

## ANGLO SAXON FOOD

The food and cookery component of a living history display rarely fails to add extra realism to an event; after all, eating is an essential authentic activity in which even the least skilled can participate! Although surviving Roman and Later Medieval cookery texts neatly circumvent our period there is a growing body of archaeological material pertaining both to cookery techniques and to the plant and animal resources of the Late Saxon period. Literary and artistic sources also afford valuable insights into Anglo-Saxon diet. Consequently this article aims to summarise some of the available evidence for Late Saxon catering and to suggest a few (purely conjectural) recipes for use at shows.

### The animal resources

The majority of mammalian bones from Late Saxon urban sites belong to domestic animals. Cattle bones almost invariably predominate although sheep and pig remains are also abundant. Many of the cattle and sheep bones derive from mature beasts suggesting that these animals were not kept purely for their meat. Indeed, it is probable that mature, but castrated, male cattle were extensively used on plough teams prior to slaughter [1,2]. Female cattle were probably also kept for dairying although there is scant evidence of an associated veal surplus. However, the bones of five young animals have been excavated from medieval Southampton and it has been tentatively suggested that these calves were slaughtered for consumption at a banquet; it is not unlikely that similar practices were observed in our period [1,3]. Increasing numbers of sheep were also kept beyond maturity in the Late Saxon age corresponding to the rise of the English woollen trade [1,2,5]. Goat bones are also known from Anglo-Saxon sites, goats may have been used for both milk and meat [1,2]. By contrast the ratio of pig bones from urban sites falls towards the eve of The Conquest, it has been suggested that this reduction may be allied to the decline of suitable pannage with the growth of towns [6]. Alternately the pigs may have been converted to boneless bacon elsewhere and subsequently transported to town; surviving documents certainly attest the provision of prepared fitches of bacon to ecclesiastical sites [7,8]. Pigs were generally slaughtered prior to full maturity at the optimum age for prime pork and were consequently kept exclusively for meat [9]. Horse meat may have been eaten on occasion although The Church apparently frowned upon this practice [5,10].

Exploitation of wild mammals was generally very limited and probably opportunistic. The remains of red and roe deer have been conclusively identified from towns such as Thetford, Durham and Southampton whilst Portchester reveals that fallow deer were present in the South of England at least [2,5,6,11]. Literary sources indicate that wild boar might be hunted

although from an archaeological viewpoint it is apparently hard to distinguish large domestic pig bones from those of their ferocious brethren [6,12]. Isolated examples of hare bones are known from Durham and Coppergate for example whilst rare beaver remains hail from Anglian levels at York [6,9,13]. Faunal assemblages from coastal or island sites such as Lindisfarne include both seal and cetacean bones; the latter suggesting that the inhabitants readily took advantage of beached whales or dolphins [14]. Unusually high levels of wild animals were exploited at the earlier insular site at Iona, this phenomena may be associated with the limited agricultural land available on such islands [10]. However it is not impossible that the denizens of more rural areas also utilised their surrounding resources in a more adventurous fashion than urban remains would suggest.

Bird bones again denote a high reliance on domestic species, most particularly the chicken and, to a lesser extent, the domestic goose, it is likely that these were kept for both eggs and meat [15]. In addition wild species such as the mallard, shelduck, widgeon, dunlin, golden plover, cormorant and curlew were occasionally consumed [2]. Both partridge and pigeon were also eaten as were capercaillie, woodcock, redwing, guillemot and black grouse to name but a few [6,11,13,16,]. Although the presence of the pheasant in Britain is not usually thought to predate the Conquest a lone example was found from Anglian York [9]. It is noteworthy that the distribution of some bird species was wider in the Viking age, hence remains of both the crane and the, now extinct, great auk also hail from insular sites [5].

Literary and archaeological evidence testifies to the existence of deep sea fishing [4,12]. However, the majority of fish and shellfish remains reveal a heavy reliance on freshwater, estuarine and inshore species with the utilisation of greater numbers of marine species such as cod, herring, mackerel and haddock with the progression of time. Thus deposits from York reveal the increasing consumption of herring from the mid tenth century, followed by the introduction of cod and later haddock and ling to the diet in the eleventh century [1]. Additionally it has been postulated that, in the absence of today's over fishing, certain 'offshore' species may have been found further inshore [18]. Freshwater and estuarine fishes known from late urban sites include eels, lampreys, pike, salmon, burbot, flounders, plaice, bass, mullet, rays and occasionally sturgeon [6,11,12,13]. These might be caught with nets, hook and line or fish weirs. Rare crustacean remains include a lobster from Saxon Durham and crab remains from Roman York, (whether crab consumption remained popular into our period is not discernible) [1,6]. Popular shellfish included oysters, cockles, mussels, whelks, winkles and even limpets [11,19,20]. Comparison with medieval Southampton and Viking Buckquoy suggests that land-snails were another possible element in the early medieval diet [3,18][6]. Lastly, both

charter and archaeological evidence indicates the importance of honey as a sweetener, not to mention a vital ingredient of mead!

### The plant resources

Botanical assemblages from excavated sites reveal, not surprisingly, the presence of a large number of domestic and wild plants. However, as botanical remains need not necessarily hail from food debris gauging the extent to which wild species contributed to the menu is problematic. Furthermore the distinction between wild and domestic cultivars is not always apparent from available evidence.

Cereals formed an important part of the diet and presumably contributed the bulk of necessary carbohydrate. The main cereal crop presumably varied with the prevailing agricultural conditions of each locality. The use of wheat, barley and to a lesser extent, oats and rye are all attested by archaeology [6,11,22]. In the case of the former grain sizes comparable with those of modern club/bread wheats are known although more primitive variants also occur [21]. Flax may also have been grown for its food content and not merely for textile use [6]. Cultivated vegetables included peas, field beans, leeks, onions, members of the cabbage family, small turnips and perhaps carrots (but not the bright orange variety), although this latter plant may alternately have been gathered wild [6,11,19]. Added flavour could be provided by herbs such as garlic and wild garlic, dill, rue, mints, sorrel and mustard together with more costly spices like cumin and coriander [11,19,22,24]. Comparison with continental material of the same period also reveals the use of horseradish, cress, cloves and pepper [24,25]. Fruit and nuts may have been gathered wild or cultivated. Archaeological material testifies to the use of blackberries, raspberries, sloes, bullace, damson plums, wild cherries, hazelnuts, small apples and pears, elderberries and perhaps the occasional walnut [6,11]. There is also evidence of imported figs and grapes from excavations in London [4]. Plants which may have been gathered wild for human consumption include wild radish, wild celery, fat hen, rowan, silverweed, chickweed and hops to name but a few although the degree to which edible wild plants were actually exploited is unknown. Mushrooms are also possible candidates although, by their very nature, they are unlikely to leave any trace in the archaeological record [6,10,11,22].

### Techniques

Butchery marks on surviving bones indicate that little distinction was made between 'cheap' and 'expensive' cuts of meat. In the light of this it has been suggested that stews formed a sizable component of the early medieval diet [2]. These stews might be cooked in the large clay cooking pots known from archaeology, some of which have holes for suspension

thongs. Alternately the pot might be placed in the hot ashes round the hearth [11]. Comparison with Scandinavian material also reveals the use of iron and copper alloy cauldrons and soapstone pots (the latter are, however, largely confined to the continent) [25,26]. Once the stewed meat was cooked it could be withdrawn from the pot using iron flesh-hooks [27]. Further attested butchery techniques include splitting cattle bones to extract the marrow and cracking open pig skulls to gain access to the brains. The Bayeux Tapestry indicates that pieces of meat and poultry might also be spitted on sticks and barbecued [30]. An iron pan resembling a modern frying pan was excavated from ninth century levels at Winchester; presumably the use of such pans has varied little over the centuries [27]. Flour could be ground at the local mill (if available) or with a hand operated quern. It is likely that flat unleavened bread was either cooked on the round breadmakers known from Mastermyr, baked under an upturned pot on the hearth, or cooked in large, possibly communal, ovens [6,23,26,29]. Round griddles with upturned rims may also have been used for pancakes or simply for shallow frying [26]. Charred, whole grains are known from analyses of middens; although these might hail from roughly ground bread it is equally likely that they either were added as thickeners to soup or stews or boiled in a manner akin to rice [6]. Dairy products might be preserved by conversion to butter or cheese [17,8]. Other forms of preservation included salting and drying whilst smoking or pickling in vinegar would also seem to be feasible propositions although evidence is limited.

#### Modern Practicalities

Prior to embarking on the latter day reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon meals a few cautionary points should be addressed. Firstly, the identification of any wild plant or mushroom should be made with the aid of a good botanical or mycological key: the popular photographic guides available are unlikely to be sufficiently precise. This is particularly important with the many members of the parsley family (umbelliferae) which include user friendly plants such as the wild carrot together with rather less amenable varieties - most notably the hemlock! Additionally wild plants, are not uncommonly tainted by a range of pollutants and should at least be thoroughly washed. Similarly native shellfish can play host to harmful bacteria and other detrimental pollutants. Care should be exercised when using rue as a flavouring as this herb can act as an abortifacient and should therefore be strenuously avoided by pregnant women. Lastly, cereal grains should always be kept under dry conditions, when damp they provide a suitable habitat for unpleasant microscopic fungi which can cause a range of ill effects, including immuno-suppression, hallucinations and death![31].

The modern day cook may encounter problems replicating the ingredients of the past, for example orange carrots, big modern

apples and South African plums are unlikely to be suitable. The nature of Anglo-Saxon onions is also a vexed question; some sources maintain that today's russet skinned onion is anachronistic although a Saxon riddle does imply that onions of the time had red or russet skins [32]. To be on the safe side it is perhaps best to stick to small peeled onions or large spring onions, additionally Sainsburys occasionally sell packs of 'slicing salad onions' which are ideal. If in doubt use leeks instead. Unless you intend to grind your own flour a packet of wholemeal flour with added grains provides an acceptable modern alternative. It is usually possible to obtain this, together with other flours, nuts and pulses, from good health food shops. Needless to say fresh ingredients should ideally be used; they reflect seasonal dietary fluctuations and can be introduced as part of the display. However, if these are inaccessible it is allowable to slip frozen ingredients into the pot prior to the public's arrival! The recipe suggestions below are purely conjectural, in reality any edible combination of authentic ingredients, cooking techniques and imagination can be used.

### Recipe suggestions

#### Flatbread

Simply mix the flour of your choice with a good pinch of salt and sufficient water to make a smooth dough. Knead the dough briefly then shape it into thin flat cakes. Place each cake on a lightly buttered griddle and cook until lightly browned on each side, turning once.

To my mind this basic recipe is vastly improved by the addition of chopped wild garlic, finely chopped or crumbled cheese or, for those with a sweet tooth, crushed hazelnuts and honey, to the mixture. Flatbread can be served simply with butter, cheese or honey. Alternately, for the more adventurous, a range of interesting spreads can be used. A couple of suggestions are outlined below.

#### Plum and nut spread

Gently stew approximately 1lb of stoned plums with a little water in an earthenware pot until the plums are soft (you may need to add more water as the plums cook). Take the pot off the heat and break up the softened plums by pressing them against the side of the pot with a wooden spoon. Add a couple of spoonfuls of honey to sweeten the plums. Next place  $\frac{1}{4}$ lb of hazelnuts in a linen bag, tie the top securely shut and then hit the bag with a heavy object until the nuts are roughly crushed. Add the crushed nuts to the plum mixture and stir. This spread can be served hot or cold on flatbread or as a filling for pancakes. Different fruits or combinations of fruit can also be used.

### Salmon and cheese spread

Flake  $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ lb cooked salmon (it is possible to cheat and use tinned!) Mix a couple of finely chopped spring onions and one tablespoon of fresh chopped dill into  $\frac{1}{2}$ lb soft cheese. Blend in the salmon and serve cold with flatbread

### Pork, pea and broad bean stew.

Place a piece of pork of roughly 2lbs in weight in a medium sized cauldron. Cover with water and bring to the boil then simmer for about an hour, skimming off any scum with a wooden spoon. Remove the pork and cut the meat from the bone if necessary. Chop the pork into pieces then return the meat to the cauldron, add about 1lb of cleaned chopped leeks, approximately 1lb of fresh broad beans and at least 1lb of dried green split peas. The optional addition of a couple of handfuls of nettle tops and a few chopped wild garlic leaves at this stage tends to fascinate the crowd. Boil until the peas are soft, stirring regularly to prevent the stew burning and consequently tasting disgusting (you may need to adjust the proportions of split peas and water to achieve the desired thickness). Finally add salt to taste and then serve. This stew is usually solid enough to need no accompaniment. However it can be served with boiled grains, pancakes or flat bread if extra stodge is needed.

Soups and stews such as this can again be made with any reasonable combination of meat and vegetables. Alternately fish or shellfish, together with a good handful of dill can be added instead of meat towards the end of the cooking time. To reiterate, any reasonable combination will suffice-

Bon appetit

Rachel.

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