

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2020

Georgian Cooking

Catherine Sampson gave a fascinating insight into Georgian Cooking at the Wargrave Local History Society's February meeting. She explained that the Georgian period was one where new technologies, changes in agriculture and transportation led to changes in eating habits, with a new generation of cookery writers spreading the message.

This was the time of Jane Austen, whose writing in the late Georgian era showed what was going out of, and coming into, fashion. It was a time when the open fields were being enclosed, creating more medium and large farms, with fields separated by hedges and other boundaries, whilst experimentation created new crops. Amongst these was the production of fodder to feed cattle over the winter. Previously, cattle was slaughtered in the autumn, and the meat treated with salt, but the fodder crop enabled fresh meat to be available through the winter period. The roads were being improved by the Turnpike Trusts, the tolls paying for a better surface and more direct routes between towns. Locks were being constructed that made the canals and rivers more navigable. The result was that a much wider range of agricultural produce, raw materials, and goods could be found in local towns and villages. In addition, the development of the docks at Bristol, and later Liverpool, enabled exotic spices to be brought from the Caribbean. This was also the time of the French Revolution, when rich French families no longer needed their chefs, who then came to England, bringing not only their cuisine but their continental etiquette.

When George I acceded to the throne in 1714, cooking was being done on an open fire - and despite developments meanwhile, that was still the case at the end of George III's reign in 1820 (the cooking range only coming into use in the Victorian era).

In the early Georgian period, the typical dining room (for middle and upper classes), would have had a dining table laid with a very long table cloth. At a 'dinner party', guests would be invited to have the edge of the cloth tucked into their neckline by a footman. The cloth would catch any food they dropped etc, so by the end of the main course it would be very mucky. For a dessert course, therefore, the cloth would be removed, or the guests moved to a second table. The French chefs were horrified by this practice, and reintroduced the use of napkins!

Dinner guests would have their own travelling cutlery set placed in front of them - to be washed and returned at the end of the meal, as few families would be able to afford sufficient for such a gathering. During the Georgian era, however, the Sheffield cutlers enabled silver plate cutlery to be mass produced, with a resultant tumbling in the price. The design also changed. Previously, forks only had 2 or maybe 3 prongs. They were used just to hold the meat whilst it was cut, and food was carried to the mouth on the edge of a knife, with much of the 'cutting' being done by the teeth. The change to cutting food into much smaller pieces and using the fork to place in the mouth led, in time, to a change in the shape of human jaws. Vegetable tureens, cruet sets, etc also came to be mass produced around this time.

Another item that guests would bring with them to a meal was their glassware. A wine glass was a very precious possession and each would be kept on a sideboard, to be brought to the table by a footman so the diner could take a sip of wine, and then be returned. When in the mid-1700s a process was developed to mass produce drinking glasses, they became much more affordable, and would be placed on the dining table - and more wine consumed.

The various courses for a formal meal would be set out on a table in a definite order, and guests would be seated accordingly - those close to the best course would be the guest of honour, whilst people of lesser importance would be seated by 'less attractive' courses. Only one course would be put on a plate at a time, but sweet and savoury items were eaten in no particular order.

These dishes would be laid out before the guests sat at the table, and there was no means to keep food warm on the table. Some courses were therefore described as 'remove dishes' (such as soup). Diners would eat these first and they would then be replaced by another, (such as fish or fowl), brought hot from the kitchen. Although many of the courses would be familiar to us, others, such as curry of rabbit, jugged hare, rais'd jelly, syllabub, baskets of pastry, would be less so, whilst buttered lobster, goose or macaroni are not often now served at a dinner party! Another notable difference is that female guests were only meant to have small portions - just a 'nibble' - whilst the males ate 'heartily'.

Popular at the time as a first dish were mulligatawny and turtle soups. It was realised that if ships coming from the Caribbean had large tanks on board, the turtles could be delivered fresh. A host able to serve turtle soup was indicating their prosperity in being able to afford such. Nothing went to waste -the soup often being served in the turtle shell. The lower classes could not afford to do enjoy such luxuries, and so had 'mock turtle' soup - made from calf meat. By the Victorian era, mock turtle soup became a vegetable broth, without even calf meat (and hence Lewis Carroll commenting on the falling standards of mock turtles!),

Georgians were not fastidious eaters, and would make good use of every part of an animal. What was not used one day would be used the next, and "Day 2 meat" would be treated with spices to disguise its taste and smell. By day 3, the curry powder would be necessary. There being no refrigeration, food poisoning was not uncommon at that time, although the Georgians had begun to introduce garnishes of vegetables (having previously thought vegetables to be poisonous).

Larger houses would have an oven, heated either from below or by putting hot coals inside before the food was heated. A variety of pies (some being 'county specialities') became popular. Originally, these would be baked in thick pastry until the meat was cooked, and the pastry then discarded, but with the introduction of pottery pie dishes, a much thinner pastry could be used, and eaten. Dessert courses would be accompanied by much wine.

The kitchen itself would be dominated by the open fire, with herbs hanging to dry and keep flies out of the way. Apart from an oven, meats would be cooked on a spit - mechanisation meant that a kitchen maid no longer had to turn the spit, but needed to be close to the fire to baste the meat as it cooked.

Although there had been cookery writers for around 100 years or so, a new kind of cook book evolved at this time. People who were aspiring to move up in the class structure of the time needed guidance on how to arrange a dinner party, as well as suitable recipes for the various courses to be served. The book "The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Simple", written in the 1740s became a best seller, as its author, Hannah Glasse, avoided jargon and so was instantly understandable by readers.

Over the course of the Georgian period, the pattern of meals changed, from having a breakfast mid-morning followed by the main meal in the late afternoon and a mid-evening snack later, to having an earlier breakfast, introducing a luncheon meal, a mid-afternoon 'tea' at about 4pm, with a dinner around 7.30 or so.

Catherine ended the evening by serving samples of a cake made to a Georgian recipe with lemon and caraway seed, so members got to taste as well as see and hear about Georgian cooking!

The Society's latest publication - A Brief History of Wargrave, outlining aspects of village history, illustrated with over 40 photographs from the Society archive, is now available at Society meetings, or at Newberry's in Twyford.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, March 10th, starting at 8 pm in the Old Pavilion at Wargrave Recreation Ground when the Society will hold its AGM and the programme for the coming year will be announced.