Why are the English so cold?

Visitors to England generally come away with one common impression - that the English have so far been losing the battle to stay warm. This struggle with the cold is not unique to their island, for there are far colder inhabited regions in the world. What distinguishes the English with respect to climate is that, by applying their powers of rational thought, they have been able to extract from their everyday, shivering existence a universal philosophy of the cold. This philosophy reaches to the very heart of the English view of reality. It is perhaps best expressed in a syllogism: England is a good country. It is cold in England. Therefore it is good to be cold.

Consider the well-dressed Englishman. At home in a drafty, ill-heated ancestral abode it is easy to account for the closely buttoned shirt, the tie and vest, the heavy woolen suit. Now go to Rome in the dead heat of summer and look for the Englishman in the crowd. He is the one wearing the buttoned-up shirt, tie, and heavy woolen suit. There is clearly a deeper teleology of clothing at work here, in which his attire symbolizes the Englishman's yearning to be back where it is good and cold. This the Englishman's way of saying - it is not my attire that is wrong, it is your weather.

Despite their basic affinity for the cold, the English have conceded that it is occasionally useful to have an indoor source of heat. It is therefore illuminating to consider how they have approached the problem of keeping warm at home. Most visitors to Britain can recall encountering the quintessential English contribution to modern domestic comfort - a little electric or gas unit, often made up to look like burning logs or a glowing coal grate, that you put into your flat's old fireplace.

These devices prompt one to imagine the early pioneers of British heating technology as they tried to identify the essential components for an indoor source of heat. They studied their surroundings, noticed that the prevailing solution involved a pile of logs or coal, glowing red, in a small hole in the parlor wall, and guessed - aha, it is from the hole in the wall that the heat comes. And so generations of Englishmen have afterwards devoted themselves to inventing newer and better devices to insert into their fireplaces in an effort to coax the heat out. (By analogy, one wonders why the British automotive industry didn't start straight off by trying to build a mechanical horse.)

The sight of these fireplace inserts reminds one of the cargo cults of the South Pacific, who make replicas of airplanes and landing strips in the vain hope of enticing the transport planes overhead to land on their islands. The English plug in their electric fires, gather round, and implore the heat god to visit them in their little parlors.

With the exception that actual logs and coal have been replaced by homomorphic electrical contraptions, the entire English repertoire of domestic heat-seeking behavior - the fireplace at each room's focus, the little circle of chairs drawn round, the subdued shivering and wearing of heavy coats indoors - has remained virtually unchanged for centuries. This has provided them ample time to devise a complex mythology explaining the health advantages of chronic pneumonia. Unfortunately, this has trapped them in an ever-widening spiral of contrary notions and further rationalizations. For instance, once having determined that it is good for humans to be cold, they were driven to conclude that it is better for beer to be warm. In consequence, one finds pubs where the only heat source in the room is the patron's glass of ale. Then more mythology is required to explain the advantages of keeping beer at the optimum temperature for bacterial growth. But perhaps this is instead just an example of the famous resourcefulness that has led Enlish scientists to make so many great discoveries using the most ordinary everyday things. In this view, if you don't like the beer, you can always use it for a lab tutorial in microbiology.

Having made their case for warm beer, one would expect the English to be equally devoted to iced tea. Yet in a rare display of inconsistency, they insist upon keeping their tea warm against all odds. Now, such devotion to an unattainable ideal should inspire them to great advances in the design of culinary heating appliances; so we find that the English, drawing once again upon a deep analogy, knit little sweaters for their teapots.

One does find on the breakfast table an appliance more in line with the English view of the virtues of cold. This is the traditional English toast cooler - a metal rack specially designed to allow cold air to circulate freely around all the slices. If a curious foreigner should be so naive as to question the concept, it will be explained that a properly chilled piece of toast permits the butter, which would otherwise melt into an unappealing pool, to remain firmly *al dente*. In fact, one can be sure that somewhere in England, someone has a theory that one best seals the essential nutrients into a piece of

toast by removing it from the toaster and immediately exposing it to a blast of frigid air from the dining room.

What can we conclude from these observations? The island of Great Britain reaches to nearly the same latitude as Siberia. But for sympathetic North Atlantic ocean currents, it would be an ice-encrusted arctic wasteland. Perhaps the English, with characteristic foresight, are simply conditioning themselves for the inevitable change in climate. Then, when the next ice age descends, they will be physically and psychologically prepared for the hardships. And they will be the only ones around with a taste for cold toast.

Martin Murphy