

# DINING AT KING'S IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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This aim of this article is to examine the diet of the fellows and scholars of King's College Cambridge during the fifteenth century. A considerable amount of light has already been shed on the functioning of King's College during the medieval period by the tremendous archival research of John Saltmarsh, research that bore its fruit in a number of fascinating articles he published in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Notwithstanding this, the documents that form the basis of this work have not been edited and – so far as I know – were not examined by John Saltmarsh. These documents are the fifteenth century “Commons Books” of King's College, ledgers of the amounts that were spent every week to feed the fellows and scholars of the College. Every week the Steward of the Hall – a College officer chosen from among the fellows and changing every week – entered into these ledgers the monetary value of the food that had been consumed by the fellows and scholars, including both what had to be bought in the market and what was taken from the college stores. The ledgers list various types of meat, fish, condiments and drink but they do not include vegetables and fruit. Also entered in the ledgers are the amounts spent on candle wax – of course candles were the principal source of light at night – and on the charcoal used to heat the ovens in the kitchens and to warm the great hall during the cold season. These documents are primarily in Latin but English terms do find their way into the records, usually when the stewards did not know the Latin names of certain types of fish. I have been transcribing entries made in the Commons' Books for two different academic years that are separated by twenty years. The first of these years, 1447-8, was situated during the reign of the College's founder Henry VI and six years after the foundation of the College. The second year, 1466-7, is situated six years after the deposition of Henry VI during the Wars of the Roses in the reign of his successor and usurper Edward IV.<sup>1</sup>

The fellows and scholars of King's College would have partaken of their meals not in the great neo-gothic dining hall that currently stands opposite our famous Chapel but in the now no longer extant Hall of the Great Court which – along with the college buttery and pantry – was situated on the site of the present Gibbs' Building. The location of the original College dining hall would thus have meant that it was located opposite the main gate, a configuration similar to those in Trinity and St. John's. The College kitchen, brewery and bakery were located in another, smaller, court to the west of the hall (near the river) and that adjacent to it. All these buildings have now disappeared, the victims of the vast building works that radically altered the form of the College during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The number of people who ate in college in this period every week – including the fellows, choir and scholars – averaged around 60. Although this may appear to be a small number to the modern observer it was in fact a significant number for a medieval monastic institution. As the research by John Saltmarsh has indicated, the provisioning of the College presented its medieval administrators with considerable

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<sup>1</sup> King's College Cambridge Archives (K.C.C.A.), *Liber Communaris*, Volumes 1 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> J. Saltmarsh, *King's College. A Short History* (Cambridge, 1958), p. 35.

headaches. Indeed, endowed with manors and estates spread across 21 counties – from Lancashire to Cornwall – the College’s landed wealth was dispersed over a wide area and its resources were thus not readily at hand.<sup>3</sup> Between 1452 and 1466 an attempt was made to create a home-farm at the only College-owned manor to be close to Cambridge – that located at Grantchester – where the College tilled its own lands and directly administered the proceeds. This experiment was not a success, however, and was ultimately abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, fish and seafood formed a major component in the diet of the fellows and scholars. The consumption of fish was boosted by the fact that on Fridays and during Lent, eating fish was a religious requirement that was strictly adhered to. The most common type of fish was eel, readily sourced from the many waterways of the fenlands. Other types of fresh water fish included roach, perch, tench and, far less commonly, gudgeons and pike. Sea fish included herring, dogfish (a type of small shark), salmon, mackerel, ling, cod and whiting, less common are haddock, sole, plaice, turbot and the appropriately named *thornback* or sting ray. Apart from oysters, shellfish appear only rarely. Molluscs – including, scallops, mussels and whelks – are far more frequent than crustaceans such as crab and shrimp. It is interesting to note that oysters were particularly plentiful on the tables of the dining hall even though their consumption was strictly limited by their seasonal availability in the autumn and winter months from October to March.

The various stewards of the college took great care to distinguish fresh fish from non-fresh fish and their records list a variety of different manners in which fish was preserved. To denote fresh fish, the stewards simply added the Latin word ‘recent’ (*recenti*) or sometimes just used the colloquial Old English expression ‘greenfish.’ Likewise herring is generally described as either ‘red’ to denote the fact that it was smoked or ‘white’ to indicate it was fresh. Also listed is so-called stockfish, the name for cod that had been dried in the air without salt and had to be soaked in water prior to consumption. Some of the fish is described as being ‘in sauce’ – a curious term which possibly indicated the fact that it was stocked in brine to help its conservation. The ledgers specify that the merchants from whom the fish came were located at the ports of Boston in Lincolnshire and Yarmouth in Norfolk.

Whilst fish and other seafood were important staples of the diet of the fellows of King’s College, meat was by no means absent. In fact, although in 1454 the College employed as a butcher a local man who was paid one penny for every head of beast he killed; only three years later a college butcher was engaged to work fulltime at the College and paid a yearly salary of 24 shillings. The most common varieties of meat to find their way to the College dining hall were of course mutton, beef, lamb and veal although rabbit and pork were by no means missing. Sheep were raised on the College’s many estates and brought to the college for slaughter. In 1457 King’s College paid 2 shillings to have 250 sheep led from one of its Manors in Hampshire to Cambridge.<sup>5</sup> A decade later, in 1466-7, the records testify that the number of sheep consumed every week in College oscillated around 6 or 7 and the records intermittently differentiate large and small sheep. Unsurprisingly, the Commons’ Books occasionally feature other parts of animals that would be quite

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<sup>3</sup> J. Saltmarsh, *King’s College. A Short History* (Cambridge, 1958), pp. 9-15.

<sup>4</sup> J. Saltmarsh, ‘A College Home-Farm in the Fifteenth Century’ offprint from *Economic History (Supplement)*, Feb. 1936.

<sup>5</sup> J. Saltmarsh, offprint from ‘The Muniments of King’s College’, *Cambridge Antiquarian Society’s Communications*, 33 (1933), p. 157.

alien to the more squeamish twenty-first century British dinner such as marrow bones – *medulla* in Latin – tripe, calves heads and even hooves.<sup>6</sup> The poultry served in college, included a variety of different birds including chickens, capons, ducks, geese, doves, pigeons, woodcocks and plovers. Chicken – just as today – appears to have been a relatively cheap meat, the ledger indicates that the price of a whole chicken was usually only 1 or 2 pence whilst a capon cost at least three times as much.<sup>7</sup> I was at first surprised not to find any geese in the ledgers but realised that the stewards of the hall were using the generic Latin term for birds – *aucis* – to indicate geese and there is indeed evidence that medieval Latin used that precise term to refer exclusively to geese.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to detect a distinct pattern in the weekly eating habits of the College. Sundays were of course a holy day and therefore were important days in the weekly food bill of the College. Friday was of course a fish-only day and whereas fish usually prevailed on the menus on Saturdays as well, Sunday was primarily a meat-eating day.<sup>9</sup> The various feast days of the Christian liturgical calendar punctuated the gastronomic life of the fellows and scholars. The most obvious and important were Easter Sunday, Christmas Eve and the feast day of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of the College. In 1447, for instance, the feast day of St. Nicholas was a particularly elaborate affair that cost the College the sizeable sum of 38 shillings and 10 pence. Amongst the array of meats and fish that was served was swan, on which 40 pence was spent.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of that of St. Nicholas, the records for 1447-8 do not indicate the feast days of saints but those of 1466-7 certainly do. The most important feasts included that commemorating the translation of St. Edward (13 October), All Saints (1 November), St. Stephen (26 December), St. John (27 December), The Innocents (28 December), Saint Thomas (29 December), the Circumcision (1 January), the Purification of Mary (2 February), the Annunciation (25 March), Ascension (7 May), Translation of Saint Nicholas (9 May), Whit Sunday and finally Holy Rood (14 September). Easter Sunday marked the return of meat to the dining hall following its long absence during the weeks of Lent. On Easter Sunday 1467, after enduring 6 gruelling weeks of eating only fish for Lent – principally herring and eels in sauce – the fellows treated themselves to a celebratory dinner of 6 calves' heads.<sup>11</sup>

To accompany their meat and fish dishes, the College kitchen used a variety of spices and condiments. Spices were acquired from local apothecaries and included pepper, ginger, cinnamon and even saffron – designated in Latin as *croco*. Many of these spices such as pepper would have been rare and luxury items, imported from India via the Islamic Near East. The sums spent on them each week are never very important. Less costly condiments were mustard (*sinapio*) and vinegar. The term *sinapio* probably served as a generic term to cover a number of different condiments such a horseradish as well as ordinary English mustard. Interestingly, the entries of the Commons' books in Lent 1448 record the use of rape seed oil – in Latin *oleo de*

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<sup>6</sup> K.C.C.A., *Liber Communaris*, Vol. 1, fols. 101v-102v; Vol. 3, fols. 17-18v, 23-23v, 77v-78, 80-80v, 82-82v, 86v-87, 88v-89v, 91-91v and 94-6.

<sup>7</sup> K.C.C.A., *Liber Communaris*, Vol. 3, fols. 5-5v and 82-82v and 94-96.

<sup>8</sup> For examples see K.C.C.A., *Liber Communaris*, Vol. 1, fols. 34-35, 38-39v, 76v-77v and 81v-82 as well as Vol. 3, fols. 5-5v, 7v-8, 9-10, 38v-39v, 42-43, 45-45v and 51-51v. On the use of the term *auca* to refer to geese in medieval documents see C. T. Martin, *The Record Interpreter* (Chichester, 1999), p. 192.

<sup>9</sup> K.C.C.A., *Liber Communaris*, Vol. 3, fols. 23-23v, 77v-78, 80-80v, 82v-82, 86v-87 and 88v-89v.

<sup>10</sup> K.C.C.A., *Liber Communaris*, Vol. 1, fols. 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> K.C.C.A., *Liber Communaris*, Vol. 3, fols. 77v-78.

*rape* – with fish but there is little room for doubt that lard, butter and milk constituted the main cooking ingredient throughout the rest of the year.

To accompany their meals, the fellows ate copious amount of bread and drank barrels of ale. The College employed both a baker and a brewer to provide for their needs in this respect. The sums spent on bread and ale are significant and account for a sizeable portion of the College's weekly budget. By way of illustration, in December 1447 the College spent 20% of its weekly food budget on bread and 15% on ale. The same is also the case twenty years later. In one week of February 1467 the College spent 70 shillings and 8½ pence on its food. The amount spent on bread represented 16% of that sum and that spent on ale accounted for 22%, over a fifth! Sometimes the records give us an indication of the quantities of ale that were involved. The last week of December 1447, for instance, 32 pitchers of ale were consumed by the members of King's College.<sup>12</sup> As the ale was brewed in the College's own brewery it must be surmised that the costs listed comprise the purchase of the raw material – that is to say barley – and possibly the salary of the brewer. I think it is important to underline the fact that medieval ale was far less alcoholic and much paler than its modern equivalent. Moreover, it was normally made without hops. Its alcoholic nature made it a sterile and safe drink, free of any bacterial contamination that plagued water supplies and this may also account in part for its prevalence and popularity. The importance of ale in the diet of the fellows of King's College need not surprise us as it was the common beverage of northern Europe, whilst wine was the major beverage of southern Europe. Wine was certainly drunk at the College though certainly not on the same scale. Certainly it was used for communion in the Chapel. Two privileges issued by Henry VI in July 1444 and February 1446 made an annual grant to the College first of two and then of eight barrels of Gascon Wine from that which was imported into the port of London.<sup>13</sup> Gascony, that's the region around Bordeaux, remained an English possession until its conquest by the French in 1453 and we do not know how the French conquest affected these privileges.

To conclude, this short paper has provided a concise insight into the gastronomic experiences of our predecessors over half a millennium ago. Many of the basic ingredients that we take for granted today – tomatoes, potatoes and maize to name but a few – were of course unknown before the exploration of the vast American continent. The absence of fruit and vegetables in the ledgers is a perplexing mystery but this must not be taken to indicate that they were not consumed in the College. On the contrary, they may have been listed in separate documents that have not survived or it is possible that they came from the College's own gardens and were thus not bought in the market. Notwithstanding this, the ledgers reveal that the diet of the fellows and scholars was surprisingly varied and incorporated many different types of meat and fish.

One last consideration that has come as a real surprise to me, especially as a historian, has been the fact that there is almost no difference in the weekly food budget or types of food purchased between the two years I have examined. This is all the more striking as the College faced difficult times following the deposition of Henry VI in 1461. Under the rule of the founder's usurper, Edward IV – who had no reason to favour a foundation that commemorated the memory of Henry VI and the Lancastrian dynasty – the College lost its royal patronage and suffered numerous

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<sup>12</sup> K.C.C.C., *Liber Communitatis*, Vol. 1, fols. 31-32v.

<sup>13</sup> K.C.C.A., documents nos. 60-61 and 62-63.

spoliations. In only a few years many estates were lost and the income of the college fell from £1000 to £500.<sup>14</sup> That this severe drop in income had no apparent repercussions on the weekly food bill of the College is surprising to say the least. Of course, there are many more as yet unedited ledgers from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the archives of King's College and my three months of research have barely scratched the surfaced of a veritable mountain of data of significant historical interest.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Saltmarsh, offprint from 'The Muniments of King's College', *Cambridge Antiquarian Society's Communications*, 33 (1933), p. 88.