

THE CHINA CLUB REVISITED IN AN ECONOMIC CONTEXT - AN IDEA TOO LATE FOR ITS TIME.

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The China Club, or the China Society as its members preferred to call it, was a trade group comprising retailers and wholesalers of ceramic wares. It was set up by Miles Mason in London and operated between 1785 and 1788.

Little had been discovered about this organisation before Kay Staniland realised the significance of the Memorandum Book¹, a large manuscript volume in the Guildhall Library in London. Her paper on the contents of this book, which comprised its rules, attendance records, minutes, accounts, and correspondence, appeared in the NCS Journal, Volume 9, in 1992.

The book itself is described in the fly-leaf as being in the ownership and containing the work of a china-man, James Coombes. It was sold in the 1890's for five guineas because it contains heraldic drawings, both in black and white and coloured, of fine quality.

At the time the China Club was established the English economy was growing fast, and there may have appeared to be many threats to the established dealers in china-ware. This paper will show the market and economic circumstances which lead to its formation, the short period of considerable influence that the China Club enjoyed,

and market forces, together with a generous helping of human nature, that ultimately caused it to fail.

Without repeating all of the previous NCS paper it is necessary to start by setting out what the China Club was all about. To do this it is probably easiest first to repeat at least some of the membership rules in abbreviated form.

1 Members met initially every Friday in the Globe Tavern in Fleet Street.

2 No member was allowed to purchase goods at "night sales" unless such a sale was being conducted by Trustees or upon the event of an insolvency.

3 At private and trade sales members would only bid an agreed price. They would meet beforehand to agree such prices and share any profits equally.

4 Members were allowed to sell goods at a meeting through the Chairman at fixed prices

5 Members could not offer more than 7 parcels of goods at any one meeting.

The remainder of the rules concerned administrative matters, but the first five, in a nutshell, describe the conduct of organisation that sought to boycott certain sales of which they did not approve, but at the same time operated as an auction ring. A similar venture today would be illegal, and as I will show, the issue of legality may in fact have been crucial then too, but there is little doubt that when the rules were established the members would have considered their club to be a legitimate way of countering the activities of other dealers who they considered to be less legitimate in their business practices. That the China Club did wield significant influence for a while was a testimony to the power and market influence of its membership, and indeed in its aspiration to control manufacturers' sales its intentions went beyond the simple remit of a buying cooperative.



Figure 1. Globe Tavern header page for first meeting.

1. The Minutes and Accounts of The China Club, Guildhall Library, MS 456

William Hewson Senior.

A person of that name traded from Hewits Court, St Martins Lane as early as 1748⁶. He traded at least between 1780 and 1802¹ from 388 The Strand. He imported French china and also sold glassware, laquerware, mats, and fans.

Robert Hillcock.

Operated initially in Bishopsgate from about 1772 but at some time during the 1780s or 1790s moved to Cheapside, from whence he operated at least between 1794 and 1811⁷. A somewhat coy member of the China Club who was fined for declining to take the post of Chairman when it was offered to him in December 1785.

Miles Mason.

The founder Chairman, who went on to become a manufacturer and whose subsequent history has been well documented.

George Neunburg.

A very significant dealer in Derby porcelains⁸. He operated from 75 Cornhill and is traceable in insurance records and trade directories from 1776 to 1802⁹.

John Roberts.

A John Roberts insured premises in Holborn, near Hatton Garden as early as 1756, although Toppin says he was succeeded by Ann Buck who used the same trade card. However, the relevant John Roberts is probably that listed in trade directories at 117 Holborn (possibly the same address) from 1775 to 1794.

An excellent and recently published paper given to the English Ceramic Circle by Robin Hildyard gives further biographical details of some of the above¹⁰.

So what motivated Miles Mason and these other china dealers to establish the China Club? One has to surmise that the most obvious reason would be to

protect their profits, and indeed this is usually at the heart of most attempts to control prices in an otherwise free market. A concern about price levels and, it appears, smuggled goods, was at the heart of the problem as the chinamen would have seen it. But, as this paper will demonstrate, the economic and market context was very much broader and more powerful than something a few men in London could control.

In the early years of the China Club there is evidence that they wielded much influence. There was extensive correspondence with the Duesbury's, culminating in the following letter, sent by William Duesbury Jnr and dated 11th October, 1785.

Amongst other information received from Mr Mason I understand that Mr Duesbury's Spring Sales to the Nobility have given you offence. I take therefore this method on behalf of my Father and self to assure you that we mean the ensuing Spring to discontinue the same...both Mr Duesbury and myself receiving infinitely greater satisfaction in the Idea of Vending our Manufactures thro' the medium of Gentlemen of the China Trade than thro' any other mode whatsoever. I remain, Gentlemen, your Obedient Humble Servant, William Duesbury Junior.

The power wielded over such manufacturers such as Derby must have been in fine balance. Nearly all the dealers identified above as members of the China Club sold Derby porcelains, this has become clear following the research by Andrew Ledger. It is unsurprising that it was Georg Neunburg who mediated with the Duesbury's as he was one of the largest dealers in their wares. Many manufacturers had London warehouses, so the relationship with the dealers was a subtle one with mutual benefits. The sale of wares to Country dealers by those in London was an important factor. Probably initiated decades before with imported Chinese Wares, these intra dealer trading

6. Source, Sun Insurance records at the Guildhall Library, 16th May 1748, MS 11936/82

7. Holden's London Directory 1811

8. A.P. Ledger: *Derby Porcelain Archive Research. Volume 2. The Bedford Street Warehouse and the London China Trade 1733 - 1796*

9. Neunburg & Nash, Glass Manufactory, *Holden's Directory 1802*

10. London Chinamen and Others *ECC Transactions* Volume 18 part 3

relationships were long established and few manufacturers seemed to try to break it by selling direct to Country dealers.

Other china-men also fell within the scrutiny of the Club. In 1785, William Hussey, who traded from Coventry Street and subsequently from Gough Sq. Fleet Street, requested members to attend his sale on the dissolution of his partnership with Mr Lucas. Presumably because his activities did not meet with the approval of the Club, this request was refused. It is evident that later Hussey came under considerable pressure from the China Club. At one point the pressure was sufficient for Hussey to suggest that there should be a meeting of the “whole trade”, although this was firmly rebuffed. In January 1786 William Hussey appeared to cave in, and he wrote the following letter:

I having received a letter from Mr Fogg wherein he informed me that any proposal I shall make to the China Club will have an impartial hearing and if found agreeable will be accepted – The following proposals I hope will meet with approbation:

*First To give up serving Country Dealers
Second To discontinue all Night Sales
Third Not to sell Retail*

If the above is found Worthy of your Sentiments I hope I shall be Worthy of your Confidence.

*I am Gentlemen with all Due Respect, your
Ready Servant
Wm Hussey*

The 1785/86 period probably represents the peak of the influence of China Club, but it was not long before Derby Spring sales were being considered again, and Hussey wrote in March of 1786 withdrawing his almost suicidal offer and saying that it was out of his power to maintain his proposals given that he was an advocate of liberty.

The general porcelain sales of the East India Company were held twice a year, in March and September, and although there were Private Trade sales at other times these were presumably rather unpredictable and occasional shortages of imported porcelains may have occurred. It is evident from the records of a dispute between the East India

Company and the London China trade that a large proportion of the trade were purchasing from the auctions. The Club's rules may have sometimes made it difficult for their members to make a living, and as early as April 1786 the restriction on attending night sales was suspended for three months, this being extended again for a further three months from July.

The fact that promises previously made by manufacturers and dealers were being withdrawn, and even the rule on attending night sales had to be relaxed, shows that quite quickly the influence of the China Club started to wane. To understand this it is necessary to consider the market in an economic context.

In the 1780s, as at other times, the key economic influences on price levels can be summarised thus:

- 1 Availability of the product.
- 2 Consumer demand (influenced by the ability to pay).
- 3 Production costs and the competitive environment.

In the eighteenth century the wider factors that came into play were more numerous than today, and caused more volatility. When the century began agriculture had a significant impact on the general economy. The “barren years” of the end of the 17th century had seen high food prices. When Rye and Oat prices were high and the general harvest bad, farmers could not feed cattle through the winter. Meat and bread shortages pushed prices up to the point where many on near subsistence levels of income could scarcely afford to eat. Agricultural produce also had a wider effect on the availability of industrial products. Tallow from sheep was used to make candles, animal fats were used to make soap, hops and Barley for ales, wheat for starch and paper. The vision, after successive bad harvests, of the poor sitting hungry and in the dark without a glass of ale to comfort them was not so far from the truth.

For the first half of the century therefore, consumer demand for more luxurious goods was still vulnerable to a downturn when people had to tighten their belts to buy the basics. Prices rose in the first quarter of the century, but they stabilised for a long period through mid century and did not,

apart from the short term fluctuations in prices of agriculturally influenced products, begin to move up sharply again until the last quarter. Indeed there is evidence that in the second quarter of the century¹¹ the economy was generally weak, so the emergence of the porcelain factories in the 1740's and 1750's may have been less successful were it not for the recovery in demand that was at last emerging.

The influence of manufacturing industries progressively increased as the industrial revolution gained momentum. Labour ebbed and flowed between agriculture and manufacturing. As agriculture became more efficient foodstuffs became more plentiful, but the enclosure of land into larger lots probably meant that fewer people were needed to tend an acre of land. Labour movement from the land to manufacturing was influenced by economic factors, but in a sense the manufacturers did no more than mop up the growing population, and they did this without a significant poaching of people still needed on the farms.

The china-men in London must have been aware that there was a general hostility to traders and middlemen. Laws existed to protect these old ideas.

We have a wise law that says that no man shall sell beef who does not kill beef,

wrote Charles Townshend¹². Similarly drovers were not allowed to deal in the animals they drove, and a "common brewer" was not allowed to sell retail.

In 1747 R. Campbell, wrote his book *The London Tradesman* providing advice to parents on suitable trades and apprenticeships for their children. His views on retailers spoke for themselves when he compared the earthenware man to a grocer:

Both...tradesmen reap large profits from their business; but require no great genius to fit them for their Trade. I apprehend it scarce worthwhile to serve a seven year apprenticeship to learn the art of buying and selling the materials they furnish their shops with. They

having nothing to learn but the market price of goods, and to be so cunning as not to sell for less than they buy.

The top end of the china trade, at least, because it dealt in Chinese, French, and German porcelains, was supplying otherwise unavailable imported products, so despite such biases the trade was able to develop. In London it had not only to supply the growing local population but also to protect and grow the wholesale market. Few substantial potteries remained there in the second half-century. The success of the London wholesale trade, whose foundations were built on the distribution of imported Chinese porcelains, meant that many goods from provincial factories were routed through London to other provincial towns. London not only was the only port where East India goods were landed but its port also accounted for the majority of England's exports.

Population continued to grow throughout the century. In London it nearly doubled over the century. But there were significant fluctuations, and in the first half century in particular there was a direct correlation between bad harvests and death rates. In the period 1730-49 from the Bills of Mortality in London 74.5% of deaths were in children under five, and total deaths exceeded baptisms by around 65% or approximately 200,000. In the period 1770-89 the under fives accounted for 51.5% and by 1810-29 it had fallen to 31.8% with baptisms exceeding deaths by 80,000 or 20%.¹³ There is no doubt that the improvements in healthcare that became so obvious in the second half of the nineteenth century were already under way in the eighteenth. Population growth in London was more about limiting deaths than the higher birth rate, but this was not the only influence as the population was also boosted by incomers from other parts of the country and from abroad.

The importance of communications by road, sea, and river was not lost on industry as it grappled with the problems of distributing rising outputs to a growing population. In 1751 when heavy rains damaged the poor roads in the Derby area, the price of a bag of coal rose from 4d to 8d. This must have

11. *Deceleration in the Eighteenth Century British Economy*, Anthony J Little, 1976.

12. "National thoughts recommended to the serious attention of the public"

13. *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, M. Dorothy George, 1925, Appendix C

affected the Derby manufactory greatly. However, subsequently roads were improved, and reduced journey times made it possible for wares to reach London at a more competitive price.

Investment in the canal system was very significant for the china trade and Wedgwood was at the forefront of the initiatives that enabled the Staffordshire potters to get their products to the Port of Liverpool, and thence to other English towns including London as well as to the export markets. Perhaps even more important to the potteries was a supply of coal.

Transport by sea around the coast of Britain was the mainstay of getting coal to the towns outside the mining areas. Coal was so significant to the sea freight business that return loads navigating from South to North were generally much cheaper than those from North to South, the latter being fully utilised for coal. The weight of coal used in firing kilns far exceeded the weight of clay used in the products. No surprise then, that potteries sprung up near the coal mining areas of Staffordshire and imported clay from Cornwall, rather than the reverse.

Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations*, exhorted all to make better use of transport by sea, arguing that it was much cheaper.¹⁴

Six or eight men.....by the help of a water-carriage, can carry and bring back in the same time the same quantity of goods between London and Edinburgh, as fifty broad wheeled waggons, attended by a hundred men, and drawn by four hundred horses. Upon two hundred tons of goods, therefore, carried by the cheapest land carriage from Edinburgh, there must be charged the maintenance of a hundred men for three weeks, and both the maintenance, and what is nearly equal to the maintenance, the wear and tear of four hundred horses and fifty great wagons. Whereas, upon the same quantity of goods carried by water, there is to be charged only the maintenance of six to eight men, the wear and tear of a ship of two hundred tons burden, together with the value of the superior risk, or the difference of insurance

between land and water carriage.

A period of relatively low interest rates prevailed throughout the middle period of the century, and it is clear that without this stability the major investment that took place in agriculture, industry, and transportation might not have occurred. Output in nearly all industries was increasing to match the demands of a growing population, and the improvements meant that industry and agriculture was more effective than in any previous period at meeting the demand. The stability of the middle period would not have been one in which the china-men of London felt it necessary to protect their market, albeit, especially in the second quarter of the century, they would have appreciated a stronger market. This relative stability was enhanced after 1756 by a long period of peace, brought about in part by the enlightened policy of William Pitt not to intervene in foreign military escapades that had no benefit to England's domestic situation.¹⁵

That the economy of England could sustain such growth and internal investment whilst sporadically financing wars abroad was one of the economic triumphs of the day. In the second half century there were a few times of slump, most notably in the 1770's. However, the concept of a National Debt through which the government could raise funds to finance wars was better developed in England probably than anywhere else in the world. Although foreign wars did have specific side effects, such as a shortage of timber for shipbuilding, the fact is that rarely in the 18th century did it significantly depress activity at home. This must be contrasted with the period immediately after the defeat of Napoleon, as in 1815, when the wars with France ended, there was almost immediately a rise in unemployment and poverty.

The effect of wars and population growth was certainly to expand significantly import demand, although this was largely matched by an increase in exports. Many of the overseas military adventures were designed to protect the export trade. In London the effect of this tide of increased international trade was profound. Many dealers in china sought to reach export markets and there is evidence that

14. Adam Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776. Book I, Chapter III.

15. *Modern British Foreign Policy, The Eighteenth Century*, Paul Langford, 1976

some, such as Weatherby and Crowther, may have failed as a result of the uncertainties of such business.

The excise duties for a wide range of goods encouraged smuggling, and as early as the 1740s a House of Commons Committee was set up to examine the effect of this on excise revenues and on the business of the East India Company. That the smuggled goods included Chinese porcelains there can be little doubt. Smuggling in the last quarter of the century increased dramatically following rises in duty, and in view of the uneasy peace with France duties on goods from that country were higher than many others. It seems likely that by now French and German porcelains were also finding their way to London through a back door.

Whilst this is mainly conjecture, it would be easy to imagine that the "night sales" which members of the China Club so hated, were used to get smuggled foreign goods to the market. At their meeting in the Globe Tavern on 3rd March 1786 the following motion was passed:

Resolved that for many years past a considerable part of the china trade has been carried out by contraband dealers not only to the great prejudice of His Majesties Revenue but also to the detriment of the Fair Trader.

And they resolved to

exert our utmost endeavours to protect the Trade against such persons and bring back the same to such proper and legal course..

At this date the Hewson family was prominent in the China Club. William Hewson senior, an importer of French and Chinese porcelain, was at the time Chairman, having taken over from Miles Mason, and three months later William Hewson junior, who sold Chinese porcelain amongst other wares, became Deputy Chairman. Perhaps the extreme pressure they had put on William Hussey was because he was suspected of trading in smuggled goods.

Probably the key concern that motivated the formation of the China Club was that more and more dealers were springing up in London, and the

last quarter of the 18th century saw an unprecedented improvement in product availability. The number of manufacturing concerns had increased progressively, improved transportation brought products to London at a reduced cost, and smuggled foreign goods were rife. Added to this, the cosy establishment was being upset by many new dealers, some representing the new potteries, and many selling the creamwares and other products at very competitive prices.

Whereas the long established factories had long established dealers in London, the burgeoning growth of the Staffordshire trade meant that many new potteries sprang up and quickly sought London representation. They may have perceived conflicts of interest in the existing dealer network because products already sold by those dealers were the ones with which the new factories wished to compete. Equally the dealers themselves might have been reluctant to take on new products that might upset their key suppliers.

A number of the long established china-men had served a distinctly aristocratic customer base in the past, but now the growth in demand was coming from elsewhere, principally fuelling the growth in earthenwares made by the Staffordshire potters.

The number of Staffordshire potteries listed in trade directories of the period provide a clue. In 1781 the *Bailey's Directory* listed 44 potters in the Staffordshire area. In 1784, just before the China Club commenced its activities, the number was 79, and by 1798 it was 117. These were all national directories, and are unlikely to have listed all the concerns. Evidence of this was provided by names included in the *Staffordshire Pottery Directory*, a specialist directory believed to have been published in 1796, which lists 140 manufacturers. This sharp rise in the number of factories must have underpinned the growth in the number of Chinamen in London. Many of the newly started concerns may have purchased only from one or two sources of supply.

George Phillips, who operated from Oxford Street in the year 1800 gave small insights into his business in a theft case at the Old Bailey.¹⁶ His evidence involved the theft from him of 75 earthenware plates and various items of cut glass:

the officer took possession of the property; they

16.. See www.oldbaileyonline.org, the case, in which Arthur Minton gave evidence has the reference T18000402-90.

were all new plates, quite bright and clean, they had not the least appearance of having been used, but they were interspersed with small straws; we had unpacked, within a few days, a great many goods from both our manufacturers, and on account of the quantity, they were put upon the shelves without wiping them, as we usually do; I have no doubt that they were a part of my stock; there were two cut glass salts, and a plain one, the cut glass salts were of the same pattern, but different in size from each other; with respect to the large one, I had, a little time before, written to my manufacturer to send me twenty-four a little larger

So the implication here is that Mr Phillips operated his business with two earthenware manufacturers and one manufacturer for cut glass items. Although there is plenty of evidence for wider product ranges amongst the larger London dealers, Phillips may have been typical of the smaller upstarts who were snapping at their heels. There were more manufacturers, and all these needed dealers in London. To avoid selling the same as his neighbour the newly established dealer may well have sought out and been well received by the new manufacturers, so it was indeed a marriage of convenience.

The growth in the London dealer network was dramatic. This has been an area of personal research for the Author. Working independently from Robin Hildyard, whose recent paper I have already referred to, my own researches, sought to identify the number of individual dealers trading in each decade of the 18th century. In the course of this work I identified the names and addresses of no less than 800 earthenware and porcelain dealers operating in London during the 18th century, a list that is as yet unpublished. It seems likely that a consolidation of this work with that of Robin Hildyard might expand the numbers to 1,000, but time has not allowed this to be completed at this point. Using my own listing the following graph of dealer numbers (figure 4) has been constructed.

The shaded area shows the numbers of London dealers identified. The numbers quoted are for the decade as a whole, so if the average life of individual businesses was, say, four years, the number trading at any one time would be significantly less. For example, the research

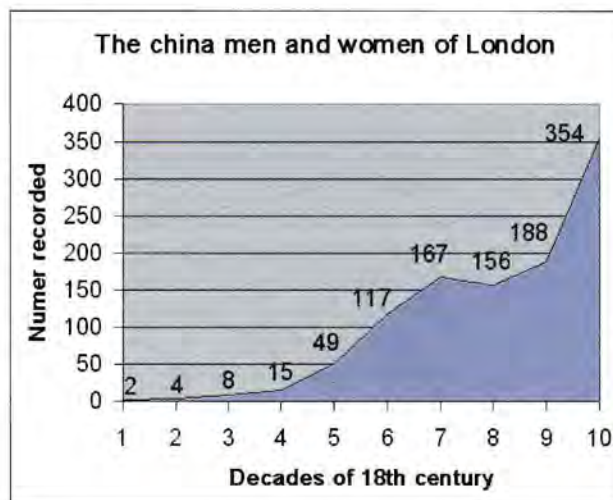


Figure 4.

identified 164 dealers operating in the 1780s, and 325 for the 1790s, but in The 1784 *Bailey's British Directory* in its London section contains around 88 names, of which 15 are Staffordshire warehouses. The 1799 *Holden's London Directory* contains the names of at least 139 chinamen of which 67 were running "Staffordshire warehouses".

It seems likely that in the late 1780s when the China Club was operating there were perhaps 90 or 100 dealers, but the numbers had grown quickly and were set to grow even more quickly. The figures above amply demonstrate the growth in the London appetite for goods from the Staffordshire trade. Although some existing establishments may have changed their business description, and their product range, one might also conclude that for many of the established individual chinamen the market growth was, at least in part, passing them by. Robert Fogg at least had adapted by selling *A great variety of cream coloured ware* but his statement illustrated in figure 5 shows him grappling with one of the economic woes of the day – a shortage of coin and the resultant time it took his customers to pay.

The maps in the appendix show the approximate location of the 1780's dealers (in red) covering the majority of the London retail area. The dealers from the 1750s are shown in blue and those from the 1730s in green. The growth was dramatic, and this was true even in the City area when at the time the most noticeable trend was to move progressively towards what later became the West End and away from the City. Had the maps also shown the 1790s



Figure 5. Robert Fogg Statement of Account

dealer locations the number would have doubled again.

Standards of living had risen almost continuously during the century, and the new middle class had been created. There is little doubt that ceramic tablewares were for many something quite new. It was not a replacement market but a new high growth fashion market, in which the new middle class were keen to participate, as soon as they could afford it.

Quite how dramatic was this growth in numbers of dealers may be seen when the numbers are plotted on a graph (figure 6) with some of the few economic indicators of the day and a few other statistics. The validity of such a comparison would no doubt be criticised by economists, but it does give us some clues to the level of activity.

The rise in dealer numbers outstripped even that of the production of broadloom cloth, an item that benefited greatly from the technology improvements

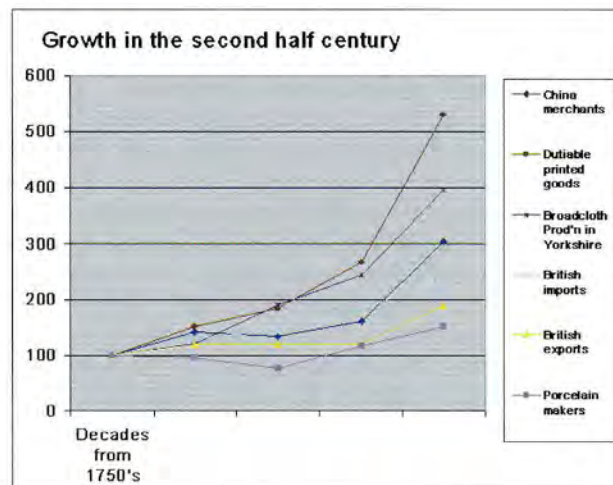


Figure 6. Growth rates graph.

in the early industrial revolution. It also outstripped the rise in dutiable printed goods, and both imports and exports. These last three measures were stated in value terms, and so the rise in the numbers of dealers outstripped them despite the affect of higher price inflation that occurred in the last quarter of the century.

At the bottom of the graph comes probably one of the more improbable statistics quoted here, the number of porcelain factories listed in Geoffrey Godden's book on British Porcelain over the decades of the second half century. Although probably of little merit statistically we can use it to remember two or three points of relevance.

Firstly, the porcelain factories were somewhat up against it in the last quarter of the century. The recession of the 1770's, aggravated further by the loss of the Americas must have impacted on demand for luxury goods. Most of the porcelain start-ups of the period avoided any undue concentration on high-end goods and sought instead to compete in the more utilitarian markets pursued by New Hall, Keeling etc.

Secondly, with productivity increasing in a more intensive factory environment there might have been no need for more and more factories. The prime example was the growth of Wedgwood, not then a porcelain maker at all, who became bigger both by creating an efficient factory environment and producing creamwares to a price.

Finally, the fact that there were significant

increases in the number of Staffordshire concerns at the same time as the established concerns were increasing their productivity demonstrates a strong demand. Despite the many fluctuations from year to year, there was indeed nothing wrong with demand at all if the price was right. Statistics for the Staffordshire concerns have not been identified for the whole of the century, or even the second half, so they are not included on the graph. However, the figures quoted earlier show that whilst the number of recorded porcelain concerns doubled between the 1770's and the 1790's, the number of Staffordshire potters probably trebled between 1780 and 1800. Few of these concerns made porcelain, the vast majority sold earthenwares.

Whilst the last quarter saw general price rises and inflation unprecedented in the middle years of the century, the preponderance of newly perfected creamwares and pearlwares must have meant that for many, buying a ceramic tea or dinner service could be afforded for the first time in their lives. So whilst the prices of established products, including porcelain, did probably rise, the market was presented with a cheaper alternative, which became the engine for continued growth.

Probably the strongest and most direct economic factor which stimulated demand had occurred just before the China Club was founded. In 1784, as compensation for the East India Company's loss of administrative freedom and high profits in India, the Commutation Act of William Pitt reduced the duties on tea from a variable rate of between 79 and 127 per cent to 12 ½ per cent. This dramatic reduction was the single most significant factor in stimulating the demand for tea, which trebled imports in a decade, and in consequence greatly increased demand for the wares from which it was consumed.

So when reviewing the economic (and technological) factors for determining the price of ceramic tablewares, it is apparent that most of the changes during the third quarter of the 18th century put downward pressure on prices, but the inflationary and highly competitive period in the final quarter, which might have disadvantaged porcelains, certainly did not price ceramic wares generally out of reach or suppress the demand which the growth in tea drinking created.

For the established dealers of London the combination of strong price competition, the growth

of affordable products in many cases sold by newly established dealers, the competition from factory shops, and the increase in smuggled foreign ceramic goods, must have seemed to be a vicious pincer movement designed to rid them of their livelihoods. That this was a true threat is evidenced by the decision of the East India Company in 1792 to discontinue regular importation of China-ware. No doubt, in its heyday, the China Club did not help the East India Company's cause at all, but it seems likely that it was the wish to fill their vessels with tea itself, the rising import duties on china and the burgeoning English competition in porcelain that really prompted their decision.

Against this almost overwhelming flow of economic and competitive factors a few Canute-like chinamen in the Globe Tavern tried to hold back the tide. Initially they won concessions from their key suppliers (such as Duesbury) and from competitors too, but they could not stop cheap earthenwares coming into London, they could not stop the new potteries and the new dealers selling their wares, and they could not alone stop the influx of smuggled goods into London.

At this time the minutes recorded poor attendance at the meetings of the China Club and less substantive business, dealing with an entire meeting with the words "Usual business". Although the minutes had never recorded details of the selling of goods between members, presumably with fewer people attending the meetings this became almost insignificant. In March 1787, presumably in an attempt to impose order on increasingly chaotic meetings, they introduced fines for members who *call a waiter, ring the bell, or order supper before the books are closed*.

There was one final blow that almost certainly

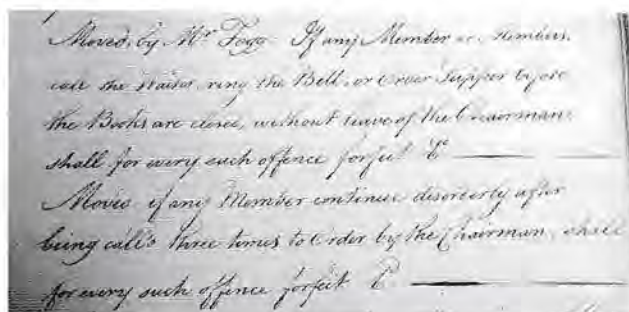


Figure 7. The supper rules.

hastened the China Club to its end. This was the dispute with the East India Company. The dispute was first identified by Geoffrey Godden from the Minutes of the East India Company. This work is put into greater context by Kay Staniland's discovery of the China Club, and by reports of Kings Bench court proceedings now identified in *The Times* newspaper.¹⁷

The main facts that emerge from a close examination of the dispute is that it emerged for the first time, to the apparent surprise of the china dealers, that their auction rigging activities might be illegal, and actually criminal. They may well have first received this news in December 1787, so it seems more than coincidental that not only did several stalwarts of the China Club including Miles Mason decline to be officers of the club at the time of the December 1787 meeting, but after paying the fines they received for this at the January 1788 meeting, it appears that the members of the China Club decided to shut up shop.

Some of the China Club members including Miles Mason were the defendants in the first Court hearing of the dispute in February 1788, although it is one of the frustrations of the remaining records that the full list of 47 china dealers who were defendants in the case has not yet been traced. At exactly this time the Minutes of the China Club ceased for ever, the Minute book being returned to the shop of William Hewson Junior, whence it was used by James Coombes, his successor, for heraldic drawings, eventually coming into the possession of the Guildhall Library.

So the disciplines of the China Club gradually broke down, its core activity was declared illegal, criminal even, doubtless to the dismay of its members, and it inevitably failed. By the time it had been founded the economic momentum was so strong that it was already too late to gather together a cohesive group of dealers and control the market. Even if the initiative had been taken in the 1750s when many forms of price control existed, it seems doubtful whether such arrangements would have survived the growing free-for-all markets of the 1790s.

By late 1787 the club had amassed around 25 members, and no less than 47 dealers were

defendants in the Kings Bench case, but there were at least as many dealers again in London who did not join the Club or participate in their auction ring. Controlling the market had in fact become an unsustainable objective.

However, the well-established chinamen of London who made up the core membership of the China Club did not fail, despite their concerns. Many of those listed above continued their work, some, as noted above, into the new century. The reason was simple, the market was still a buoyant and growing one, and whilst the super-profits of the past may not always have been repeatable, there was enough business for all those who aspired to make a living in the retail and wholesale china trade in London. Without knowing how to go about achieving it, and having played no real part in influencing events, the members of the China Club in London obtained the happy ending they had been seeking all along.

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I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Guildhall library for allowing photographs of the China Club Memorandum Book to be published.

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I thank Motco.com for permission to use their maps.

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Appendix.



Figure 8. Cheapside to Whitechapel 1780's



Figure 9. Strand to St. Paul's, 1780's.



Figure 10. Piccadilly and Pall Mall, 1790's.

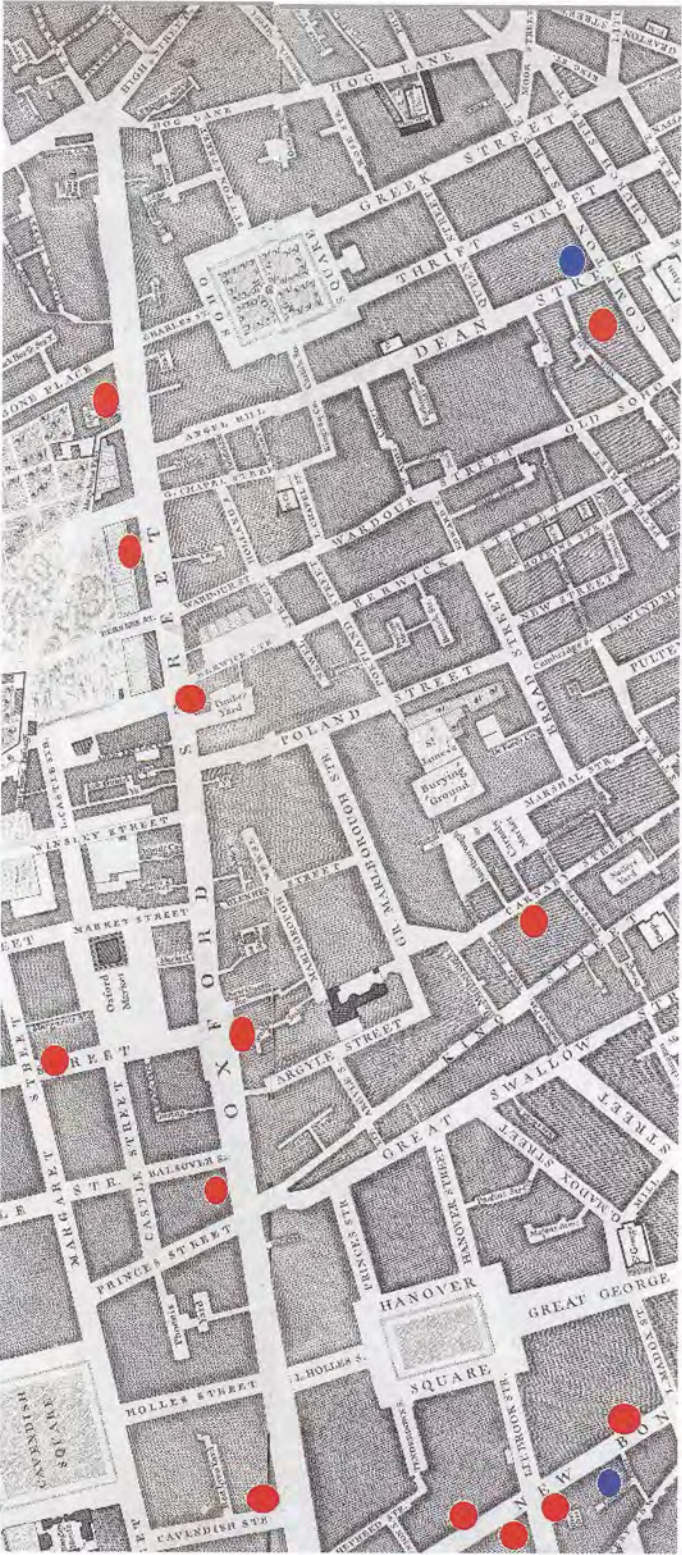


Figure 11. Oxford St., Bond St. and Tottenham Court Road, 1780's.