What Farming Means to Devon: The Devonshire Association, President's Symposium

Devonshire Food and Cookery by Tom Jaine

Despite merrily downing the next plateful of snow peas from Guatemala, French beans from Mali, or kangaroo tails from the Murray River basin, a sense of belonging to a particular locality – and eating it – may still be something we wish to encourage.

Today, farmers consider themselves as part of an industry. The product of their labour is a commodity, traded on wider markets than the neighbouring town. The sale of their commodity converts it to cash, which they then use to purchase food. But we should not rush to judgement on this astonishingly complicated route to daily sustenance.

It is in a strange way life-affirming that a naval officer, spending his daily watch steering a hulk of metal by computer would rather, as his weekend activities bear witness, be face to face with the briny, bracing his mizzen mast, his visage tanned a rich mahogany by swirling winds and salty sea spray. No technician, then, but a true Lord Nelson, in love with his element. So, too, the modern farmer: scratch away beneath the surface of global prices and currency fluctuations and there beats a heart in tune with the seasons, whose holding may yield industrial quantities of milk, but who is a victim, not a creator of the cash nexus.

This transference of attention from crops to cash has been a long time coming. My own hamlet may have been rated as a quarter of a knight's fee in the 12th century, but that was rarely translated into 10 days' service on the walls of Totnes, much rather it was quickly converted to a monetary rent. It seems to me comparable to another great shift in the tide of human development, the adoption of settled agriculture after millennia as hunter-gatherers. While the domestication of livestock and the growing of food plants in orderly succession seems a great advance on the arrangements that were previously in force, when people hunted their food or wandered the forest floor gathering fruits, roots and other desirables, it can be argued with equal force that the change was not altogether a good thing. There was, for example, a greater dislocation of humans from the natural environment. Just as we wonder at modern city children who know nothing of the origin of their eggs, bread and butter, so the hunter-gatherer must have viewed with dismay the growing ignorance of the new-fangled farming societies of the bounties of the natural world. From a diet that drew on the benefits of scores of food plants, we now depend on just a handful of major crops. In other words, there were costs as well as benefits from social change. Prehistorians have noted that the skeletons of early farmers were much smaller than those of contemporary hunter-gatherers, and that they showed greater susceptibility to disease. However, the benefits of increased population, and the means to support more sophisticated political arrangements, were thought to outweigh these disadvantages.

So, too, with our conversion to the cash economy. We have witnessed a further reduction in the genetic wealth of our food resources. There has also been, so at least some people would argue, a decline in the nutritive value of our daily fare over and against that which prevailed in the days when we grew and consumed our own food. And there has been a further dislocation between humans and their food production. Food comes not from the fields, but from the supermarket. Food is something you buy, not something you grow. Daddy goes to work not for the next meal, but for money to buy the next meal. And as the food he consumes becomes ever more frequently a manufactured item, the dislocation is complete.

You may reasonably ask, What has this to do with Devon? Well, the county has been in the forefront of the commodification of agriculture in England. Think of the wool trade in the Middle Ages, or think of the development of the dairy industry in North Devon as it became the milk supplier to the United Dairies and Express Dairies forging new patterns of urban distribution in the late nineteenth century.

In that wonderful portrait by Jacqui Sarsby of Sweetstone, the last mixed farm in my own parish of Blackawton near Dartmouth, she notes some important statistics. In 1881 there were 857 cattle in the parish, 3356 sheep and 389 pigs. 450 acres of land was under wheat, 500 odd under

barley and a like amount put to root crops. A century later, there were 4000 cattle, 5250 sheep and 521 pigs, in other words more than double the stock; and the 450 acres of wheat had reduced to 12. The mixed holding, where the land was shared between the needs of humans and livestock, and was often little more than 50 acres in extent, had grown into a small industrial unit where the product was fuelled from outside sources and the operator's requirements were met entirely by cash.

The farmhouse described by Peter Brears in his catalogue of the Laycock collection in the Torquay Museum owes its form and structure to economic arrangements that viewed the land as producing a meal, not an income. Thus the two kitchens on one side of the central corridor were supported by a courtyard of outbuildings and service accommodation. There was a fuel store stuffed with peat and logs; then a cellar to hold the cider, beer, and home-distilled spirits and cordial waters to refresh and to heal; this was followed by the brew house where the ale was made, and the pound house where could be seen the apple press for cider making. At the back of the dwelling itself was the dairy (for butter and cream) and the cheese room, while the adjacent yard had homes for pigs, cows and calves. Reached by a small passage, there was a walled garden with fruit trees, herbs, bee skeps and well-tilled vegetable beds. This was a machine designed to keep body and soul together: that there was a cash surplus from, for example, cheese production, was perhaps a secondary consideration.

This farmhouse's offices may be compared to those of a property belonging to the Fortescue family of Castle Hill in the 16th century where an inventory bears witness to a larder for the salting and preservation of meat; a boulting-house where the bread dough was prepared and the flour was sifted for various baked goods (you never trusted this job to the miller, who might well carry away a goodly fraction of the gleanings); as well as a fish-house for the storage of all manner of salted and dried fish.

If you look further into the records of the Fortescues for the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (held at the Devon Record Office) you find plenty of evidence of both an independent food network that drew on the estates and the locality for its supplies, as well as a cash economy that enabled food to be gathered from further afield.

Before I touch upon this, I would draw your attention to the importance of technology in changing our relationship to our food supplies. There are two episodes from the history of the Fortescues that illustrate this. In 1645, during the English Civil War, Sir Edmund Fortescue was charged with revictualling Salcombe Castle. Among other things, he laid in hogsheads of salt beef, salted tongues, bacon and salt pork; oil; vinegar; dried peas; dried hake and dried whitings; biscuit; coarse oatmeal, '20 pots with sweetmeats, and a great box of all sorts of especially good dry preserves', 200 lemons, six hundredweight of tobacco, one hundredweight of raw milk cheese, 'six pecks (twelve gallons) of [undisclosed] fruit'; and butter. Enough no doubt to withstand a siege, but all either fresh and capable of long-keeping like the lemons, or salted, dried or pickled. Two hundred years later, another Fortescue was hunting for provisions. This time it was Lady Ebrington, who returned in 1859 for a quick visit to London from Madeira, where she was living on account of Lord Ebrington's poor health. A shopping-list survives. 'Newspaper arrangement, postage stamps, a Peerage for 1860 and new reviews' are her notes for the improvement of the mind; while 'mutton, hams, tongues, cheese, tea, caviare, truffles, turtle soup, partridge and truffle pâté, lampreys done in claret and either celery or onions, foie gras, reindeers' tongues, venison pasty, and macaroni' are her jottings *re* the table. Dried foods figure again, but the bulk of these items are of course canned, that great revolution in food conservation that took hold in the early 19th century – without which the British Empire would never have been built.

These episodes may illustrate changes in technology, but they also remind us that it was perhaps more enjoyable to be an invalid in Madeira than under siege in Salcombe. The range of Victorian preserves was breathtaking; the diet of the royalist soldiers must have been edging towards monotony. In our own day, of course, the technical underpinning to our diet has gone through further developments, particularly as a result of refrigeration and freezing.

The vision of self-sufficiency that often hovers above our view of the past is both absent and present in the Fortescue archive. Sometimes, what would have been enough for humble souls, would not suffice for the nobility, so an estate that in 1821 could supply from its own resources 11,224 pounds of mutton, beef and veal, 2,441 pounds of bacon and pork, as well as all the

poultry, still required the delivery of 3,000 pounds of butcher's meat. And that pursuit of luxury and variety – the reasons for which are perhaps implicit in that list of foods for Salcombe Castle – meant that at about the same time (1821) Castle Hill bought from the shelves of three Barnstaple grocers (Messrs Mackrell, Messrs Linnington, and Messrs Roberts) the following items: pipe macaroni, vermicelli, Carolina rice, Patna rice, pearl sago, tapioca, coconuts, patent cocoa, Turkey raisins, muscatel raisins, Jordan almonds, bitter almonds, capers, Souchong tea, Turkey figs, Faro figs, pickling vinegar, tarragon vinegar, elder vinegar, mushroom ketchup, Harvey's Sauce, shrimp sauce, superfine mustard, salad oil, salt lemons, lemon peel, isinglass, bicarbonate of soda, cream of tartar, as well as various chemicals used for preserving, baking and pickling. On top of this remarkable list, the grocers' staple trade was in sugar, fresh oranges and lemons, and spices. In 1821 the Castle Hill kitchen got through 17 pounds of nutmeg, 7 pounds of cinnamon, 8 pounds of mace, 4 pounds of cloves and 19 pounds of ginger (much the same, by the way, as their consumption in 1706). Over and above the Barnstaple tradesmen, the Fortescues procured goods via their agents in London and Exeter – for example marmalade came down from Hedges & Butler, preserved fruits from Fortnum and Mason and turtle soup from Gunter. The Exeter agent, between handling the bank manager and various lawyers, also went on the quay to buy fish as well as sending the best cheeses he could find. (While the estate continued to produce cream and butter, it seems to have stopped making cheese some time during the 18th century; – and by way of parenthesis, it could never make enough butter. In 1820 Castle Hill got through about 3 pints of cream per day and 5 pounds of butter. About a third of this last was bought in the district.)

None the less, the level of self sufficiency that was achievable on a country estate was quite remarkable. Much of the grain used for bread and cakes was grown on the home farm (but was sent out for milling). The exception, towards the middle of the 19th century, was a small amount of American flour bought in for cakes and biscuits. And the baking was often done at Castle Hill itself, where the great Victorian bread oven survives. In the 1840s a week's consumption might have been 44 pounds in the parlour, 48 pounds in the housekeeper's room, 56 pounds in the servants' hall, 24 pounds by the housemaids, 12 pounds in the laundry and just 4 pounds in the kitchen. The staff ate plenty – as too they drank – 2,000 gallons of beer were brewed at the house every year. (On that subject, there was a note made in 1851 that when the family was in their London house not more than three shillings worth of beer should be consumed by the servants during dinner parties upstairs.)

The London season left its own mark on the records. When the family was there, regular shipments of game, cream and butter came up by coach from Castle Hill. Of course, greenstuffs had too short a shelf-life for travel, so the household relied on tradesmen for garden produce. The London greengrocer's account for the 1814 season included chervil, tarragon, sorrel, mackerel herbs, parsley, thyme, mint, pennyroyal, corn salad and other saladings, endives, watercress, spinach, sea kale, asparagus, globe artichokes, French beans, cucumbers, broccoli, potatoes, shallots, onions, parsnips, beetroot, and carrots. Back in Devon, all this would have come from his Lordship's garden. When he was away in town, he once wrote to the steward that the crops had better be given away to neighbours or consumed by the relicts of the household and, after that, that the gardener should sell on the open market.

The garden account of the Courtenay family at Powderham has also survived, this one for the year 1819. When there was no-one at home, the surplus was sold to Exeter market traders or the gardener would make a little cash income from promiscuous visitors and passers-by who would treat the garden much as we stop at a roadside booth today in the strawberry season.

The gardens of Devon have long been famous for their fecundity. The peach trees at Castle Hill were famous in the 18th century; pineapples were almost two a penny; at Bicton the Rolle family interspersed their pineapples with ginger plants, yielding 10 or 12 pounds yearly; Dunster Castle sported a large lemon tree and a pomegranate tree; Luscombe Castle had a fruiting olive tree as well as lemons, citrons and limes; even the King's Arms at Kingsbridge had a lemon tree that supplied fruit enough for the use of the inn.

While the daily requirements of the family would be met from the farm and garden, or the moorland nearby that yielded a plethora of game (and that's not including the rabbits – one Hartland resident recalls trapping and netting five tons of rabbit each week in the early years of the 20th century; and Castle Hill caught 1,372 rabbits in the 1880-81 season) the staff itself was

constantly at work to confect the month-by-month supplies, the essential footings of a daily diet. Thus the stillroom was making strong waters of lettuce, endive, costmary, sorrel, coltsfoot, plantain, burnett, wormwood and calaminth, and ointments were made, using butter as their vehicle. More pleasure was had from the orange brandy and cherry brandy that was another production. In the kitchen, jams were piling up. In 1856 they bought 180 jam pots, 329 pounds of preserving sugar and 2 gallons of preserving brandy. Meanwhile, laver, samphire and gherkins were pickled.

These are but notes from a foodie's scrapbook. As I gather them together, I observe small Devon towns in the midst of a rich and fertile countryside embracing the produce not of their locality but of international traders such as Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer. These need, to cite but the latest of such developments, ten 40-tonne lorries each day to fill their shelves, for a town of no more than 6000 souls. With what? Certainly not food from Devon. The farmers'-market movement is but a slight sticking-plaster against this tendency to desert our own bounty for the charms of the wider world.