

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2014

Tudor and Stuart Feasts.

For their first meeting of the autumn, the Wargrave Local History Society welcomed back well-known local historian Joan Dils, who spoke about Tudor and Stuart Feasts.

Although the lives of the kings, queens and nobility of the Tudor and Stuart period is described in many places, the lives of 'ordinary people', what they ate, how they entertained their friends and celebrated community life is not as easy to discover. By using sources from within Berkshire, however, Joan was able to reveal something of what life was like for those of more humble status. The reformation did away with many of these feasts and celebrations, and many cultural traditions were lost at that time.

Typical of the kind of communal celebration was the Whitsun Ales, held up to the 1590s. These were usually run by the local churchwardens, who would collect quantities of wheat - to make bread, and barley - to make ale, from the wealthier residents. The less wealthy would then be provided with a feast, which would be held in the church house if there was one. In places where there was no such building, the feast was held in the church itself, as happened in Reading. There would be feasting and dancing - activities that later the Puritans would disapprove of, particularly if held in the church. It is not surprising, therefore, that celebrations like this then died out.

Several places in Berkshire are known to have held such feasts, such as Childrey, Kintbury, Thatcham, St Mary's in Reading and St Laurence's in Reading. The churchwardens' accounts recorded the arrangements for these feasts, and fortunately the early accounts for Reading survive.

The accounts recorded that a cook was employed to make pasties, and that the churchwardens also paid for meat and spices. In some parishes the wardens also bought raisins. The result was that quite sophisticated cooking was provided for the ordinary people, often at the festivals in the church calendar, such as Whitsun. The St Mary's Reading accounts for the 1550s, for example, show that the churchwardens had bought in bread, a calf's head, veal, mutton, butter, spices, currants, raisins and salt. The spices would have been purchased at one of several fairs held locally each year, or from one of several merchants in the town who sold them.

A relatively low level of society was therefore able to experience sophisticated food. Prodigious quantities of beer would be consumed - one feast in 1514 included "a kilderkin of beer, a dozen good ales, and 3 gallons of ordinary ale". (A kilderkin was 18 gallons). An account for the mid 1550s records that 14 shillings was spent for 3 barrels of beer. (The population at that time was 1000, but is doubtful that all would attend the feast, so a 'plentiful supply' was available). An indication of the quantity of meat provided is given in the records for Stanford Dingley, where they had "great brass pot to hold a quarter of beef" - that is over 500 pounds.

In the towns, such as Hungerford and Reading, there was also a feast provided at Hocktide - the Monday and Tuesday after the 1st Sunday after Easter. The tradition was that on one day the women held the men to ransom, and on the other the men held the women to ransom - that women always made more money than the men from the forfeits - although maybe the men spent more on ale! The money raised as a result would be partly used by the churchwardens for the use of the church, but the rest would provide for a communal feast. Sometimes these would be for a particular group such as a wives' supper, or a bachelor's supper. Although such festivities ceased in most places in the Puritanical era, the village of Stanford in the Vale was a very conservative parish, and disliked anything to do with the Reformation, so the feasting

continued there until 1621. Another activity that could give rise to the people sharing food together was beating the bounds. This set out to check the parish boundaries - in particular to see that the appropriate tithes were being paid. The vicar of Newbury in 1608 thought he was not being given the tithes he expected. He was entitled to a tenth of the produce, such as stooks of corn, each parishioner had. Maybe people removed some before he arrived to check on what he was able to take, and those near the boundary might not have declared what they had at all. The account of the 'Perambulation of Newbury' that year recorded that one witness, aged 70, had come to say he remembered as a young boy that whenever they reached Sandleford Farm they always had bread and beer at the farm house, whilst a 50 year old similarly recalled being provided with cake and ale there. Similarly, at West Lockinge it was recalled that in the early 1500s when the procession reached West Lockinge farm 'the Gospel was read and the parishioners feasted'.

There were also feasts for the young people, - for Summer Lady and Summer Lord, where they could 'let their hair down without adults present'. On one occasion, at Milton in 1590, the youths had gathered to make merry and have supper in the church house - but it did not turn out as they expected. When the large dish with what they expected would be the food was brought in, and the cover removed, there was not meat etc, but a hare's foot, a sheep's horn a bullock's horn etc - symbols representing fornication - a way to say that their Summer Lady and Summer Lord should not be there!!!

Another event that would lead to a feast would be a wedding, when as many people as possible would be invited as the family could afford to feed. For example, Peter Tull postponed his daughter's marriage until he had enough barley to make sufficient beer. Clearly the feast was an important part of the marriage - he local vicar being expected to turn up to prevent the celebrations getting out of hand!

More is known about the feasting that followed a funeral than a wedding, as often money was left in a will to make provision for it. A shilling would buy a dozen breads, although a white loaf would be rather smaller than a wholemeal one. It would be left up to the executors as to how to spend the shillings to provide the quantity of bread. Typically, a Margaret Rogers left 4/- for 4 dozen breads for the poor, whereas in Wargrave, Robert Basil in 1630 provided 40/- for cake and breads for the poor. It was considered socially right to provide a feast for the 'worthy poor' of the parish. In 1670, Hannibal Baskerville left £3/18/9d for beer - about 60 gallons, and £13/15/- for wine, whilst for a funeral at Clewer 6 gallons of sack (a sweet wine), 7 gallons of claret and 5lbs of sugar were used - the sugar needed as to make mulled wine, very popular at the time. To lay on a good feast when one died was seen as an indication that the person was 'someone of standing'.

Other special occasions were the big Guild feasts. The Reading Merchants always feasted on St Matthew's Day - and in 1498 this fell on a Friday, so no meat could be eaten - so a meal of bread, ale, wine, salt fish (by the barrel load from London), conger eels, trout, pike, haddock, oysters etc was provided.

Ale was made from malt, and the mash was strained to provide the best, strong, beer, high in calories, after which more boiling water would be added, and the process repeated (like re-using a tea-bag), making a weaker 'small beer'. Most of the time people drank this small beer - water - especially in towns - being unsafe to drink, but brewing boiled the water. Milk was rarely drunk, being used to make butter or cheese. A typical household of 8 people used 200 gallons of beer per month. The cakes were a sweetened bread, with spices, currants and raisins, rather than the modern types of cake.

Such feasts would be a special event for most ordinary people, as a meal with 'butcher's meat' was something they would not otherwise have very often. The best meat they normally had was bacon, and often meals were based on a cheese dish. Eggs were often frowned upon - one lady served an 'omelette' to her husband, who asked 'what's this, have you nothing better?' On being told 'no', he apparently commented that 'if that man from down the road called, he would have got better'!

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, October 14th, when Barbara Askew will recount the work involved in the Windsor Fire Restoration, following the 1992 disaster, and then on Tuesday, November 11th, Christina Hill-Williams, a former High Sheriff of Berkshire, will give us a personal insight into the history and duties of this ancient office. Then on Tuesday, December 9th the Society will hold its Christmas Party.