



THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

The East India Company was established in 1600 to challenge the Dutch-Portuguese monopoly of the spice trade. Queen Elizabeth granted the company monopoly rights to bring goods from India. With the approval of local Indian rulers, the East India Company (EIC) established trading posts in Bengal and Madras, trading in cottons, silks, indigo, saltpetre, tea and spices. Spices were valuable for use as a preservative (for otherwise inedible meat) and in medicines. Nutmeg was much sought after for the treatment of rheumatism and cloves for toothache.

From the original subscribing merchants in London, a Court of Directors emerged with 24 members elected by the shareholders for a 4-year period of office.

It was not long before the Company was one of the largest employers of labour around London, with dockyards of its own at Deptford and Blackwall, as well as warehouses, foundries, cordage works, sawmills and even slaughterhouses where cattle were butchered to victual the Company's growing fleet of East Indiamen. All this was supervised from a sequence of headquarters until in 1726 a splendid new building went up in Leadenhall St. from which the Company functioned for the rest of its days.

A third major centre for the EIC governance of India was set up in 1819, when Mountstuart Elphinstone, formerly Governor of Madras, was then appointed Governor of Bombay. The 3 Presidencies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay expanded rapidly as military and administrative establishments. Mountstuart Elphinstone's country house was Hookwood, in Limpsfield, Surrey. He was a cousin of John Fullerton Elphinstone who in 1826 had purchased Ford Manor, Dormans Land - (*see: Local Servants of the EIC*).

The 3 Presidencies were independent of each other and corresponded directly with London. The President, or Governor, was supported by senior merchants from whose ranks was selected a council of ten members. New administrators were recommended to the Governing Board, if approved they began their career as 'writers' (clerks), commonly spending 5 years in post before promotion to 'factors', then 3 years in that post before promotion to Junior Merchant.

The biggest hazard that faced the British in India was to their health. Between 1707 and 1775 - 57% of the Company's employees died of sickness in Bengal. In the worst decade, 1747 to 1756, the toll stood at 74%. The British too ate and drank far more than was safe for them in the climate. They drank punch in large quantities. The name

'Punch' was derived from the Malathi word for '5' - the number of ingredients in the concoction - sugar, lime-juice, spice, water and arrack (the local spirit).

Despite the risk to their health, and the uncomfortably long sea journey (the round voyage between London and India could take up to 18 months) the Company was never short of recruits. Young men left for India by boatloads hoping to make their fortunes. The Mughal authorities distributed favours for a variety of services rendered and there were great opportunities for gain, even though the Company paid a fixed salary for their work

Three armies were centred on the presidencies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay; composed mainly of Indians called sepoy ('sepoy' derived from the Urdu 'sipahi') with British officers, although there were some wholly European regiments. In addition, British army regiments were hired from the crown. The military organisation of the Company in India was complex. At any one time the Company might deploy native troops (sepoys) of its Indian army, European troops of the same army, troops of the British army stationed in India and subsidised by the Company, forces of Indian princes or states in alliance with the Company and irregular cavalry or troops formally or informally associated with the Company. This complexity is a reflection of the ad hoc evolution of the forces.

At its height the Indian army consisted of 250,000 men, of which no more than 45,000 were European officers and other ranks. Sepoys were professional soldiers who served the Company in return for a livelihood, status, security and honour. A sepoy would often be a small landowner; the pay was sufficiently good for a man to be able to support his extended family, to employ a bag handler, and others to cook and look after his needs.

For European officers, the Indian army had many attractions. Unlike the Crown army, commissions were not bought but achieved on merit, which attracted the ambitious sons of the middle classes. Nor, of course, could commissions be sold, so officers would try to make as much money as possible while on active service. Field allowances were generous and postings gave opportunities to make substantial amounts of money. In 1809 a Company Cadet College was founded at Addiscombe in Surrey, which provided training for this new European officer class.

Even after the Suez Canal began to be used for the Indian trooping service, during the winter of 1868-9, the sea voyage from Portsmouth to Bombay still took over five weeks.

Apart from the fighting, soldiers had to contend with the heat, the flies, the mosquitoes and the risk of illness; in particular cholera and dysentery. Barrack accommodation was not available for all the troops, the remainder were housed in overcrowded tents which became unbearably hot.

The East India Company in China

The English East India Company established trading links with China in 1699 and became the first company to set up a permanent establishment in Canton in 1715. The Emperor maintained strict direct control of trade which he restricted to Canton.

Western trading nations were allowed to establish factories along the Canton waterfront. The EIC had a palatial factory with a decorative balcony overlooking a lush garden. The factory typically housed 12 Supercargoes (officers in charge of commercial activities), 8 writers, 2 tea inspectors, 2 surgeons and a chaplain. Native employees worked as clerks and local tax collectors.

Foreign trade was confined to, at most, four months in the year, between October and March, when the winds of the South China Sea allowed. For the remaining eight months of the year the Chinese authorities insisted that all foreign traders should leave Canton. All staff then retired to the Portuguese colony of Macao, at the mouth of the Pearl River on which Canton lay. Eight months of leisure followed, consisting of a social round of balls, tea parties and cricket matches.

A posting as writer was usually acquired by patronage; the Directors of the Company controlled the selection process, enabling them to place relatives and friends in positions that could make their fortunes. A writer would be paid 100 pounds a year, but that might rise in 5 years to 1,000 pounds, with all living expenses paid. The Supercargoes could, with commissions, earn 9,000 pounds a year, which was enough for a comfortable retirement after a few years' service.

Tea was not the initial target of the Company's trade with China but it rapidly assumed enormous significance. By 1750 the Company was shipping over **2.5 million lbs** of tea a year - this could fetch 5 shillings a lb. at auction in London - at least twice the cost price in Canton. The British Government placed sky-high duties on tea imports, which, by the year 1800, had reached over **20 million lbs** a year, producing more revenue than the whole of India. The high cost of tea encouraged a black market trade and gangs of smugglers were active throughout Kent, Sussex and Surrey. The EIC held its monopoly on the China trade until 1833.

The teas were predominantly green (unfermented) teas and were called by curious names:

Hyson Skin, Bing, Caper and Twankey (after which Gilbert & Sullivan's Widow Twankey was named).

Sir Joseph Banks, the botanist, was an advisor to the EIC, and was interested in the potential for growing Chinese varieties of tea in India (from the *Camellia Sinensis* leaf). Banks had a tea house in the basement of his house in Soho Square, and experimented with many different flavourings including the addition of bergamot oil (the nearest thing to the Chinese bitter orange). The recipe for Earl Grey tea most likely resulted from those experiments; the recipe was named after the Prime Minister, Earl Grey.

Other commodities imported to Britain from China included Chinese lacquered furniture, usually based on western designs and mainly commissioned by private traders. Chinese craftsmen were skilled ivory carvers. Substantial amounts of ivory were shipped to Canton from India, south-east Asia and even Africa. High quality carved ivory fans, game sets and workboxes were made for the export market.

From the late 18th century porcelain decorated with 'Chinese designs' was in high demand - a fashion that came to be known as Chinoiserie. Chinese wallpaper was highly popular in the homes of the rich European households.

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Sources:

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