

West Dartmoor U3A

Meeting Report: December 2021	Prepared by: Brian Gibson
Speaker: Dr Ann Pulsford	Subject: The history of chocolate

Cocoa comes from the fruit of the cacao tree. It only grows near the equator between 10° N to 10° S. It likes a humid environment above 15°C and grows best in an area shielded by taller trees. The pods containing the beans are about 1 foot long and grow directly on the trunks of the trees, making them easy to harvest.

The pods have to be processed right away as the beans begin to sprout inside the pod. The soft edible fruit outside the beans is collected by monkeys, a food they enjoy. They are responsible for dispersing the seeds over a wide area. Very small midges are responsible for transferring pollen from one plant to another. Fewer than 5% of flowers are pollinated. Artificial pollination does improve the yield but it's very labour-intensive.

Cultivated trees are of one species of cacao, having the advantage that they all flower and produce the crop at the same time, making it easier to harvest. The disadvantage being if adverse weather or disease strikes then the whole crop is affected at once. In the forest different wild trees crop at different times.

The beans are left for 26 days to dry, then roasted for between 1/2 an hour to 2 hours. They are ground then pressed releasing the fat (cocoa butter) leaving a powder (cocoa). Chocolate is made from cocoa, cocoa butter and sugar. Despite cropping, twice a year, the whole of a year's crop from one tree is needed to produce 1 kg of chocolate.

Chocolate was first made by Olmecs over 4000 years ago, traces being found in drinking vessels dating to that time. Mayan, Aztec and Inca civilisations used cocoa soon afterwards. It was used in religious ceremonies by the elite. Aztecs used it as money. It was used to treat illnesses. {Modern studies have shown that eating '70%' chocolate helps the blood flow and even repairs damage to skin caused by smoking.}

Columbus found cocoa beans in 1492 and from then on it started to be introduced to Europe taken as a drink with added sugar. In 1666 hot chocolate was on the menu at a Versailles wedding.

In England in 1652 it was used as a digestive aid. Soon afterwards Chocolate Houses were opened which became dens of vice and gambling and eventually developed into gentlemen's clubs.

Up to then chocolate had always been a drink but in 1847 Joseph Fry of Bristol produced the first solid chocolate bar (Five Boys). They also sold cocoa powder. Other Quaker families joined in the race to provide the country with a wholesome non-alcoholic drink, Cadbury in Birmingham, and Rowntree in York. In our modern world these have all been taken over by others.

Ann Pulsford's talk was very well received by the audience who were disappointed she had not brought any samples along!