

## THE SAXON SUPPER

On 15<sup>th</sup> January the Local History Society AGM was preceded by a Saxon supper. The Anglo-Saxon period covered about six centuries from the time the Romans left until the Norman conquest in 1066. The name "Whilton" is Saxon and it was a settlement in the kingdom of Mercia probably by the 600s.

In the early Saxon period there would still have been memories of Roman cooking and ingredients from the Mediterranean, but these had mostly faded away in later times, and more exotic spices were not available for the majority of the population. Even pepper was an expensive imported luxury. Communities needed to be self sufficient with the purchase of just a very few extras, in particular salt.

Homes were thatched and cooking and heating was provided by a central stone fire pit, usually lined with stones, perhaps cobbles here. These stones helped to hold the heat. Our ancestors would have lived in a smoky atmosphere, as chimneys were not yet in use. Most food was cooked in a cauldron. The words "seethe" and "simmer" and "broth" are derived from Anglo-Saxon. .



Sometimes different foods encased in bags could be cooked in the same water. Another method was to wrap food in clay and bake it in the embers of the fire. In larger establishments it might be cooked on a spit over a fire, and in some cases roasted in an oven. Ovens were often in a separate building for safety reasons.

When it was available the Saxons ate meat, poultry and fish. As farmers they had domestic animals, so that beef, mutton, goat, pork and bacon and poultry were eaten. They would have eaten the meat of small birds when they could net them, and the rich would have had the opportunity to hunt wild boar and deer. There were hares to be caught, but rabbits were introduced with the Normans. Many animals were slaughtered in autumn and early winter, to avoid providing fodder. The main methods of preserving were by salting or smoking, sometimes a combination of both.

Milk, cheese and butter were available, but hard cheeses were the preserve of the wealthy. When butter was short, dripping (animal fat from cooked meat) would have been used on bread. Egg laying was less regular and not all year round as today. Fish would have depended on local supplies, such as eels in the Nene or river trout, and probably the Whilton manorial fishponds were in existence by the late Saxon period.



In the fields the community grew wheat, rye, barley and oats – used for bread making, brewing, porridge and animal feed. They grew and ate peas, beans, parsnips, leeks, onions, cabbage, white or purple carrots, lettuce and garlic. There were also wild plants and fruits to be gathered, such as nettles, dandelions, mint, mushrooms, nuts, berries and fruit.

They kept bees and so had some honey for sweetening. Herbs and some imported spices were used for flavouring, From all this we can see that, providing there was not a crop failure or disasters caused by awful weather or war, the Saxons had a varied and healthy diet, with some lean periods, especially as winter ended and spring began.

We ate our meal by candlelight, using only knives and spoons in keeping with Saxon custom. Forks had not yet been introduced. Boiled gammon, pease pudding and parsnips were eaten with wholemeal and rye bread and butter, followed by baked apples stuffed with dried plums and served with cream.