

Food Fit For a King

by Tom Sykes

What do you feed a famished monarch when he turns up at your door in the dead of night? The Penderel family had to ask themselves just that question when, in the small hours of Thursday 4th September 1651, the young King Charles II arrived on their doorstep. The King had been defeated at the battle of Worcester and was now on the run. Pursued by Oliver Cromwell's forces, he had fought in a battle, and ridden 25 miles through the night; all on a chunk of bread and a cup of beer.

The Penderel brothers, and their families, were servants and farmers on the Boscobel estate, in the heavily wooded Staffordshire/Shropshire border. The estate itself belonged to the Giffords, an influential, Catholic and royalist family. Thanks to the contemporary accounts we know how the Penderels, caught unprepared, gave Charles the best of what they had to hand, or what they could obtain by their own means without causing suspicion. Ironically, it is the arrival of a King that allows us a peek into what this humble yeoman (or husbandman) family would actually have eaten.

Talk not of goose and capon, give me good beef and bacon

And good bread and cheese at hand:

With pudding, brawn and souse all in a farmer's house

That is living for the husband-man

'A Dialogue Between the Husbandman and the Servingman', a traditional country ballad

The 'Dialogue Between the Husbandman and Servingman' spells out what we would supposedly find on a good yeoman's table: bread, cheese, beef and bacon. All that is missing from that list is trusty mutton and a cup of beer. Charles found himself in humble company for most of his time at Boscobel, and this is illustrated by what he was, and was not, served from this list of staple yeoman's dishes.

George Penderel, the housekeeper of Whiteladies, the home of Mrs Dorothy Gifford, was first amongst the sleepy eyed inhabitants of the Boscobel estate to greet the King. Then, as now, when an unexpected guest comes calling whatever snack is readily available is usually offered, and in this case it was a tray of sack and bisket. Sack was a popular fortified white wine from Spain. Biskets were the forerunner of modern biscuits, although recipes indicate that they were longer lasting and more hard-wearing, but still sweet (more like modern Biscotti). George had been sent to gather his brothers to assist the King, and so the sack and bisket was brought to Charles by the lady of the house. This was apt as labouring people would not regularly have had such dainties at their fingertips. It was the last dainty that Charles received for some while.

To make Bisket bread.

Take a pound of flour, and a pound of Sugar beaten, and mingle them together with the Yolks of six Eggs, and the Whites of three Eggs, and Anniseed, Corianderseed, and Carrawaies, of all these half an ounce, and a little Rosewater, to the quantity of half a quarter of half a pint, you must labour all these together with a wooden Ladle, till it be mingled like thick water, and the more you labour it the whiter it will be, and annoint your Coffins or plates with a little melted butter, and so fill it no to full for running over, and so set them into the Oven, and your Oven must be no hotter then to bake a Tart, and they must have as much

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soaking as Manchet, and then take them out, and cut them thin with a knife in slices and lay them on a sheet of paper, and then put them into the oven to dry till they be hard like Bisket bread.

Natura Exenterata, Philiatros, 1655

The fugitive monarch spent his first day at the Boscobel estate hidden in the depths of a nearby coppiced wood. Shivering and soaking wet he was offered a 'Messe of Milk, Eggs and Sugar in a black earthen Cup' to warm him up. Could this be Scrambled eggs? The meal of last resort when the fridge is bare. Being such a basic dish, tracking down a recipe for a 'Messe' of eggs in contemporary recipe books is not easy. A similar problem occurs when looking for Seventeenth Century descriptions of cuts of meat, one recipe book specifically, and rather tersely, stating that it won't list them as everyone knows what they are. I have, however, found a recipe containing similar ingredients, an omelette:

To make an Amalet.

Take ten eggs, and more then half the whites, beat them very well, and put in a spoonfull or two of cream, then heat some butter in your frying pan, and when it is hot put in your eggs and stir them a little, then fry them till you find they are enough; and a little before you put them out of the pan, turn both the sides over that the may meet in the middle, and lay it the bottome upward in the dish serve it in wit verjuice, butter and sugar.

The Cook's Guide, Hannah Woolley, 1670

The most common meal offered to the King, during his stay, was cheese and bread. Charles is given cheese and bread at various times of day. During the famous day spent hiding up an oak tree (the eponymous Royal Oak) all Charles was given to eat was bread, cheese and small beer. Charles received beer again that night, this time in the form of a 'posset'; a mixture of curdled cream and alcohol that was a popular Seventeenth Century comfort drink. Cheese and beer were a staple part of the diet of ordinary folk and many yeoman household would have a side building for either brewing or dairy production, or both. This would keep the family in cheese, but could also provide a surplus to sell at market.

The appearance of bacon is the only reference to the Penderels having meat near at hand. In one account the King is given a 'Fricasse of Bacon and Eggs' in Richard Penderel's house. Whether it was referred to by the Penderels as a 'fricasse', we don't know, but it is unlikely. Fricassees were generally considered fanciful, French dishes at this time, but the dish may well have seemed like a fricassee to Charles. However, bacon certainly was the common food of ordinary husbandmen, indeed it was more often associated with the poorer members of the labouring class. The woods of Boscobel would have been ideal territory for putting pigs out to pannage, so it is not surprising that the woodcutter Richard had such meat in his larder.

The King was not used to eating with his rustic subjects, and the Penderel's were certainly not used to catering for a monarch, and inevitably this led to some awkward situations. One such culture clash occurred toward the end of his stay. It is a scene often considered to portray Charles' common touch, but in fact it goes to show the gulf that separates him and the Penderel family:

After supper Colonel Carlis [another fugitive hiding at Boscobel] asked his majesty what meat he would please to have provided for the morrow, being Sunday; his majesty desired some mutton, if it might be had. But it was thought dangerous for William [Penderel] to go to any market to buy it, since his neighbours all knew he did not use to buy such for his own diet, and so it might beget a suspicion of his having strangers at his house. But the colonel found another expedient to satisfy his majesty's desires. Early on Sunday morning he repairs to Mr. Wm. Staunton's sheepcoat, who rented some of the demesns of Boscobel; here he chose one of the best sheep, sticks him with his dagger, then sends William for the mutton, who brings him home on his back.

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As soon as the mutton was cold, William cut it up and brought a leg of it into the parlour; his majesty called for a knife and a trencher, and cut some of it into collops, and pricked them with a knife point, then called for a frying-pan and butter, and fried the collops [small steaks] himself, of which he eat heartily; Colonel Carlis the while being but under cook, and that honour enough too, made the fire and turned the collops in the pan.

Thomas Blount, Boscobel

It is a great passage; surreal, gruesome and amusing. By asking for mutton no doubt the King thought he was choosing a humble dish, well he was certainly polite enough not to ask for venison. Yet, it is immediately clear that mutton does not usually appear on the Penderels' diet, William Penderel marching into town and buying mutton would immediately have raised suspicion. Even the way in which the meat was cooked would have been alien to the brothers. Meat was for roasting, not cutting up into 'collops' and sizzling in a pan.

Aside from bacon it is the absence of meat that prompts us to consider what the Penderel's regular diet said about their social position. The absence of mutton is telling, and so too is the absence of that great defining meat of the yeoman, beef. The stout English yeoman had already become intimately associated with beef, think of that quintessential figure the Yeoman of the Guard, otherwise known as: the Beefeater.

The unexpected appearance of a King in their midst was both life threatening and uncomfortable for the Penderel family, but it enables us to see the best that these ordinary, hard working folk had to offer from their regular diet. They fed their King as best they could from what they had without raising suspicion. Charles did not complain about the food he was given, though it was rough pickings compared to what he was used to. He was gracious throughout, indeed, referring to the mess of eggs it is recorded that:

...the King guessed [it] to be Milk and Apples, and said, he loved it very well; after he gave the rest to George and bid him eat it; for it was very good.

Husbandman fare it might have been, but perhaps it was food fit for a King after all.