

## Food in Early Modern England: Phases, Fads, Fashions 1500-1760

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John Walter

A gentleman should never tell, but *Food in Early Modern England* is published 50 years after the appearance of Joan Thirsk's first book, *English Peasant Farming* (1957). Between those dates, Thirsk has published, edited and contributed to a formidable list of volumes and journals. This helps to explain why it has been Joan Thirsk who has done most to advance our understanding of agrarian change in early modern England, last but not least, as the editor of not one, but two key volumes in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, a series for which she has also served as general editor. Thirsk's major contribution, along with her colleague Alan Everitt, has been her advocacy and exemplification of what has come to be known as the Leicester School of Local History. Beginning first with a county study, then through a series of regional and national studies, Thirsk developed a regional framework for understanding the late medieval and early modern agrarian economy and economic change in that period. As her work has demonstrated, the Leicester School's model of regional ecologies offered a framework for an integrated history that moved beyond economic history narrowly conceived. The map of regional ecologies, which Thirsk's own work has done much to refine, provided a more appropriate unit of analysis than the old county study, in which not only the relationships between agrarian, urban and industrial change might be analysed, but also the relationships between settlement patterns and social change and, more provocatively, between patterns of regional society and those in the early modern mental and cultural worlds. The impact of this body of work on what used to be called the new social history of the later 20th century awaits its historian, but it is hard to overstate Thirsk's significance; much of what is admirable in the nuanced, more recent work in social and cultural history, with its 'rediscovery' of the significance of 'space' and the spatial variable, can be traced back to hers and the Leicester School's influence - even when its practitioners seem apparently unaware of the umbilical link.

Much of the dynamic in Thirsk's work on agrarian history was, unsurprisingly, provided by the demands placed on a pre-industrialised economy by demographic growth. It was a growing population's demand for food and, in a culture which privileged grains ('give us this day our daily bread ...'), for increased cereal production, which acted as the major motor for change. The centrality of questions of harvest quality and production meant that this was more often serial, rather than cereal history, with price series and (estimated) output figures brought to the fore. If food was never entirely absent from Thirsk's earlier work, production, not consumption, dominated the discussion. Questions of what type of food were eaten and in what forms, if discussed, were inevitably subordinated to the economic historian's emphasis on supply and demand.

*Food in Early Modern England* magnificently redresses the balance. Its appearance, of course, marks a significant shift across a whole series of historiographies; for example, converging interests in the importance of consumption and, not least, the emergence of food history as a subject fit for serious academic study inside and, significantly, outside the academy. Yet in its distinctive approach to its subject, let alone its formidable array of sources, this present work shows that Thirsk was never indifferent to the centrality of diet and dietary regimes to those earlier histories. At the same time, what makes this book exciting is the provocative arguments Thirsk advances for finding, in a close-grained focus on what early modern men and women ate, possible new answers to one of the key questions in the macro-history of the period: how did England manage to expand and stabilise its food supply so as to escape famine, sustain demographic growth and underwrite urban and industrial growth?

Given the paradox of both recent and rapid growth in the field of early modern food history and the alarming 'dark holes' yet remaining in our knowledge of the subject, Thirsk adopts a very practical strategy for monitoring change across the period. In the first half of the book, she divides the period up into shorter time spans, whose varying durations (from 20-60 years) reflect her belief that changes in dietary practice did not occur evenly. As might be expected, Thirsk writes across the whole of this period with a command of the economic changes that underpinned and responded to shifts in food preference. Within the shorter time spans, Thirsk reconstructs patterns of consumption and cooking by moving between two worlds: that of writers on food and the world of the kitchen. Though sensitive to differences in diet broadly determined by class and region (on which the second half of the book has more to say), it is the household accounts of generally wealthier households that provide the evidence of what went into the kitchen and, with some significant exceptions, printed books written for a middling and upwards readership, that provide evidence for writing on food. On the latter, Thirsk has very sensible things to say and is acutely aware, as presumably are readers of this review, that books on food are as good to think with, as to cook from. But it would be good here, as has been the case in much work drawing on early modern print culture, to have a clearer sense of authorial intent and intended audiences.

The trends that Thirsk recovers from this approach may be broadly familiar, but there is a depth to the discussion and detailing of evidence that is very impressive. There are also some provocative arguments that only someone as steeped in the period as Thirsk is, could make and sustain. Although in her conclusion Thirsk argues, perhaps surprisingly given the detail advanced in the core of the book, that public knowledge of food was minimal in 1500, this was from the beginning a food culture in which, at all levels of society, significant time and thought was given to food. Throughout the period there was a growing interest in new types of food and in new ways of producing traditional staples, with some periods, for example the later 16th and the later 17th centuries proving particularly fertile. While England in 1500 might have broadly conformed to its place within Braudelian global patterns and to contemporary foreign comment with cereal eating forming the major part of the diet and, increasingly through the period, in the larger quantities of meat consumed, at all levels, Thirsk argues, there was an attempt to produce and eat a more varied diet. For the rich this represented an attempt to enliven the palate; for the poor, to fill the belly. Thus, over the early modern period, foods were moving into and out of the diets and up and down the social hierarchy. A renewed interest in garden plants among a small section of the elite in the Middle Ages led to a golden age of 'vegetables' in the later 16th and 17th centuries and by the later 17th century, root vegetables had moved 'a long way up the social scale' (p. 288). The rise of the garden (still largely an unwritten chapter in the history of the poor's diet), along with increased access to 'need foods' in the wastes and commons, saw plebeian

diets also bulked out with greens and herbs as foodstuffs. At the beginning of the period, butter, largely used for cooking in elite households, became increasingly prominent on the tables of the gentry and middling sort. Over time, cheese became more in demand, more varied and more expensive, even if its use in cooking lagged some way behind. Depending on region, this might have given the poor greater access to those 'white meats' - butter and cheese - and waste products (whey) which gave relish to an otherwise often monotonous diet. However against this, commercialisation might see the otherwise valuable waste product of dairying, which was sometimes distributed free to the poor, being used to fatten livestock. While mutton (for the fortunate only) and herring were sources of protein, a greater catholicity in diet in a world in which 'hardly a bird in the sky was not eaten' (p. xi) and which saw a growing market for small birds the British now like to think only unfeeling foreigners eat, offers one example of a much wider diet that, Thirsk argues, was 'free for the taking'. (Although Thirsk later recognises that urbanisation and industrialisation tended to remove the labouring poor from direct access to rural foodstuffs, this emphasis on 'food for free' perhaps needs greater sensitivity to the changing regional, social and political factors that determined access to 'nature's larder'.) By the 17th century, England's growing dominance in a European world economy also brought an increasing range of new foodstuffs. If many of these were to be reserved for the tables of the rich, contemporary commentators were struck by the sight of ordinary Londoners munching oranges in the capital's streets. And, although its acceptance was to be gradual and contested, the potato had, by the end of the period Thirsk writes about, begun to make its transition from a regional introduction to a national staple.

If over this period, and in some regions from an earlier date, a diet of wheaten bread and beef were to come to represent the symbolically cultural good in John Bull's England, Thirsk argues that this oversimplifies a more complex regional and social patterning to diet and misrepresents the chronological changes in the early modern dietary regime. For the most part, the story she has to tell is one of incremental change. England experienced a 'quiet revolution', to which family tradition, regional use, popular knowledge and later cheap print, all contributed and in which Thirsk is at pains to suggest women in the kitchen, as much as men in the fields, had a vital role to play.

But in charting these, and it needs to be emphasised, many other changes, Thirsk also suggests that the period witnessed key moments in the adoption of new foods (for example, root vegetables in the hard times of the 1590s, fruit in the 1620s, and pickled meat in the 1710s). Indeed, she argues that on occasion these changes might be read as a series of revolutions in England's foodways. These were not revolutionary in the sense that they represented radical new additions to the list of what was thought fit to eat. For example, a 'fruit revolution' is Thirsk's term for the qualitative differences that had been produced in fruit by 1600. But they were or might have been revolutionary in terms of their consequences for a significantly increased food supply. Of these 'revolutions', Thirsk pays particular attention to two. The first is the emerging skill of pickling. Thirsk suggests that economic historians' neglect of the increased possibilities of food storage that this represented, misses an important factor in explaining England's success in meeting the demands of increased population growth in the 18th century. The second was an 'incipient pulse revolution' (p. 179). In the first half of the 18th century, peas and beans - which had formerly been seen as animal fodder or a need food primarily of the poor - had come to be eaten by all classes. Pulses offered a cheap source of nutrition, and Thirsk suggests their consumption might, at least in the south, have exceeded that of potatoes. But if this was a revolution, and hard data is of course hard to come by, it was one interrupted by the eventual triumph of the potato.

Recent food history has sought to draw out the cultural and conceptual significance of the highly recursive fact of humans' daily need for food in social organisation and social and cultural identities. Taste, what is thought good to eat, is of course culturally shaped in complex ways and, we might emphasise, is subject to political regulation and contest. In constructing identities, consumption of a common food can create nations and commensality constitute consumption 'communities', while evident quantitative, and sometimes, subtle qualitative, differences in what is eaten and how, can also be powerful markers of social difference and division. Thirsk is aware of these issues, but *Food in Early Modern England* addresses food as hard social fact and cultural metaphor only incidentally. However, the rich fare it provides, offered as ever in Thirsk's accessible prose, furnishes repeated illustration of the potential of food history. In offering the best summary

we have of changes in early modern England's dietary regime, it also provides a series of clues to be followed up, and an agenda for future research.

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