleasing; namely, she admires [the novel] *Camilla*, & drinks no cream in her Tea."

The Austens kept their sugar locked up because it, too, was expensive. It was sold in many grades, from the highly refined, pure white sugar that only the well-off could afford, down to the darkest of brown sugars used by the poor. Granulated sugar had been only recently invented and was not yet widely available. Sugar was molded into large, cone-shaped loaves weighing several pounds each that had to be broken up or grated before the sugar could be used. Sugar cubes would not be invented until 1843—if people wanted sugar for tea, they had to first break it into irregular lumps with



At 9 o'clock she made breakfast—that was *her* part of the household work—The tea and sugar stores were under *her* charge.

— *My Aunt Jane Austen*,
by Caroline Austen



The breakfasts are generally very frugal, consisting commonly of tea, and muffins or hot rolls, with good butter. Coffee is less frequently used; and it is seldom good. I could rarely get it strong or clear, and in this only does there seem to be any proof that the English do not understand cooking.

— Letters from England, by Joshua White, 1810

special tools called “sugar nippers,” from which practice comes the traditional question “One lump or two?”

The breakfast Jane made for her family was a light, elegant meal consisting of toast, or perhaps muffins or rolls, in addition to the tea. The Austens had a cook, who would have done the actual baking. She probably sliced the bread in the kitchen and brought it to the table in a toast rack, ready for Jane to toast. To make the toast, Jane would have used a long-handled toasting fork or a hearth toaster (a metal rack designed to hold the bread in place) to toast the bread over the open fire—a tricky business. In Jane Austen’s unfinished novel *Sanditon*, fussy Arthur Parker shows Charlotte Heywood his mastery of the skill: “I hope you will eat some of this Toast,” said he. “I reckon myself a very good Toaster; I never burn my Toasts—I never put them too near the Fire at first—& yet, you see, there is not a Corner but what is well browned.”

With the toast went good country butter, and sometimes raspberry jam made in the Austen household or honey from Cassandra’s beehives. Jane and Cassandra’s mother, who suffered from digestive disorders and “bilious complaints,” preferred to eat dry toast for breakfast, but hypochondriac Arthur Parker has the

opposite fear—that dry toast will “hurt the coats of the stomach.” Arthur, a stout young man, amuses Charlotte when he assures her that the best way to protect his stomach from toast that “irritates and acts like a nutmeg grater” is to eat as much butter as possible on his toast, much to his sisters’ disapproval: “Charlotte c[oul]d hardly contain herself as she saw him watching his sisters while he scrupulously scraped off almost as much butter as he put on, & then seizing an odd moment for adding a great dab just before it went into his Mouth.”

When the Austens lived in the country, at Steventon and later at Chawton, good butter would have been readily available, but when they lived in the cities of Bath and Southampton, quality milk and butter would have been harder to procure. Fresh dairy products were difficult to import from the countryside, especially in warm weather. To help solve this problem, cows were often kept in cities to provide for the city dwellers. Yet the diet of city cows was so poor that they generally produced unappetizing, watery milk and inferior butter. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, banished to the city of Portsmouth, must drink her tea with unappealing milk that is “a mixture of motes floating in thin blue.” Jane once wrote to Cassandra complaining about Bath butter: “My breakfast supplied only two ideas, that the rolls were good, & the butter bad.”



Breakfast with Mr. Darcy

Though breakfast in British households might mean variations on the theme of tea and toast, the meal could sometimes be a luxurious affair. At the grander houses, such as Mr. Darcy’s Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, boiling water for tea in a simple copper kettle on the hearth would have been unthinkable. Instead,