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**English
Reading for Understanding,
Analysis and Evaluation
Text**

THURSDAY, 9 MAY

Read carefully the passage which follows overleaf. It will help if you read it twice. When you have done so, answer the questions.

How we eat

It is over thirty years since McDonald's opened its first UK drive-thru — 1986 being a year of firsts for a brand that now has 1,200 restaurants across Britain. The figures show today's consumers really are "lovin' it", yet the fast food experience is also ubiquitous — familiar, disposable and repeatable. So, how was it for customers when such places were still new? Was what is now commonplace ever thought a thrill?

It is 1975. UK cinemas are showing an advert for a brand whose name, at this point, is principally linked in the national consciousness to a nursery rhyme farmer. To the viewer, "golden arches" means nothing. A "Big Mac" is just an oversized raincoat.

The advert comes a year after American fast food restaurants started to appear in London. Few Brits, however, have visited them. People are still using knives and forks. The past, as they say, is a foreign country — they do things differently there.

Fast forward to 1983 and there are still only 100 McDonald's restaurants in the UK. The odds remain against most people seeing one. They literally do not know what they are missing.

Then 1986 rolls around and three things happen to boost our acquaintance with fast food empires. In Middlesex, the first franchises are given out by McDonald's to allow individuals to run their own stores. Another introduction is the Happy Meal, the very title of which suggests things have moved on from buying food to buying emotions — "eat this to feel like this." Things are now about experience. The stand-out concept in late-86, though, is the drive-thru: the missing "o", "g" and "h" letting Brits know things are different. Or at least in Manchester, where the first one opened, followed before the end of the year by drive-thrus in London and the West Midlands.

"It seemed a wacky idea and one with technology my family didn't trust."

This is the memory of a present-day McDonald's customer Chris Hammond — a West Midlands man born in the 70s and raised in the 80s. These were halcyon days for those who remember the brand when it was new and Britain was a thinner and, some would say, healthier nation. Chris gives an estimate of "mid-80s" for his first McDonald's visit, but it was not until as a teen in the 90s that he used a "space age" drive-thru, with its electronic ordering of goods via disembodied dialogue, overseen by teens in caps.

"The futuristic nature of it meant that we didn't understand what was meant to happen," he says. "And friends who did use drive-thrus back then didn't quite know their purpose; their parents ordered the food but ate it in the car park. It was driving through for its own sake. Now my car has a cup-holder as standard."

But what was it that put on the brakes and left people confused as to whether to take home the food? How could things have ever appeared "other" and "not for me"? In the mid-1980s a visit to a fast food eatery was so outwith the realm of everyday experience that it created doubt over how to be and how to feel — uncertainty mixed with a thrill now difficult to imagine. This was a place where up was down and even falsehood had an air of glamour. "McDonald's was the first place I ever saw a fake plant," one early customer recalled.

This new environment scrambled people's brains. Before the arrival of fast food establishments, children's experience of eating out was limited. Social eating tended to happen at home, or at school, or at a friend's house. Yet here was a restaurant where they did not have to keep their legs still. It was a picnic inside. Christmas in July.

Customers thought the once-a-year visit to McDonald's "exotic", the Filet-O-Fish "posh", and the taste secondary to going at all. Chris remembers it as an "event". It was an experience and destination unto itself. And one which created a cultural shift towards American eating habits.

"At first," he said, recalling colourful, plastic toadstools for seats, "McDonald's seemed to be only about children's parties — I couldn't conceive of people just going for something to eat, but after a while, I was one of them."

“Before, I had been used to knives and forks, but here you were out of the house and using your hands without a plate. And yet my parents felt the need to formalise it all by choosing what amounted to a starter, a main course and a pudding.”

But the balance of formality and convenience in the 80s played havoc with concepts of time. Fast food? It was not that simple. “We were never sure,” Chris said, “about how quickly to get away. If anything, it was the opposite of fast food and we hung around. You wanted it to feel like it was a thing you’d set out to do.”

The product the nostalgic are most excited to recall is the Big Mac, which was invented in 1967 by a US franchisee, and is still going, of course. But it is now a background thing, rarely resulting in a second glance, except at the discarded gherkins: discs of crinkly pickled cucumber left on a table top. But thirty or more years ago, the Big Mac drew kids’ gasps. In one sesame-seeded stack it seemed to rip up the rulebook. With its two burgers and bread bridge, the top half mirrored the bottom; a sort of bun and beef palindrome for mouths that — crucially — were milk teeth-free.

“I thought Big Macs were only for truckers and wrestlers,” Chris said. “I thought there must be a rule about it.”

It was typical of those early fast food experiences: confusion, newness and thrill all at once. It sounds like love. Or at least “lovin’ it.” But “lovin’ it” now in a different century, where eating habits have certainly changed, has brought with it another cultural shift — a growing awareness of how and what we eat.

Adapted from an article by John Newton on the BBC news website.

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