Keywords
Food fishes in medieval England; English history; household accounts

Abstract
The accounts of a fifteenth-century English bishop give details of the fish eaten in his Wiltshire household on meatless days, comprising twenty-five species of fish, and seven types of crustaceans and gastropods. This reflects the advances in ship building and fishing methods. The servants were fed imported smoked and pickled North Sea herring, and salted and dried Icelandic cod, supplied by the Hanseatic league of German ports. The bishop, his guests and household officials ate a variety of fresh marine and freshwater species, caught in the English Channel and Severn estuary and in local rivers. The daily fish ration was 0.5-1 kg and the total annual cost of the fish was nearly 5% of the bishop's income.

Zusammenfassung

Résumé
Les archives d'un évêché anglais du XVe siècle fournissent des détails sur la consommation de poissons dans une maisonnée du Wiltshire pendant les jours où la viande était interdite. On recense vingt-cinq espèces de poissons et sept sortes de crustacés et mollusques, reflet des progrès accomplis dans la construction navale et les techniques de pêche. Les domestiques étaient nourris de harengs fumés ou marinés, importés de la Mer du Nord, et de morue d'Islande salée et séchée fournie par la ligue hanséatique des ports allemands. L'évêque, ses hôtes et ses employés se nourrissaient d'une grande variété de poissons marins et d'eau douce capturés dans la Manche, l'estuaire de la Severn et les rivières locales. La ration journalière de poissons varie de un demi à un kg et le coût total annuel représente près de 5% du revenu de l'évêque.

Introduction
In medieval times, the whole of Christendom in Western Europe was directed by the Church to refrain from eating meat at least once a week. For poor people this was easy, since their diet was weighted towards cereals and vegetables. Those who were wealthy enough to eat meat daily, "fasted" on Fridays by eating fish instead. Clerical households regularly consumed a variety of fish three times a week, as well as on days of special religious significance and on every one of the forty days of Lent.

This paper examines the consumption of fish in the household of Richard Metford, Bishop of Salisbury in Wiltshire, England (Fig. 1), as recorded in the diet accounts of his household over a period from October 1406 to May 1407. They are perhaps the longest and most detailed set of household accounts for a...
medieval English episcopal household of this period that have survived the accidents of time.

Materials and methods

The accounts, written in Latin on both sides of eighty large paper folios, are preserved in the British Library as MS Harley 3755. The original text in Gothic script was the work of several clerks in the bishop’s household, who daily recorded all the resources used. These included bread, ale, wine, candles and all the ingredients of the two daily meals, as well as hay and oats for the horses. Each folio was headed with the place of residence of the bishop, which for most of the period covered by the accounts was a large residence at Potteme, a village on one of the episcopal manors in central Wiltshire (Fig. 1). The number of portions of food served during the day was noted in the margin, together with the names of important guests, and the number of servants accompanying them, and other lesser visitors. At the end of each day’s entry there was a summary of expenditure, and a notation showing that it had been checked later by an accountant.

From Woolgar’s edition of the manuscript in the original Latin (Woolgar, 1992) it has been possible to construct a series of data bases for the various types of food and drink, and for the number of portions served each day. From the latter the number of persons dining each day could be deduced, how many of them were gentlefolk (the bishop, his important guests and the senior members of his staff) and how many were servants, and the size of the resident household.

In deciding the identity of the fishes recorded by the kitchen clerk, the English name was obtained from Woolgar’s 1992 glossary, and the scientific names from Wheeler (1969) with one exception. If the common name referred to more than one species, the one first identified by Linnaeus in 1758 was chosen, as being the kind most commonly caught at that period.
The identification of 'bream' is uncertain. The freshwater bronze bream (Abramis brama) was commonly bred in fish-ponds in medieval times, but in the accounts 'breme' was usually mentioned in association with marine gurnard; it was more probably sea-bream (Spondyliosoma canthus).

Estimating the average weight of the fishes was problematic. The smaller boats and gear of the period precluded fishing in very deep water, so that fish such as cod and haddock might be smaller than present-day catches. On the other hand, the intensity of fishing was relatively low compared to modern times, so that some fish such as herring and inshore species might be appreciably larger. Tentative weights were assigned, using data derived from Wheeler, 1969 and Wheeler, 1985 (Table I).

**Results**

The following twenty-six species of freshwater and marine fish and seven types of crustaceans and gastropods were regularly mentioned in the accounts.

**Marine**

- **Bass** *Dicentrarchus labrax* (Linnaeus, 1758). Marine, but likes coasts, and is attracted to brackish water. Common in mouths of estuaries, creeks, and even well up rivers in summer. Also off sandy and shingle beaches in S. and W. coasts of British Is. In winter, it is scattered in rough weather. Caught on lines and in trawls.

- **Bream** (sea bream) *Spondyliosoma canthus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Common on west coast of Britain. Especially plentiful on rocky reefs in summer.

- **Cod** *Gadus morhua* Linnaeus, 1758. Distribution N. Atlantic and Baltic Sea, also in the North Sea and coasts of British Is. Shoals of cod are often found at c. 30 m depth, but may rise. Caught on lines and trawls. ‘Stokfish’ are cod caught off Iceland and dried in the Arctic wind.

- **Conger eel** *Conger conger* (Linnaeus, 1758). Offshore, between tide marks on rocky shores and rough ground. In shallow water it is active only by night, hides in crevices by day. Migrates in mid-summer to warmer deep water to spawn. Off and on coasts of south and west of British Is.

- **Dover Sole** *Solea solea* (Linnaeus, 1758). Flatfish, found off coasts of British Is. It likes fine sand and estuarine muds in summer, migrates offshore in winter. It lies partly concealed in mud during the day, feeds actively at night on bottom. Mostly trawled.

- **Flounder** *Platichthys flesus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Coastal, or found well up estuaries in fairly fresh water, especially in summer. May almost hibernate in winter.

- **Gurnard** *Eutrigla gurnardus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Abundant but “bony”. Found on the shoreline to mid-depth, most common in 20-40m. All round the British Is., migrates shoreward in summer to sandy bays and estuaries, often very shallow. Caught in nets.

- **Haddock** *Melanogrammus aeglefinus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Common off the west coast but less so in the English Channel. Feeds on the bottom at mid-depth (40m+), does not come right inshore. Mostly trawled, but some are caught on lines.

- **Hake** *Merluccius merluccius* (Linnaeus, 1758). Stays in deep water in winter and spring, but migrates into shallower water in summer. Off coasts of British Is., eats smaller fish and squids. Fished on lines.

- **Herring** *Clupea harengus* Linnaeus, 1758. Originally extremely common, mainly from the North Sea but also off the English coast. Pelagic, in shoals which are caught in nets. May come inshore after food which it follows.

- **Huss (Nurse hound, dogfish)** *Scyliorhinus stellaris* (Linnaeus, 1758). Rocky bays and off-shore, south and west of British Is. in the algal zone. Another species, (*S. caniculus*) is very common, comes inshore on bottom. This shark is easily caught on lines.

- **Mackerel** *Scomber scombrus* Linnaeus, 1758. Common off the English coast in summer and autumn, near the surface in enormous shoals. Caught in nets and on lines.

- **Merling** *Merlangius merlangus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Whiting. Extremely common in shallow water and close inshore in sandy bays, it can be caught in a few feet of water with nets and lines.

- **Mullet** probably *Chelon labrosus* (Risso, 1827) as this appears to be the most common mullet species in English waters. Estuarine and inshore, common especially in spring and summer. Hibernates in winter. Caught with nets.

- **Plaice** *Pleuronectes platessa* Linnaeus, 1758. Flat fish, very abundant on the coastal shelf, near coasts in c. 20-40m, but not far into estuaries. Younger ones live closer inshore. Taken in nets and on lines.


- **Skate** (Thornback ray) *Raja clavata* Linnaeus, 1758. The most common British species of ray, dorsally covered with coarse prickles. On a variety of bottom, migrates inshore in winter.

- **Turbot** *Scophthalmus maximus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Large flat fish, found on British coasts, especially the North Sea, close inshore but not in estuaries. Sandy and gravel bottoms.

**Fresh Water**

- **Eel** probably *Anguilla anguilla* (Linnaeus, 1758). Common in most rivers and estuaries. Active at night, hides in mud or weed by day. Migrates to the sea when mature to spawn. Caught on line and in nets and traps.

- **Grayling** *Thymallus thymallus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Lives in clear swift streams in shoals, but in spring...
pairs up to spawn. Omnivorous, and is caught on lines.

**Perch** *Perca fluviatilis* Linnaeus, 1758. Common in ponds, lakes and slow streams. Hides against stones, tree roots, reeds, etc. Caught on lines with worms.

**Pike** *Esox lucius* Linnaeus, 1758. A large carnivorous fish of rivers, streams and lakes. Small ones can be caught with a hand net. The pike hides until a fish swims past, then pounces. Caught on lines with live bait.

**Roach** *Rutilus rutilus* (Linnaeus, 1758). Lives in all types of fresh water, large lakes to slow rivers and weedy marshes. Best for eating in summer and autumn. Caught on lines and in nets. This fish may be confused with **rudd**, *Scardinius erythrophthalmus* (Linnaeus, 1758), another common freshwater fish which may be distinguished from the roach by its more golden tint and the position of its dorsal fin. The two species are known to interbreed when living together.

**Salmon** *Salmo salar* Linnaeus, 1758. Young are found in freshwater, migrate to the sea to develop and remounts the same river when mature. Formerly taken in the Thames and other estuaries such as the Severn.

**Trout** *Salmo trutta* Linnaeus, 1758. Lives in rivers and lakes. The fish is small in the upper reaches, where the water is well oxygenated and usually colder. Grows bigger in turbid, warmer lakes and rivers. Caught by line fishing and fixed nets.

**Lobsters, crabs, shrimps, oysters, mussels, whelks and cockles were also eaten.**

Herring, cod, conger eel and salmon were preserved by salting, smoking or drying. The average weight of preserved fish, marine and freshwater fish eaten weekly varied seasonally. The number of diners also varied daily, with very large numbers of people present at the Christmas-tide feasts, when up to 100 tenants were entertained. A servant's daily ration was one herring or a portion of salt cod or salmon, weighing about 0.5 kg. The cost of the various types of fish (Table I) was given in units of pennies and half-pennies.

**Discussion**

The variety and numbers of marine fish eaten in the household (Figs. 2 and 3) reflect both the advances in ship design (facilitating fishing in off-shore waters), and the extensive influence on trade of the Hanseatic League of North German and Baltic towns (Postan, 1951). By the early fourteenth century the cog, a small ship of about 150 tons displacement, was the main carrier for the Hanseatic trade, providing relatively low cost transport. Herring caught in the Baltic Sea and packed in brine (white herring) at Scania, Sweden, were exported by the Hanse to western Europe and London. The growth of the herring trade led to competition between the Hanse and England. Fleets from ports such as Newcastle, Grimsby and Great Yarmouth fished the shallow North Sea for herring in

**Table I.** Average weights and prices of the fish eaten by the Bishop of Salisbury's household and guests. The prices of white and red varieties of herring are derived from the price per cade, a barrel containing 600 fish. A firkin was a small barrel of c. 3.7 dl capacity. ? shows that no separate price was recorded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marine</th>
<th>Littoral</th>
<th>Freshwater</th>
<th>Preserved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Kgs</td>
<td>Price each</td>
<td>Name, price per 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>3¼d.</td>
<td>Cockles ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bream</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3 ½d.</td>
<td>Crab 6d.each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cod</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Lobster 5d.each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conger eel</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35d.</td>
<td>Mussels 3d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dover sole</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>Oysters 2d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flounder</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>Shrimp ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gurnard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2d.</td>
<td>Whelks 2 ½d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haddock</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hake</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herring</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>24d./100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huss (dogfish)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mackeral</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merling</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>½d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullet</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 ½d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 ½d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red gurnard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skate</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7 ¼d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turbot</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiting</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
large quantities (Unger, 1980). Agents in London bought barrels of white herring and smoked red herring for the bishop’s household. They were sufficiently cheap to form the main part of the fish for the servants. Sturgeon was another salted fish from the major northern European rivers, which the Hanse organisation exported to London; in the bishop’s household small pieces were served to the gentlefolk as a delicacy on special occasions.

During the fourteenth century, England imported much cod (‘salt fish’) from Norway, and also fished for it themselves out of Cromer and Blakeney on the Norfolk coast. By the end of the century the dominance of the Icelandic codfish trade by the Wendish group of the Hanse, raised prices. The English defied the Hanseatic monopoly and traded direct with Iceland for the freeze-dried cod called stokfish (Carus Wilson, 1951, p. 161). They could be stored for several years, but when used had to be beaten with a mallet for a long time to soften it. Conger eels were usually eaten salted, but these would have been caught locally, probably in the Severn estuary.

Although the greater part of the marine fish consumed was already preserved in some fashion, fresh marine fish was purchased regularly and transported rapidly by pack horse. The bishop’s household favoured the market at Warminster for purchases of fresh fish, but occasionally sent to Devizes or Salisbury. These fish were caught in the estuaries of the Severn River or of the Test River (now Southampton Water) and off the coast. Fish could be transported quite long distances packed in wet grass or rushes, especially in cold weather (Stean, 1988).

The most common fresh sea fishes purchased by the household (Fig. 3) were merling, gurnard, skate and whiting. When plentiful and cheap, some formed part of the servants’ meals. Fresh herrings, mackerel and conger eel also figured on the menu at Potterne. Smaller purchases of the more desirable fishes were reserved for the gentlefolk. Porpoise (then categorised as a fish) was served on just one occasion at the beginning of Lent. It was probably a Harbour Porpoise (Phocoena phocoena), which was relatively common within protected anchorages such as Bristol, then a small port not far from the mouth of the River Avon which flows into the Severn estuary. Archaeological evidence shows that fish traps set in the Severn Estuary were used to catch skate, gurnard, sea bream, salmon, mullet and plaice (Stean & Foreman, 1988, p. 118), species which were all mentioned in the accounts. Conger eel is a shallow water marine species, whose large size is reflected in the high price paid for them.

Lobsters and crabs were delicacies bought a few at a time, and reserved for the high table. Shellfish such as oysters, whelks, mussels and cockles were bought...
in very large numbers for only a few pence per hundred. This allowed the inclusion of shellfish in the dishes for the servants. The price per hundred probably reflected the low cost of gathering them from the shore, as opposed to the use of boats and nets or rods in fishing at sea, together with the danger involved. Women and children were probably set the relatively light work of chipping or pulling them from the rocks, or digging in the sand (cockles). Preliminary excavations at Potterne revealed large quantities of oyster shells (McGlashan & Sandell, 1974).

Carefully constructed manorial and monastic fishponds were common by the thirteenth century, both for breeding young fish and for harvesting mature fish. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the king made gifts of breeding pairs of breams from ponds on royal manors (Stean, 1988). However, by Metford’s time fish breeding on the bishop’s manors had ceased: only roach was recorded ‘from stock’. The Abbey at Sherborne (another of his manors) still had fish-ponds containing pike and eels which were sent to Potterne, and trout could be fished with rod and line from some local streams. Freshwater species were caught in fish-weirs in rivers, where eels were particularly numerous. These also abounded in natural ponds and millponds, and the ‘sticks of small eels’ bought cheaply at Potterne were probably small freshwater eels caught in traps in the local mill ponds. Eel-traps made from wicker-work baskets woven with a plug at the end for emptying the catch, and with a non-return valve pointing towards it were used in the tidal reaches of the Lower Severn river (Stean & Foreman, 1988). Just such a trap was illustrated in the Luttrell Psalter (Fig. 4), an illuminated devotional book made for a wealthy country gentleman (Backhouse, 1989).

Grayling, pike, roach, salmon and trout were the most commonly purchased types of freshwater fish. These were high-status foods, because of the large expense of constructing and maintaining fishponds (Woolgar, 1999). Freshwater fish, other than roach were obtained from market. Pike provided the greatest weight of freshwater fish consumed, eels and roach were the most numerous.

The proportions of preserved, marine and freshwater fish eaten by the household varied seasonally (Fig. 2). The high totals of February and March reflected the abstinence from meat during Lent. Consumption of fresh marine fish decreased during the autumn and winter as fishing was increasingly discouraged by bad weather. However, the low fish consumption in January was a reflection of the big Yuletide feasts of meat. Only part of May is represented, before the household moved to Salisbury for the bishop’s funeral.

Some of the variation was due to the varying number of persons present. On ‘fast’ days when fish was served (Fig. 5) the number of resident gentlefolk was commonly between three and ten, exceeding ten on only seven occasions. Guests of gentle status seldom exceeded six. The servants were commonly fewer than on ‘meat’ days, seldom were more than eighty, and commonly ranged between thirty and seventy.
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Fig. 4. Eel traps set in a mill pond, with an eel entering one of them. The traps, made of wicker-work, were tethered to a stake and weighted to keep them on the bottom. From the *Luttrell Psalter*, by courtesy of the British Library.

Fig. 5. The attendance at meals in the bishop's residence at Potterne. The gentlefolk included the bishop's principal household officers and important guests, while those given servants' portions included household servants, visitors' attendants and less important guests such as tradesmen and pilgrims.
The fact that fewer servants worked on fast days might be due to the shorter cooking time of fish than meat and the consequent smaller consumption of firewood. Cooking on open fires consumed enormous quantities of wood, which had to be carried to the kitchen from a barn.

If we assume that the preserved fish was fed to the servants, the visitors’ men and the ‘other’ visitors, the daily ration of fish for these persons varied between 0.5 kg and 1 kg. The lower figure might have been supplemented by shellfish, which were not included in the calculations. On days when more than this amount of preserved fish was consumed, some of it was presumably included in a dish for the gentlefolk.

In the accounts the prices for whole fish (Table I) are in the currency units of the time, commonly as pennies, halfpennies and farthings (e.g. 3½d.), occasionally in shillings. It is not possible to give a present-day equivalent, but for comparison the bishop’s head cook was paid 2d. for a twelve-hour day, and the falconer (the highest paid servant) had 4d., which included an allowance for food. A skilled carpenter would earn 4d. per day (Farmer, 1991, p. 517). Unskilled servants in the household worked for their food alone, which was considerably better than the average peasant diet.

The total cost of shellfish, marine fish excluding whiting, and freshwater fish amounted to £25 12s. 4½d. The fish eaten by the bishop’s gentle visitors cost him £15 10s. 5d. of this sum, while the salt fish eaten by their servants cost him £7 0s. 2.½d. The ‘other’ visitors’ fish meals cost £9. 12s.3d. The bishop’s expenses for those who enjoyed his hospitality on days when fish was eaten were at least £32 2s.10.5d. during the time covered by the accounts. That is equivalent to about £52 per year, or about 5 % of the bishop’s annual income. This sum does not cover the cost of bread, a major item; however the wheat was supplied by the estate administration. Neither does it include the costs of wine, ale or ingredients such as cheese, milk, spices (extremely expensive) or the various condiments such as verjuice and mustard. The visitors’ horses and dogs had to be fed too. When consideration is given to the even higher expenses of hospitality on days when meat and poultry were eaten, it can be appreciated that Richard Metford conformed to the medieval ideal of a generous noble host.

Acknowledgements

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References


For all its brevity, this account is a tantalizing glimpse into a craft which, considering its importance to daily life in medieval northern Europe, has attracted remarkably little systematic attention from scholars, and most of that attention has focused specifically on the role of alewives rather than the brewing industry as a whole. Despite the failure of her brewery, I would like to consider Margery Kempe as a typical commercial brewer at the beginning of the fifteenth century and place the hints she gives us into a wider context of how medieval English breweries functioned. I want to ask Fish consumption by people was the lowest throughout the 25 years period and dropped from an average weekly consumption of 60 grammes in 1979 to 40 grammes in 2004. In contrast, the consumption of chicken grew over the 25 years period and people ate 150 grams of chicken on a weekly basis in 1979 which increased up to 250 grammes in 2004. [Written by - Shalley Daniel].

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References: