

TEACUP STORM:

Tea, the nation's number one beverage, becomes the nation's number one talking-point as, once again, the price goes up. True, if you go to the right places, it's still quite a bargain. But, if you're a heavy tea-drinker, even the slightest increase can hit your budget hard. However, some, it seems, can still afford to be lavish.

Tea, it's been calculated, costs less than a ha'penny a cup. At Plantation House in Mincing Lane, the auctions held there govern the price we pay. If the buyers bid higher, then that ha'penny simply won't be enough. World demand threatens to outstrip supplies and consequently competition is keen. Then the distribution costs have to be paid. The recent increases, say the distributors, don't help them - only the growers are benefiting. Before the housewife buys her packet, much has to be done by the distributors. The blenders have skilled, if uncomfortable, tasks.

Now for the tasting. Boiling water goes into the cups in which different teas have been put, and the taster, a man of delicate palate and unerring aim, goes to work.

Next stage is the packing. All this work by the distributors costs, they claim, about 1/8d. per pound packet. So, with auction prices at about 7/- a pound, many firms say they are losing money. At Winsford in Cheshire, a grocer, Tom Hope, has made a practical protest against the high prices, of tea. All old age pensioners can buy half a pound a week at cost price - that's about 6d less than they'd normally pay. Although one or two other grocers have since adopted a similar scheme, (and the pensioners are more than thankful) the Grocers' Association has criticised Mr. Hope severely. As a consequence he may have to withdraw his offer.

Forecasts about the future price of tea differ considerably. A Ceylon grower says it may fall by about fifty per cent within eight months. Other traders believe it will continue to go up. Should there be a further increase the whole country will feel the pinch. But, as so often happens, it will be the old folk who will suffer most.

---