

West Stow - Authenticity and food shopping

Health and Safety

There are two points to consider. If you buy it can you store it appropriately until it is needed. I.e. does it need to be kept cool etc.

The second point is that the public may be genuinely interested in what we are eating but, unfortunately, under no circumstances are we allowed to let them sample it.

Seasonality

Until the second half of the 20th century almost all foods were seasonal in their availability. Now the fresh items are imported from other parts of the world; in the first millennium the only way around this was to preserve them, which often changes their appearance, texture and taste. To try to cook within the constraints of seasonality may seem very limiting but to succeed in doing so is not only possible but can be very rewarding so why not give it a try?

Sources of foodstuffs

Supermarkets are convenient in that a wide range of foods can be bought in one place. However, health food shops are often a good source of useful ingredients. Traditional butchers will often do a better job of supplying the authentic item, as will some bakers and greengrocers, so if you know of good traditional suppliers make use of them!

Foods of Animal origin.

Dairy Products

Before purchasing please consider how these products can be stored and how they could be packaged for public view. If dairy products are to be stored in authentic containers you should scald the container first using clean boiling water.

Cheese

Much of the cheese made in this period was probably made from the milk of ewes and goats. Cheese keeps best if salted and pressed to give hard cheese but it still needs to be kept cool. We have no evidence for cheese presses, although these could have existed, and it would therefore seem safest to assume that it was soft or semi hard cheese (such as feta). Salt is thought to have been expensive and would probably not have been used for all cheese. Therefore, the shelf life would have been relatively short. Cheese would have been wrapped in something like muslin or unwrapped (either way mould would soon have formed on the surface). A hard or semi-hard cheese could have been covered with leaves, rather than muslin, but there is no evidence one way or the other. Annatto (the orange dye used in some modern cheese) comes from a South American plant, without it the cheese would have been white. Best compromise for authenticity is to buy soft cheese or a hard white cheese such as Wensleydale, Lancashire or Caerphilly.

Before pasteurisation soft cheese was made by straining sour milk through butter muslin. I am told that the same can be done with Greek yoghurt, which can be flavoured with leaves.

Butter

Butter was probably made in a dash churn. This is not difficult if someone has one (Jorvik have). If making it on site, buy 18% cream. If it is to keep, butter has to be salted and kept cool. Butter made for immediate consumption would be similar to modern butter, except that without the annatto it would be paler than the modern version. It is sometimes possible to get the real stuff but would be more expensive. Lactic butter may be more authentic than fresh cream butter but the public will not know the difference. Shape is not a problem as it is easily moulded to any desired shape and this can be the modern block. For shopping purposes buy ordinary butter. A traditional approach to packaging is to wrap it in leaves. Wooden containers are also possible as finds of “Bog butter” are in this type of packaging.

Butter milk

This is a by-product of butter making and is somewhat similar to skimmed milk, except that it is almost greenish in colour. It does not keep and is/was used as a drink.

Cream

Cream will have been made by placing cow’s milk in shallow containers and leaving overnight before skimming off the cream with a spoon with holes in it. This technique would make it possible to produce single or double cream and it would not have been impossible to go on to make clotted cream but I am not aware of any evidence for the implements to do this. For shopping purposes buy ordinary single or double cream. NB the milk from ewes and goats has very small fat globules and it is not practical to separate the cream.

Low fat milk

This is an inevitable consequence of the production of cream. The residual cream content would probably have been between that of modern skimmed and semi skimmed milk. For shopping either would pass muster.

Full fat milk

I suspect that this would not have been used for drinking, except at times of real surplus, if then – i.e. May.

Cultured milk products (Yogurt etc.)

There is no technical reason why such products would not have been available but we do not have the evidence. If they were available the flavour would probably have approximated to that of organic natural yogurt. However, as the public will not get to taste it anything that looks like natural yogurt would be acceptable.

Meat, Poultry & Game

Some vegetarians (and a few non vegetarians) get very upset at the sight of raw meat, especially if it looks too much like an animal – it may be best not to let the public see the corpse!

Veal

There is evidence that a significant number of calves were slaughtered at less than one year of age. Veal would therefore be authentic and would be tender. It is probably more expensive than beef and tends not to be as readily available. As a lot of people object to it on ethical grounds it is probably best to discuss the idea before buying this. NB some veal is free range.

Beef

There is another peak of slaughter at about two years of age. This corresponds with most modern beef, so the tender cuts of beef that do not have to be stewed, are acceptable. However, ask how it will be cooked and allow that it will be expensive. The cheaper cuts are best stewed. Allowing that the rest of the beef came from old dairy cows, unwanted bulls and draught oxen there would have been a fair bit of tough meat about. It will generally be best to buy stewing beef but not mince as the mincing machine had not been invented.

Sheep

Sheep and goats are difficult to separate in the archaeological record. One sheep will give about 10% of the quantity of meat that you can expect from a beef animal and as their remains are less common, than those of cattle they are less appropriate but still allowed. Both old and young animals were used, so tender cuts are allowed but the majority of the meat would have been more suited to stewing.

Pigs

In the early period these are not numerous but they gradually became more important by the Viking age. The early medieval pig was very different to the modern version in that it had a shorter back (fewer rashers of bacon) and longer legs. It was also much leaner. Pigs were probably eaten both as pork and bacon but allow that pork does not keep at all well, especially in warm weather and, until refrigeration, was not traditionally eaten during the summer. For shopping the leaner the better.

Sausages

For obvious reasons these do not turn up in the archaeological record but there is literary evidence from the Viking period and no reason why they would not have been available earlier. They will have been made from lengths of intestine filled with finely diced meat, fat and cereal. For shopping, and, if the public will see them, buy ones that are not too homogenous. Black pudding is attested from the Viking period and again was almost certainly available earlier.

Horse

Horses were eaten but these were prestige items and would not often have appeared on the table. As horse meat disappears in the Christian period it is likely that there were religious aspects to its consumption.

Poultry

Fowls, ducks and geese were all kept and eaten but the females would only be eaten when they had finished laying so, as with the other species, there would have been more tough ones about. In particular fowls would have been smaller. For shopping there will probably not be much choice unless you know someone who sells the right item.

Wild animals.

These do not generally turn up in supermarkets but some information may be of interest. Venison is appropriate but expensive. Hare is appropriate. Rabbits are almost certainly not appropriate but once dressed could be passed off as hare. Badgers are thought to have been eaten but are not an option for us. Most wild birds will have been eaten but would not have been easy to catch. Some partridges and quail are recent introductions and should not be bought if the public will see them. Pheasants are also introduced but remains have been found in pre Norman deposits, so they would seem possible for the later Saxon period and may be for the 5th and 6th centuries.

Fats

Lard, dripping, suet and butter would have been available. The suet would have come as a lump and would then have to be chopped very finely. It ought to be possible to get this from any good butcher, especially if you ask for it in advance. In the case of the lard, dripping and butter the problem for us is the packaging – think how to store these and what they can be put into, if the public may see them. In the case of the suet there are only two options; do it properly or make sure that the public do not see the modern stuff.

Fish

A wide range of fish were eaten, but only a few were used in large quantities. The types of fish that were eaten seem to depend on the location, with coastal sites having mainly sea fish while inland ones are mainly fresh water species although some sea fish were traded inland. Perch and pike are known from West Stow. Other fresh water species eaten include carp, Salmon and especially eel. Sea fish seem to have been mainly the inshore species such as flat fish and whiting but herring were important. Deep sea fish such as cod became important from the 8th century onwards. It is likely that some of the inland finds of sea fish were salted, dried or smoked.

The biggest problem with buying fish is that it is about the worst option in terms of keeping. For shopping we should use fish without breadcrumbs or batter and of native species. The ones most likely to be available from a supermarket are plaice, cod, salmon and trout. The trout will probably be the wrong species but most of the public will not realise. Kippers would probably also be authentic. Better still get the right type and bring them ready frozen and in their own cool box.

Shell fish

These are sea species but they can be transported in barrels of sea water. Oysters, crabs, mussels, winkles, cockles and lobsters were eaten but most of these are difficult to get hold of now. Shrimps and prawns and crab must have been available but the evidence has probably not survived. Shrimps and prawns are available from supermarkets, at reasonable prices, but may only have been available to coastal settlements.

Eggs

The poultry of the period were similar in size to bantams. As such their eggs will have been smaller than the modern supermarket egg and would not have had lions on them (or “organic”). If you want large eggs there is no reason for not having goose eggs. Eggs will also have been seasonal. The cheapest compromise is to buy small supermarket eggs and keep them the right way up, alternatively use privately purchased free range eggs. Quail are a later import so quail eggs are off, unless they can be passed off as wild bird eggs, but these would also have been very seasonal.

Foods of insect origin

Honey

Honey was the main sweetener of the period. The main problem with honey is the container; either keep it out of sight or transfer it to a pottery container. If talking to the public bear in mind that this stuff is valuable – the rich and powerful will want most of it as tax so that they can convert it to mead.

Foods of plant origin.

Cereals

Some cereals and cereal products are available from supermarkets. However, others are generally only available from health food shops and in any case their products are often closer to what would have been available in the Anglo Saxon period.

Wheat

The primary use of wheat is to grind for flour, which is then used for bread making. In Anglo Saxon England at least four types of wheat are attested, for the period between the fifth and the eighth centuries. Spelt and emmer seem to have gone out of favour during this time, probably because of the fact that they have a hard outer coat, which has to be removed before use for culinary purposes. The most important was bread wheat.

If the intention is to produce flour on site buy ordinary wheat. The flour produced by this process would be relatively coarse and will be wholemeal. White flour did exist and may have been made by putting the wholemeal flour through a horse hair sieve or through loosely woven cloth. The literature suggests that white bread was a luxury, so it seems unlikely that sieving was normal. If buying flour, the ideal would be to buy stone ground plain wholemeal flour but check first to see if the cook and the eaters will accept this. Because of the effort of grinding, it they would probably have eaten more porridge type dishes and less bread than we do although the later Anglo-Saxon literature puts great emphasis on the importance of bread. If anyone wants to make frumenty it is best to buy cracked wheat.

Rye

This crop is tolerant of relatively infertile and drought prone soils. Because of the sandy nature of the soil around West Stow this is an appropriate cereal, which was definitely grown in the period. Like wheat, it can be used for bread making but the grain would not be of much use to us. Having some rye bread would almost certainly be authentic and would add variety but is more expensive than most wheaten bread. On the other hand it will keep better.

Barley

Like rye, this crop is more tolerant of poor fertility than is wheat. When used for bread making the result is heavy, although the flavour is pleasant. One problem is that most barley has a hard outer coating which has to be removed before use for cooking. Probably the main use was in brewing, in which case the outer coating does not need to be removed. If pearl barley is required for stews or soups, this would be entirely reasonable but would probably still have been brown rather than white. Again the stuff stocked by the health food shop will be right.

Oats

Oats are particularly useful in areas with a high rainfall. As such this is not the cereal of first choice for West Stow. However oats can be useful as a culinary item (oat cakes, porridge and various oatmeal dishes). Porridge oats would be difficult to produce with authentic equipment and oatmeal would not only be more useful but safe for the public to see. This is available as fine, medium and coarse – ask the cook what they want.

Other cereals

Millet is not really attested from Britain, so should be avoided. Maize is not authentic. Rice does not grow in Britain and is not known to have been available. Bulgar wheat is not a cereal and should not be used.

Bread

Yeast would have been available from brewing and bread can be made from various forms of sourdough, in which case a little of the dough is cultured until required for the next baking. Literary evidence suggests that bread was an important part of the diet and culture. The loaves will have been less well risen than is the case for the modern versions. In addition they will not have been made in tins! Buy brown/wholemeal loaves of a natural shape. This type of loaf is often decorated with seeds, many of which are unsuitable for our purposes. Sesame seeds are from India so not appropriate. Poppy and sunflower seeds are now available from France; even if they were available in the 5th and 6th centuries I doubt if they would often have found their way to a rural village in East Anglia so they should be avoided.

Vegetables

Before modern plant breeding led to the development of uniformly cropping vegetables there was much less distinction between wild and garden plants. Several plants, which we regard as weeds, were eaten, notably fat hen, charlock, good king henry and dandelion. There is literary evidence that nettles were eaten in times of famine. However, potatoes, tomatoes and sweet corn all originate in the Americas and would not have been found in Europe, at this time.

Peas and beans

As well as being used as green vegetables, large quantities of these would have been grown to be harvested and dried for use during the winter. Peas, broad beans and field beans are acceptable. Runner beans, baked beans and soya beans all come from America and so would not have been available. Chick peas and lentils are Asian and are unlikely to have been available either.

Onions

Early Welsh laws describe a garden as a place where leeks and cabbages are grown. Onions and leeks were available, but choose smaller ones when buying them. Shallots may not have been grown, but are good substitutes for similar plants like Welsh onion. Onions can be stored for a couple of years so there is no problem with seasonality. Leeks would only be available from about August to the middle of April.

Cabbage

This was more open and green. Buy spring cabbage or curly kale. Purple sprouting broccoli is possibly a later import but it does look similar to many cabbage family plants at the going to flower stage so we could get away with it. Dense red or white cabbage, callabrese and cauliflower are all too highly developed by modern plant breeding.

Root vegetables

Carrots were either white or purple and much more uneven in shape prior to the Victorian period. However, as these are not easy to obtain, orange ones are acceptable. Parsnips and turnips were also grown. Swedes date from about the 15th Century, but can be used as a compromise; as they are easier to find in shops than are turnips. To clarify which is which the turnips are relatively small and mainly white while Swedes can be more than six inches in diameter, darker skinned and are light yellow when cut. Root vegetables would be available from about July onwards and can be stored in dry sand so would probably last until April.

Red and white radish is more appropriate than symmetrical uniformly red ones. I suspect that these would not keep for long so summer and autumn only.

Beetroot were probably not uniform red either and evidence suggests that the Anglo Saxons ate only the leaves!

Scorzonera and skirrett were also eaten but you are unlikely to find these in the local supermarket.

Other leaf vegetables

Lettuce, celery, chicory, sorrel, sea kale, spinach, watercress and samphire are all attested in literature. Chard is also likely. Loose, open lettuce would be the best buy, and celery was probably not blanched, so the greener the leaf stems the better.

Fruit

As with the vegetables fruit would have been smaller, less uniform in size and shape and more seasonal. The chances are that it would have shown more evidence of pests as well!

Apples and pears

Apples were widely grown and there is later Anglo-Saxon, literary, evidence for an orchard and knowledge of pruning and grafting the trees. Several different varieties of apples were known. They would probably have been smaller and less regular than modern apples. Be careful to remove the little plastic labels. Crab apples were also used and four have been found along with an onion in a bowl in a late 7th Century burial. Pears were also grown. In this country they would probably have been the harder green ones rather than the squishy yellow varieties. Apples can be stored over

winter if protected from frost but kept cool. This year some of our home grown ones lasted until May although the wastage was significant by then.

Peaches

There is 10th century evidence for peaches being eaten. They were unlikely to have been widely available, especially in the 5th and 6th centuries. There is mention of peach stones in literature. However, there does not appear to be any evidence for apricots.

Plums

A 10th Century herbal mentions garden plums, grafted on to sloe rootstocks. Plum family fruits would be very seasonal. Sloes (which are very bitter) and bullaces (a cross between a plum and a sloe) were also known. Greengages and damsons do not get mentioned in the literature, but both probably look very like the plums which were grown, and are more suitable than big Spanish plums.

Cherries

A pre Conquest document says that, along with apples, pears and plums, cherries were widely grown. Wild cherries are native and cherry stones are frequently found in large numbers in excavations of rubbish pits. They are, therefore, acceptable but would be a seasonal fruit.

Grapes

There is both literary evidence and finds of grape pips to indicate that grapes were available in this country. Alternatively they could have originated from imported currants. However, cultivation of grapes seems to be associated with monasteries and most of the grapes would be used to make wine. Grapes do not grow particularly well in our climate, so either imported or locally grown they would have been a luxury item and not really appropriate to a rural village of this period.

Berry fruits

There is evidence that strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and bilberries were all available. These would all have been very seasonal. Strawberries would have been much more like the tiny wild fruit, and so buy the smallest ones you can find. Bilberries are much smaller than American blueberries. Black currant, red currant and probably gooseberry are all native plants. Wild gooseberries are smaller than cherries. Rowan is another native plant, the fruit of which was probably eaten.

Other fruits

There is some evidence that small quantities of dates and figs were imported. However, in literary references they are rarely referred to, except in bible stories. This suggests that they were only available to the very wealthy. Quinces, medlars and mulberries were also known, but these are not usually available in the shops. Bananas are definitely off, as they are a modern hybrid of a tropical fruit. Oranges were not available at that time, although lemons were grown in southern areas of Europe. Again they are not likely to turn up except in the homes of the very wealthy.

Nuts

The most important nut seems to have been the hazel nut. Walnuts and Sweet Chestnuts were probably introduced by the Romans and would have been available but sweet chestnuts seldom produce useful nuts in Britain.

Fungi

There is relatively little evidence for fungi but later Anglo-Saxon literary evidence supports the consumption of mushrooms and truffles. Mushrooms will have been seasonal but are now cheap and keep moderately well. The large, open, field mushrooms would be very appropriate but closed cup ones would do. Fungi are very seasonal (July – October).

Herbs and spices

Salt

During the later Anglo Saxon period, rock salt was exploited at places such as Droitwich but for West Stow and most areas on the east side of England the salt would probably have been sea salt. It would probably have been less white than modern sea salt, due to the production methods. For shopping coarse sea salt would be good and we would not need much.

Herbs

A number of herbs were used by the Anglo Saxons, however, it is often unclear whether they were used as flavourings or for medicinal purposes. Several of those listed have unpleasant side effects. Be very cautious if picking wild ingredients as they may be poisonous, or may have been sprayed, or be contaminated by traffic fumes. It is unlikely that anything which could not be grown locally or found growing wild was readily available. The following can be bought in the supermarket and are appropriate as either fresh or dried herbs: bay, chamomile, chive, coriander, cumin, dill, fennel, fenugreek, marjoram, mint, oregano, parsley, rocket, rosemary, sage, tarragon and thyme. If you can get angelica (not candied), chervil, lovage, rue, or summer savory, these can also be used. Of these mint, parsley, chervil and dill were the most common. Basil would not be available.

Spices

These are not local products and many are imported from the Far East. Literary references to the Anglo Saxons being renowned for highly spiced food relate to the later Anglo Saxon period and even then do not necessarily imply oriental spices. Even if they did find their way into England during the 5th and 6th centuries, they would have been brought in as diplomatic gifts and only the rich and important would have encountered them. Black pepper (rare), juniper berries, celery seed, garlic, horse-radish? and mustard are probably acceptable. Turmeric would not have been available.

Preserved foods

Pickles

We have no evidence for pickles. As the main ingredients are sugar and vinegar there would have been some problems with them but sour wine and honey could have been used as substitutes. However the honey would have been expensive. If fruit is boiled

down, the natural fruit sugars are concentrated and some degree of preservation is possible, so this is something that we may be able to get away with providing it does not obviously contain inappropriate ingredients. Apple chutney with mint would be reasonable but bright orange/red tomato chutney would not.

Raising agents

Yeast was available but there is nothing to suggest that baking powder was. Baking powder should not be visible but could be used for purposes where it would be possible to do the job with yeast. Fine white wood ash can be used as a natural form of raising agent and this is another possibility but I do not expect it to be as good. Mixtures of copper, arsenic and various organic poisons are used as wood preservatives so do not try this unless you are very sure of the source of the wood ash.

Beverages

Water

As wells are even found close to rivers it seems that considerable effort was made to get clean water. The trouble is that clean appears to have been minimising the sediment, which is not always the same thing as free from pathogens!

Milk

See under dairy products.

Fruit juices

Apple juice would be possible but would not keep until converted into cider etc.

Cordials and infusions

If the herbals are to be believed cordials and infusions made from various plants were used in the later Anglo-Saxon period but it is an open question to what extent they were only used in a medicinal role. Tea may be safe providing that we do not admit to what it is. The same may be true of instant coffee but in the case of the real stuff the smell would give the game away.

Wine

Only for the rich!

Ale

This seems to have been the major drink. The water used in making it is boiled and therefore less likely to contain pathogens. Much of what was drunk routinely was probably weak but some stronger ale would have been brewed. Even then ale would have been less alcoholic than cider, wine or mead. The experts do not seem to be able to agree about the date at which hops were introduced to brewing but some sort of flavouring agent was probably used. Our main problem is what to use as an authentic container as glass bottles are off and the pottery of the period was not all that impervious.

Cider

As with ale the main problem is the container.

Mead

Because the main raw material is honey which would have been in very limited supply this would have been a drink for the rich or for special occasions. Yet again the problem is the container.

This summary incorporates considerable constructive criticism from Fiona Davies, Caroline Buckley and Russell Scott. However, Hannah and I have had to make up our own minds what to include so blame us if it is wrong.

Robert & Hannah Wilkinson.