

Woburn Abbey

Does Woburn Abbey mean anything to you? Does the Duchess of Bedford stir a memory? Do you enjoy afternoon tea? If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions you may wish to read on.

In the early nineteenth century it was customary to have only two meals a day. Breakfast was served in the morning and dinner was generally served at about 8 o'clock in the evening.

Anna, the 7th Duchess of Bedford, is credited with beginning the tradition of afternoon tea. It is our good fortune today that she got a bit peckish in the afternoon. "Having that sinking feeling" is how she described it. She decided that a nice pot of tea and a light snack served in her boudoir in the afternoon was the solution.

It eventually occurred to her that she was probably not the only lady feeling this way so she began to invite some of her friends to join her at Woburn Abbey. She continued the practise in London and was quickly copied by other socialites. It became very fashionable to invite ladies over for tea, finger sandwiches, and sweets followed by an afternoon walk. These were small affairs for close acquaintances of the hostess.

When Queen Victoria became a devotee the ritual became much grander and larger. Socially prominent women began inviting as many as two hundred guests to a come and go tea reception from four to seven in the evening. These at homes have evolved into what we now call afternoon tea.

The terms "low tea" and "high tea" do not refer to the delicacies served but rather to the height of the table used. The upper classes would serve tea at about four in the afternoon in the drawing room at low tables. This was a light meal as we know it to be today. The middle and lower classes served a more substantial meal at about five or six o'clock at the dinner table which was higher. This was usually their main meal of the day and often consisted of a meat dish.

There are no fast rules about what to serve at a tea but some things have been traditionally associated with the ritual. Typically finger sandwiches, warm scones and sweets are served with the freshly brewed loose tea.