INTRODUCTION

Coffee drinking began in the mid-15th century, reaching England in the 16th century and becoming increasingly popular in the 17th century. By the 1650s, coffeehouses were being established in major English cities and by 1675 there were more than 3,000 in England. These institutions played an important role in mid-17th- to late 18th-century social, political and economic life; although by the mid-18th century tea had overtaken coffee in importance in England, becoming the ‘national drink’. In particular they were identified by Habermas as crucial institutions in terms of a developing public sphere; an area in social life where individuals could freely come together to discuss issues, which was defined by its inclusivity, disregard of status and role as a domain of ‘common concern’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Although Habermas’ ideas have been challenged in certain respects coffeehouses continue to be regarded as important institutions.[[2]](#endnote-2) Despite the recent surge of interest in the social and literary histories of 17th- to 18th-century coffeehouses, little attention has been directed towards the material aspects of these establishments. Documentary sources, such as inventories, seldom provide detailed information; pictorial representations of interiors are infrequent and non-specific; there is little material in museum collections; and archaeological discoveries are rare.[[3]](#endnote-3) This is despite the fact that coffee consumption has numerous material impacts and correlates, as recognised by contemporary authors, such as John Houghton, who noted that ‘Coffee hath greatly increased the Trade of Tobacco and Pipes, Earthen dishes, Tin wares, News-Papers, Coals, Candles, Sugar, Tea, Chocolate, and what not’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In 2005–12 the Cambridge Archaeological Unit conducted a series of archaeological interventions on behalf of St John’s College, Cambridge, within the street block situated directly opposite the college entrance and bounded by Bridge Street, St John’s Street and All Saints’ Passage (Figs 1–3). During one phase of investigation, quantities of ceramics and glass were observed being disturbed by work outside the areas scheduled for archaeological excavation. Brief investigations revealed that this was a substantial assemblage deposited within a cellar, and a decision was made to ‘rescue’ the material.[[5]](#endnote-5) It rapidly became apparent that the material derived from a coffeehouse.

1. NOTES

   Habermas 1989; see also Calhoun 1992. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cowan 2005; Ellis 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cowan 2005, 78–86; Ellis 2004, 129; Forsyth 2011, 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Houghton 1699, 317. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Newman 2008.

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