

Taking tea in the colonies

Tea drinking, that very British and colonial habit, is ingrained in our Australian culture and regarded by many as an essential daily ritual. Tea is cheap and plentiful today, but this was not always the case.

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Tea leaves were first imported to England from China in the 17th century, initially in very small quantities. Tea was widely regarded as having invigorating and health-promoting properties and thus was eagerly sought after. However, some people feared that “the practice of tea sipping was an effeminate act, sure to destroy British masculinity.”¹

Much of the ensuing tea trade was controlled by the British East India Company, which had been set up in 1600.

Parliament granted it a monopoly in 1698. The importation of tea was inextricably linked with the opium trade. John Barrow wrote in the *Quarterly Review* of 1836

... it is a curious circumstance that we grow poppy in our Indian territories to poison the people of China in return for a wholesome beverage which they prepare almost exclusively for us.²

Less than 70 lb of tea was imported to England in 1701, but demand rose quickly, with 20 million lb per annum

brought in during the 1790s. As demand grew, tea became increasingly expensive, partly because of additional government import duties. The price was about 16 shillings a pound by the end of the 18th century, which made it impossible for poor people to afford it.³ Some resorted to other methods to obtain it, such as buying second-hand tea leaves from inns. Smuggling and adulteration with, among other things, leaves from other shrubs or trees, dust, sand and dried sheep droppings became rife. In 1776 the British Parliament passed the *Adulteration of Tea Act* (17 Geo. III, Act



1
“The Tea Tree of New South Wales”, pl 24 in John White, *Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales*, London, 1790

2
Smilax glycyphylla plant growing on Middle Head, Sydney NSW, January 2014



29) which provided a penalty of £20 for such a practice. A tax on tea sold in colonial America led to the famous Boston Tea Party of 1773, when colonists protesting “no taxation without representation” dumped tea chests overboard in Boston Harbor; this event was later the inspiration of the low-tax, populist Tea Party movement of the 21st century.

Tea at Port Jackson

Cocoa and coffee are listed among goods consigned in 1787 with the First Fleet, as well as “15 tons of drinking water, 5 puncheons of rum and 300 gallons of brandy”, but there is no mention of tea or tea plants.⁴

Despite some popular claims that a portion of tea was given to convicts, there is no evidence that tea was included in the daily ration during the first two years of the colony.⁵ This is somewhat surprising because, by 1788, tea drinking was entrenched in British culture and far from being a luxury item was regarded by many as a necessity.⁶

Because there was no tea in the new settlement,

trials were made with the fragrant leaves of many of the shrubs and trees which abounded. Sometimes green leaves were boiled, and sometimes infusions were made of leaves which had been dried. Liquor named “tea” was the result and the shrubs and trees from which the leaves were obtained were called tea trees (or ti trees).⁷

Campbell identifies these shrubs as *Leptospermum* or *Kunzea* and the trees as *Melaleuca*. *Leptospermum scoparium* or Manuka is also known as Captain Cook’s tea tree. Its leaves were considered to provide an additional and extremely important anti-scorbutic effect.⁸ Cook had tried many different products to try and prevent scurvy among his crew, including fresh fruit and vegetables, spruce beer, saffras, sauerkraut, onions and wild plants and grasses.⁹

Scurvy is a disorder of collagen or connective tissue, characterised by malaise, lethargy, skin spots and bruising,



3-5

Tea caddy, beefwood, pine, NSW origin, c 1825. H 13.5 cm. This is the earliest known Australian tea caddy. Private collection



bleeding from the gums, corkscrew-shaped hairs, jaundice, neuritis and even death. It was known to be particularly common among sailors who were at sea for long periods (hence the name “sea distemper”).¹⁰ James Lind, a surgeon in the Royal Navy, proved it could be treated with citrus fruit and published his findings in 1753.¹¹ However it was not until 1932, when Vitamin C was isolated and identified, that scurvy was recognised as a deficiency of this vitamin.

Unfortunately Lind’s findings were not widely known, and at the time it was impossible to preserve fresh fruit and vegetables for long periods at sea. Thus other ways to prevent scurvy were explored. In November 1788, Surgeon Dennis Conisden, who had sailed on the *Scarborough* in the First Fleet, wrote:

I have sent you some of the sweet tea of this country, which I greatly recommend, and is generally used by the marines and convicts. As such it is a good anti-scorbutic as well as a substitute for tea which is more costly.¹²

John White, Surgeon-General of NSW and a botanical collector, in 1790 describes and illustrates the “Tea Tree of New South Wales” and the “Sweet Tea plant” (plate 1).¹³ White observes

The leaves have the taste of liquorice root accompanied with bitter. They are said to make a kind of tea, not unpleasant to the taste, and good for the scurvy. The plant promises much in the last respect, from its bitter as a tonic, as well as the quantity of saccharine matter it contains.

Campbell describes the local tea substitute (plate 2) as

6-8

Tea caddy, musk, blackwood, cedar and pine with fiddleback blackwood, internal lids and glass surround, Tasmanian origin, c 1835. Private collection.



A creeping plant with hard wiry branches and black berries, which grows among sandstone, has leaves with a taste somewhat like liquorice, and was used in lieu of China tea. Its botanical name is *Smilax glycyphylla*, but the popular name is Sweet Sarsaparilla and tea made from this plant was known as Botany Bay Sweet Tea. It was used to treat chest complaints as well as scurvy.¹⁴

The perception that *Smilax glycyphylla* might cure scurvy was common. In the 1790s, John Bradley and Watkin Tench, among others, make this claim.¹⁵ However, it has since been established that “native sarsaparilla leaves do not contain enough vitamin C ... thousands of leaves would be needed daily to allay just one person’s scurvy.”¹⁶

Early settlers in the Australian colonies were intent on maintaining the tradition of “taking tea” and there are many documented examples of officers having tea with their colleagues. There were regular tea parties at Government House, which even included a captured “man of this country”, Arabanoo, who was being taught “civilized practices.”¹⁷

Tea parties were popular among recreational activities for the “few ladies in the leisure class,” according to Newling, who cites a passage from Helen King’s book

Captain Porter’s wife and Elizabeth Macarthur enjoyed little boating parties on the harbour ... and chose some pleasant point of land such as Garden Island, “where we sent for our tea equipage and drank Tea on the turf.”¹⁸

Tea imports

In the early days of the colony, there were attempts to start a trade in tea leaves. From 1792 officers of the NSW Corps started regular shipping runs to China and India to import tea and other consumables.¹⁹ In January 1796, the American vessel *Otter* arrived in Port Jackson from Boston,²⁰ and the captain, Ebenezer Dorr, offered a few goods for

sale, including four and a half chests of Bohea tea.²¹ The visit of the *Otter* was famous for another reason, as the Scottish political prisoner Thomas Muir escaped on her when she sailed.

Eventually colonial merchants started to trade with China and exchange goods from the South Seas for tea leaves. Such goods included tortoiseshell, pearl shell, sandalwood and shark fins, which found a ready market in Canton.²² Simeon Lord placed an advertisement in the *Sydney Gazette* of 1804 that asks

WANTED a Quantity of SHARKS FINS properly dried and preserved ... Application to be made to Mr Lord.²³

Lord was already a successful merchant by 1804.²⁴ He established many trading links and in 1805 sent a cargo of Fijian sandalwood to Canton on an American sealing vessel, *Criterion*. The ship returned with a Chinese cargo, which “most likely included tealeaves” and Lord was known to have traded tea and other commodities from his commission warehouse in Macquarie Place.²⁵

On 11 April 1806, the ship *William Pitt* arrived in Sydney Cove, having brought a supply of tea along with its cargo of 117 female convicts. Soon the *Sydney Gazette* had noted that

On Thursday a quantity of tea landed from the *William Pitt* reduced the price of a commodity to ten shillings per pound that had a day or two before, with little exception as to quality, sold at forty eight.²⁶

Another merchant, George Frederick Read (1788–1860), had established a trade between Hobart Town, Sydney, Batavia, Calcutta and Canton from 1812.²⁷ In May 1814, as master of the *Amelia*, he brought tea, sugar, rum and tobacco from Calcutta to Sydney and returned with wine and whale oil.

Eventually, regular trading in tea leaves became well established in the colony although not always without problems. Adelaide’s *Southern Australian* reported in 1839

The rupture in Canton between the Chinese authorities and the traders, appears by our latest accounts to be as far from being amicably settled as ever. The following extracts, which we take from late Sydney journals, shew plainly enough that if the tea trade must be continued, it will be necessary to bring John Chinaman to his senses in rather a rough way. The indignities which the European nations have suffered from the authorities of China, for the sake of this enervating drug, have been no less numerous than disgraceful; but we think it is pretty evident that matters are now arrived at that crisis, when it becomes absolutely necessary on the part of traders to China either to relinquish the trade altogether, or to compel the Chinese into reason.²⁸

Storing tea: tea caddies and teapots

Given their relative scarcity and cost, tea leaves had to be stored securely, leading to the construction of items designed specifically for the purpose.

Tea caddies and teapots were first made in the mid-18th century in Britain and subsequently many were constructed in colonial India and other British colonies, including Australia. The name *caddy* is most likely derived from the Malay word *kati* which is a measure of weight, between 1 and 1¹/₃ lb. Alternatively, Sheraton suggested that caddy is derived from Cadus or Cad, an ancient measure for wine, and “now applied to various kinds of tea chests, of square, octagon and circular shapes.”²⁹

Originally, caddies or canisters were made from porcelain, and subsequently from tortoise shell, pewter, brass and silver. Ultimately construction used mahogany, rosewood and other decorative timbers, often inlaid with ebony or brass. Wooden tea caddies had the advantage of being able to be fitted with locks to keep the valuable tea leaves secure, and were usually lined in tin or lead to keep the tea fresh. Sarcophagus-shaped timber caddies became very popular. Caddies usually contained two



9-11

Teapoy, cedar, with circular brass ant trap to base of column, NSW origin, c 1840. H 78 cm. Private collection, ex Ruth Simon collection

Eventually tea caddies were combined with tea tables to make what is now known as a teapoy. The word *teapoy* is derived from the Hindi or Urdu word *tipai* for “three” and relates to a three-legged or tripod-based table. Such tables were used to support a container of tea or a tea service. Later tea tables became more elaborate with a fold-over top. They were indistinguishable from card tables in design, except for the absence of a baize lining. The scarcity and value of tea-leaves led to the almost universal incorporation of a lock with a key in both caddies and teapoys.³¹

Australian examples of tea-related furniture are fairly rare, particularly teapoys and tea tables. Fahy, Simpson and Simpson depict cedar, blackwood and casuarina tea caddies (plates 226, 228, 230) cedar teapoys (plates 228, 229), a cedar tea table (plate 473) and a casuarina tea table (plate 425).³² Fahy and Simpson show tea caddies constructed from native timbers including cypress pine, native cherry and a combination of different timbers including musk, sheoak, huon pine, myrtle and blackwood (plates 66, 67, 68).³³

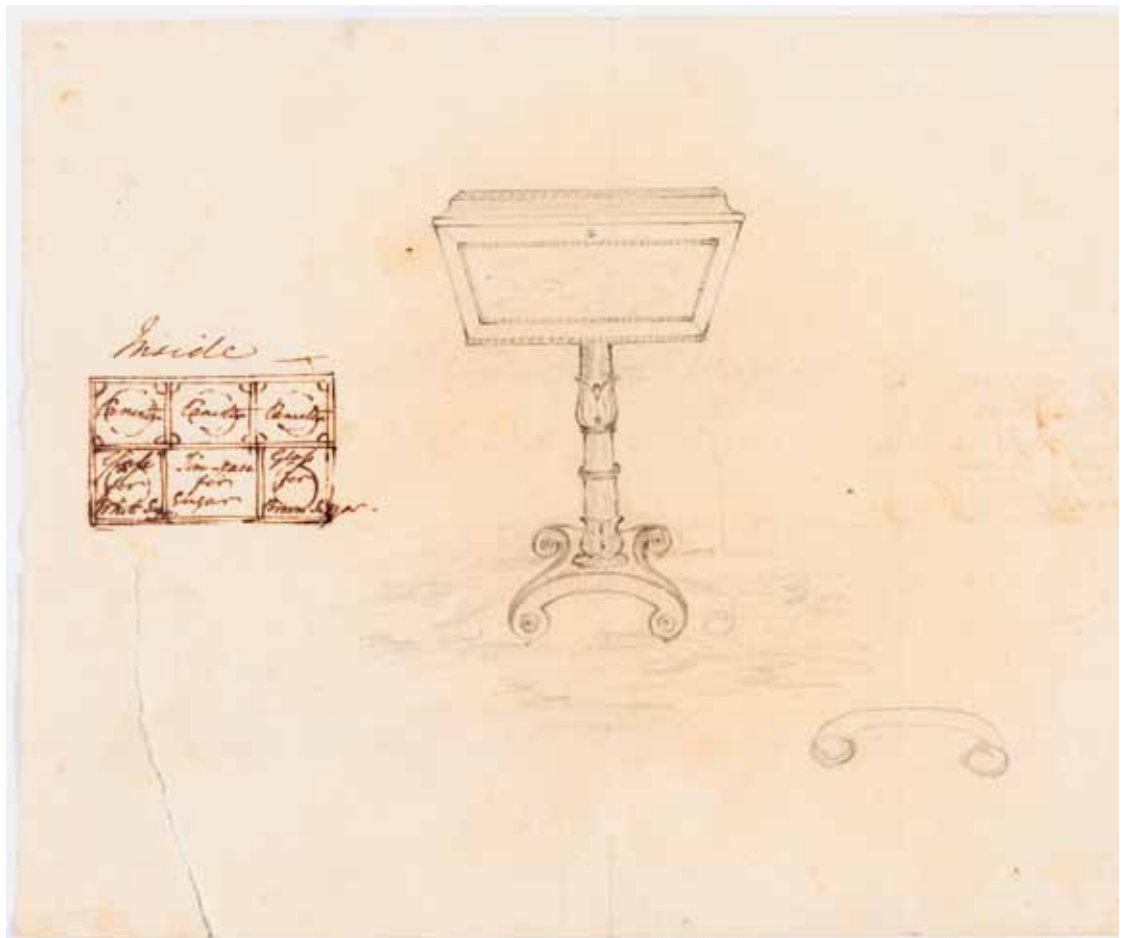
or more internal compartments fitted with removable lids, often with space for a glass bowl in between. Exotic timbers sent back from the early Australian settlements were used to make tea

caddies in Britain. Thomas Hope’s book on furniture shows illustrations for a tea table, tea chest and even a tea urn, all influenced by Egyptian design concepts.³⁰



12

Robert Scott, drawing of teapoy and interior, c 1835. Collection: Mitchell Library, Sydney



The earliest known Australian-made tea caddy, c 1825, is of NSW origin (**plates 3–5**).³⁴ Of simple design it shows the classic sarcophagus shape and is made from scrub beefwood, veneered on to pine. The two internal compartments show the remains of the tin lining and have solid beefwood lids with tiny turned solid beefwood knobs. The lock has an ebonised beefwood escutcheon.

The musk tea caddy (**plates 6–8**) is of Tasmanian origin and is also made in the sarcophagus shape. It is of excellent proportions and displays beautiful cuts of show timber with the characteristic walnut-like figure of musk. The internal compartments have lids of figured blackwood and the same timber is used for the surround for the glass bowl and the ring handles at either end. Other timbers used are pine and cedar and the knobs on the internal lids are ivory. Objects made from musk are extremely rare.

The cedar teapoy c 1840 of NSW origin (**plates 9–11**), while of a somewhat heavy and colonial

appearance, is unusual for two reasons. Firstly, because of the incorporation of a Bramah lock, which was “famed for its resistance to lock picking and tampering.”³⁵ Such locks were expensive and usually only incorporated into superior pieces of furniture, such as bookcases, wing wardrobes or gentlemen’s presses. Obviously the contents of the teapoy were valuable.

Secondly however the most interesting and apparently unique part of the design is the incorporation of a brass ant-trap at the base of the pedestal. This feature allows resolution of the debate concerning the use of glass “mixing” bowls which were frequently incorporated in tea caddies and teapoy. Clearly these were not for mixing tea, but rather for holding something sweet and therefore pest-attracting. Most likely this was sugar, but an alternative is condensed milk, which was widely used before the invention of refrigeration.³⁶

The Scott papers in the Mitchell library show drawings of a sarcophagus-shaped teapoy, which was somewhat

unusually included among drawings of farm houses, buildings, gates and fences.³⁷ Bombay-born Robert Scott was an early settler in NSW, having arrived with his brother Helenus in 1822, but it is not known whether the teapoy was ever constructed. A drawing of the teapoy’s interior shows six compartments, three labelled “canister”, one “glass for white sugar,” one “glass for brown sugar” and one “tin case for sugar” (**plate 12**).³⁸

Although there are examples of silverware made in the early days of the colony, there does not appear to be any evidence of locally produced crockery. Early settlers brought items such as teacups and saucers with them, while merchants imported them from Britain and China. An exhibition titled *Taking Tea: from teapoy to teabags*, held at *Elizabeth Bay House* in December 1991, showed several English 19th-century tea services, but no Australian examples.³⁹

Hawkins illustrates a silver three-piece tea service c 1827 made by Alexander Dick and bearing the monogram of George Allen (now in the National



13–17

Teapoy, blackwood, cedar, casuarina, myrtle, Huon pine, native cherry, eucalypt, pine, ivory and silver, Tasmanian origin, presented to Rev. Benjamin Cardrosso, Hobart, 1830. H 83 cm. Collection: Wesley Hobart Museum

Gallery of Australia, Canberra).⁴⁰ It comprises a teapot, creamer and sugar bowl. He also illustrates silver teaspoons by Dick c 1826 (retailed by James Robertson) and Henry Cohen c 1829 and silver sugar tongs with shell nips by Dick c 1826. The explorer John Oxley had an Indian silver teapot, made by Hippolitus Poinand of Calcutta, and engraved with his crest.⁴¹ Early silversmiths in Van Diemen's Land included James Grove, who was also an engraver, and David Barclay who arrived in 1830. Thomas Bock and Charles Bruce were engravers and early arrivals in Tasmania, but examples of tea-related silverware made by them, have not yet appeared.⁴²

The Carvosso teapoy

This teapoy (**plates 13–18**) is arguably the finest example made in Australia and has an impeccable provenance. It is in the collection of the Wesley Hobart Museum. In 19th-century Australia, the Wesleyan or Methodist Church promoted temperance, so tea was an important beverage at church events. Churches held annual “tea meetings” – lunches with “a cup of that which cheers but does not inebriate” – to raise funds for the minister's annual stipend.⁴³

The teapoy is constructed predominantly from cedar and blackwood with five internal, tin-lined, cedar compartments in the pine strung, sarcophagus-shaped “caddy.” The blackwood column is magnificently carved and turned, with design elements that include rope-twist spiral reeding, acanthus leaves and an egg-and-dart border. The cedar quadriform base is veneered with blackwood on the top and has cross-banded casuarina-veneered edges. The teapoy is supported on carved lion's paw cedar feet. The feet are enhanced with a trailing, acanthus leaf inspired, carved decoration.

The top of the opening lid is made from imported mahogany while the inner lining to the top is of Huon pine. The sides of the top and the body of the caddy section are cedar and the lock has a whalebone escutcheon. The stringing is of an unknown pine, possibly Tasmanian. Each internal cedar compartment has a lid of another timber including Tasmanian native cherry, myrtle and honeysuckle, and (possibly) Oyster Bay pine. A velvet-lined cavity would have held a glass bowl, which is now missing.

On the top of the lid is an inset rectangular silver plaque bordered by cedar knulling (**plate 16**). The worn inscription reads “Presented to the Revd B. Carvosso as a mark of Esteem by the hearers at Melville Street Chapel Hobart Town Van Diemen's Land Jan. 20th 1830.”

The Carvosso connection

The Reverend Benjamin Carvosso trained in England as a Methodist minister and in 1819 was commissioned to become a



missionary in New South Wales.⁴⁴ He and his wife sailed to Van Diemen's Land on the *Saracen*, with the first port of call being Hobart Town, after four months at sea. Three days after arrival, on 28 April 1820, he preached the first Methodist sermon in the colony from the front steps of the Courthouse in Murray Street. He had sought and received permission from Lt Governor Sorell to conduct the service and his wife Deborah led the singing. The service went ahead despite the warning "that any attempt to preach in the open air would almost certainly be greeted by missiles and insults."⁴⁵

Deborah Carvosso records her first impressions of the island in a diary entry dated 15 May 1820.

Van Diemen's Land is an Island about the size of Ireland. The country is fine, the soil is good and the climate, I suppose, is almost unequalled... The number of English Colonists including the convicts is about six thousand. The black natives, the original inhabitants of the land are few and seldom seen. Their appearance differs a little from the natives of New Holland. Hobart



Town is ten miles from the entrance of the Derwent Harbour. The town is very neat. There are many good brick houses. The inhabitants are about two thousand. The river runs many miles further into the interior. The land has a very beautiful appearance on each side of the river. The mountains rise on either hand in constant succession in the distance; some of which are stupendously high and all covered with trees that are evergreen. The appearance of the country was certainly beautiful to us.⁴⁶

After eight days in Hobart the couple sailed on to Sydney where they served in three circuits in New South Wales.⁴⁷

In 1825 the Reverend Carvosso and his wife were posted back to Hobart to lead the Methodist Church in Van Diemen's Land. According to Stansell, they were instrumental in calling a meeting on 19 September 1825 for the purpose of establishing a Public and Church Library, which is claimed to have been Australia's first public library. At the meeting the considerable sum of £10 was collected and Carvosso donated 50 of his own books.⁴⁸

other pious and benevolent objects, she was among the foremost of the friendly leading spirits.⁵¹

Cabinet maker

The maker of the teapoy is unknown but it would have been expensive to construct given the sophisticated standard of cabinet work and variety of timbers used. It is possible that the maker was a member of the church or even one of the “hearers” referred to on the plaque. There was a small number of cabinet makers operating in Hobart Town in the 1820s, including Samuel Whittaker and John Lapine, but the most important was Joseph William Woolley.⁵² He had arrived in Van Diemen’s Land in 1822 and his name first appears as a cabinet maker in 1831.⁵³ In the Directory in James Ross’s *Van Diemen’s Land Almanac* he is said to have had premises in Macquarie Street a few doors south of Murray Street.⁵⁴ This would have placed his workshop only about four blocks from the Methodist church in Melville Street.

No signed or stamped pieces of furniture from his workshop are known, but other pieces of furniture attributed to him by Hawkins⁵⁵ show similar paw feet, beading and egg-and-dart moulding. While these were common features on English furniture of the day, there would have been only a handful of cabinet makers in Van Diemen’s Land in the 1820s capable of producing such a sophisticated object.

Hawkins has listed the names of convict chair makers and cabinet makers working in the Hobart Lumber Yard in February 1828, and has documented the names of possible retailers or cabinet makers who may have been involved in furnishing Government House, Hobart between 1827 and 1840.⁵⁶ The list of free settlers includes Woolley as well as Robert Household, Thomas Household and James Jeffrey. Given the fine cabinetry displayed in the teapoy, it would seem reasonable to suggest that one of these cabinet makers would have constructed the teapoy. Of Hawkins’ ten contenders, two can be ruled out as they did not arrive in Hobart until after 1830, which is when the teapoy was presented.



The Carvosso clock

In 1830 the Reverend Benjamin Carvosso presented to the Wesleyan Church a clock which was mounted in the balustrade at the northern end facing the preacher (and challenging them to keep their remarks within definite time limits). The clock can still be seen in the Church in Melville Street, Hobart and an inscription on the clock face reads “For use of the Wesleyan Chapel, Hobart Town, Van Diemen’s Land. Presented by B. Carvosso, A.D. 1830. Makers: J and G Mackie, City Road, London.”

Benjamin Carvosso made a significant contribution to the establishment of the Methodist Church in Australia, which is reflected in the elaborate teapoy and taset which were presented to him on 20 January 1830, to mark the end of his tenure. Rev. Hutchinson, who arrived on 31 January 1830,⁴⁹ replaced Carvosso, who sailed from Hobart with his wife and five children on 11 March.⁵⁰ It is not clear whether the teapoy was actually put to use, although in the memoirs of his wife Deborah, the Reverend Carvosso writes

In a large number of Society Tea Meetings connected with the Library, Wesleyan Sunday School and various

The identity of the “hearers” referred to on the plaque is not known but is taken to be Church congregation. The maker of the silver plaque is unknown.

Further history of the teapoy

The Carvosso family finally arrived back in England in late July 1830. The “silver tea pot and spoons etc were packed and accompanied the Carvossos back to England.”⁵⁷ It is not known whether these items of silverware were made locally and there are no known illustrations or drawings of them.

The subsequent whereabouts of the teapoy after 1830 are not clear. One account suggests that it was too bulky to take back to England and that Benjamin Carvosso donated it to the Church before leaving for England.⁵⁸ However the same author states elsewhere that “The teapoy, being too bulky for shipment, stayed with members of the family in Australia. It was donated to the Church by the Carvosso family in 1952.”⁵⁹

Conclusion

It is clear that taking tea, with all of the associated rituals, was established almost from the outset of British settlement in the colonies at Sydney Cove and Hobart Town, and became a focal point for both social and business activities. There was a flourishing trade in importation of tea leaves in exchange for exotic local products. Early settlers “made do” with substitutes for the real thing, notably *Smilax glycyphylla*, but claims that the NSW tea-tree was an antidote for scurvy are erroneous.

Tea “equipage”, often of extremely high quality, was made in NSW and Van Diemen’s Land with notable examples of ceremonial tea furniture, mainly constructed from native timbers, being held in private and public collections.

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