

# Trenchers and Teapots: Food at Winchester College

**Intro:** Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

**Thomas:** Hi, I'm Thomas.

**Douglas:** And I am Douglas.

**Thomas:** And we are both absolutely delighted to be hosting this bonus episode for Hampshire HistBites as part of Winchester Heritage Open Days.

**Douglas:** We are bringing you inside the walls of Winchester College and through over 600 years of history to discover how the food has changed here. We begin our tale in this glorious building, College Hall. Built in the 1380s as an integral part of William of Wickham's College, College Hall has been the center of food for the 70 scholars here ever since.

**Thomas:** We want to bring you on this journey with us, so take a moment if you can, to close your eyes and transport yourself to where we are now. Imagine a large medieval rectangular hall. There is a wooden floor and some wooden paneling climbing just under halfway up the wall. There are two sets of long, wooden, unpolished tables and benches along the length of the hall. Looking down onto us are portraits of notable Wykehamists and Wykeham himself. There are some large windows with some modest stained glass. On the table in front of me is a trencher. Douglas, what is a trencher?

**Douglas:** Well, a trencher is basically a wooden platter. In College, they're square. Boys used to eat off the wooden platters with their food rationed to fit the size of the trenchers. This gives rise to the phrase, a square meal. Throughout this podcast, we will be interviewing many OWs, or former pupils, who are now dons, or teachers, about their experiences of the food here.

**Thomas:** When you were a boy at Winchester college, Mr. Mercer, did you use trenchers?

**Mr. Mercer:** Trenchers being the toast boards in College Hall? Yeah, absolutely we had those. I never really knew where they came from. They seemed imperishable, because after people finish their toast, they would then score them with knives repeatedly and yet there must have been someone sanding manically in the backgrounds.

**Thomas:** Were they called trenchers when you were using them?

**Mr. Mercer:** I suppose they must've been, but I would never have remembered to call it that.

**Thomas:** So obviously this is a room I'm very familiar with. But as I look closely around, I noticed tucked away, close to a small door in the corner of hall, there's a wooden box. It's geometric like a chocolate box, but much taller and there's a prominent rusty padlock sitting on it. What is it, Douglas?

**Douglas:** This big chest is called the tub. All the leftover fragments of meat from the college's meals were placed into the tub to be distributed amongst the poor. One of the senior

pupils, the Aulæ Præ, which translates from Latin as Prefect of Tub, had to ensure that the meat was distributed properly.

**Thomas:** Although College Hall is the home of food for Wykeham's 70 scholars, it is also a hive of conversation, most unusually between pupils and domestic staff.

**Mr. Mercer:** When I think back on being in College Hall, it's not the food I remember.

**Thomas:** It's the staff.

**Mr. Mercer:** Absolutely it's the staff, and it was such a pleasure coming back here and finding, you know, Pauline who now runs Common Room. You know, she was here throughout my five years. Don is still here. Bubbles is still here - who you probably, you call Paul now? He was known as Bubbles because on his first day in College Kitchens, he puts about five times as much washing up liquid into the dishwasher as he should have and came back two minutes later and the entire kitchen was filled with bubbles and he really owned this, you must mention it to him, but you know, Harriet, everyone, you know, I can't list them all, but these are the people I remember. It's the people behind the food and I'm sure it has been for centuries that actually make it such a, it's an important place, a kitchen. It's where we all go to eat and be together and yeah, they're all wonderful. It's the same in Toye's now.

**Thomas:** We've now moved across Chamber Court, the medieval quadrangle at Winchester College, to the Muniment room, a medieval stronghold for documents. And it's here that most of the documents we will be talking about are stored.

**Douglas:** We are surrounded by some big wooden containers, including two original medieval oak chests. But more strikingly, we are underneath the great stone vaulted ceiling, which descends into four different corbels. They depict a Bishop, an Abbott, Saint Michael and finally, a King.

**Thomas:** And royalty ties in quite nicely with the first document that we have.

**Douglas:** This is one of the earliest documents in the College's collections and it records the expenses of the household of William of Wykeham. Wykeham was the Lord Chancellor, the equivalent of prime minister, of Richard II, and it was Richard who authorized the foundation of Winchester College. I wonder for the benefit of our listeners, whether you might give a description of the object, Thomas?

**Thomas:** Of course, it's made with 21 unique pieces of velum, or animal skin, stitched together to form an incredibly long document, almost 15 meters in length. Comparing the first piece to the others, I can see that the writing on the first is faded probably because it's received so much more exposure to light than the others.

**Douglas:** The accounts in the document show that Richard II came to Winchester twice during the period of the rule and were entertained by Wykeham.

On an average day, take Thursday, the 24th of July 1394, Wykeham had 49 people in his household. It cost him three pounds, eight shillings, and 11 pence to pay for everyone's food. This is equivalent to 2000 pounds in today's money. There were preparations being made for the King's visit the next day, however. On Friday, the 25th Wykeham had 234 people in his household, an increase of 185 people and he had a further 180 guests, including the King.

The cost of the food on that day was 22 pounds, 19 shillings and five pence. The equivalent of 15,000 pounds today.

**Thomas:** Okay, Douglas, but what did they actually eat?

**Douglas:** Well, as it was a Friday when the king visited, they ate fish instead of meat, yet no expense was spared. The accounts shows that they ate sturgeon, salmon, mackerel, salted fish, 400 eels, whiting, sole, mullet, bream, 33 crabs, trout, shrimp, minnows, 600 eggs, onions, four flagons of honey and two flagons of wine vinegar from all over the local region. On the King's second visit to Winchester in 1394, it wasn't a Friday, so meat was consumed including beef, bacon, lamb. 72 rabbits, six swans, 10 geese, 2 deer, 81 chickens, 108 pigeons, 12 piglets, four calves, 13 lobsters, 15 crabs, and over 2000 eggs alongside much fish, and fruit and veg.

**Thomas:** Whoa, what other celebrations on a scale of such as this have there been at the College?

**Douglas:** Coincidentally exactly 499 years to the day that Richard visited Winchester for the first time in 1394, the College celebrated its quincentenary with two meals, one in Winchester and one in India. We have the menus of the two dinners here.

**Thomas:** In comparison to the food listed, the actual menus look very modest. On the Winchester menu there are 29 dishes listed, including salmon, lobsters, lamb, beef, veal with truffles, chicken, turkey, various types of game, foie gras, tarts, jellies, cheeses, and cakes.

**Douglas:** They give Wykeham a serious run for his money.

**Thomas:** What celebrations do the OW Don's from past remember?

**Mr. Hurley:** For me I think the biggest one I had as a boy was Sixes dinner in my fourth year where all three teams got together in the Master in College's, do you call it his dining room?

**Douglas:** Yeah.

**Mr. Hurley:** There were 18 of us, all the coaches, Mr. Lamb at the time and that was really special, and the kitchen did an amazing job, it was a massive meal and they invented this sort of pudding with blue, red and brown in it. The blue was some sort of fake raspberry jelly, I think. But no, that was really special to be in that room and eating all together.

**Douglas:** When Wykeham founded the college, he allocated certain values of food for the scholars, choristers, chaplains, fellows and masters. The food was mostly provided by the College Estates, which led to a very simple and invariable diet, mostly of boiled beef and boiled mutton, with fish on Fridays and a roast joint on Sundays. Certainly in College, we still have a roast on Sundays and fish on Fridays. The diet of boys remained mostly unchanged for four centuries, following the foundation. This document written by Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury, allowed the members of the College to eat meat on Wednesdays, due to problems with the supply and the quality of the fish. Obviously, fish Friday had changed to fish Wednesday by this stage.

**Thomas:** Looking at the document, I can see that it was signed Mathias Cantuar, Cantuar meaning Canterbury. It's a short but wide document attached with some string to a red seal, which has been broken into two fragments.

We are now in the main library of the college. Originally the medieval building that we are in was a brewery to brew beer for the College. Douglas, why did we need to brew beer?

**Douglas:** The answer is very simple. The water was not consistently good enough to drink. It was often polluted.

**Thomas:** How come people weren't drunk permanently?

**Douglas:** It would have been a very weak form of beer, with a low alcohol content. So there would have been very few drunk boys and teachers. However, up to 18,000 gallons of beer went missing in an average year in the 18th century. Perhaps the Warden who held the key to the brewery became a little tipsy, sometimes. There were some complaints that there was too much beer, a perpetual flow of it even.

**Thomas:** What, in general, were there drinks that were served in Hall?

**Mr. Mercer:** So, there was, a sort of orange squash. I believe there was an apple version as well, but we all preferred the orange one and it was known as a ranker.

**Thomas:** Oh right.

**Mr. Mercer:** Is that something that's lasted?

**Thomas:** I don't think so.

**Mr. Mercer:** No. Okay and for some reason everyone was terribly taken with this term. We loved the ranker and would occasionally mix it with the apple and make applanker and sort of, yeah, weird fruit cocktail mixes.

**Thomas:** What drinks were you served when you were here at school?

**Mr. Normand:** I can remember a few. These are all going to be rather long and rambling stories. The first drink I was served was Pomagne. And that was, I couldn't give you a year, but I think that was my, probably my open day in Chawker's. Stick in my mind about it. First of all, I was far too young to be plied with it that much, but my housemaster, a bachelor called Colin Badcock served it to my entire family and we and I, my parents lived in Winchester, so we three youngsters, myself, and two siblings are sisters, we had to cycle home. Right. And my parents were terribly worried. They stayed to finish the case or something. anyway, that was the first drink I had. Other drinks - are probably the only thing I particularly remember is that milk at breakfast was served in great big aluminum jugs, I should think four- or five-point jugs. I don't know if they still happen.

**Thomas:** So Douglas, why don't we drink beer today?

**Douglas:** They abolished it. The college continued to brew its own beer until 1904 and beer was served in College Hall, where we were earlier, at lunchtime until 1915. This poem is about the abolition of beer in college.

**Thomas:** And it's called Lines on the Abolition of College Beer.

*Yes, all is o'er. We must drink water now,  
Or sip the anaemic juices of the cow.  
Swipes are for ever gone; the doctors say  
Beer hinders work, and saps the strength for play.  
Besides, of course, the present situation  
Makes it the gravest danger to the nation.  
If College were to go on drinking beer,  
What could prevent the Germans landing here?  
What were the worth of our all-shattering guns  
If College traitors drank – and helped the Huns?  
Yet, Swipes, methinks the spectres of the past  
Rise from their graves to watch thee breathe thy last.  
And Bacchus drapes his portly paunch in black,  
To signify, O Swipes, we wish thee back*

**Douglas:** The other staple food, alongside beer, was bread. In this letter, Francis Lucas, a boy in 1891 describes to his mother the food provided.

*Here we do not have mouldy bread, thinly scraped with rancid butter that tasted like bad cheese, but each boy has his own fresh roll. And there was a piece of delicious fresh butter to every five boys.*

**Thomas:** This letter is also signed off by Francis Lucas. It contains the list of food that he would like to be sent. The Notion or a word specific to Winchester college for tuck at this time was a cargo. Although Mr. Mercer, one of the OW Don's whom we interviewed would disagree.

What tuck did you have whilst you were at College?

**Mr. Mercer:** So, firstly, let me make a point about Notions that, it was never tuck. It was mange [pronounced mounge]. Okay. So that's a perversion of, manger<sup>1</sup>, clearly, but it had to be pronounced in that slightly nasal way and you'd have nazby mange, meant really nice. But actually, in fact, as part of this health drive they installed the vending machine that's probably still there, but they filled it with health food, including apple crisps, bananas in there and fresh fruit and no one ever used it. So of course the fruit went incredibly mouldy and it was just flies hovering around it and within about a month, it was just full of *inaudible*

**Thomas:** Here is Lucas's list, which he's put in order of preference, potted meats, honey, jam, one apple and two pears, biscuits, chocolates, and figs or dates. In the next letter of the set, Lucas thanks his mother for his cargoes, but it says that the jam jar had been shattered, ruining the jam.

**Douglas:** In this letter from 1887, a boy called Cecil reports, how they ate the jam.

*Boys usually bring jam, which they eat at lunch or supper with biscuits.*

---

1 French for to eat

He is not sure in the letter whether apples and pears as Lucas requested are allowed.

**Thomas:** A different way that boys both in the past and nowadays can fill their sugary needs is through local shops in Winchester.

**Douglas:** Octavius Le Croix set up a business in 8 College Street, now home to the gift shop Cornflowers and catered for almost anything. He earned a particular reputation for his brown bread ice cream. His recipe can be found in some modern cookery books.

**Thomas:** This transcript of the memoirs of James Ogilvie, a boy at Winchester from 1866 to 1870 talks about how Le Croix delivered food at night to boys, so that the prefects and dons would not see the deliveries.

*Octavius Le Croix and his talented spouse, keepers of the college tuck shop could be unfailingly relied on not only to serve it up, but to see that it was safely packed and steaming hot and with a generous complement of clipped potatoes into the basket, which we thoughtfully dangled from the dormitory windows.*

**Mr. Cunningham:** There was a sort of school-based canteen, called School Shop. So where Cornflowers is now, was a, I think probably a greasy spoon is the kind of best way to describe it, run by Mrs. Stillwell and Mrs. Pointer. And Mrs. Stillwell was front of house and Mrs. Pointer did the cooking. And I would say that it was actually sort of deliciously unhealthy.

**Thomas:** Yeah.

**Mr. Cunningham:** And things like fried bread that was probably incredibly bad for you, but incredibly delicious. And then in the summer, near Hunter Tent, they had a summer abode in which you could go and get milkshakes and stuff like that and sweets. So I think that was the sort of salvation, even if you felt you weren't getting enough or at least the right quality food, people would pile into one of those.

**Douglas:** And what tuck did you have whilst you were at school?

**Mr. Burbridge:** Oh too much of the wrong things, I'm sure. I mean, yeah, sweets, crisps, chocolates, the same as all teenage boys are probably eager to try and consume or very sort of poor calories that I would never really encourage the boys to try and consume now, as a PE teacher. And I think also we were, allowed a little bit more license to indulge in as a takeaway fare in the evenings. We also had two take-away restaurants just up the road. So on the corner of St James's Lane, there used to be an Indian and a Chinese restaurant which were quite regularly sort of frequented by some of my peers.

**Mr. Normand:** Well, I was very lucky in that my parents lived in town, so I had quite ready access.

**Thomas:** Yeah.

**Mr. Normand:** But actually on my way up to town, if you turn left after Chawker's now. And go just beyond Cook's passage, there's some relatively new houses. There used to be a post office there. So rather like KPO now does, it fulfilled the role of providing sugar to that Cook's, Hopper's and Chawker's block. But those were proper old sweets where they came

out of a jar and got weighed and put in a paper bag. That's probably where most of the tuck came from.

When I was very new, there was actually a, there was quite a good institution. There was a man who came up from Chandler's Ford on a Monday evening, and you could put tuck on blue bills, which was very satisfactory, and he would even cut your hair if it got too long, he sat down and was in the house library and had your hair out.

**Douglas:** This letter by Robert Ingles is a good example of the food the boys would order from home in the 19th century. Here he requests some food from his mother. He suggests boiled beef, jam and a cake or two.

**Thomas:** And here we have a different letter, with a prominent red stamp saying Winchester College Muniments.

**Douglas:** This letter is by Thomas Arnold, the great reformer of Rugby School. He had just moved from Commoners to College and describes the differences between the food in these places.

**Thomas:** The slightly grammatically wrong letter reads:-

*As in Commoners, till one o'clock, when instead of dinner, we go up in hall to have bread and cheese with plum pudding on Fridays and Saturdays and beef on Sundays. As in Commoners, till six when we have our dinner of mutton, some of the best I have ever tasted, which I relish accordingly.*

What were the boys campaigning for in terms of food changes when you were here?

**Mr. Hurley:** Fewer jacket potatoes mainly.

**Mr. Cunningham:** We dreamed of jacket potatoes. I think the reality was, I think we just wanted it to be better. The quantity was okay, but quality was maybe a little iffy.

**Thomas:** Were there kind of significant differences between the houses in their food?

**Mr. Hurley:** Well, we had quite an experimental chef and actually that was one of the things we wanted a bit less of. We wanted more staple, boring, normal, and he was trying to be quite interesting to his credit. But I think we wanted chips and sausages.

**Mr. Cunningham:** I think Furley's was believed to have the worst food. Certainly they made the most fuss about it. I think it was particularly teas. Their cook had this thing called beanie bake, which I think was basically the stuff the pigs didn't want was put in a big catering tin. It was a, it was just one of those large metal catering containers with all the bits put in it and then onion, chopped up and baked beans and some cheese put on top bunged in the oven. So you had sort of leftovers, okay, but not particularly high-quality beans and raw onion and sort of catering cheese. And they didn't like that. The only problem is that actually the Freddy's cooks learned about it. And so we got served it. I think we managed to get that taken off the menu.

**Thomas:** We are now in a location with so much to talk about, War Cloister. The largest private War Memorial in Europe, War Cloister is built from knapped flint, dressed stone and English oak, imitating the style of the medieval cloister here built during Wykeham's lifetime.

In the center of the Cloister is a Memorial Cross and running around the outside is a poignant inscription. Obviously, the purpose of the cloister is to commemorate the dons, pupils and quirksters who died in the two world wars.

We are here to look at how the food at Winchester suffered at that time. Douglas, how did boys' tuck change with rationing during World War I?

**Douglas:** The letter that I have in front of me was sent by the then headmaster Montague, or Monty Rendall to the boys' parents. He says that they will adhere strictly to the code of rations for adolescents and when the full amounts are not available, housemasters will endeavour to supplement them by non-rationed foods.

He says that LeCroix's, the school shop, would be closed for general purposes, but subject to certain regulations, boys will be able to order fish, eggs, potatoes, and jam. He urges parents to reduce parcels from home to a minimum and declares that in no case must boys receive any rationed food from home. Owing to the impact of a poorer diet on cognitive ability, Rendall says that he is reducing the amount of boys' work and increasing the amount of their sleep.

**Thomas:** Douglas, what foods weren't rationed?

**Douglas:** Most notably, oatmeal wasn't as part of the voluntary ration scheme in 1917. This led to the creation of the Southgate Corner Porridge Club. The club was mostly formed, if not entirely formed, from Freddy-ites.

**Thomas:** In front of us is a handwritten list of rules, which dictate quite thoroughly how the society should be run. Here it says that there should be an inspector of hygiene to oversee the cleanliness of all utensils.

**Douglas:** These photographs show a tea held for wounded soldiers during the first world war in Chamber Court, the medieval quadrangle, where we began our podcast.

**Thomas:** In these photographs, I can see nine long tables each with about 50 soldiers. There are also some shorter tables around the edge, more accessible for those immobile.

This photo shows the wounded soldiers leaving Chamber Court after the tea. We can see people in wheelchairs waiting for those on crutches to leave first.

Douglas, how else related to food, did Winchester help the community during the war?

**Douglas:** The college helped farmers weeding and haymaking. This article written by a boy describes his work as, for the most part, pleasant. The boys had been divided into two shifts, one in the morning, one in the afternoon. The article reports that the farmers were not unsatisfied with their work. In World War II, a similar scheme took place. During the summer holidays, boys could go on a harvest camp, as this photograph shows. They would have stayed in tents in the farmers' local village and worked during the day. Perhaps putting up sheaves of grain to dry.

Thomas, I understand that food plays an integral role in the college's community service programme, which you have partaken in for two years now.

**Thomas:** There are several CS activities which rely on food to help the community. Among them are cooking and cleaning for the homeless at the Winchester Night Shelter and meal



feeding at the Royal Hampshire County Hospital. We also run a big Christmas party for the local nursing homes, where all our CS, and some non-CS, music groups play and sing. There is a large array of food for the elderly at the party.

Back to food during the wars, did the college partake in the Dig for Victory campaign?

**Douglas:** The College most certainly partook in the Dig for Victory campaign, particularly around the edge of the playing fields and in the Warden's garden. This would have supplemented the rationed food. Boys also fished in the river and kept animals using scraps of waste food.

**Thomas:** So how was food impacted during the wars?

**Douglas:** It was greatly impacted. There were tales of potato peel soup, stringy meat, and plain bread with some margarine. Here, Reynolds, a boy at the time during World War II describes how he could supplement his food with some, as he called it, hot food from the school shop. This would have been a beans, egg and chips type meal. Tea and breakfast were still served on trenchers, the wooden boards that we saw at the time.

**Thomas:** But how has food changed in more recent times? We've got a few interviews with our OW dons to talk about that.

**Mr. Hurley:** I think one of the main differences now in terms of sort of snacking food and stuff, I don't know whether all the houses, but certainly in Trant's, the break in between toy times and morning break, there's sort of an array of cakes or biscuits and things made by the kitchen. Whereas we had none of that. We had bread and cereal left out for us by the kitchen staff.

**Thomas:** That definitely varies cause we don't have anything during break now. In College, cereal and toast if you want it.

What was the experience of having a brew like, and how often did you use it?

**Mr. Hurley:** Well, the main brew was where the cereal was left out, but sort of during toy time. So, I mean, I used it every day.

**Mr. Cunningham:** Brew was quite, you know, that was where you went in the break. I think there may have been something after Preces, but there wasn't anything in the middle of toy time. You would go to brew and have toast, basically, but there wouldn't have been a toaster. I don't know quite how we made toast.

**Mr. Hurley:** With some, one of the great Beloe's inventions or not inventions, but moments when we got Bruce, as it was called by Mr. Billington, one of those revolving toasters.

**Thomas:** Oh yeah.

**Mr. Hurley:** Except that you could never put it on the right setting. So you'd have to play a dangerous game with your knife, flicking it halfway once it went round once, you didn't want to put it round all the way through, again, you'd have to flick it and try and get it to halfway through so that it wouldn't catch fire.

**Mr. Mercer:** We weren't big fans of the fish, generally. I've got to say there was a sort of general attitude that for lunch every day, would be meat in sauce. It became a bit of a joke because, oh, what's for lunch today? Meat and sauce. Yeah, it was. And they would invent sort of weird, exotic adjectives to make it seem attractive. It was like, aha today, we have Hawaiian pork and you're: whoa - oh, that's meat in sauce. No, I think to be honest, we're fed pretty well most the time the fish wasn't great. Nothing stands out.

**Thomas:** Thank you for listening and I hope you enjoyed this bonus episode of Hampshire HistBites from Winchester College. Also thank you to Miss. Foster, the college archivist for her help, our Messrs. Mercer, Hurley, Cunningham, Burbridge and Normand, whom we interviewed

**Douglas:** To look at the show notes where you can see the items that we have been talking about, or to find out more about the other Winchester Heritage Open Days events this September, check out the festival website, [www.winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://www.winchesterheritageopendays.org).

**Outro:** We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, [www.winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://www.winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.