

D1 Medieval Bread-Making and Diet

A Medieval Meal

Most common people would give service either in trade or labour to a higher class family. These households provided for a great number of people and would expect to provide food to travellers and other visitors.

Bread was the staple of the Elizabethan diet with the upper classes able to afford 'manchet', which was white bread made from wheat, while the poor ate coarse bread made from barley or rye. Most householders could cultivate cereal crops, of rye, wheat, barley and oats and vegetables such as turnips and peas in their gardens, orchards and meadows. Vetch was grown as a 'green crop' and fed to livestock, along with grain. Livestock and poultry were also part of the household and wild birds, rabbit and hare were netted and eaten.

People ate only meat (when they could) mainly pork and bread in two meals a day. Vegetables were only eaten when meat was unavailable. Some people might 'break their fast' with a type of porridge. Tea as a drink was a luxury, wine and spirits were not available to the lower orders who drank beer and 'small beer' (a watered brew). Not many people would drink water, unless away from home. Forks were not yet in general use and everyone would carry a knife to cut up their food. Food was served on wooden platters, unless the household could afford pewter or silver dishes. Cooking was done using a cauldron over an open fire, though well-off households would use copper skillets and pans and roast meat on a spit.



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A cutting tool c. 1600s

Use of land and agriculture

The Normans had established a system of Open fields with tenants allocated strips in a number of fields, designed to share the good and poor ground. Cultivation followed a three year cycle of rye or winter wheat, followed by oats or barley and the ground left fallow in the third year. Following the Great Famine and episodes of plague in the 14th century, which decimated the population, the open fields system gave way to payments in labour, goods or money as rent for land on which to produce grain and run livestock. By the 1500s, fields had been amalgamated and some enclosed, however, the 1588 Grosmont map shows evidence of the 3-year rotation of crops. In addition, early maps (and place names) show many Commons in the area on which tenants had a right of grazing and pannage (running pigs) and could gather wood for fuel. In the 1386 half the tenants in the lordship of Whitecastle held fewer than 5 acres, but by 1500 six men held over 40 acres each.¹⁷ Farming for ordinary people had always been for their own survival, with breadcorn the main crop. Cultivation was based on grain: wheat for bread (sometimes mixed with rye), oats for feed for horses and for making beer, barley used mainly for beer.

17. Ibid p.45 reference:R.R.Davies *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales*.

The importance of grain can be seen in wills from the 1500 and 1600s which highlight the importance of standing and of stored grain. For example, the inventory of Arthur John David ap Gwilym who died in 1608 left: 'unto Anne my wife all my corn now in blade growing upon the land adjoining to my dwelling house', all his family receive cattle and sheep. His will mentions: 6 kine in calf, 2 yearling calves, 1 yearling bull, 5 oxen (which indicates he worked a fair amount of ploughland), 2 yearling heifers, 1 red cow, 2 bullocks, 10 ewes and 8 yearling sheep.

John Morice of Cefn Llytha, Llangattock Lingoed, in his will of 1594 left: 'To Gwenllian Jenkin my wife all my corn growing and all the corn in my barn.' At Llantilio Crossenny in 1582, Morris ap William (father of John Morice) left his wife Margery a large flock of '26 ewes with lambs, 68 sheep and 28 young sheep.'¹⁸



Labourer using a hay rake c. 1600s

18. Ibid. p.51

19. Phillip Morgan 2008 *A Grosmont Miscellany* p.105

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Growing vines to produce wine

The production of wine from grapes for drinking goes back thousands of years in Europe and was brought to Wales by the Romans. Wine growing in the early Middle Ages reached a high point in Wales with the establishment of Benedictine and Cistercian orders. Monks from Morimund Abbey, Haute-Marne, France, settled at Abbey Dore, the mother house of Grace Dieu, a monastery on the River Monnow between Skenfrith and Monmouth in the 12th century. In the 13th century, Cistercian monks, known as the 'white monks' by their dress, held Lyncoed grange (now Great Campston) given by Henry III and confirmed by Hubert de Burgh, lord of the Three Castles, in 1230. With gifts from some Welsh land-owners, the holding amounted to 443 acres managed from the great Abbey at Dore. The Cistercians also held 230 acres at Cold grange on the Graig and Llanfair grange, about a mile from the Croft barn. Llanfair grange was worked by lay brothers and comprised a chapel, barn, fishponds, terraces and extensive land, which combined with the Cistercian holding at Cold Grange and Campston, covered much of northern Monmouthshire. The Cistercians traded wool and sheep with Flanders and Italy; the wool from Dore and Tintern being of especially fine quality. The Abbeys in France traded primarily in wine, and the expertise in growing vines and producing wine would have been available to the monks at Llanfair. The influence of the Cistercians in Wales had declined by the 14th century and after the Dissolution of the monasteries in the mid 1500s, their lands passed into secular ownership.²⁰

South Wales has seen a revival in growing vines to produce wine in the 20th and 21st centuries with 12 vineyards commercially viable. The White Castle Vineyard alongside the Croft Barn is planted with grape varieties producing red, white and rose wine.



Resources:

Visit to Croft Barn to make bread using traditional ingredients

Notes on Gluten Spelt and Yeast action in bread making

A tour of Whitecastle Vineyard (1 hour) can be booked with a visit to Croft Barn

Sale map of Great Trethew estate 1843 showing use of fields