

AN ENTERTAINMENT

For presentation after the Worth Gardeners' Christmas Dinner on 8-12-2000

Links

Well, Gardeners of Worth, I hope you are all feeling well fed, but not fed up. Over the past few years you have been regaled with the legendary tale of the Scurvy Weevil and good St George and latterly with superb anthologies on the theme of Christmas. Knowing that this is why you really attend this prestigious banquet who are we to disappoint such a distinguished company.

Now it says somewhere 'In the beginning was the word', and as you all know at the top of The Street is a sign that proclaims 'There's Good Worth in Word'. So here is a good place to start - a good place to make a beginning. Therefore let us transport you back to a beginning, the one that was reported in July 1897:

Reading 1

“Where are you going to my pretty maid!”
(By chance, on the Rope Walk, I met her;)
“I’m going to Worth, kind Sir”, she said;
I answered, “You couldn’t do better.”

“May I walk with you, my pretty maid ?”
She answered me most demurely -
“If you go my way - then to say you nay
Would be more than I should do, surely!”

So we sauntered along in sweet converse,
And I wished that the way were longer;
Till the flutter of flags was seen afar,
And the strains of the band grew stronger.

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So the East Kent Mercury heralded the first Show of the Worth Gardeners' in the late Victorian period, when the Church, the School and the Big House with the support of their Gardeners and local Growers set up a Society to encourage the Cottagers to grow and display the finest produce in the hope of winning one of the silver cups. So with the good clean air and an abundance of excellent home grown food the lot of the people of Worth was a healthy one. But were the people of this island always so fortunate ?

Reading 2

Even in times when all the food was organic, there were fads and fashions about what people ate. Today, in the latter part of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, a healthy breakfast may consist of a bowl of muesli, a glass of orange juice and a slice of toast. In Elizabeth I's time, 'half a chyne of mutton or a chyne of boiled beef' was the usual breakfast fare in a well-off household, and fresh fruit was thought to be bad for the stomach.

The Queen herself preferred a meatless start to the day. One morning in 1576 she was recorded as breakfasting on sixpence-worth of bread, three-pence ha'penny-worth of `ale and beare , plus a pint of wine that cost seven pence. If that sounds like a dangerous amount of alcohol so early in the day, one should remember that it was safer and more nourishing than drinking the water.

The great British country house breakfast, as per the strict instructions of Mrs Beeton in the 1892 edition of her *Book of Household Management* was as follows. Deviled kidneys stand in their chafing dish opposite the soles; fish rissoles flank poached eggs; muffins and homemade rolls are keeping warm, while the sideboard display includes a game pie and a grisly, foot-long ox-tongue with a paper ruff around its root. This intimidating spread is laid on a crisp, white tablecloth, which Mrs Beeton insisted should be used at breakfast, for `it exercises a certain moral influence upon the inmates of the house in the degree of care or thought that is bestowed upon it`.

Elizabeth I's subjects would have been familiar with most of these items. But the tray of gleaming silver-plate at the head of the table would have been a puzzle, for tea and coffee were unknown in Britain until the seventeenth century. Both these novel beverages, along with chocolate, were first marketed as tonics, with none-too-subtle suggestions about their aphrodisiac qualities.

In Shakespeare's day, sugar was the food of love, as well as being thought to have soothing digestive properties. Both these beliefs help explain why the better-off were so often less healthy than their servants, particularly in the tooth department. The Jacobean banqueting arbour was in effect, a temple of love, on whose altar an almost sickening variety of sweetmeats, comfits, jellied marmalades and marzipans were laid out. They were to be eaten off painted sugar trenchers and accompanied by draughts of spiced wine drunk from edible sugar drinking flutes. This sweet and powerful digestif was known as hippocras.

Two centuries later the sweet tooth of the British upper classes had lost none of its keenness, to judge from Regency dessert courses. But the extreme delicacy of its confections - moulded sugar baskets, preserved gooseberries in the form of giant hops - suggests that the consumption of such quantities of sugar at this stage of a dinner was by now pure indulgence and had long since ceased to have its supposed medicinal function of preventing `a flux of the bellie`.

In the early part of the seventeenth century, the price of tea led to a huge trade in counterfeit drinks based on sloe and hawthorn leaves, called 'smouch'. Later, as the tea and bread-and-butter habit spread, it encouraged the poor to spend more than they could afford on white wheat bread instead of the coarser but more nourishing whole meal and rye loaves of earlier generations. And it tempted the well-to-do, especially gross women who lead sedentary lives to eat too much butter, according to a dietitian called William Buchan, writing in 1797. 'Their tea-bread is generally contrived so as to suck up butter like a sponge. What quantities of crumpets and muffins they will devour in a morning, soaked with this oil; and afterwards complain of indigestion, when they have eaten what would overload the stomach of a ploughman.'

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And so as you have all eaten in moderation and are in no danger whatsoever of flux of the bellie you can reflect on how the wisdom that we now possess enables us to enjoy ourselves so much better than in other ages. And high on our list of enjoyment must come our gardens. Rudyard Kipling has some insights into the 'Glory of the Garden' :

Reading 3

Our England is a garden that is full of stately views,
Of borders, beds and shrubberies and lawns and avenues,
With statues on the terraces and peacocks strutting by;
But the Glory of the Garden lies in more than meets the eye.
For where the old thick laurels grow, along the thin red wall,
You'll find the tool and potting sheds which are the heart of all,
The cold-frames and the hothouses, the dung pits and the tanks,
The rollers, carts and drainpipes, with the barrows and the planks.

And there you'll see the gardeners, the men and `prentice boys
Told off to do as they are bid and do it without noise;
For, except when seeds are planted and we shout to scare the birds,
The Glory of the Garden it abideth not in words.
And some can pot begonias and some can bud a rose,
And some are hardly fit to trust with anything that grows;
But they can roll and trim the lawns and sift the sand and loam,
For the Glory of the Garden occupieth all who come.

Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing;- `Oh, how beautiful,' and sitting in the shade,
While better men than we go out and start their working lives
At grubbing weeds from gravel paths with broken dinner knives.
There's not a pair of legs so thin, there's not a head so thick,
There's not a hand so weak and white, nor yet a heart so sick,
But it can find some needful job that's crying to be done,
For the Glory of the Garden glorifieth every one.

Then seek your job with thankfulness and work till further orders,
If it's only netting strawberries or killing slugs on borders;
And when your back stops aching and your hands begin to harden,
You will find yourself a partner in the Glory of the Garden.
Oh, Adam was a gardener, and God who made him sees
That half a proper gardener's work is done upon his knees,
So when your work is finished, you can wash your hands and pray
For the Glory of the Garden that it may not pass away!
And the Glory of the Garden it shall never pass away!

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So there you have it, confirmation that you're not the only one who is a slave to beauty. And as you sink into your favourite chair, picking up your latest Worth Gardeners' Show Schedule to plan your strategy for next year, it may surprise you to learn that not everyone looks favourably on growing vegetables for Show ! Chef Rowley Leigh of Kensington Palace expresses his concerns:

Reading 4

The pumpkin is one of the victims of our peculiar desire to grow vegetables very, very big, and very, very flavourless. Onions, leeks and marrows have all suffered in similar fashion and lunatics with a mania for producing outsized examples of these species are actually rewarded in competitions with garlands and rosettes. Worse still, the largest of these pumped-up monstrosities are subject to vandalism and sabotage, not in the name of good taste but at the hands of jealous growers hell-bent upon victory for their own gigantic vegetables.

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Now he is clearly in favour of flavour and moderate quantities, and doubtless exercises great skill in selecting and preparing his delicacies. But you know even this is not always enough, as Ivor Cutler recounts !

Reading 5

“Hello, Billy, tea-time! Gruts for tea! - Billy! Billy! Come on, son. Gruts for tea! Fresh gruts!”

“Oh, I don‘t want gruts for tea, Daddy.”

“What? I went out specially and got them for you.”

“Aw, but Daddy, we had gruts yesterday.”

“Look, son, I walked seven miles to the High Wood to get you gruts. That‘s fourteen miles in all, counting the journey back, and you don‘t want gruts? I fried them for you. Fried gruts - mmm - I fried them in butter.”

“I don‘t want them, Daddy. Daddy, we‘ve had gruts for three years now. I‘m fed up with gruts. I don‘t want them any more. Daddy, can‘t we have something else for tea?”

“Oh, son! Gruts! They‘re lovely.”

“Daddy, I don‘t want gruts any more. I hate gruts. I detest them. I have them every day and they‘re always fried in butter. Can‘t you think of another way of cooking gruts? There‘s hundreds of ways of cooking gruts: boil them or bake them or stew them or braise them - but every day - fried gruts.

Billy, come in for tea. Fried gruts. I‘ve walked fourteen miles. Seven miles to the High Wood and back.‘ Three years of gruts. Look what it‘s done to me, Daddy! Come here! Come here into the bedroom and look at ourselves in the mirror, you and me. Now look at that!”

“Yes. I see what you mean. Son, let’s not waste these gruts. Tomorrow, I’ll go to the High Wood and get something else.”

“Look, Daddy, you’ve been saying this for three years now. Every day we have this same thing. I take you to the mirror and you say we’ll have something else for tea. What else is there in the High Wood besides gruts?”

“Well, there’s leaves, bark, grass, and leaves. Gruts are really the best. You must admit it.”

“Yes, Daddy, I admit it. Gruts are really the best, but I don’t want them. “

“Oh, don’t do that! Don’t throw them out for goodness’ sake! You’ll poison the dog!”

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Now those of you love the flower growing side of Gardening may be feeling a little left out with all this talk of vegetables ! So let us redress the balance and spend a while contemplating their beauty and symbolism as we hear of the garden of one even more exulted than Charlie Dimmock !

Reading 6

King Jesus hath a garden full of diverse flowers,
Where I go culling posies gay, all times and hours.
The Lily, white in blossom there is Chastity:
The Violet, with sweet perfume, Humility.
There naught is heard but Paradise bird,
Harp, dulcimer, lute,
With cymbal, trump and timbal,
And the tender, soothing flute.

The bonny Damask-rose is known as Patience :
The blithe and thrifty Marygold, Obedience.
The Crown Imperial bloometh too in yonder place,
‘Tis Charity, of stock divine, the flower of grace.
There naught is heard but Paradise bird,
Harp, dulcimer, lute,
With cymbal, trump and timbal,
And the tender, soothing flute.

Yet, ‘mid the brave, the bravest prize of all may claim
The Star of Bethlehem - Jesus - blessèd be his Name !
Ah! Jesus Lord, my heal and weal, my bliss complete,
Make thou my heart thy garden-plot, fair, trim and neat.
That I may hear this musik clear,
Harp, dulcimer, lute,
With cymbal, trump and timbal,
And the tender, soothing flute.

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There, just as you thought that the coming Festive Season was not going to get a mention, there it was, creeping in almost unheralded. Would you believe that even the Festive Season has its cynics !

Reading 7

Christmas time is here, by golly,
Disapproval would be folly,
Deck the halls with hunks of holly,
Fill the cup and don't say when.

Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens,
Mix the punch, drag out the Dickens,
Even though the prospect sickens,
Brother, here we go again.

On Christmas Day you can't get sore,
Your fellow man you must adore!
There's time to rob him all the more
The other three hundred and sixty-four...

Relations, sparing no expense, will
Send some useless old utensil,
Or a matching pen and pencil -
("Just the thing I need, how nice!")

It doesn't matter how sincere it
Is, nor how heartfelt the spirit,
Sentiment will not endear it,
What's important is the price.

Hark, the Herald Tribune sings,
Advertising wondrous things!
God rest ye merry merchants,
May ye make the Yuletide pay!
Angels we have heard on high,
Tell us to go out and buy!

So, let the raucous sleigh-bells jingle,
Hail our dear old friend Chris Cringle,
Driving his reindeer across the sky -
Don't stand underneath when they fly by!

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Thus spake Tom Lehrer, tongue in cheek ? And it is, as he says, time to trot out the Dickens.

Reading 8

It was a pleasant thing to see Mr Pickwick in the centre of the group, now pulled this way, and then that, and first kissed on the chin, and then on the nose, and then on the spectacles : and to hear the peals of laughter which were raised on every side; but it was a still more pleasant thing to see Mr Pickwick, blinded shortly afterwards with a silk handkerchief, falling up against the wall, and scrambling into corners, and going through all the mysteries of blind-man's buff, with the utmost relish for the game, until at last he caught one of the poor relations, and then had to evade the blind-man himself, which he did with nimbleness and agility that elicited the admiration and applause of all beholders. The poor relations caught the people who they thought would like it, and, when the game flagged, got caught themselves. When they were all tired of blind-man's buff, there was a great game at snap-dragon, and when fingers enough were burned with that, and all the raisins were gone, they sat down by the huge fire of blazing logs to a substantial supper, and a mighty bowl of wassail, something smaller than an ordinary wash-house copper, in which the hot apples were hissing and bubbling with a rich look, and a jolly sound, that were perfectly irresistible. 'This,' said Mr Pickwick, looking round him, 'this is, indeed, comfort.'

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So if you like your Christmas to be in the Dickens Style, then warm and comfortable, good food, warm log fire, and cheerful company are what you need. It's rather like a recipe, you have all the ingredients but the outcome depends on how you measure, mix and combine them. Some like this, others like that and perhaps some things are best avoided!

Reading 9

How will you your Christmas keep ?
Feasting, fasting, or asleep?
Will you laugh or will you pray,
Or will you forget the day ?

Be it kept with joy or prayer,
Keep of either some to share;
Whatsoever brings the day,
Do not keep but give away.

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Good night and merry Christmas to you all!
The last one out will clear the Hall
And neatly, chairs and tables stack;
Chairs down the sides, tables round the back!
But if you're quick, you'll clearly see, that
That last person will be me !
Annoy not the neighbours with your loud stampede,
Or stop, inebriate, their flower - beds to weed!
Into the pond be certain not to fall !
Good-night and Merry Christmas to you all !

The Small Print

This entertainment was devised by Rent-a-nuisance.com

Also in this series are

'Our Friends the Slugs'

'Slug Juggling for Beginners'

'Exciting things to do with the things the cat brings home'

'43 ways to use creepy-crawlies in your dessert menus'.

'The Home Office Guide to gift wrapping Snails'

'The Complete Worm Cookery Course'

'Browsing the Internet for the best suppliers of Reindeer Poo'

If you've got this far you must a) be very bored OR b) have brilliant eye-sight.