

**Object(s):** Print of busy cooks Tudor times

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### Introduction

This print is one of a series of images produced between 1940-60, as teaching aids for schools, by Macmillan Publishing. It shows three women preparing and cooking a meal in a kitchen. The meat, which looks like goose or wild fowl are roasting on a spit in front of an open fire, with a cauldron cooking pot suspended over it. Beneath the spit there are drip trays to catch the fat and meat juices for basting the meat during cooking. The other women are preparing a second spit with further birds for roasting. Hanging from the wall of the kitchen are a rabbit and a hare, which will be skinned and cooked later. A basket of fresh vegetables stands in the kitchen doorway. There are three large pewter platters atop a cupboard beneath the kitchen window. A young boy is carrying a platter of food (fish?) to a table of diners in the next room.

In the bottom centre there is an inscription which reads: 'Busy cooks, Tudor times.' A further inscription at the bottom left reads: 'Macmillan's History Pictures.'

The age of the print can be verified by the clothing worn. Specifically, the ruffs worn around the necks of the cooks and the tunic and breeches of the young boy. The hats worn by the male diners also suggest that they may be local gentry.

### Society in Tudor Britain

Tudor society was very class driven. Maintaining the difference between the various ranks of society was considered so important that the Tudors enshrined class distinctions in several and all pervading 'Sumptuary' laws, which in this country, unlike similar rules across Europe, were passed by parliament. These laws were intended to preserve a social structure by dictating what people could wear, eat and even the furniture they could possess. It seems very strange today, but the Sumptuary laws were vitally important to maintaining the class order of Tudor society. They were even used to deal with social and economic problems such as the effects of the plague.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that in Tudor society, personal possessions were significant enough to be passed from generation to generation of the same family.

### The effect of Sumptuary laws on Tudor dining

The Tudor Times website suggests that for the poorest in society, Sumptuary Laws were not terribly relevant as most diets consisted of a simple pottage, akin to a cabbage soup with barley or oats and a little pork or mutton to add flavour. The rich ate pottage too although a nobleman's pottage could also contain almonds, ginger and saffron as well as wine.

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<sup>1</sup> Bluffkinghal. Sumptuary Laws under Henry VIII [Internet]. A bit of Henry love - a blog dedicated to the life and times of Henry VIII. Wordpress; [cited 2023Mar20]. Available from: <https://bluffkinghal.wordpress.com/2012/05/17/sumptuary-laws-under-henry-viii/>

For nobles and anyone who wanted to gain favour at the royal court, the Sumptuary Law was very relevant because failing to obey it would lead to a fine and widespread condemnation for trying to 'copy your betters.' In theory, even the nobles were supposed to limit the amount spent on food each year to about 10% of their capital, although that was for their immediate family, and did not include the amount to be spent on the household.<sup>2</sup>

Williams tells us that during Henry VIII's time, strict rules were laid down about the number of dishes that could be served at any one meal by rank vis.

Cardinal – nine dishes

Duke, Archbishop, Marquis, Earl or Bishop – seven dishes

Mayors of the City of London, Bishops, etc. – six dishes

And so on until those whose income fell between £40-£100 per year could have just three.<sup>3</sup>

Tableware associated with dining became prized items and were regularly displayed for visitors to see. An example of this can also be seen in this image, with the large platters on display. As with the number of dishes which could be served, displays of tableware were restricted by the number of shelves a person could have. For example.

Dukes – four or five shelves

Lesser nobles – three shelves

Knights - two shelves

Gentlemen – just one.<sup>4</sup>

We note that our image only has a single shelf and must therefore be the house of a gentleman.

Monarchs had little limitation on what they ate or offered guests and courtiers. They also had greater freedom on the number of shelves on which they displayed their tableware. Henry VIII for example had 12 shelves of heavily guarded gold plate.

At Henry VIII's Court, many different meats and fowl would be eaten, including brawn, beef, mutton, bacon, goose, veal, lamb, kid, hens, capons, peacocks, cygnet, mallard, teal, woodcock, ousels, thrush, robins, cranes, bitterns, buzzards and venison of all sorts. Venison was the king of meats – not available to buy, it was hunted in the deer parks of the king and his nobles, and frequently given as a present. Henry VIII sent a hart to Anne Boleyn as a symbol of courtship.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tudor times [Internet]. Tudor Times. [cited 2023Mar20]. Available from: <https://tudortimes.co.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> Williams J. Cookery through the ages. Online presentation for the Workers Educational Association. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 2.

### What did the Tudors eat?

This following section has been adapted from an article on the website 'Tudortimes', together with source material from a presentation by Jane Williams on behalf of the WEA.

Tudor diet was influenced by the seasons. Smaller landowners often had insufficient feed to keep livestock over winter. The majority of their livestock was slaughtered, and the meat preserved by salting and smoking. Wealthier landowners kept more meat, slaughtering as needed. Game continued to be hunted throughout the winter by the wealthy. Poaching became a regular issue with still penalties being handed out.

The diet of Tudor nobility was heavily weighted towards meat. Salads were popular; cooked and raw, and included green vegetables such as leeks, onions, radishes and cabbage as well as lettuce, chives, boiled carrots, flowers and herbs. They were dressed with oil, vinegar, and sometimes sugar. In spite of the assertions of today's ministers; Turnips, fell out of favour, being considered only fit for cattle!

Fruit was widely eaten, but only in season, or otherwise preserved by bottling.

Most households ate two meals a day. The main meal of the day was dinner. Dinner was taken at 10 or 11am and a supper was eaten around 5pm.

For the middle classes or above, dinner was two courses with several different dishes in each. A 'dish' contained a set amount of a particular item, for example one swan, bustard or peacock (for the higher ranks of nobility), but four smaller fowl, or twelve small birds, such as larks. To prevent the higher classes feeling deprived if they went out to dinner, the host could serve the number of dishes and food appropriate to the highest-ranking guest. Both courses would offer a pottage plus a selection of meats, custards, tarts, fritters and fruit. The first course tended to offer boiled meats, and the second, roasted or baked meats.

Each course of a formal feast was preceded with a 'subtlety'. Subtleties were a decorative culinary art form made from marzipan and spun sugar, and might include representations of castles, cathedrals, hunting scenes.

At the Royal Court, after the main courses, came a third, consisting of spiced wine, known as hippocras (a drink, possibly heated and made from wine mixed with sugar and spices), sweetmeats, comfits of all kinds and wafers. Wafers were only permitted for the highest-ranking people, and were thin, crisp biscuits made by pressing flavoured batter between hot irons. This course was normally eaten whilst standing and was known as the 'void', which meant that the table had been cleared (or voided).

Feasting etiquette for the Royal Court was mentioned in John Russell's 'Book of nurture', which describes the order in which the various bishops should be seated after being shown to their places on the seating plan. Arguably, Russell's book might be described as a forerunner of Debrett's Handbook of Etiquette, still being used today.

Understandably, supper would be a simpler meal. However, supper at the Royal Court might still consist of two courses, each made up of numerous dishes.

#### Tudor household and recipe books

Williams tells us that cookery books began to be published regularly from the late 1500's. She gives examples such as.

- 'A Proper New Booke of Cookery' – anon 1550.
- 'The Good Huswife's Jewell' – Thomas Dawson 1585.
- 'Elinor Fettiplace's Recipe Book' – 1604.
- 'Murrell's New Cookerie' – 1615.
- 'The Accomplisht Cook' – Robert May 1660.<sup>6</sup>

What is particularly interesting about these books is their comprehensive coverage of the subject stretching far beyond simple recipes. 'A Proper New Book of Cookery' for example includes lists of birds in season for eating, both simple and more complex recipes as well as instructions on basic dining etiquette.

Other books such as 'The Good Huswife's Jewell' provide, tips on husbandry, suggested shopping lists for banquets as well as medicinal recipes.

Later books such as 'Murrell's New Cookerie' demonstrate the influence of French cuisine and fashion which became popular at the Royal Court.

Recipes from this time also demonstrate a knowledge of cookery techniques such as par-boiling, roasting and water based cookery, often the domain of professional chefs who had served time in the kitchens of the nobility. They also speak of the rich variety of herbs, dried fruits and spices (many not grown in this country) available for everyday cooking, together with the authors understanding of what proportions should be used to achieve the desired flavour.

Overall, these books speak of a nation, keen to take advantage of new trade routes forged by the global ambitions that marked this period in our history.

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<sup>6</sup> Supra 3.