

November Geography Report

We welcomed back Professor Peter Atkins, of Durham University, who gave us a fascinating talk with the intriguing title “The Historical Geography of Food, with particular reference to cheese and the North East of England.” We even did a blind tasting of some samples!

English cheese production is documented from the early 13th century. West Wickham manor, in Hampshire, produced 167 cheeses in 1208-9. The majority were sold but some formed part of the tithe. Whole cheeses were probably small by modern standards, weighing around 3.27lbs and were produced from sheep’s milk. In medieval times production was concentrated along the Essex coast and later extended into Suffolk and Kent. This is known from landscape, land use, archaeological and documentary evidence. Place names also give clues – the ending ‘wick’ meaning a place for making cheese e.g., Gatwick. The Luttrell Psalter c.1300 has an illustration of sheep but it is difficult to determine the breed.

Anglo-Saxon manuscripts indicate that cheese played a role in the national diet from before the Norman Conquest. Consumption probably varied by region. Over the centuries some local cheeses, for example, Cleveland, have vanished. Wensleydale, originally a blue cheese, nearly ceased production in 1957 but has been successfully revived. Cheshire cheese has a long and fascinating history. During the English Civil War, it was transported by sea to London and was eaten during military campaigns in Scotland and Ireland. Later it was ordered by the Navy as it kept well for 6 months. It was preferable to Suffolk cheese, which was considered too hard - even by the weevils! Cheddar, now the world’s most popular cheese, was only produced from the 1840s and was particularly suited to factory production.

I could go on at length about all the fascinating facts we learned about cheese but sadly there isn’t the space!

Professor Atkins concluded by looking at regional variations in diet and cited evidence suggesting that prior to the Industrial Revolution, northerners with their access to small holdings were probably better fed than their southern urban-based counterparts. A useful insight into what people were eating in the past can be gleaned from contemporary recipe books. Until the advent of the railways and the invention of the tin can however, people could only eat what was in season or could be pickled or preserved.

Report by Jane Harrison

Next meetings:

Thursday 19th January 2023. 2pm in the Witham. Professor Alan Townsend will speak about “The Quaker line: the Darlington to Stockton railway.”

Thursday 16th February 2023. 2pm in the Witham. Dr Jonathan Mitchell will talk about the geopolitics of southeast Europe.