

Christmas 2009

Over-indulgence? - compared to our



CHRISTMAS has always been celebrated by over-indulgence, it is indeed a feast.

Although we all admit to over-eating and drinking at this time of year, our efforts are but pale shades of the meals our ancestors stuffed merrily away.

Fifteen, twenty or even more substantial courses were the order of the day at Christmas dinners, which were only brought to an end as the last diner slipped senseless to the floor below the table.

Unlike us today, the meal began with the plum pudding or porridge as it was then. This was a heady concoction composed by boiling beef and veal in a large quantity of sack, old hock, sherry, lemon and orange juice, sugar, raisins, currants, prunes, cochineal, nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves. As the porridge boiled it was particularly thickened with brown breadcrumbs and served steaming hot from a huge tureen. All diners were expected to consume a large bowl full of the porridge, after which the rest of the meal would be served.

Goose was always the favourite Christmas bird though it seldom

appeared at the table alone. Depending on the wealth of the household it would come surrounded by boiled chickens, capons, and game birds of all sorts. In a noble or royal house, the goose would be eclipsed by swan, a high flavoured delicacy of yesteryear.

Turkey was usually only presented at the highest table in the land, as it wasn't brought to this country until the sixteenth century. Henry VIII however was known to be very fond of it.

When the birds had been eaten, a few joints of mutton and several cured hams would be presented at the table, to be followed in their turn by a wide variety of pies, puddings and sausages. Hakin was a special sausage of huge proportions, made from the blood and offals obtained from all the other meats that had been served, bound together with oatmeal, rather in the fashion of haggis.

It was a very significant sausage however in that it had to be boiled at midnight on Christmas Eve, and some was always eaten in the early hours of the morning as a starter of the revelries. Cooks who boiled the hakin before or after midnight often lost their jobs.

After the hakin came the less savoury

dishes. Mince pies were much in evidence. They were made to resemble the cradle in which Christ was placed, and the fruity, spicy filling represented the frankincense and myrrh brought by the Wise Men. A gold coin was also placed in the pie for the same reason and the whole lot topped off with a tiny, pastry baby doll.

Sometimes the mince pie was large and sometimes there were many small ones depending on the fancy of the household. Needless to say, everyone present had to sample at least some of this part of the meal. In addition there would be custards, blancmanges, syllabubs, dishes of soured cream, junkets, bowls of fresh, sweet cream, fruit snows and fruit compotes.

These would be followed by bowls of fresh fruit, spiced cakes and sweets. The wealthy households again would probably have the end of the meal signalled by the entrance of a huge and elaborate sugar sculpture of a swan perhaps, or a woodland scene, and even this would be happily consumed by all present.

Needless to say, the meal would be accompanied by wines and ales in vast quantities.

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