

Views of English food. Alan Macfarlane

In order to gain an overview, we can start by looking at what the English themselves thought. The relative ampleness of English diet is recorded from at least the thirteenth century and could no doubt be found earlier. In the middle of the thirteenth century, the English Franciscan Bartholomaeus Anglicus included a description of England in his massive encyclopaedia. He believed that England was 'the plenteousest corner of the world, full rich a land...England is full of mirth and of game...'¹ In the fourteenth century the **Polychronicon** of Ranulf Higden gives a similar picture, containing a 'paean to British resources'.² In the middle of the fifteenth century, Sir John Fortescue, exiled for many years to France, commented on the difference between that country and England. In France, among the rural inhabitants 'Neither man nor women eat any flesh there, but only lard or bacon, with a small quantity whereof they fatten their potage and broths. As for roasted or sodden meat of flesh they taste none, except it be of the innards sometimes and heads of beasts that be killed for gentlemen and merchants.'³ In England, on the other hand, 'They eat plentifully of all kinds of fish and flesh.'⁴ He believed that 'In deed England is so fertile and fruitful, that comparing quantity to quantity, it surmounteth all other lands in fruitfulness...the lands, the fields, the groves and the woods do so abundantly spring, that the same untilled do commonly yield to their owners more profit than tilled, though else they be most fruitful of corn and grain.'⁵

John Aylmer, later Bishop of London, who was living in exile on the continent, published a tract in 1559 in which he compared the standard of living in various European countries. Addressing his fellow Englishmen, he told them that 'In Italy...the husbandmen...cometh to the market with a hen or two in one hand, and a dozen eggs in a net in the other, which being sold and told, he buyeth and carrieth home with him, no Beef or Mutton, Veal, or sea fish, as you do: but a quart of oil to make salads of herbs, wherewith he liveth all the week following. And in Germany though they be in some better case than the other: yet eat they more roots than flesh...Now compare them with thee: and thou shalt see how happy thou art. They eat herbs: and thou Beef and Mutton, They eat roots: and thou butter, cheese, and eggs...They go from the market with a salad: and thou with good flesh fill thy wallet. They lightly never

¹ On The Propertis of Things, ii, p.734

² Preface to Harrison, Description of England, p.xviii

³ Commendation, fols. 81-81v

⁴ *ibid*, 85-85v

⁵ *ibid*, fols. 65v,66

see any sea fish: and thou hast thy belly full of it.⁶

Fynes Moryson travelled around Europe in 1605-17 and made a dietary survey. He found 'the diet of the Germans is simple, and very modest, if you set aside their intemperate drinking.'⁷ The people of the Netherlands had an extremely rich diet of butter, milk, meat and other products.⁸ In Denmark the ordinary people 'feed much on divers kinds of dried fishes', which he thought led to their 'leane and withered faces' and they 'likewise feede on bread very black, heavy and windy.'⁹ In general in diet 'they are much like the Germans.' Some Italians ate well and others badly. On the whole, however, 'The Italians generally compared with English or French, are most sparing in their diet.'¹⁰ They were 'not so great flesh-eaters as the Northerne men', but ate a lot of bread and salads. Likewise 'For their dyet, the Turkes live sparingly.'¹¹ France abounded with many foodstuffs, yet the common people had very little good food. 'At this day none eate lesse Bacon or dried flesh for ordinary diet, than the French.' There were many fish and wild animals, but the 'countrey people neither do nor may eate them. Their Beef is neither very good, nor much used. Their Sheep are lesse than ours in England', though sweet. 'They use not much whitemeats, nor have I tasted there any good Butter...' Even the wealthier lived less well than the English. 'As well the Gentlemen as Citizens live more sparingly than the English in their ordinary private diet, and have not their Tables so furnished with variety and number of dishes.'¹² The Scots 'eate much red Colewort and Cabbage, but little fresh meate and a lot of porredge.'¹³ In Ireland, the 'English-Irish' lived well, but the 'meere Irish' lived on what he considered a filthy, if nutritious diet including horse meat, oats and even the blood from living cattle.

⁶ Orwell, Pamphleteer, i, p.29-33

⁷ Moryson, iv, p.24

⁸ Moryson, iv, p.59

⁹ Moryson, iv, p.67

¹⁰ Moryson, iv, p.93

¹¹ Moryson, iv, p.125

¹² Moryson, iv, p.140-41

¹³ Moryson, iv, p.183

As for the English, he believed they had an excellent diet. 'At this day the English inhabitants eat almost no flesh more than Hennes, and for Geese they eat them at two seasons...They had also great plenty of Connies (rabbits)...' The English have 'abundance of Whitemeats¹⁴, of all Kinds of Flesh, Fowle, and Fish, and of all things good for foods.' They also had many delicacies which were rare or not known abroad, oysters, many sea birds, fallow deer, brawn. As for grains 'The English Husbandmen eat Barley and Rye browne bread, and preferre it to white bread as abiding longer in the stomach, and not so soone digested with their labour, but Citizens and Gentlemen eat most pure white bread, England yeelding (as I have said) all kinds of Corne in plenty.'

As a result of the abundance of food, the English were thought to be the gluttons of Europe, a charge which Moryson was keen to refute. He had to admit that 'the said abundance and the riches vulgarly increased, and the old custome of the English, make our tables plentifully furnished, where upon other Nations esteeme us gluttons and devourers of flesh', but argued that often the food was for 'strangers and reliefe of the poor.' He had to 'confesse, that the English custome, first to serve grosse meates, on which hunger spares not to feede, and then to serve dainties, which invite to eat without hunger, as likewise the longe sitting and discoursing at tables, which makes men unawares eat more, than the Italians can doe at their solitary tables, these things (I say) give us just cause to cry with Socrates, God deliver mee from meates, that invite to eate beyond hunger.' He was also eager to refute the slander that the English not only ate huge amounts, but ate four meals a day. He claimed that 'the Italian Sansovine is much deceived, writing, that in generall the English eate and cover the table at least foure times in the day; for howsoever those that journey, and some sickly men staying at home, may perhaps take a small breakfast, yet in generall the English eate but two meales (of dinner and supper) each day, and I could never see him that useth to eate foure times in the day.' He argued that pound for pound the Italians ate as much as the English, even if it was somewhat inferior food. 'And I will professe for my selfe and other Englishmen, passing through Italy so famous for temperance, that wee often observed, that howsoever wee might have a Pullet and some flesh prepared for us, eating it with a moderate proportion of bread, the Italians at the same time, with a Charger full of hearbs for a sallet, and with rootes, and like meates of small price, would each of them eat two or three penny-worth of bread. And since all fulnesse is ill, and that of bread worst, I thinke wee were more temperate in our dyet, though eating more flesh, then they eating so much more bread then wee did.' Yet again he had to admit that 'It is true that the English prepare largely for ordinarie dyet for themselves and their friendes comming by chance, and at feastes for invited friendes are so excessive in the number of dishes, as the table is not thought well furnished, except they stand one upon another. Neither use they to set drinke on the Table, for which no roome is left, but the Cuppes and Glasses are served in upon a side table...'¹⁵

The reputation of the English as comparatively well fed continued into the eighteenth century. Satirical prints, for example showed the fat, roast-beef stuffed English countrymen and the thin, wasted,

¹⁴Whitemeats: butter, cheese and other milk products.

¹⁵ Moryson, *Itinerary*, iv, p.171-74

herbivorous Frenchmen.¹⁶ Arthur Young, we are told 'represents the labouring classes of France, just at the commencement of the revolution, as "76 per cent worse fed, worse clothed, and worse supported, both in sickness and health, than the same classes in England".¹⁷

Although the evidence is consistent and fits with what we know about the productivity of English agriculture, the general wealth of the people, and the lightness of the population, we might be tempted to dismiss much of this as chauvinistic propaganda about John Bull's island of roast beef and the wheaten loaf. Yet it is supported by the comment of outsiders. Andrew Trevisano as an Ambassador to the court of King Henry VII in the later fifteenth century wrote a report home for his government. It was not written as propaganda or for a literary market and there is no reason for this acute observer to exaggerate. Coming as he did from one of the richest parts of Europe, Venice, and with the cultured background and contacts which later made him Pope, he was nevertheless impressed. He wrote that 'the riches of England are greater than those of any other country in Europe, as I have been told by one of the oldest and most experienced merchants, and also as I myself can vouch from what I have seen.' He believed that this was partly due to the 'great fertility of the soil', as well as to the tin and wool trade. Whatever the cause, 'everyone who makes a tour in the island will soon become aware of this great wealth.' Thus there is no small innkeeper, however poor and humble he may be, who does not serve his table with silver dishes and drinking cups... Even when engaged in war, the people 'will seek for good eating, and all their other comforts, without thinking of what harm might befall them.'¹⁸

In 1560 the Dutch physician Levinus Lemnius wrote that he travelled in 'that flourishing Island' of England to see the fashions of that 'wealthy Country.' He was struck by the 'exquisite fineness, the pleasant and delightful furniture in every point of the household' and the 'wholesome and exquisite meat.' He noted 'the fruitfulness of their ground and soil...their great herds and flocks of cattle...'¹⁹ A little later, Emmanuel van Meteren, an Antwerp merchant who lived in London throughout the reign of Elizabeth and travelled through the whole of England and Ireland was equally impressed. He noted that the English 'feed well and delicately, and eat a great deal of meat...'²⁰ Paul Hentzner, from Brandenburg, visited England in the 1590s and noted the great wealth: 'the soil is fruitful and abounds with cattle', and upon the hills 'wander numerous flocks' of sheep. He noted that compared to the French the inhabitants

¹⁶ Duffy, *Englishman and Foreigner*, p.39,47,48,74,75,95

¹⁷ Malthus, *Population*, 1, p.230-31

¹⁸ *Italian Relation*, p.22ff

¹⁹ Rye, *Foreigners*, p.78-80

²⁰ Rye, *Foreigners*, p.70-1

ate 'less bread but more meat, which they roast in perfection; they put a great deal of sugar in their drink...'²¹

In the early eighteenth century, the Swiss traveller De Saussure noted of London, 'In these markets an abundance of every kind of salt and fresh water fish is to be found; also vegetables and poultry of every description.'²² He wrote that 'English people are large eaters; they prefer meat to bread, some people scarcely touching the latter. The cooking is simple and uniform, stews are seldom served, and they do not roast or boil their meats as much as we do, which makes it, I think, more succulent and delicate, thereby giving it a better taste.'²³ As for dairy products, 'Outside the town you scarcely see anything but large, fine pastures, where all the year round thousands of cows graze and give an abundance of milk. English people consume of great quantity of dairy produce; they are very fond of cream, milk and butter.'²⁴ Butter was particularly important, for 'English people consume a great deal of butter, and they do not know how to prepare fish and vegetables except with this ingredient melted.'²⁵ Fruit and vegetables were also in abundance. 'Around London there are numerous fine large gardens, all belonging to gardeners who grow vegetables of every kind and flowers and fruit trees.'²⁶ La Rochefoucauld noted that 'The consumption of meat is much greater in England than in any other country whatever; the whole nation eats it and the Englishman, generally speaking, is a flesh-eater.'²⁷

At the end of the eighteenth century, Henry Meister wrote that 'I do not impose upon you when I say that...the English labourer is better clothed, better fed, and better lodged than the French...'²⁸ Earlier Adam Smith wrote, 'The common people in Scotland, who are fed with oatmeal, are in general neither

²¹ Rye, *Foreigners*, p.110

²² De Saussure, *Foreign*, p.171

²³ De Saussure, *Foreign*, p.221

²⁴ De Saussure, *Foreign*, p.133

²⁵ De Saussure, *Foreign*, p.222

²⁶ De Saussure, *Foreign*, p.137

²⁷ La Rochefoucauld, *Frenchman*, p.204

²⁸ quoted in Marshall, *People*, p.160

so strong nor so handsome as the same rank of people in England, who are fed with wheaten bread. They neither work so well, nor look so well...²⁹ The difference in bread and meat consumption which had earlier been constantly noted, was reported by the Scottish political economist, Dugald Stewart. In France, 'bread is said to form nineteen parts in twenty of their food' whereas 'in England, on the contrary, the quantity of meat, and of the produce of the dairy consumed by all ranks, is immense.'³⁰ The same contrast was noted in the middle of the nineteenth century by Taine. 'The fresh green grass, incessantly reborn, springs everywhere superabundant. Translate it into meat and dairy produce and compare that to the bread, wine and vegetables which form the principal food of our own peasantry. In this respect and many others the English are much more like the Dutch than the French.'³¹

²⁹ Smith, *Wealth*, i, p.179

³⁰ Stewart, *Works*, viii, p.106

³¹ Taine, *Notes*, p.127