

FEASTING IN BYGONE BERKHAMSTED

By "BEORCHAM"

Some years ago a popular British film showed Henry VIII behaving like a savage as he scooped up food with his fingers, stuffed his mouth in the most revolting way, and munched away regardless of the grease that cascaded down his chin and bespattered his clothes.

It was not a pretty spectacle, and one hopes that Henry VIII did not really behave so grossly as the belching glutton portrayed on the screen. But we can be sure that the standard of etiquette in Tudor days was far different from that of modern times. For one thing, there was very little cutlery—forks were not introduced to this country until the 17th century—and in palace and peasant's hovel alike it was customary to use one's fingers. Eating must have been a very sticky business!

A 600 years-old document from our own district provides an interesting commentary on the eating habits of long ago. At Ashridge Monastery, where the standard was presumably fairly high for the period, monks were warned not to wipe their noses on the tablecloth! It was also necessary to remind them that it was discourteous to crack nuts during conversation.

Setting the Fashion

How different were table manners when Ashridge Monastery became the country seat of the Bridgewater. By the 17th century the elaborate dining etiquette of the present day was already evolving, and we can be sure that the Earls of Bridgewater, with their wealth, culture and opportunities of travel, set the fashion in refinement in this district. The second Earl, a martinet if ever there was one, went to the length of drawing up detailed "Orderings of the Household."

Guests could doubtless be depended upon to behave as gentlemen, but the Earl found it necessary to direct the

servants to use "civill and sober demeanour . . . at the severall tables where they are appoynted to sit" and avoid "unseemly and rude deportment." Servants were expressly forbidden to rise from the table "until thanks be first given to God"; on the other hand, the usher was to "permit none after meals are done, to sitt drinke in the hall."

It is amusing to read that waiters were "diligently to attend their service at the table, without gazing about (soe blinding their owne eyes from findinge what is fitting for them to doe) or listening too earnestly to what is said (soe stoppinge their owne ears against the calle of such as have occasion to make use of them)."

The Earl was a rich man, but he liked to be sure he had value for money. Thus, the steward was ordered "to look carefully to all bills . . . that the stuff be good, the prices reasonable, and none of the bills paid twice." The clerk of the kitchen, the cook and the larder maid, were to be "watchful to prevent the wasteful expence of butter, which hath hitherto been too little considered, and too little valued, and too much wasted." Incidentally, the porter was to take the "broken meat" to the gate and give to the poor.

Menus at Berkhamsted Castle

The Earl of Bridgewater's "Orderings" were by no means the first of their kind. Two and a half centuries earlier (from 1477 to 1495) Berkhamsted Castle was the home of Cicely, Duchess of York, and her "Orders and Rules" show that she ran the Castle on business-like lines that would have done justice to a modern efficiency expert. The household was run to a strict time-table, and even the menus followed a regular weekly routine. The list, necessarily abbreviated, is given with the original strange and often inconsistent spellings:

Sondaye, Tuesdaye and Thursdaye: dynner, boyled beefe and mutton, and one roste; supper, leyched beefe and mutton roste.

Mondaye and Wensdaye: dynner, one boyled beefe and mutton; supper, as above.

Satterdaye: dynner, saltfysche, one freshfishe, and butter; supper, saltfishe and egges.

Fastinge dayes: salte fysche, and two dishes of fresh fische.

Dinner was served at 11 a.m. on "eatynge dayes" and at noon on "fastynge dayes." Supper was at 5 p.m. When her highness had been served with the second course, the household was rewarded with "breaude and ale, after the discretyon of the usher." Wine was given daily to "head offycers when they be presente, to the ladyes and gentlewomen, to the Deane of the Chappell, to the Almoner, to the gentlemen-ushers, to the

Cofferer, to the Clerke of the Kytchin, and to the Marshall."

Duchess Cicely ordered that payment was to be made on Fridays for "freshe" provisions, and at the end of the month "for all manner other things." Proclamation was to be made four times a year "about Berkhamsted in market townes, to understande whether the purveyors . . . make true paymente of my ladyes money or not; and also to understande by the same whether my ladyes servants make true payment of their owne debts or not; and if any default be found, a remedy to be had forthwith for a recompense."

Chickens a Penny Each!

More will be told of Duchess Cicely, Berkhamsted Castle's last resident, in a later article. Meanwhile, the subject is Food, and it is appropriate, if perhaps a little tantalising, to turn to a fragmentary document in the Church chest giving details of a parish feast held in Berkhamsted in Tudor times. The bill came to 21s. 5d. (exclusive of 1s. 6d. for horse-meat!) and one feels that the company at "Harry Dawnsserris howsse" must have dined well, if not altogether wisely. They consumed, or at any rate paid for, beef, mutton, three pigs, 19 piglets, three geese, 19 chickens, one capon, three small capons, an unspecified number of eggs, bread, cheese, milk, cream, 31 gallons of ale, three pottels of small ale, not to mention sundry items such as "saffron, raysonys, powder geenger, synemond, sewerger, hony, weneger and yergewys, mustard, batter, sewette," etc.

William Cobbett at Tring

The prices seem absurd until it is remembered that in Tudor times money had a purchasing power many times that of the present day. Twopence was paid for a leg of mutton, pigs were fivepence each, geese sixpence each, and chickens were slightly more than a penny each. We have no means of knowing how many "heyggys" (eggs) were supplied for fivepence, or how much "mylke and krem" was purchased for twopence. Bread, at 1s. 8d., was a comparatively expensive item; so was sugar, for two ounces cost twopence. But ale was merely a fraction over a penny a gallon!

For an account of another gargantuan feast, let us turn to the pages of "Rural Rides," in which William Cobbett describes a public dinner given in his honour at the Rose and Crown Inn, Tring, in 1829. Cobbett says, "Though I tasted nothing but the breast of a little chicken, and drank nothing but water, the dinner was the best that ever I saw called a public dinner, and certainly unreasonably cheap. There were excellent joints of meat of the finest description, fowls and geese in abundance, and, finally, a very fine haunch of venison, with a bottle of wine for each person, and all for seven shillings and sixpence per head. Good waiting upon; civil landlord and lady; and, in short, everything

at this very pretty town pleased me exceedingly."

Fifty Years Ago

But we have no need to go outside our own town for details of lavish repasts in more modern times. Recently the writer was shown the menu card of a dinner given at the Town Hall exactly 50 years ago to employees of Cooper's Chemical Works. The items included roast beef, roast turkey, roast veal, boiled ham, sucking pigs, boiled mutton and caper sauce, roast pork, roast mutton, boiled chickens and white sauce, roast chickens, boiled beef; plum pudding, rhubarb tarts, apple tarts, mince pies, blanc-mange, tippy cakes, jellies; cheese, celery; dessert.

A "groaning board," indeed. But before anyone makes the obvious comment, "Those were the days!" let it be added that there was want as well as plenty when that memorable dinner was held in 1896. While the Town Hall diners were enjoying a sumptuous repast, scores of families in Berkhamsted were hungry. It was not for nothing that free soup kitchens were set up in the Castle Grounds and at Foster's Brewery in Victorian Berkhamsted; dire poverty existed, especially in the winter months, and malnutrition was widespread despite the well-stocked shops.

A point worth thinking about before grumbling about present day rations—even if this article does leave one with a hungry feeling!

The big jump in Berkhamsted's rate for the current year from 13s. 10d. to 16s. in the £ is mainly due to the increased call from the Herts County Council, which will take no less than 11s. 9d. Other precepting authorities require 4d., so that Berkhamsted Council will be left with only 3s. 10½d. to meet the cost of local services.

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