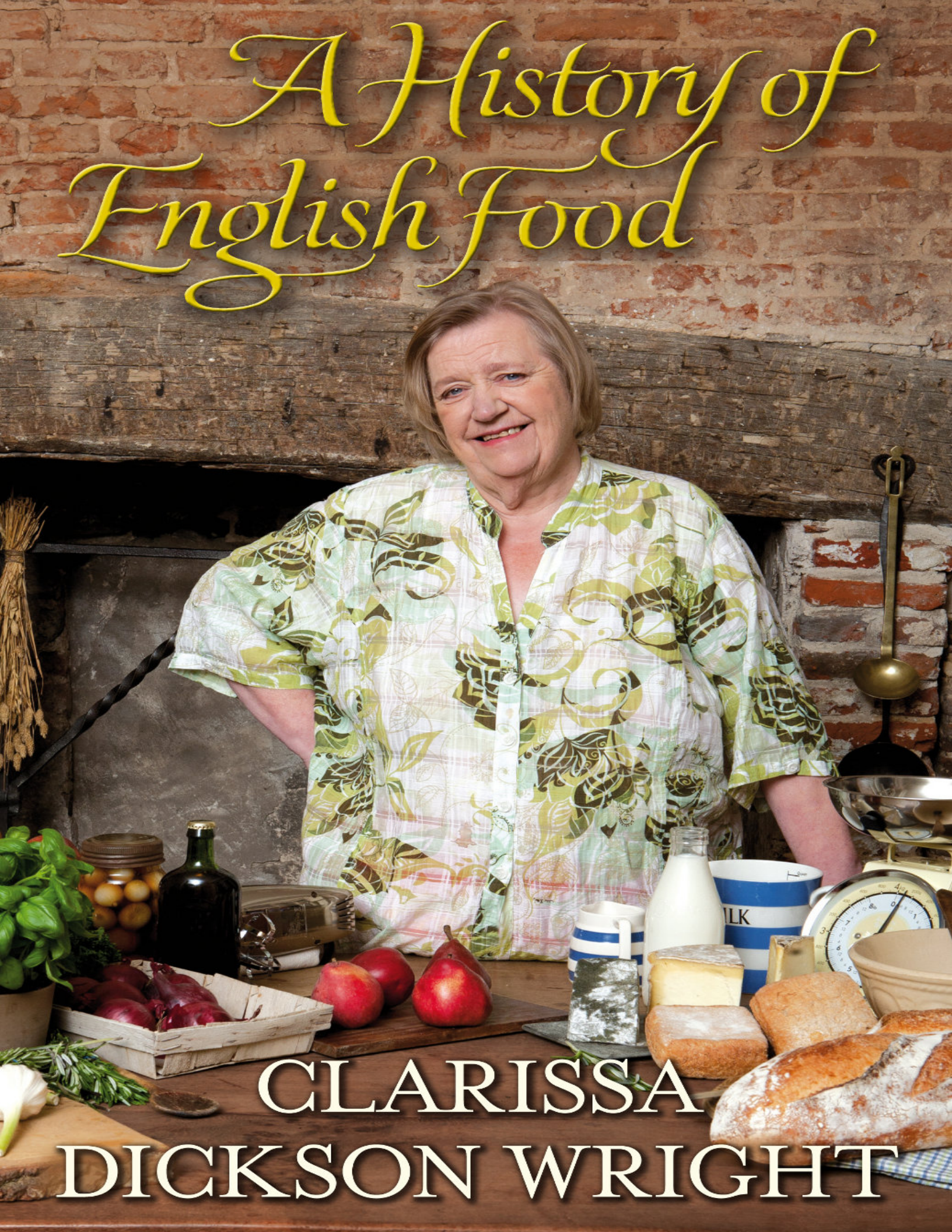
A History of English Food



CLARISSA DICKSON WRIGHT

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About the Book

In this major new history of English food, Clarissa Dickson Wright takes the reader on a journey from the time of the Second Crusade and the feasts of medieval kings to the cuisine – both good and bad – of the present day. She looks at the shifting influences on the national diet as new ideas and ingredients have arrived, and immigrant communities have made their contribution to the life of the country. She evokes lost worlds of open fires and ice houses, of constant pickling and preserving, and of manchet loaves and curly-coated pigs. And she tells the stories of the chefs, cookery book writers, gourmets and gluttons who have shaped public taste, from the salad-loving Catherine of Aragon to the foodies of today. Above all, she gives a vivid sense of what it was like to sit down to the meals of previous ages, whether an eighteenth-century labourer's breakfast or a twelve-course Victorian banquet or a lunch out during the Second World War.

Insightful and entertaining by turns, this is a magnificent tour of nearly a thousand years of English cuisine, peppered with surprises and seasoned with Clarissa Dickson Wright's characteristic wit.

About the Author

Clarissa Dickson Wright found fame alongside Jennifer Paterson as one half of the much-loved TV cooking partnership *Two Fat Ladies.* Her autobiography, *Spilling the Beans*, was a *Sunday Times* number one bestseller and she is also the author of many other books, including *Clarissa and the Countryman*, *Clarissa and the Countryman Sally Forth*, *The Game Cookbook* and *Potty!* She has made several programmes for television about food history, including *Clarissa and the King's Cookbook* (which looks at recipes from the reign of Richard II) and a documentary on the eighteenth-century food writer Hannah Glasse.

A History of English Food

Clarissa Dickson Wright

To my father, who taught me how and where to look things up and how to join the facts up laterally

Introduction

THIS IS THE book I always knew I would write some day. Over my sixty-four years, two of my great passions have been food and history. So when, in 2006, Nigel Wilcockson of Random House clicked his fingers, I jumped and the book was born. There was something of a hiatus when I fell ill with pleurisy and complications set in, but last autumn I was able to return to the task.

England is unique: a small island with a history of European holdings and foreign empires, of waves of invasions and immigration. English food is an amalgam of all these experiences. At times the results have been very exciting, at others dull and pedestrian. Things have never stayed static: every generation has made its contribution, and just as certain foods have come into fashion, others have disappeared. Today, we no longer yearn for swan or heron, and country folk no longer subsist on badger or seal. On the other hand, I suspect many of our ancestors would be horrified by our addiction to the duller reaches of fast food.

Food tells us so much about the nature of society at a particular point in time, whether royalty, the urban and rural poor, or the merchant class who have played such a vital role in English history (I'm intrigued, for example, by the fact that the Puritans among them were instrumental in banning Christmas plum pudding after the Civil War, though they otherwise ate well). Food also tells us about individuals. For me, the picture I have of Queen Victoria's boiled egg sitting in its gold egg cup with its gold spoon helps to humanise her, just as her passion for puddings

does. Dr Johnson’s vast daily intake of tea may not explain his other secret vice – you will have to go to Lichfield to find out about that – but it does help to explain that nose and that complexion.

Throughout the book like a silver thread runs my other great passion: field sports, an important means of providing food and controlling pests and vermin.

A professor of nutrition at Strathclyde University remarked recently that we have no idea how soon we will need to be self-sufficient. I hope, therefore, that while our food continues to evolve, we will increasingly produce our own ingredients and show the same flexibility and ingenuity that our ancestors did.

And I do hope that as you read the book, you will come to share my admiration for our forebears and will want to try some of the dishes that they prepared and loved. At the same time I hope that I may be able to shatter a few firmly held beliefs and drop in a few surprises.

Eat well and enjoy the book.

Clarissa Dickson Wright
20 July 2011

Acknowledgements

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Sometime between 1320 and 1340 Geoffrey Luttrell, who owned substantial estates in Lincolnshire, commissioned a psalter whose magnificent illuminations provide fascinating glimpses of contemporary everyday life. Here sheep are being tended by two shepherds, one of them playing a double pipe. The rather diminutive nature of the sheep is partly due to artistic licence and partly due to the fact that medieval sheep were much smaller than the ones we know today.

CHAPTER 1

Bacon and New-laid Eggs

The Medieval Larder

A HISTORY OF English food could very well start in Anglo-Saxon times, or possibly the Roman period, or arguably even earlier, but I have elected to begin my journey in the mid twelfth century. The date may seem a little arbitrary, but I think the 1150s and 1160s were a significant moment in our culinary history, for they were the decades that started to see major developments in what we ate and the way we ate it. And there were two simple reasons for this: peace and wealth. This was a time of relative tranquillity: Henry Fitz-Empress's enthronement as Henry II in 1154 ended years of civil war between his mother Matilda, only surviving daughter of Henry I, and her cousin Stephen. As for wealth, Henry ruled an empire that included Normandy and Anjou as well as England. Moreover, England at this time was governed by dynamic and stylish people: Henry's reign wasn't without its problems, but he had all the energy and intelligence you could wish for in a ruler and he was married to one of the most stylish and influential women ever to have lived – the beautiful Eleanor of Aquitaine, who also happened to be the richest woman in Europe.

England during this period was, of course, a feudal country. Loyalty was to your lord, not to your country. Tenure of property descended in established order from the Crown

(who owned all the land), through the great nobles to the minor lords and knights, and down eventually to the peasants who worked the land and turned out to fight for their landlords as and when required. Everyone derived seisin, or possession of land, from someone else, and it was in the interests of the overlord to ensure that his labour was housed and fed. At the same time the power of community created an interdependence where everyone had their place and had to pull their weight for the good of all. This meant that the basics of life were generally provided. Ariadne, a thirteen-year-old friend of mine, once asked me what homeless people ate at this time, and it struck me that the homeless didn't really exist then. Yes, there were outlaws who lived in the forest for various reasons, mostly to do with evading the law (hence their name), but even they tended to band together to make life easier. The fact is that labour was a valuable asset, not to be wasted or starved. This became even more the case in the mid fourteenth century when over a third of the population was wiped out by the Black Death.

To an extent, the Church stood apart from this feudal culture. Its primary allegiance was to the Pope, not to the king, and it wielded huge power, holding dominion over people's souls and with the power of anathema and excommunication that could refuse baptism, marriage, absolution of sins and funeral rights, and consign men to hell. Yet it was also deeply embedded in society, providing home and food not just for monks and friars but many lay brothers. It was, moreover, a substantial employer. As we will see later, once the Church's control was shattered by the Reformation, homelessness erupted.

Another group that lay a little outside feudal society was that of the steadily growing livery companies and guilds of the nation's cities, which controlled the governance of trades, from goldsmiths to butchers and street cleaners. They too, however, had responsibility for employment and

so for the individual's welfare. Towns and cities at this time were small affairs. Of the 2 million people who lived in England at the time the Domesday Book was compiled in the late eleventh century, perhaps only 10 per cent could describe themselves as urban dwellers. Winchester, the second largest city in the country, had a population of probably no more than 6,000. Norwich, York and Lincoln contained perhaps 5,000 inhabitants each. As for London, described proudly by William FitzStephen in the late 1170s as 'head and shoulders' above other cities in the world, this could boast around 10,000 citizens – a handful less than the population of, say, Cranleigh in Surrey today. Nevertheless, towns and cities continued to expand throughout the Middle Ages to become major centres of trade and wealth.

I will talk about the ways in which the national diet developed during Henry II's reign a little later. For the moment, let's focus on the basics: the staple fare that people in medieval England would have had access to. For most, that meant only what could be grown or reared locally and what happened to be in season. Opportunities to buy food from further afield would have been few and far between – and well outside the budget of most. For the wealthy, things were a little different. The king and the great lords would move around the country from estate to estate so as not to devour all the provisions in one place. Their households, from the highest born to the lowliest scullions, would move with them, so being assured of their next meal. It must have been quite a sight: up to several hundred people making their way along the inadequate roads to the next place of sojourn, their ox carts creaking with everything needed for the journey – carpets, wall hangings, cooking pots – under cloths waxed against the rain and secured with rope. Nevertheless, the basic building blocks of their diet, like everyone else's, were seasonal, except where food could be preserved by salting, drying and preserving in fat, oil or wine.

Much reliance was placed on the living larder – after all, food was much fresher if you kept it alive until the last moment, rather as they do in Far Eastern markets today. Many of the animals used for food were indigenous, but the Normans were responsible for some important additions. Indeed, their powerful impact on the food of this country can be traced through language: the names of the various animals that were eaten were transformed at the moment of death and preparation for the table from Old English to Norman French, a bullock becoming beef, a sheep becoming mutton, pig becoming pork, a deer, venison, and so on.

Rabbits are a case in point. We know that the Romans certainly reared them for food, but while they brought the brown hare to Britain for sport in the form of coursing, if they introduced the rabbit as well no traces of this have remained and the animals must have died out with their departure. The Normans, however, reintroduced them, keeping them in warrens or artificial burrows. They did not become wild until, possibly, the sixteenth century. We know a lot about the Normans' relationship with coneys, as the animals were called. Rabbits were a luxury and the keepers of the king's warrens were great lords. Initially the animals were reared in tiled courtyards so that they bred above ground, but later artificial burrows were built by raising large mounds of earth, known as pillow mounds. These were situated on poor ground – an excellent way of utilising such locations. The rabbits were kept within a designated area protected by a palisade or stone walls, and were harvested by men with nets and ferrets. The last working warrens in England remained in use until the mid twentieth century, and the one at Thetford in East Anglia covered a square mile. I once talked to a lovely man called Basil whose father had been head keeper at Kingsclere in Berkshire, which had a large working warren. He told me that when he was a child they would import buck rabbits from East Anglia to improve

the breeding stock, a practice that must have dated back to medieval times.

The walls that enclosed the warrens were there not only to keep the rabbits in but to keep the poachers out: coneys were a valuable asset, the price per beast being around 3d (perhaps £6 or so in today's money). Poaching was prevalent and not limited just to the peasantry. There is a court record of proceedings in Blythburgh in 1182 where three Augustinian friars were prosecuted for poaching with specially trained greyhounds and were fined 46s 8d. This was regarded – shock horror – as an indication of the deterioration of church morals: the friars were acting with their prior's approval.

The optimum eating age for rabbits was three months. This was not just because they were beautifully tender but because, by one of those fictions beloved of the medieval world, they were not designated as meat at that age and so could be eaten on fish days (more of which later). They were eaten seethed (stewed) with galingale (galangal, a type of ginger) and verjuice (apple or wine vinegar) or, if older, were roasted or made into pies. They also supplied fur (I have a hat made from such fur, and it is very warm and soft), and a very good quality glue could be made from their bones. Such glue is still used today by workers with gold leaf. Nowadays we bury tons of wild rabbit a year and import farmed rabbit from China and rabbit glue from Germany. Madness? Yes!

Pigeons also formed part of the living larder and the country is still littered with dovecotes, most of them sadly no longer in use. Only lords of the manor and others of rank, along with churches and monastic properties, were allowed to own *pigeonniers*, as the lofts were called. These were usually built of stone and were circular in form. The birds lived and nested on stone platforms arranged around the building. Most had a central laddered pole on a swivel known as a potence, which allowed for harvesting and

cleaning. Many were closed in, with shutters that were opened at certain times to allow the birds to go out and feed on the stubble fields, berries or whatever was thought suitable; for the rest of the time they were fed on peas. Some of the bigger lofts may have held up to 1,000 birds. Fine examples of disused lofts remain, two particularly good ones being in Dunster in Somerset and another at nearby Compton Martin. The latter, which stands in the churchyard and was intended for use by the parish priest, is unusual in that it is square.

The medieval household harvested the squabs (young pigeons) that had not yet flown the nest. In Italy they still rear a species of pigeon that produces a very large squab, and I would imagine a similar type was reared in pigeon lofts in medieval times. As usual, nothing was wasted. The guano such lofts produced was a useful fertiliser for the fields and potagers (vegetable gardens), and the feathers were used for stuffing mattresses, comforters and pillows. Pigeons when kept in captivity always return to their own lofts if allowed to fly free, the recognition of which led to the development of the carrier pigeon as a means of communication.

Deer parks were also important. In the Middle Ages all deer, whether red, fallow or roe, belonged to the Crown and to have a private deer park you generally needed a royal licence, although there is considerable evidence for unlicensed parks (as long as they were well away from royal hunting domains, the rules don’t seem to have been strictly enforced). Only the largest of parks were used for hunting deer – Sutton Park in Birmingham, one of the largest enclosed parks in Europe and associated at one point with the bishopric of Exeter, was one such. The smaller ones simply kept the deer for the table. Probably one of the last contemporary examples of a working deer park is Richmond Park in London, where 300 red and 350 fallow deer roam in their separate herds over its green expanse throughout the

year. The stags fight each other and breed with the does, and the calves are born as they have been for centuries, all with very little trouble to the rangers. Every November and February the park is closed early for a few days while the deer are culled. The meat is then distributed to grace-and-favour recipients and the rest sold through the local butcher.

In the Middle Ages the deer would have been taken at various times throughout the year, whenever it was in season according to the various forest laws that had come into force shortly after the Conquest (the first forest laws being passed in William the Conqueror's time). Today quite a lot of farmed fresh venison is available, produced in a similar way if on a more intensive basis, its sale still governed by the game laws. As with other animals in medieval times, nothing was wasted. Because deer were kept enclosed, their antlers were easily collected when they dropped each year. Known as hartshorn, these antlers were one of the few sources of ammonia available. Deer bone was a good source of gelatine, while the skin provided buckskin – a supple, tough leather suitable for clothing. Buckskin breeches are still worn today. Umble pie, a term which has given us the expression 'to eat humble pie', was the beaters' or huntsmen's perk when a deer was killed. The umbles were what is now called the fry or offal – the kidneys, liver, lights (lungs), heart, testicles and parts of the tripe. These were the perishable parts of the beast which needed to be eaten almost immediately, either in a pie or possibly in a haggis, which was a dish found throughout England and not just a perquisite of Scotland. Incidentally, because venison is a lean meat it is better suited to the human digestion than beef: this no doubt helps to explain why venison featured so heavily in the diets of our ancestors.

Also crucial to the living larder were the stew (or fish) ponds. As much for the practical reason of preserving animal stocks as for religious beliefs, the Church decreed

that over and above the forty days of Lent, every Friday and Saturday were to be fish days – flesh-free days of abstinence. Lent coincides with the season when ruminants are giving birth and suckling their young and the poultry are just starting to lay, so it's completely understandable why the powers that be were anxious to avoid meat-eating then. There was also a health angle to a fish diet at this time of year. Most people in medieval times would probably have come out of winter suffering slightly from scurvy, a condition that could be cured not just by eating green stuff but by consuming fish. Monastic orders were particularly strict about keeping to a meat-free diet except on certain holy days, and it was probably the monks who developed the idea of 'farming' fish so that they would always be readily available. Fish stews, or ponds, were dug in a rectangular shape on or near a spring and usually with a nearby stream channelling through them. This ensured not only that the ponds were self-cleansing and oxygenated, but that the fish were not reared in muddy water, which might taint the flavour of their flesh. The sides of the pool were banked up to allow a moderate depth of water. Some households had separate pools for different types of fish, with areas set aside for breeding.

Edible freshwater fish such as carp and pike were the most popular. An order, for example, survives from the reign of Henry III (1216–72), Eleanor and Henry II's grandson, for a purchase of 600 luce, or pike as we know them, 100 of which were assigned for delivery to the fish ponds at the Palace of Westminster. Pike were an expensive luxury: by the end of the thirteenth century a large pike cost 6s 8d, the price of two pigs. Recipes of the time also mention other freshwater fish, such as roach, perch, tench and dace, and presumably, though it is not specifically named, zander (pike perch) was also used. It was a social nicety that the higher you ranked in the Order of Precedence, the larger the fish you were served. Bishop Grosseteste (*c.* 1170–1253),

the great Bishop of Lincoln, is recorded as having once reprimanded his servants for having transgressed the rules of etiquette by giving the Earl of Gloucester a smaller fish than himself. Apparently the earl was rather surprised by the bishop's reprimand: he knew the bishop was of low birth and therefore assumed that he would not know the correct way to behave. Given that the bishop may well have been educated at Oxford and Paris universities and had been Chancellor of Oxford University as well as bishop of a major diocese, this says a lot about the arrogance and snobbery displayed by a Norman to someone who had come from a poor Saxon family. The Church offered the easiest way for an intelligent lad to rise on the social ladder.

Eels were another staple and popular fish. Every mill race held eel traps, and dabbing for eels with a piece of rotten meat on a hook was a popular sport as well as a way of supplying the table. There is a scene in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* where a horse's head is used for this method of fishing: ideal in times of war when there would have been a lot of dead horses around. Eels were particularly prevalent in the Fens, which at this time was a pretty wild and trackless country, rich in fish and wildfowl. Before the drainage of the Fens was begun in earnest in the seventeenth century, tens of thousands of eels (known as Fenman's gold) were caught and supplied to the University of Cambridge, the great city of Lincoln and elsewhere. Some idea of their value can be gauged from the fact that the Barnach stone for the 'Ship of the Fens', Ely Cathedral (Ely means 'eel region'), was bought from Benedictine monks in Northamptonshire in the eleventh century in exchange for the supplying of 8,000 eels a year for a fixed period of time, the details of which are now lost to us. In the same period, some Cambridgeshire people actually appear to have paid their taxes in eels. Eels had another use, too. Eelskin could be cured and dried to produce a strong supple leather used to make wedding rings, shoes, satchels and belts. Twenty

years ago there was a fad for eelskin wallets until it was discovered that their thinness was such that credit cards were very susceptible to any magnetic forces that might be lurking. End of fad.

Even in recent times eels six foot long, calculated as being sixty years old, have been taken from the Fens, so imagine what they might have harvested in the Middle Ages. All eels were merchantable, and the Fens were not the only source. One of the main exports of Cornwall, a rich county in the Middle Ages, were conger eels dried and sold to Europe to feed their days of abstinence. Eels could be prepared in various ways: salted, smoked or dried. They have gone out of fashion in my lifetime, but when I was a child every London fishmonger had a live eel tank, and along the Hammersmith Mall I remember rough boys fishing for eels and selling them to customers in pubs to take home for tea. Today most eels caught are sent to Holland for smoking, though a limited number are smoked in England, mostly in Somerset. Elvers, young eels, are a valuable commodity, and most are sold to Spain or Japan or are reared into fully grown eels in areas such as Lough Neagh.

Obviously it was not just freshwater fish that fed the nation. Sea fish of all types were sold widely in coastal areas. One of the great staples – as it was to remain for many centuries to come – was the herring. It was a cheap fish selling at around ten pence per hundred (in fact, this would have been the curious medieval measurement for fish of a long hundred, which was actually six score, in other words 120; I am not sure of the rationale behind this, but it may have allowed for spoilage). This was at a time when a labourer would have earned between one and three pennies a day or their equivalent in kind. Yarmouth was the main centre of the herring industry and dealt in both white herrings (salted but not smoked) and red herrings (more about preservation than pleasure, these are heavily salted, then dried, then smoked). Red herrings are still produced

but are only popular now in Africa and the West Indies, and in the days before the potato existed to balance their flavour in a meal, they must have been really quite unpleasant.

Bloaters were also popular (kippers came along a little later). A bloater is hot-smoked in the round rather than split, and as it is not gutted it does not keep anywhere near as long as a cold-smoked split kipper. The name, incidentally, comes ultimately from an Old Norse word meaning ‘soaked’ or ‘wet’ – perhaps because herrings cured in this way are plumper than those that have been completely dried. There is a belief that bloaters are a Victorian invention (bloater paste was popular in Victorian times, when glass jars became cheaply available), but references in the Countess of Leicester’s household accounts indicate that something very akin to a bloater was sold in the thirteenth century. The records also show that the countess’s household at Odiham Castle consumed between 400 and 1,000 herrings a day during Lent 1265. Easter must have seemed a long way off!

Bloaters are still cured at Yarmouth and the Cley Smokehouse nearby, though they are not so popular outside the area. As for fresh herrings, these were a luxury for people who lived away from the coast, even for the king. East Carlton had an obligation to deliver twenty-four herring pies to the monarch each year from the first herring shoals. Each pie had to contain a minimum number of herrings and to be seasoned with ginger, pepper and cinnamon. Supplying pies to the monarch was a feature of the Middle Ages; the city of Gloucester, for example, sent a large lamprey pie to the Crown annually until well into the nineteenth century. Lampreys are not much eaten in modern England, but having tasted one I have to say that it was so delicious I can see why Henry I died of eating a surfeit of them. They are a type of sucker fish that prey on salmon – very popular in Portugal, but now only used for fishing bait in England.

Salmon was another commonplace fish through most of English history. So many salmon came up the rivers that the apprentice boys of the main cities sometimes rioted in protest at the amount of the fish they were fed by their employers, and legislation prevented employers from feeding salmon to their servants more than three times a week. Salmon was salted for keeping and also hot-smoked, which would have made it last a bit longer. But for the most part it was potted in some way. Potting under fat, oil or wine in sealed jars was an effective method of storing food and, provided the air was excluded by the potting covering, was remarkably successful in keeping food unspoiled for a surprisingly long time.

As for other seafood, contemporary household accounts list John Dory, mackerel, mullet, flounder, plaice, sole, whelks, crayfish and crabs. Cod were commonly dried and salted. At the more exotic end, whale, porpoise and sturgeon were particularly prized. Whale and sturgeon were reserved for the king, although in the case of whale, as long as the king received the head and the queen the tail, the pieces in between could be distributed elsewhere. A barrel of whale meat cost thirty shillings: it was clearly something of a luxury. No doubt the whales in question were usually those that had swum ashore and become stranded. Seal is also recorded as being eaten, and in coastal regions would have been a useful supplement to the diet of the poorer elements of the population. Seal, I should tell you, is disgusting, but falls within the medieval taste for oily, fishy flavours, which we'll explore later.

Back on land, a common component of the living larder was poultry. Chickens were kept in some quantity, eggs being a major part of the English diet, and they were always killed fresh for the table. Capons (castrated cocks), fatter and more tender than ordinary chickens, were also popular. It is difficult to find capons in England today as rearers have

taken to relying on chemical castration, which was once (in my opinion, rightly) prohibited, but they are well worth looking for and are still readily available in France.

As for geese, these were a regular feature of the diet and each manor would have had a gooseherd to look after flocks of them. Of all livestock, geese add weight most easily from the smallest amount of food: they are the most efficient of feeders. Moreover, their feathers were used to stuff beds or to flight the arrows that were so crucial to England's success in the European wars of the period. Goose fat was used in cooking and even to grease axles. Up until the Second World War, country people would rub their bodies with goose grease and sew themselves into their long johns to endure the winter cold.

But perhaps the ultimate multi-purpose animal was the sheep, as the following somewhat modernised version of a thirteenth-century verse makes abundantly clear:

Of the sheep is cast away nothing,
His horns for notches – to ashes goeth his bones,
To Lordes great profit goeth his entire dung,
His tallow also serveth plastres, more than one.
For harp strings his ropes serve everyone,
Of whose head boiled whole and all
There cometh a jelly, and ointment full Royal.
For ache of bones and also for bruises
It is remedy that doeth ease quickly
Causing men's stark points to recure,
It doeth sinews again restore to life.
Black sheep's wool, with fresh oil of olive,
The men at armes, with charms, they prove it good
And at straight need, they can well staunch blood.

It's perhaps worth elaborating on some of this. In the old breeds of sheep both sexes have horns, and the rough, ridged material was perfect for the notches over which the bow string was hooked on an archer's bow. Sheep were folded at night to manure the lord of the manor's field, and shepherds were told to look out for barren patches on which to place the animals; they were then enclosed by woven wooden hurdles, the action of their own sharp hooves

tramping the dung into the field. The tallow the poem refers to was burnt as a cheap source of light, and the lanolin obtained from the wool must have been particularly useful in the rough and tumble and achingly cold world of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is still in use. A clean piece of fleece over a wound will help it heal, and patients who are laid on a fresh fleece are less likely to get bedsores. The tallow ‘plastres’ referred to in the verse reflect the original meaning of the word plaster: a medicinal substance spread on a bandage.

Sheep’s wool had long been an important commodity in England when the Normans arrived, but wool as an industry was really developed by the Cistercian order of monks, who spread to England from France in the early twelfth century. Convinced that traditional monasticism had become lax, the Cistercians, or White Monks, broke away from the Benedictines, adopting a more austere life in abbeys often built in remote places. These happened to be better suited to the raising of sheep, and the Cistercians then practised selective breeding, improving the wool crop from the old breeds and, by better feeding, enhancing the size and breeding productivity of their flocks. Their success made the order very rich indeed, as the ruins of Rievaulx and other abbeys indicate – ironic given that it was an order that initially prided itself on poverty and simplicity. By Eleanor and Henry’s time, wool was becoming an important component of the nation’s wealth, much of it being sent to Flanders for processing into cloth that was then sold all over Europe. Incidentally, although the Cistercians did much to improve the quality of sheep, the animal remained much smaller than its modern descendants; as late as the early eighteenth century a sheep wasn’t much bulkier than a Labrador dog.

In addition to the wool, the meat of the sheep was also important. The English tend to think of themselves as a nation of beef eaters. In fact, mutton eaters would be more

historically correct. Sheep would have been surrendered to the table when they were four or five years old and their wool production was starting to drop. In the thirteenth century they might have fetched between 6d and 10d at this point. Much of the meat would inevitably have been salted down, and having eaten Macon, which is mutton ham, I can tell you that salted sheep is not something to rush home for. Having said that, I have eaten the fresh meat of a five-year-old blackface sheep – the sort of animal our medieval ancestors would have recognised – and it was very good indeed.

Cattle were as adaptable as sheep in medieval husbandry. Dairy animals were there to produce milk for butter or cheese and would have been eaten only when their yield started to drop; moreover, what we would think of as a beef animal had the double purpose of being a working or draught animal that could pull heavy loads. There is an old adage, ‘A year to grow, two years to plough and a year to fatten’. The beef medieval people would have eaten would have been a maturer, denser meat than we are used to today. I have always longed to try it. The muscle acquired from a working ox would have broken down over the fattening year and provided wonderful fat covering and marbling. Given the amount of brewing that took place, the odds are that the animals would have been fed a little drained mash from time to time. Kobe beef, that excessively expensive Japanese beef, was originally obtained from ex-plough animals whose muscles were broken down by mash from sake production and by massage. I’d like to think our beef might have had a not dissimilar flavour.

Venues today that sell mock medieval feasts, and indeed television programmes that recreate great baronial halls, suggest that the Middle Ages were nothing but a continuous round of massively over-the-top banquets involving enormous joints of meat. Don’t believe it. Medieval kitchens were designed for pragmatism and efficiency. Given the

time it takes to carve a large roast, and not forgetting the fact that most meat was salted down as soon as it was killed, it seems highly unlikely that great spits of meat were being eaten by Sheriff of Nottingham types on a daily basis. Many cattle, in fact, were killed at a particular time of the year – Michaelmas, at the end of September – when they had enjoyed the benefits of summer feed and were at their fattest and in the best condition. Obviously there were ox roasts on occasion to celebrate some special event – the coming of age or marriage of an heir, for example – but these were designed to feed a whole estate over a day-long party and were the exception rather than the rule.

Much of the milk from cows went to make cheese, a great staple in medieval times, in part because it kept well. Andrew Boorde, the sixteenth-century physician and writer, records that cheese fell into four distinct types: ‘harde’, ‘softe’, ‘grene’ and ‘spermyse’. Grene meant new and not heavily pressed, so that some of the whey remained. It was rather in the nature of today’s Cheshire or Caerphilly, ready within a few weeks or so of pressing and binding. Spermyse was made from curds and was largely used for tarts and pies, sometimes flavoured with juice extruded from herbs; the modern-day Sage Derby is probably the only remaining example of this. Softe was cheese made from whey (the leftover curds being eaten by the poor). Harde cheese was probably made with skimmed milk and its main advantage was undoubtedly that it kept: it could help a castle to resist a siege or a ship endure a long voyage.

Some parts of the country inevitably had better grazing land than others and so could produce better cheese. The rich pasture lands of the west coast, running from Lancashire down to Somerset, with their consistent seam of salt, would probably, as now, have produced the most varied and best cheeses; Leicestershire would have come next. The household records of the Countess of Leicester show that she bought cheese by the ‘poise’ or ‘wey’ – a

vague measure that varied from fourteen to twenty stone. The cellars of a castle would have provided perfect storage conditions. The fourteenth-century Goodman of Paris in his household book gives instructions for choosing cheese which hold just as true today. I have judged at the Nantwich cheese festival in Cheshire (even in the Middle Ages, Nantwich was regarded as an important centre of the cheese industry), and the judges might well carry his words on their clipboards:

Not white as snow, like fair Helen,
Nor moist like tearful Magdalen,
Not like Argus, full of eyes,
But heavy, like a bull of prize,
Well resisting a thumb pressed in,
And let it have a scaly skin,
Eyeless, and tearless, in colour not white,
Scaly, resisting and weighing not light

It’s amazing, isn’t it, the level of knowledge he expects from his readers: such classical and biblical references in a twenty-first-century book would fly over the head of most readers!

The dairy was the preserve of women. (I have tried and failed over the years to find out whether the sterner orders of monks trained men for this chore, though I suspect that the answer is probably yes.) The choice of women might have been due to the need to multitask in the dairy, or because the labour involved was not as physically demanding as other agricultural work. That said, milking is certainly not as easy as it looks. The dairymaid would have had to hobble the cow, seat herself on her three-legged stool and milk into her bucket by hand. She would also have had to know the individual idiosyncrasies of each animal: the kicker, the head-butter and the animal that doesn’t willingly let down her milk. And she would have had to look out for infections, mastitis or sore udders. Once she’d finished milking, she would have taken the pail of milk to the main dairy building, strained it to remove any impurities

and left it to stand in shallow earthenware dishes for the cream to rise – one day for single cream and two days for double cream. The cream would then be skimmed from the top of the dish and either sent to the kitchen or churned for butter. If the milk was to be used for cheese it would be poured into large containers and rennet would be added. The rennet might come from a piece of dried intestine from a veal calf or possibly from the seed head of a milk thistle (so named for obvious reasons), or even from a cardoon if one was available. The juice of the small, yellow-flowered plant known as Our Lady's Bedstraw was also regularly used, so called because it was supposed to have been among the herbs in the Christ child's manger in Bethlehem. Women would add it to the straw used to stuff their mattresses, possibly because of superstitious connections with fertility but more likely because it had properties as a fleabane. The juice not only acts as an effective rennet but also helps to colour the cheese a good yellow. In medieval times it was also used as a dye, but the roots were too small to make it commercially effective.

Once the curds were set and well combed they were drained and set into a mould to be pressed. Few medieval cheese presses have survived, but their design lasted for many centuries to come: a smooth, coopered barrel-type construction with holes drilled in the sides to allow the whey to drain out. A fitted board would be placed on top and then weights added to put pressure on the cheese. If you go to Blanchland in Northumberland, you will find the remains of an ancient cheese press in the centre of the town: a bollard formed the base, and grooves and a spout carried off the drained liquid. The whey was, for the most part, drained off and fed to the pigs. Once the curds were well pressed they would be wrapped in a muslin cloth and set to mature.

What the cows ate was said to influence the flavour of the cheese. The particular flavour of spring Wensleydale, for example, was attributed to the cattle grazing in limestone

meadows. There are only fleeting references to blue cheese in the Middle Ages, but as it is quite hard to exclude mould from cheese, quite a lot would have been blued. I remember once coming across a rather unpleasant cheese made from skimmed milk which was blued by having an uncleaned horse harness dragged through it. This was probably a type of hard cheese familiar to medieval times and certainly the blue did give it an improved flavour, if only marginally. Another rather nasty type of cheese, probably only eaten by the very poor, was made from whey and buttermilk.

Milk was also, of course, made into butter. Some would have been spread on bread, but butter was also the main fat used in the more delicate forms of cooking. Medieval cooks used a lot of pastry, and while raised pies would have been made with lard, and coffyns (pastry boxes) made simply with flour and water, flans, cheesecakes and puff pastry would all have called for butter. The commonest vessel for making it would have been a barrel with a plunger for the dairymaid to work up and down until the butter took. Once the butter set it was scraped out of the churn, leaving the buttermilk to be poured off and kept for drinking; with its slightly tart flavour it was a popular drink and was also used in baking. Salt was always added to butter, both for taste and for preservation, and during the summer period it was packed into earthenware crocks which were sealed and stored for use in the winter months. Regulations were quite strict: no animal could be milked or suckled for some weeks after Lady Day (25 March), as this rule allowed them to build up their strength for the winter months.

Sheep and goats also provided milk that could be turned into butter and cheese, but then, as now, the principal dairy animal was the cow. There was little of the specialised breeding that was to come later. In medieval times you would have seen an animal much like the Dexter: an all-purpose cow providing milk and meat, economic in the utilisation of food and amenable to handle.