

# NEWTON ST CYRES HISTORY GROUP

## Christmas Traditions



By the time you read this report, Christmas 2021 will be truly packed away, but our CAHZoom meeting in December was suitably seasonal. On Friday 10<sup>th</sup> December, Dr Paul Cleave talked about Christmas Traditions. Dr Cleave is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, and a food historian with a particular interest in Devon. He has addressed the History Group before, on Wartime Recipes and on Christmas Recipes in Devon. If you were there you will remember that he brought samples of the recipes for us to try, but sadly this is not possible in the virtual world.

Dr Cleave started by reminding us that in early December, as he was speaking, the build-up to Christmas and food preparation was going on as it has done for generations – making a cake, puddings, mincemeat and maybe a chocolate log. A main theme of his presentation was to explain how many of these customs are still observed today, although in a different form. Many of the traditions are Victorian in origin, and re-reading ‘A Christmas Carol’ by Dickens, was recommended for its descriptions of Christmas food.

Using as his some of his sources menus and cookery books from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Cleave mentioned the local connections of a recipe book belonging to Lady Walker, who had lived at The Beehive, and also a book on ‘Coping with Christmas’ by Fanny and Johnnie Cradock, whose editor, Alison Leach, lived locally for some years. A photo of a typical Devonshire farm kitchen of the 1920s was shown, where food would have been prepared on an open hearth with trivets and a cauldron, although in living memory a Christmas dinner could be taken to the local baker for roasting in his oven.

Another tradition was a ‘gooding’. The Western Times reported in 1875 that at Newcombes House in Crediton, on Christmas Eve, the squire would hand out 2/6d or more to anyone who called who was in need, and that many others would do the same. These days the same impulse to help translates into charity giving at Christmas.

Another aspect that links the present with the past is a vegetarian Christmas. It was fascinating to see a 1908 menu featuring lentils, macaroni cheese, stuffed tomatoes, a savoury pie and mock goose for Christmas lunch. This was from ‘A Manual of Vegetarian Cookery’ by Dr Black, who had moved to Torquay for his health and established the Dartmoor Hotel at Belstone with a vegetarian regime. He acknowledged that the recipes were from his cook.

During the 1920s, changes in society started to mean that people were having to manage their homes with fewer servants, and this resulted in books on advice, with recipes, being written and published by society ladies. Dr Cleave referred to some of these. Lady Jekyll recommended serving a Lemon Syllabub with Christmas Pudding. On trying out this idea, he found that it worked very well, as the lemon cream cut through the richness of the pudding, and yet still used traditional ingredients. He commented that although the books are nearly a century old, you can get ideas from them.

Lady Jekyll was sister-in-law to Gertrude Jekyll, the famous garden designer, and wrote for *The Times* on matters such as managing weekend parties and picnics. Mrs Martineau, also a talented gardener and cookery writer, suggested that when children have left home for ‘a winter sports holiday’, it is good to invite friends and neighbours who are ‘waifs and strays’ to come to share a Christmas meal.



*A Victorian game of Snapdragon*

She describes in detail how to decorate the table and what to serve: chilled grapefruit, a soup, sole with fried banana, turkey with whole chestnuts braised in stock and vegetables, and a Christmas pudding, but also mince pies without a lid and with vanilla ice cream and poached pears as a refreshing combination, cheese straws and then a desert of exotic fruit. ‘Snapdragons’ was a popular seasonal game at the time, when large muscatel raisins in a dish

were heated and flamed in brandy and you had to pick one out of the flames. I have never tried this but it must have used a lot of brandy, I imagine!

These days there are quite a few cookery schools in the south-west, but 1920s Devon had an expensive cookery school, Harcombe House at Uplyme, run by Mrs Winifred Francillon, who wrote ‘Good Cookery’ as a training manual. The Christmas dinner was a very traditional meal of roast turkey and sausages or goose, sage and onion stuffing, apple sauce, and a rich gravy with bread sauce, all accompanied by an array of the usual vegetables. Dr Cleave observed that glossy supermarket magazines today still use these traditional recipes, which hark back to Mrs Beeton.

Another parallel with the present was the option of buying and having delivered a complete Christmas dinner, at least in Exeter. Deller’s Restaurant and Café of Bedford

Street offered Christmas and New Year celebrations, and they specialised in Christmas Puddings, making hundreds, all carefully costed, including the cloth and wrappings. Promotion of British produce and supporting farmers is also nothing new. A Fortnum and Mason catalogue of 1927 features Devonshire Cream and Butter, and they also sold Christmas Hampers, costing from one to five guineas. Buying produce from the British Empire was encouraged. The chef to King George V offering a recipe full of spices, rum and fruit from countries within the empire.

During the Second World War, these rich and lavish recipes were no longer possible, but the government considered that Christmas was very good for morale and rationing was varied accordingly. Suitable recipes were distributed and a 1944 leaflet entitled 'Festive Food' was purposely made bright and cheerful, and even though there was not a great deal of food in the shops. Dr Cleave had been shown, by Bill Mitchell of Mitchell's Bakery, Crediton, papers owned by Bill's father and grandfather, in which were recipes given out to professional bakers from a wartime research bakery.

They recommended ways of making the best use of the ingredients available and adhering to government regulations; for instance, icing on a cake was not allowed. Also from this period were a series of letters, which included Christmas greetings to a young airman from Enterlake Farm, Yeoford, who had been posted to India in autumn 1944, just after his marriage. Together they build up a picture of the preparations for a wartime Christmas, and the detail sheds light on the constraints of the time. The Christmas cake was made late because there were not the ingredients to make it rich enough to keep. There was carol singing to raise money for the Red Cross to buy presents for soldiers, but the children were warned that Santa would not be able to make his usual journey and there would be fewer presents for them.

Dr Cleave ended by comparing present-day advice and recipes with those of earlier years. He quoted an amusing extract from Fanny Cradock's book 'Christmas Countdown' from January throughout the year, and saying that without preparations, Christmas can be 'sheer hell for the average wife and mum'! Nevertheless, the planning and looking forward to Christmas, with food being central, is handed on from generation to generation. Although things evolve, many are elements endure.

There were interested questions after the talk ended, and it was a most fascinating and also comforting talk on the way that Christmas food has been enjoyed and celebrated over the years.

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