

Object(s): Print of meat roasting

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Introduction

This print is one of a set of images produced between 1940-60, as teaching aids for schools, by Macmillan Educational Publishing. This image shows a woman dressed in white clothing, sitting by a fire watching meat roasting on a mechanically spit which is being driven by a dog running in a treadmill. At the top of the image, we can see joints of cured meat and onions hanging from hooks in the ceiling. There are benches of men and women sitting to the right. In the bottom centre there is an inscription which reads: 'A Turnspit in an Inn Kitchen, Late 18th. C.' A further inscription at the bottom left reads: 'Macmillan's History Pictures.'

The age of the print can be identified by the period costume, but it also illustrates meat and cooking methods of the time.

18th century Britain

The 18th century was a period of significant invention and development in agriculture, industrialisation and transport. However, and in spite of increasing urbanisation, the polarisation of society between rich and poor remained as significant as it had been in earlier centuries.¹

Although meat had become a more regular feature of everyone's diet in Britain, the gap between rich and poor was still evident. In addition to a wide variety of meat, fish, game and poultry, the rich were also consuming; fruit, vegetables, substantial amounts of sugar (on average 9lbs per person per year)² and even chocolate. The diet of the poor however, still consisted mainly of bread and potatoes, supplemented with meat in the form of mutton, beef, pork rabbit, chicken or wood pigeon, sometimes made into a stew with root vegetables and peas. However, increasing urbanisation meant that meat was transported over greater distances with a concomitant effect on its quality.

What does this object tell us about eating in the 18th century?

Firstly, this object tells us about the importance food, particularly meat, in the 18th century diet. The woman is tending a leg of meat spit roasting by the fire. A drip tray stands beneath the joint to catch any fat or meat juices coming from meat as it cooks, which can be used for basting the meat. There are other cured joints of meat hanging from the ceiling which suggests that meat was valued throughout the year, together with some onions, used to add flavour to dishes. Standing beside the table, an elderly lady is carrying a wicker basket which may be carrying apples, she has one in her hand and the small boy

¹ Lambert T. Society in 18th Century Britain [Internet]. Local Histories. 2022 [cited 2023Feb14]. Available from: <https://localhistories.org/life-in-the-18th-century/>

² Foster CL. British Foodways Throughout the Centuries. Family Search. 2018. p. 1–6.

next to her is holding one too. Interestingly, few people in the 18th century would ever consider eating uncooked fruit which was thought to be bad for the digestive system or even a cause of the plague!³

At the table, we can see people drinking from pewter tankards, which suggests that they are visitors to the inn, enjoying some ale before journeying on their way. What is less clear is whether the Inn offered food to its guests. It is, however, a reasonable assumption that they would offer some food, especially for any guests spending the night at the inn before resuming their onward journey.

Dining on the road

Inns were the earliest form of roadside diner. We know this from the diaries of travellers such as Fiennes, Byng and Moritz, all of whom diarised their travels through Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴ We should remember that travelling around the country by foot or horse was the norm and longer journey's would often last several days. Most inns of the period would offer accommodation as well as food which often comprised of mutton, bread and cheese. However, some of the fare on offer would compare favourably with a travellers meal today.

Celia Fiennes ate salmon, trout, eggs, bacon and West Country tarts. John Byng dined on veal, fruit tart, chicken, cake, beef streak, sage cheese, pigeon, cabbage, cucumbers, salad with cheese, cold meats, rice pudding, gooseberry pie, beef, pig, fowls, partridge and scotched collops (veal escallops cooked in cream, with egg yolks, lemon and seasoned with spices). Finally, Karl Moritz also ate roast meats, salad, pickled salmon, Cheshire cheese, fowl and cold meats.⁵

In fact, such was the variety of fare in the places they stayed at, we might be forgiven for thinking this was the diet of everyday folk in Britain at the time.

Spit roasting

As we have seen in the image, the method of cookery is by roasting meat over an open fire. To roast any joint of meat using a single heat source, means that the meat has to regularly turned and basted to prevent it from being burned on one side and undercooked on the other.

The name 'spit' derives from the middle English "spitu", which means a pointed object or a rod on which meat is cooked.⁶ As much as we might like to speculate, the name spit does not derive from the spitting of fat and meat juices as the roasting occurs!

³ Shamo DV. [Internet]. Types of food in 18th century England. [cited 2023Mar14]. Available from: http://websites.umich.edu/~ece/student_projects/food/foods.htm

⁴ Ford J. Food and drink in 17th and 18th century inns and alehouses [Internet]. History is Now Magazine. History is Now Magazine; 2014 [cited 2023Mar14]. Available from: <http://www.historyisnowmagazine.com/blog/2014/6/7/food-and-drink-in-17th-and-18th-century-inns-and-alehouses#.ZBBaX3bP1D8=>

⁵ Ibid 4.

⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press. 1914.

Spit roasting is a primitive method of roasting all types of meat and fish, whose exact origins are unknown. West tells us that a 'Sunday Roast' was popularised by Henry VII, who ruled between 1485 to 1509. Indeed, the popularity of beef as the roast of choice, gave the Royal Guards of the Tower of London the nickname of "Beefeaters".⁷

West, refers to a 19th century cookery publication to suggest that the cooking time required, using a spit roast method, for a 15lb sirloin joint, would be around four hours. This, she argues, would require a large fireplace and thus be the preserve of the rich.⁸ Turning a spit for that length of time, would be hot and thirsty work.

Cloake, says the job of turning the spit by hand was given to the lowliest servants in the household; usually a kitchen boy, small enough to fit into the available space beside the spit. The task was hot and laborious. So hot in fact that the youngster would sit behind a soaked bale of hay, as protection from the excessive heat.⁹

By the 16th century, mechanical spits began to appear, which were driven by an external source of power, and away from the direct heat of the fire.¹⁰ Treadmills, had been used for centuries to provide power to lift and move water and heavy weight. Smaller treadmills, powered by a short legged dog, especially bred for the purpose, became commonplace. The example in this image is a typical representation of the design. Dogs were thought to be ideal because of their great stamina and were easily trained using small pieces of meat placed on the treadmill to encourage the dog to move. The specific breed of turnspit dog has long disappeared although it is perhaps similar in shape to today's corgi.

Provided it is regularly turned, spit roasting cooks evenly, and with constant basting, it produces a succulent roast. However, not everyone had access to a spit and many people would take their meat along to the local baker to be cooked in the bread oven. By the 19th century, most houses were being fitted with cooking ranges made of cast iron and powered by a single coal fire within the range itself. Because cast iron is a good conductor of heat, the single fire was enough to heat an oven and one of two hot plates above on which food could be used for boiling and frying.¹¹ Similarly, for many homes, the range was the only source of heat and became the focal point for the family to sit around on cold winter evenings.

Unlike spit roasting, the range oven was heated by dry, warm air produced by the fire. Circulating the heat around the outer walls of the oven, meant that the side closest to the fire was always hotter than

⁷ West C. Sunday Roast - a tasty history [Internet]. Oxford Open Learning. The Oxford Open Learning Trust; 2021 [cited 2023Mar27]. Available from: <https://www.oool.co.uk/blog/sunday-roast-a-tasty-history/>

⁸ Ibid 7.

⁹ Cloake F. Turnspit Tykes [Internet]. The Junket. The Junket; 2016 [cited 2023Mar27]. Available from: <http://thejunket.org/2016/10/archive/turnspit-tykes/>

¹⁰ Ibid 9.

¹¹ The Victorian kitchen range. [cited 2023Mar27]. Available from: <https://www.1900s.org.uk/1900s-cooking-range.htm>

the side furthest way from it, which led to uneven cooking. To ensure a more even roast, meat either had to be shielded from the strongest heat or regularly turned during roasting so it took longer to roast than on a spit. Nevertheless, the cast iron range brought more effective cooking to the masses and although different fuels, coal, gas and electricity have been tried; we still rely on the oven today to cook our traditional Sunday Roast.