

Swiss eye view of a British institution

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Swiss eye view of a British institution



THE Swiss and other continentals smile at the Briton's habit of queueing. They say that wherever more than a dozen people want to do the same thing at the same time, they get into line and wait like sheep till their turn comes.

Since the war, they remark, queueing has become a national institution of the British.

The British on the other hand, complain that in most Continental countries it is positively dangerous to allow women and children to go out during the rush hour, for the motto of the Continental crowd is "Every man for himself" and only the strongest and fittest can survive the battle that takes place at every tram-stop.

Both versions are, of course, exaggerated, but there is no doubt that nowadays most British people, both men and women, spend a good part of their lives standing in queues.

In huge, crowded cities like London, where hundreds of thousands of people want to do the same thing at the same time, the practice of queueing had become a real necessity long before the war.

Every day veritable masses of people travel to and from their work on the same trains and buses, invade the restaurants and cafés, theatres and cinemas and shops during the same hours. Moreover, all take their holidays during the summer months, packing themselves into the same hotels at the same seaside resorts and indulging in the same amusements and hobbies.

The result would be chaos if some attempt were not made to maintain order.

Orderliness is not by any means a national quality of

the British, but they do possess plenty of practical common sense. And they have discovered that the queue, though they regard it as a necessary evil of life in their densely populated island, nevertheless appeals to them not only as the best solution of a very definite problem but as a symbol of discipline and fair play.

During the war, with its many crises and emergencies, housewives queued in front of the shops for their rations of potatoes and bread and groceries. Fish of all kinds - cod and mackerel, plaice and herring - took the place of meat on the daily menu, and it was important to reach the head of the queue before the fishmonger's shelves had been emptied of the most tasty species.

There were, of course, also selfish individuals who tried to reach the counter ahead of their turn, and the story is told of one shopkeeper who put a notice in his window reading "The first six in the queue will be served last".

Thus the queue acquired

a certain tradition and became the most democratic of all institutions, for it gave charwomen the same rights as ladies of title; and even in the first years after the war, when supplies of numerous commodities were still scarce and had to be kept on the ration, queueing remained the best means of preventing unfair distribution.

But in normal times, too, the visitor to Britain may see queues in front of theatres and cinemas - though never, it must be confessed, in front of churches - and the system has long been in force at the booking-offices of railway stations.

"First come, first served" is one of the mottoes that is today applied in everyday practice, quite as a matter of course, throughout the country.