

A TYPICAL MEDIEVAL WINTER MEAL

On Thursday 15th January 2009 Whilton Local History Society met for a medieval winter meal. Over 30 people sat down by candlelight and tucked into a meal based on food either available or produced in Whilton in about 1388.

1388 was a significant year, because John Holt, a lawyer and the lord of the manor of Whilton, a supporter of Richard II, had been declared a traitor by the Merciless Parliament of that year. The king was too weak to prevent him from being exiled to Ireland. Because all the property of any traitor became forfeit to the Crown, the "civil servants" of the day needed to know what John Holt was worth. As a result we have details of the crops and livestock in the lord's demesne that year from the ricks of rye and peas and the malt in the granary to the sow with her 12 piglets worth two shillings.

John Holt's land is described as three gardens for depasturing, (this probably means enclosed fields for grazing), 200 acres of arable adjoining the manor, "divers pieces of meadow and pasture", a dovecote, a water mill, rents, perquisites of courts and 13 boon-works for mowing hay. There were fish ponds too, but it appears no one was very keen on fish, despite the medieval rules for avoiding meat on Fridays and other occasions. The fish in the ponds were sold for two shillings.

The first course was leek and rabbit soup, providing a flavour of the medieval winter cooking pot, which hung over the fire. Every cottager had his own piece of garden, which was cultivated to produce essentials for the family. Onions were grown throughout the country, as were leeks.

The rabbits may have been poached, or may have just been culled to protect the crops. The lord of Whilton Manor, William de Whilton, had obtained the grant of free warren in 1258, and so officially all the rabbits belonged to his successors. However it seems unlikely that they all stayed inside the warren!

This was followed by a small taste of terrine of pike, one of the fish which may have been stocked in the lord of the manor's fishponds.

The main course consisted of smoked bacon, pigeon breast, pease pudding, parsnips and rye bread with mustard sauce. Records show that peas were grown in quantity in Whilton and put into ricks. They provided protein and a filling ingredient in the days before potatoes. The pudding was cooked very long and slowly, and took in the flavours of other items in the pot, in this case the bacon. Parsnips were probably grown in the gardens here and perhaps a few pigeons escaped from the lord's dovecote!

Lastly oatcakes were served with a choice of honeyed apples or cheese, all good winter fare in medieval Whilton.

The onion and mustard sauce

Some people liked the sauce and asked for the recipe to be put in the Newsletter, as follows:

Ingredients:

One onion

A knob of butter (about 1½ oz)

1 rounded tablespoon flour

Heaped teaspoon Colman's mustard powder

About ¾ pint of milk and stock (or liquid from your cooking pot)

Heaped teaspoon French whole grain mustard from Waitrose

Melt the butter and very gently cook the chopped onion, without letting it turn brown (about 15-20 minutes).

Stir in the flour and mustard powder over a gentle heat.

Gradually add the stock and milk, until you reach the consistency you wish, stirring all the time over a low heat.

Allow to barely simmer for about 5 minutes.

Just before serving, stir in the French mustard.