

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Richard Smith, Ale-brewing, Ale-houses and Ale-selling in Medieval Suffolk

Richard Smith gave an interesting account of medieval brewing, based upon detailed research, to the June meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He emphasized the importance of grain to all aspects of the medieval diet, especially for the poor. In the medieval period, grain was consumed by humans in three ways. There was bread, ale and pottage. Pottage was a form of porridge made using oats, barley and vegetables. It was a major part of the staple diet of the poorest in society.

The poor have left few records but the household accounts of the elite give some insight into the medieval diet. The accounts of a Benedictine monastery in London show an allowance of one gallon of ale a day for each monk. Similar quantities of ale seem to have been consumed at Framlingham Castle as 78 gallons of ale a day were provided for the 83 inhabitants during 1385-6. This may seem to be a lot to us. However, the ale had a lower alcoholic content than modern beers and was much safer to drink than the contaminated water available at the time.

It is likely that brewing would have been a widespread activity in villages because there were few technological needs for the process. It tended to be done by women. Brewing began with malting. Barley was soaked for several days and then turned onto a floor to germinate and ferment. It was then dried. The drying for wealthier households was done in a kiln but the poor dried their grain in the sun as fuel was expensive. Once dry, the malted grain would last up to a year. Malt was crushed with a hand mill and then mixed with hot water where its sugars were dissolved. The liquid was drawn off and yeast was added. The ale was ready in a couple of days. Households tended to brew every three to six days as the ale would go sour within a week.

From the 13th Century the price and quality of ale was monitored. Assize records offer valuable information about brewing. The price of ale was linked to the cost of grain and was higher in the towns than in the countryside. This possibly reflects lower transport costs. Fines were imposed upon people selling ale which had not been checked for quality or where it was found to be inferior or sour. Ale tended to be sold from the front of the brewer's house. There are few archaeological remains indicating the existence of pubs in the medieval period.

Records show that there was a busy market at Botesdale in 1289. 18 stalls sold ale which was often bought by the very poor who had little land but earned wages by labouring. Intriguingly, one large scale producer was called Roger the Taverner which may suggest that he owned a pub.

The Black Death (1348-9) brought about considerable change as standards of living rose with increased wages. More barley was grown and the alcoholic strength of ale increased. Men tended to replace women as brewers because production became a more lucrative business. Further change occurred in the late 15th Century when the introduction of hops into brewing led to the production of beer which lasted longer and could be transported over greater distances. Inns and taverns began to develop. These were initially used by richer people as a place to eat, drink and stay when travelling. Ale houses were opened from the 16th Century as places run by the poor for the poor. Their increase in number, and instances of drunkenness, sinfulness and disorder worried Tudor and Stuart governments. This was an approach to brewing and leisure which is more familiar to us than the medieval period.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 27 July 2016 at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Georgette Vale will be speaking as Lucilla Reeve about the villages lost in the creation of STANTA. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy