

Penny Ices

In the ice cream trade, small family businesses were the norm, but, in a few instances, they developed into large enterprises - none larger than that of Carlo Gatti. A Swiss-Italian, Gatti arrived in London in 1847 aged thirty and virtually penniless. He started out with a stall selling coffee, goffre (a kind of waffle), roast potatoes and roast chestnuts. Then, in 1849, he joined forces with Battista Bolla, a chocolatier from Castro in south-east Italy, to establish a café-restaurant called Gatti and Bolla. This was located at the southern end of Little Italy at 129 Holborn Hill on the corner of Leather Lane close to Holborn Circus. Gatti and Bolla also lived there with their families. Here they sold drinking chocolate, a novelty at the time. According to an obituary of Gatti, in 1849 he made a trip to Paris from where:

"He immediately returned with a machine for manufacturing chocolate. The machine was an old and rusty one, but that was all he could get with the money at his disposal. He and Battista Bolla set themselves to place it in working order and began the manufacture of chocolate before the very eyes of the public at the house numbered 129 Holborn Hill..."

In 1853 Gatti started selling ice cream. Before long, his penny ices had become a Victorian craze. As his business grew, Gatti built a wharf by the Regent's Canal where he stored, in two huge wells, ice imported from Norway. The ice was transported by ship to the London Docks, then by barge along the canal. The building today houses the London Canal Museum. The ice stored there was sold to a variety of customers for refrigeration and in this way Gatti pioneered the refrigeration revolution in the food industry. Later, in the 1860s, Gatti opened a palace of varieties in Westminster Bridge Road and a music hall in Villiers Street off the Strand. Though much altered, the music hall still stands today, home to the New Players Theatre. When he died in 1878, Gatti was reputedly a millionaire. His was truly a rags to riches story.



The above ice cream tools have been collected by a member of the Anglo Italian Family History Society.

The glass containers were known as 'licking glasses' as wafers had not been invented. This was not very sanitary. The customer would lick the ice cream off the dish and return it to the vendor who would rinse it, then fill it for the next customer. The ice cream became known as 'hokey pokey' and the Italian ice cream sellers as 'hokey-pokey men'. It is thought that this derived from the cry of the seller in Italian of "ecco un poco" (here is a little piece) or, "o che poco" (oh, how little), referring to the cheap price.

The extracts on the left and above were taken from *Little Italy The Story of London's Italian Quarter* by Tudor Allen published by Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre
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