

Mortality and Meals: The Black Death's Impact on Diet in England

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Jessica Cordova

University of Washington Tacoma

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Advisor: Dr. Kucher

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of the Black Death in developing England's eating habits and culinary traditions. The mid-fourteenth century saw a marked change in English cuisine, change that traversed the classes. This change correlates with the timing of the Black Death, an episode of extreme mortality caused by bubonic plague. Notorious as the greatest single source of death across medieval Europe, the Black Death looms in modern minds as an unparalleled tragedy. Between 1348 to 1350, the Black Death swept across Europe and killed between one third and one half of the population. England endured an average of forty percent population loss, seemingly turning society upside down as manors and fields were neglected. However, two interesting phenomena occurred following the Black Death that had repercussions for centuries: the proportion of livestock to farmed land increased dramatically, and the peasant classes gained better wages and unprecedented mobility leading to a demand for more and higher quality foods. Existing scholarship tends to focus on economic, sociological, and agricultural trends during the Black Death, or on cooking, kitchens, and food customs. This paper connects Black Death history to food history. Primary sources utilized include manorial records and data compiled from these records, fourteenth century recipes, contemporary literature including the thirteenth century *Treatise of Walter Bibbesworth* and fourteenth century *Canterbury Tales* and *Piers Plowman*. The sources confirm that the Black Death contributed greatly to the change in the way nearly all lower-class English subjects ate, as well as the attitudes surrounding food.

Introduction

The fourteenth century was a tumultuous time for England, fraught with war, famine and plague.¹ The Hundred Years' War, in which King Edward III attempted to assert his right to the French throne, waged on in the background of the fourteenth century through the rule of Richard II (1377-99).² By the early 1300's, England was approaching a Malthusian crisis— the population was at subsistence level, producing just barely enough food to meet the caloric needs of the people— as agricultural technology stagnated in the face of economic and demographic expansion.³ Unusually wet and cold weather throughout Europe triggered the Great Famine of 1315-1317, which hit the lower strata of society especially hard.⁴ Another, lesser known event that followed the Great Famine was the Great Bovine Pestilence, a bovine disease which killed up to 62% of the cattle in England in 1319-1320 and created a dairy scarcity that lasted until 1332. This rendered the population, heavily dependent on dairy for protein and calcium, stunted, malnourished, and vulnerable to disease.⁵

In 1348, a new, deadly illness descended upon Europe, spreading and killing quickly. Within two years, between thirty and forty percent of Europe's population perished. It is known that the Black Death contributed to considerable change to the social and economic landscape in England In the mid-fourteenth century.⁶ Prior to the onset of the Black Death in England, rising economic prosperity brought the

¹ Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 2016), 210-211.

² *Ibid.*, 211.

³ Sharon DeWitte and Philip Slavin, "Between Famine and Death: England on the Eve of the Black Death—Evidence from Paleoepidemiology and Manorial Accounts." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 44, no. 1 (2013): 38.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶ Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 211.

population to 5 million by 1300 CE.⁷ In 1348, the Black Death emerged in England, thought to be caused by a new strain of bubonic plague which devastated the entire country, killing 2.4 million people in the course of two years.⁸ These large, population-wide crises must have had substantial effect on the psyches of the people who survived. The sudden decrease in population following the plague allowed for societal rearrangement that had various implications, such as the ending of serfdom and the limiting of the power of landlords. These changes allowed for increased individualism at large and opportunities for the lower classes.⁹ It is after the plague that England saw peasant uprisings, such as the Peasant's Revolt led by Wat Tyler in response to the 1381 Poll Tax.¹⁰

Through all these changes, however, life went on. People still needed to eat, rich or poor, revolting or recovering. While food culture in England had typically remained stagnant, the Black Death was pervasive enough to change such a fundamental aspect of life. The Norman Conquest, a monumental event in England's political history, for example made very little effect on the food habits of the English populace.¹¹ This may be because the Norman Conquest mostly affected royalty and nobility. The effects of the Black Death were much more far-reaching, affecting people of all walks of life.¹²

Food is vital to life; without food, there is quite literally no life. A subject so central to existence unsurprisingly can be inextricably linked to many aspects of life. Food culture in late medieval England

⁷ Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 2016), 123, 126.

⁸ Sean Martin, "The Pestilence Tyme." In *The Black Death* (New York: Oldcastle Books, 2011), 65, 67.

⁹ Stuart J Borsch, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study*, First ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

¹¹ Ben Jervis, Fiona Whelan and Alexandra Livarda, "Cuisine and Conquest : Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Food, Continuity and Change in 11th-Century England and Beyond," in *The Archaeology of the 11th Century*, ed. by D. Hadley and C. Dyer (London: Routledge, 2017), 244.

¹² Borsch, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study*, 65-66.

is, therefore, deeply intertwined with agriculture, the economy, domestic life and gender, and religious life. This paper argues that the Black Death triggered a permanent change in England's diet and culinary traditions for the lower classes from the fourteenth century onward despite best efforts from the nobility to prevent upward mobility in peasant food culture. This can be observed in manorial records, cook-books and recipes, and contemporary literature.

Background

The Black Death reached England in June 1348 in the port town of Bristol, subsequently spreading throughout England.¹³ Contemporary accounts expressed a sense of apocalyptic horror as men, women and children alike fell to the sickness in droves. Villages were abandoned or decimated, fields left to overgrow, livestock left untended, and the dead were unceremoniously heaped into mass graves as cemeteries became full and the living sparse.¹⁴ Causes were assumed to be some combination of the wrath of God, alignment of the planets, and bad air.¹⁵ While modern debate about the source continues, bubonic plague was most likely a virulent strain of the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which still exists today in a less deadly form and is treatable with antibiotics.¹⁶

As England emerged from the initial shock of the Great Mortality, it became apparent—readily for some, reluctantly for others—that things would be different. Nearly half of the labor force was gone; at the same time, there were dramatically fewer mouths to feed.¹⁷ The shortage of labor to work the fields

¹³ Ralph Higden, *Polychronicon Radulphi Higden Monachi Cestrenis*, ed. By C. Babington and J. R. Lumby, quoted in *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series, trans. and ed. By Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 62.

¹⁴ Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series, trans. and ed. By Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-110.

¹⁶ Aria Nouri, "The Black Death Pathogen Genome Uncovered," *American Association for the Advancement of Science* website, 10/26/2011, accessed 11/29/2018, <https://www.aaas.org/black-death-pathogen-genome-uncovered>.

¹⁷ Borsch, 65-66.

of great manors created competition between lords, as peasants found themselves in a place to negotiate better deals for the first time.¹⁸ Figure 1 shows the nose dive the population took in a very short period, not fully recovering until the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁹ As the lower classes acquired

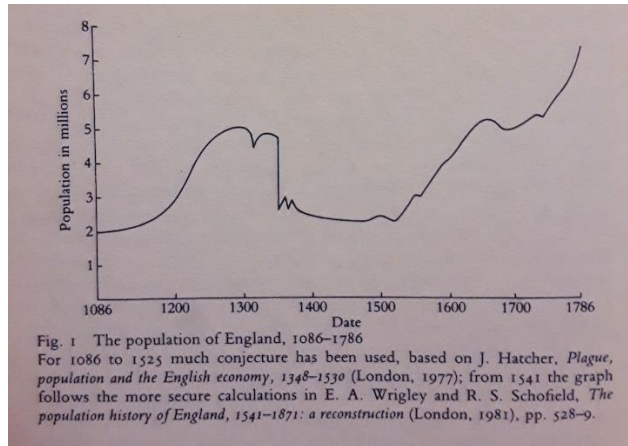


Figure 1. Population of England, 1086-1786. Dyer, *Standards of Living the Later Middle Ages, Social Change in England, C. 1200-1520*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks.(Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.4.

some proverbial breathing room, they found themselves with unprecedented opportunity, as the chaos from the Black Death allowed many villeins (feudal tenants) to escape bondage from a lord without consequence, which was apparently rampant for decades after as evidenced in the 1388 Statutes ordaining that all laborers and employees shall not leave at the end of their employment term without written permission.²⁰

Agriculture was permanently changed after the Black Death. The demesne system of farming that had dominated England for centuries dissipated as Lords began leasing out their land, which had become

¹⁸ John Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," *Past & Present*, no. 144 (1994): 27.

¹⁹ Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, C. 1200-1520*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4.

²⁰ Statutes of the Realm, II pp.56-8, in *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series, trans. and ed. by Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 323.

unwieldy with the shortage of labor and rising wages. Focus turned to cattle, and in particular, sheep husbandry, with 60 percent more sheep being raised by the end of the fourteenth century than at the beginning.²¹ Historian Bruce Campbell argues that it was this period of change that allowed greater interaction with the marketplace and thus was a first step in England's modern economic and agrarian evolution.²²

Literature Review

The Black Death has captured the imaginations of historians for over a century. During this time, drastically differing interpretations about nearly every aspect of this unprecedented Great Mortality evolved. Interest in the Black Death began in earnest in the late nineteenth century as history shifted to a more empirical profession.²³ One of the most significant early works investigating the Black Death's impact on Europe is Francis Aidan Gasquet's 1893 *The Great Pestilence*. Gasquet (1846-1929), an English Roman Catholic historian, explored the long reaching effects of the Black Death throughout Europe, focusing primarily on England. Sifting through an impressive array of Church rolls, court rolls, manorial accounts, documenting the spread of the plague and "desolation of the country."²⁴

One of the first historians to argue that the Black Death was a turning point in England's history, Gasquet boldly claimed that the "most striking and immediate effect of the mortality was to bring about nothing less than a complete social revolution."²⁵ In Gasquet's view, the written sources of the plague

²¹ Bruce Campbell, K. Bartley and J. Power, "The Demesne-Farming Systems of Post-Black Death England: A Classification," *The Agricultural History Review*, 44, no.2 (1996): 135.

²² Bruce Campbell, "Economy and Society in Town and Country," in *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, Ages Edited by S. H. Rigby, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2003), 23.

²³Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 120.

²⁴ Francis Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence: The Black Death of 1348 and 1349, 2nd Edition* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908),188-224.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

document the end of the feudalism and beginning of the rise of capitalism. This set the paradigm for the view of the Black Death as a watershed moment for modern England, at least until the second half of the twentieth century.

In 1969, Philip Ziegler offered a somewhat new interpretation of the Black Death's impact in *The Black Death*.²⁶ Ziegler, while admitting the Black Death had considerable effect on England and Europe at large, argued that the conditions for social change were already present in the early fourteenth century, and the Black Death merely accelerated the rate of change.²⁷ Ziegler calculated a lowered death toll from the median deaths documented of English clergy, reducing the average from 50 percent to 30 percent.²⁸ It must be noted, however, that Ziegler was neither a historian by training nor career, but rather a British journalist and biographer with an education focusing on law.²⁹ A new trend of downplaying the Black Death's influence on social change in England emerged.

A controversial social theory about the upheaval of the fourteenth century was put forth by Robert Brenner in a 1976 article, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe." Brenner argues that the changes observed beginning in the mid-fourteenth century are primarily attributable to class struggles, and shifts the focus from the Plague and what he called the "demographic model" to the feudal social structure itself, claiming it was inherently prone to revolution.³⁰ Fellow historians responded in defense of the demographic model, claiming Brenner was confused or lacked sufficient medieval knowledge. This snowballed into what was called the Brenner Debate, in which the

²⁶ Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York: John Day, 1969).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁹ Harper Collins Publishing, "Philip Ziegler," *Harper Collins Publishers* website, copyright 2018, accessed 11/1/2018.

³⁰ Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," *Past & Present*, no. 70 (1976): 31, <http://www.jstor.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/stable/650345>.

cause of the change seen in the fourteenth century was called into question.³¹ A series of articles that make up the debate have been collected into a book, *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe* edited by T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin.³²

This trend was subsequently challenged in the 1990s with medievalist John Hatcher's 1994 paper, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death."³³ In "England and the Aftermath of the Black Death," Hatcher declares the Black Death to be indeed a massively important point in England's history that should be treated as such. Hatcher notes that while the quantitative evidence is valuable, it allows historians to overlook important aspects that are missing from recorded documents.³⁴ To this extent, he provided contrasts of official documentation to contemporary English literature, including William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, as court cases and complaints against peasants.³⁵ Hatcher finds within these sources hidden hints at improved living standards, increased bargaining power and unprecedented mobility in the peasant class.³⁶ Hatcher concludes:

It is time to rein back the exuberance with which historians have long sought to undermine the significance of the Black Death. The fact that there was much in the years after 1349 which appeared to revert towards the status quo ante should not overshadow the fact that there was also much that had been transformed. Nor should it be assumed that the new directions which can be discerned in the first half of the fourteenth century would all have been followed with the same force and for the same duration without the intervention of the Black Death and later epidemics.³⁷

³¹ Peter Burke, "The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe. (Book Review)," *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 4 (1987): 1051.

³² T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, *The Brenner Debate : Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe* (Past and Present Publications, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³³ John Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," *Past & Present*, no. 144 (1994): 3-35. <http://www.jstor.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/stable/651142>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-18.

³⁶ Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," 15-27.

As so many aspects of life were affected by the Black Death, a multifaceted approach has become necessary. While the economic factors, such as income and prices, are heavily used to observe change from the early fourteenth century to late fourteenth century, one of the most prolific historians specializing in late medieval England economic, social and environmental history surrounding the Black Death is Bruce M. Campbell.³⁸ Campbell examines the fourteenth century, both prior to and after the Black Death, discerning the changes in market conditions, as well as standards of living, agricultural methods and environmental effects during this time. Campbell works with colleagues across disciplines, such as environmental science and epidemiological specialists, to garner evidence that is otherwise lacking in purely written sources.³⁹ Campbell is responsible for creating two invaluable collections of data extracted from thousands of medieval accounts. One is an online database of crop yields and prices, called *Three Centuries of Crop Yields*; the other is an atlas full of graphs and maps, *England on the Eve of the Black Death: An Atlas of Lay Lordship, Land and Wealth 1300-49*.⁴⁰

Detailing the lifestyles of varying levels of society in England in the late Middle Ages adds another layer of understanding to the food eaten and the culture and mindset surrounding it. While not specifically about the Black Death, Christopher Dyer's *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200-1520* encompasses the time period of the Plague. Dyer compares the daily life and living standards of the nobility to that of the peasant classes, meanwhile exploring the changing relationships of each via these standards. Referring to many secondary sources on medieval England's social strata, agriculture, and economy, as well as manorial records of purchases and wages,

³⁷ Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," 32-33.

³⁸ "Professor Bruce Campbell," *Queen's University Belfast* website, accessed 11-1-2018, [https://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/bruce-campbell\(9eb7fb57-b5e7-493a-9dfe-3d62beef83ba\).html](https://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/bruce-campbell(9eb7fb57-b5e7-493a-9dfe-3d62beef83ba).html).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Bruce M. S. Campbell (2007), *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491*, <http://www.cropyields.ac.uk>, accessed 11/1/2018; Bruce Campbell and Ken Bartley, *England on the eve of the Black Death: An Atlas of Lay Lordship, Land and Wealth 1300-49* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

church rolls, tax records and contemporary literature, Dyer posits that living standards improved for the lower classes, while changes in the economy ensured famines as terrible as that of 1315 never returned.⁴¹

Apart from living standards and the economy is the actual food eaten in medieval England. Delving into this enticing subject is Peter Brears' *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*. In *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*, Peter Brears describes many aspects of the food and daily life in Late Medieval England. His argument is that the study of Medieval food is necessary to enrich our understanding of daily life in this period. Brears uses medieval architectural layouts to discern eating and serving patterns, and to further deduce the changing relationships of people and food. Brears provides recipes and in-depth analysis of many aspects of the preparation and eating of food, such as set up of kitchen spaces, water supplies, serving etiquette, and table manners.⁴²

Food culture in England is also explored in depth by Chris Woolgar. Woolgar specializes in the study of everyday life in medieval England, particularly food and nutrition.⁴³ In his 2016 book *The Culture of Food in England: 1200-1500*, Woolgar discusses what food meant to people in England in the late Middle Ages. Woolgar's argument is that food conveys a deeper meaning in everyday life in late medieval England than mere sustenance and can act as a window to the hearts and minds of cooks and diners, illuminating social and cultural norms not otherwise obvious. This book provides insight into many cultural aspects of the foods of late medieval England. Woolgar explains what was eaten, how and by whom it was prepared, and what this shows about the social and religious culture of England.

⁴¹ Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages : Social Change in England, C. 1200-1520* (Cambridge Medieval Textbooks. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 276-7.

⁴² Peter Brears, *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England* (Devon, UK: Prospect Books, 2008).

⁴³ "Professor Chris Woolgar," *University of Southampton* website, accessed 11-1-2018, <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/history/about/staff/cw7g10.page>.

Woolgar utilizes resources such as coroner records of food related deaths and legal contracts stipulating workers' meal times.⁴⁴

Manorial records

Most of the sources about this subject come from the records kept by various manors throughout England, records which often span centuries. In medieval England, a manor was a unit of land administered by a given lord, to whom tenants paid rent, either with service, money or with produce. Tenants were usually peasants of varying degrees of prosperity; they could be villeins, who were tied to the land, unable to leave without the lord's consent and burdened with heavy obligation, or freeholders, who paid rent but were not tied to the land and had somewhat more opportunity for betterment.⁴⁵ Manorial records include court rolls, tenant tax assessments, contracts, marriage and funerary fees, rents paid and debts owed, as well manor purchases.⁴⁶

These records detail seed and livestock purchases, crop yields, prices and wages of the demesne, from which trends can be traced through time. The change in agriculture in the fourteenth century is one of the most visible indicators that what was eaten had also changed. A reduction in demesne, or manorial, farming systems in general, and a move from intensive arable agriculture—farming using less land but more labor—to extensive farming—that which utilized more land but less labor—with increased animal

⁴⁴ C.M. Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England: 1200-1500* (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁴⁵ "Manuscripts and Special Collections: Introduction to Manorial Records," *University of Nottingham* website, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/researchguidance/manorial/introduction.aspx>.

⁴⁶ P. D. A. Harvey, *Manorial Records of Cuxham, Oxfordshire : Circa 1200-1359*, Oxfordshire Record Society (Series); v. 50. (London: H.M. Stationery Off., 1976), 12-13.

husbandry was observed.⁴⁷ While this trend began in the earlier fourteenth century, it gained major traction from the sudden dramatic decrease in population caused by the Black Death.⁴⁸ There was nearly instantaneously much more land per capita, and comparatively less labor to work it; at the same time, the labor shortage gave laborers bargaining power, as they could finally demand higher wages at the threat of finding a more generous lord for whom to work.⁴⁹

To discern regional agricultural changes, a team of historians led by Professor Bruce Campbell compiled the data spanning three centuries from an unprecedented breadth of English manorial records, including two-hundred and fifty manors and thirty-four thousand individual crop yield observations.⁵⁰ Assembled in a free, open access website, the Medieval Crop Yields Database provides a quantifiable and accessible reservoir of primary source material. While animal husbandry is not included in this dataset, it is nonetheless a remarkable resource for medieval agricultural information from 1211 to 1491 CE.

The data, as shown in Figure 2, shows that the actual amount of total grain grown shifts down only slightly over the fourteenth century, possibly due to a need for grain for feeding livestock, as other sources note that consumption of most grains besides wheat was largely reduced by the 1380's.⁵¹ It is interesting to note that oats and barley yields increase while wheat decreases, as shown in Figure 3.⁵² This

⁴⁷ Bruce Campbell, K. Bartley, and J. Power, J, "The Demesne-Farming Systems of Post-Black Death England: A Classification," *The Agricultural History Review*, 1996, 44(2), 177.

⁴⁸ Christopher Dyer, "Changes in Diet in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of Harvest Workers," *The Agricultural History Review* 36, no. 1 (1988): 31.

⁴⁹ S. Pamuk, "The Black Death and the Origins of the 'Great Divergence' across Europe, 1300-1600," *European Review of Economic History*, 11(3) (2007): 294.

⁵⁰ Bruce M. S. Campbell (2007), *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491*, <http://www.cropyields.ac.uk>, accessed 11/1/2018.

⁵¹ Campbell, "The Demesne-Farming Systems of Post-Black Death England," *The Agricultural History Review*, 1996, 44(2): 133. Bruce M. S. Campbell (2007), "Chronologies, Graph 46," *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491*, http://www.cropyields.ac.uk/images/chronologies_graph_46.png.

supports the change to a preference for meat and wheat, in that order. Oats and barley—expendable once the population was halved—were needed to feed livestock. Wheat, the preferred grain for human consumption, needed to fulfill a smaller population's needs, so growing less despite being preferred makes sense. There was a distinct change in percentage of winter grains to spring grains grown, with winter grains changing from the greater to the lesser quantity, as shown in Figure 4. This change began in the decade of the Black Death years, and we can surmise that this relates to the increase in fodder grown for livestock, since wheat is a winter crop and oats and barley are spring crops.⁵³

While manorial records were primarily written for rural lords, one can glean information about the peasantry through this aristocratic lens. Maintenance contracts between the lord and a retiring tenant provide insight. These agreements often listed a regular, fixed amount of food pledged to the elderly tenant, likely to have been similar to the food eaten before retirement.⁵⁴ An example is the contract written in 1348, the eve of the Black Death, as recounted by Christopher Dyer, for the retirement Godfrey Welsh, which stipulated that the elderly tenant would receive a quarter of barley and four bushels of wheat annually.⁵⁵ Workers received an increased amount of meat and ale in the second half of the

⁵² Campbell (2007), "Chronologies, Graph 41," *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491*, www.cropyields.ac.uk/images/chronologies_graph_41.png. accessed 11/1/2018.

⁵³ Campbell (2007), "Chronologies, Graph 33," *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491*, www.cropyields.ac.uk/images/chronologies_graph_33.png. accessed 11/1/2018.

⁵⁴ Christopher Dyer, "Did the Peasants Really Starve in Medieval England?" in *Food History: Critical and Primary Sources: Classical and Postclassical Eras*, edited by Jeffrey M. Pilcher (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), Accessed October 26, 2018, 171.

⁵⁵ East Sussex R. O., Gage 18/6a, quoted in Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, 151.

Figure 3: Wheat Barley Oats YPS, Chronology 46 Bruce M. S. Campbell (2007), "Chronologies, Graph 46," *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491*, http://www.cropyields.ac.uk/images/chronologies_graph_46.png,

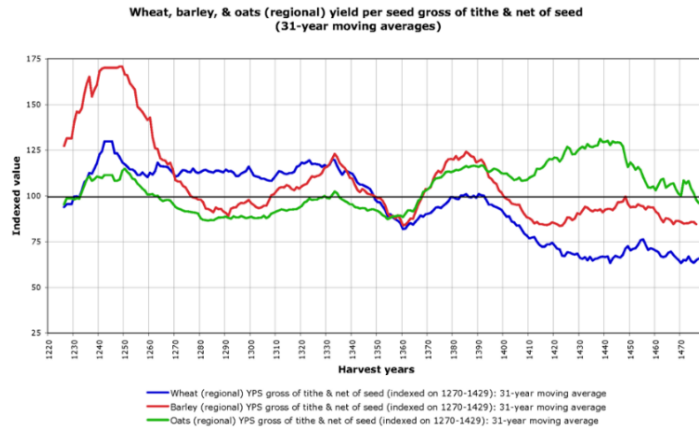


Figure 3 Winter Grains to Spring Grains, "Chronology 41" in Campbell, "Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491", http://www.cropyields.ac.uk/images/chronologies_graph_46.png

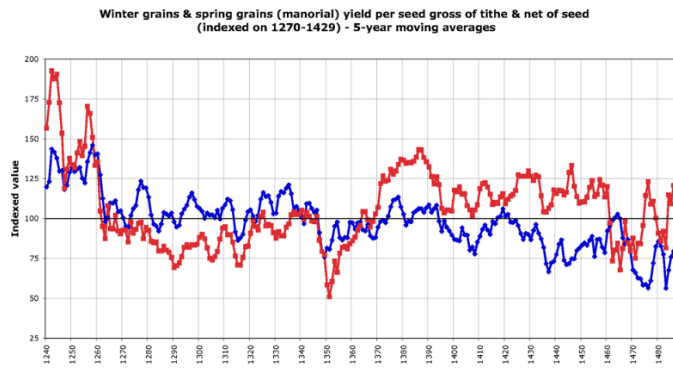
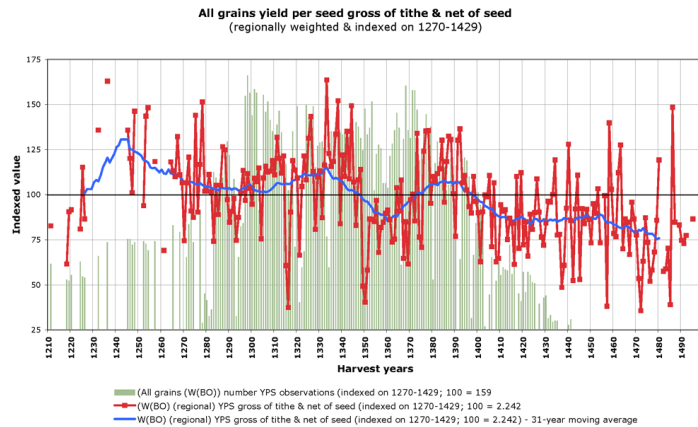


Figure 4: All Grains, Chronology 46, Campbell.



fourteenth century, as documented in the house records, indicating peasants and laborers were indeed changing their eating habits, possibly more than the wealthy.⁵⁶ Information gleaned from manorial accounts of payments and food provided to harvest workers illustrates the change after the Black Death years particularly well. Dyer provides the data compiled from the physical primary sources—only available in England—into accessible tables and graphs from which interpretations can be made. I will focus on the the data provided from Sedgeford, Norfolk.⁵⁷ It was customary for lords of the manors to feed the temporary workers bringing in the year’s harvest each August, and ever economically mindful, the manor’s expenses were recorded consistently over nearly two decades.⁵⁸ The foods provided are broken down into categories: bread; pottage corn; ale; meat; fish; and dairy produce.

Figure 5 below shows that in 1256 bread constituted 41 percent of the workers’ diet, ale was 13 percent, meat 4 percent, fish 13 percent, dairy 28 percent. By 1353, two years after the Black Death, these numbers shift to bread as 31 percent, ale 26 percent, meat nearly quadrupled to 15 percent, and dairy more than halved at 13 percent. This continues through the early fifteenth century, when bread is a mere 15 percent of workers’ diet, ale 41 percent, and meat 28 percent.⁵⁹ While there is a slight trend of increased ale and meat in the early fourteenth century, it is in the decades following the Black Death that we see a marked change, where for the first time meat increases as fish and dairy intake decreases. By 1387, six years after Wat Tyler’s Rebellion, harvest workers were receiving 50 percent of their diet as meat and ale.

⁵⁷Norfolk RO, DCN 60/33/1,2,4,5,7,10,14,19,25,30,31; Le Strange MSS, IB ¼, 3/5, quoted in Christopher Dyer, “Changes in Diet in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of Harvest Workers,” *The Agricultural History Review*, 36,1(1988): 25.

⁵⁸Christopher Dyer, “Changes in Diet in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of Harvest Workers,” *The Agricultural History Review*, 36,1(1988): 21.

⁵⁹ Norfolk RO, DCN 60/33/1,2,4,5,7,10,14,19,25,30,31; Le Strange MSS, IB ¼, 3/5, quoted in Dyer, “Changes in Diet in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of Harvest Workers,” *The Agricultural History Review*, 36,1(1988): 25.

The manorial records taken together prove that there certainly was a shift in diet centered in the fourteenth century, with prominent change evident immediately after the Black Death, which continued into the fifteenth century. Both the crops grown and foods provided to lower class workers support a permanent change. If the seeds of peasant preference had been planted in the early fourteenth century, it was the Black Death that irreversibly cultivated it.

Analysis (by Value, in Percentages, of Food-stuffs Consumed by Harvest Workers at Sedgeford, Norfolk, 1256-1424*

Year	1256	1264	1274	1286	1294	1310	1326	1341
Bread	41	48	49	47	48	43	39	34
Pottage corn	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1
Ale	13	7	11	12	16	14	17	21
Meat	4	4	7	14	8	8	11	9
Fish	13	16	12	12	9	10	10	17
Dairy produce	28	24	19	13	18	24	22	18

Year	1353	1368	1378	1387	1407	1413	1424
Bread	31	19	15	14	17	20	15
Pottage corn	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Ale	26	28	22	20	33	29	41
Meat	15	25	24	30	28	50	6
Fish	14	13	15	23	10		
Dairy produce	13	14	23	12	11		

* All columns total 100%

Figure 5. Christopher Dyer, "Changes in Diet in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of Harvest Workers," *The Agricultural History Review*, 36,1(1988): 25.

Recipes and Cookbooks

An increase in technical writing in the late fourteenth century began with Geoffrey Chaucer's 1391 *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, the first known technical writing in English.⁶⁰ This is also when cookbooks written in vernacular seemed to emerge, increasing in number and types ever after.⁶¹ The early recipes recorded tended to be primarily sourced from large upper-class households, possibly for purposes of meal planning and reminding cooks of ingredients and methods for special meals infrequently

⁶⁰ Gregory Chaucer, *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, ed. by F. N. Robinson (Fordham Sourcebooks, 1997), Fordham Sourcebooks Website, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/chaucer-astro.asp>.

⁶¹ S. Kernan, Daniel Hobbins, Alison Beach, and Christopher Otter, "'For Al Them That Delight in Cookery': The Production and Use of Cookery Books in England, 1300-1600," ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2016, 9.

prepared.⁶² Into the fifteenth century, cookbooks found a new audience in professionals such as doctors and lawyers, who were eager to keep up with the trends of nobility.⁶³ The trend toward simpler, less expensive vernacular cookeries supports the change toward increasingly rich tastes of all walks of life, as the former plain peasant diet disappeared and a new national cuisine developed and spread across England.

Very few cookbooks, also called cookeries, are thought to have existed before the plague years.⁶⁴ Certainly people were cooking, but there appeared to be little need for cookeries. *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth* provides one of the first detailed descriptions of English cuisine and instructions such as how to bake bread and brew ale.⁶⁵ *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth* was written, as suggested by the title, by Walter of Bibbesworth, an aristocrat, around 1235 for his friend Dionisie de Montchensi, who was marrying into a noble—therefore French-speaking—family and needed to teach her children French. The treatise, written in French with English glosses, was meant for Dionisie, who was not fluent French, to read aloud to the children and entertain them with the playful verse while teaching the language.⁶⁶ While Bibbesworth notes in his preface to Dionisie that he is including instructions for estate management, the primary purpose of the book is to teach aristocratic children the language of the English aristocracy.⁶⁷ These children would not be expected to actually make the bread and ale, or prepare a royal feast. This early treatise with baking and brewing instructions, while vastly informative, was not meant to

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁴ Constance Hiaett and Sharon Butler, *Curye on Inglysch* (London: Oxford University Press: 1985), 1-2.

⁶⁵ Walter de Bibbesworth and Andrew Dalby, *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth- Le Tretiz*, (Devon: Prospect Books, 2012), lines 368-409, 465-508.

⁶⁶ Andrew Dalby, "Introduction," in *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth- Le Tretiz*, (Devon: Prospect Books, 2012), 11-12.

⁶⁷ Walter de Bibbesworth and Andrew Dalby, *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth- Le Tretiz*, (Devon: Prospect Books, 2012), 39.

be used as instructional in those activities at all. The meals described in the feast at the very end of the treatise, Bibbesworth detailed the dishes served at a feast, titled in translation as “The High Feast,” beginning at line 820:

At the beginning was served boar’s head, well armed
The snout with the neck garlanded, then venison
With Frumenty.
About the house there was plenty of grice and fermison.
Then there were various meats roasted, six dishes each and
More on the side,
Cranes, peacocks and swans, marsh-geese, suckling-pigs and
Hens.
As third course they had rabbits in gravy and *Viaunde de
Cypre*, steeped.
Mace, cubebs, and gilded cloves, white and red wine in plenty;
Pheasants, woodcocks, partridges, fieldfares, larks, plovers well roasted.
Brawn, crisps and fritters with powdered rose-sugar as corrective;
And when the table was removed, blanch powder as whole sweetmeats.⁶⁸

This shows that in the mid-thirteenth century, the only foods thought worthy of describing were that of a high feast potentially held for a king. There was no attempt to instruct how to make these lavish plates, all of the cooks that would have made them were trained via elite apprenticeship.

It is not until after the Black Death that cookeries became popular, and from about 1360 to 1400 there began a transformation of cookeries as memory aids for professional cooks and objects for nobles and professionals to boast of their connection to royal and high-class menus, to affordable instructional texts bringing the meals of the great chefs to regular people.⁶⁹ Sarah Kernan asserts, in her assessment of the physical manuscripts of medieval England, that most late fourteenth century cookeries and recipes were intended as instructional rather than for boasting.⁷⁰ From the images of the manuscripts, we can see

⁶⁸ Ibid., 143-153. Noted by the editor/translator: Well armed means with tusks intact; frument is a garnish for venison; grice is young goats or pigs slaughtered “out of season”; fermison is venison taken out of season; *Viaunde de Cypre* is made of almond milk, rice flour and ginger, garnished with pistachios; blanch powder is sugar and ground ginger.

⁶⁹ Sarah Kernan, “For Al Them That Delight in Cookery’: The Production and Use of Cookery Books in England, 1300–1600,” ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2016, 62-63.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 48-51.

the sauce and grease stains on the pages, the singed edges and marginalia that these cookeries were indeed clearly used in the kitchen while cooking. Kernan notes that the paper—used as opposed to parchment—black ink, and penmanship of later fourteenth century and early fifteenth manuscripts indicates cheaper quality and less time to produce.⁷¹ The Sloane manuscript in Figure 6 is an example of this early fifteenth century paper-and-freehand inclination.⁷² The progression begun by the Black Death brought about lower cost, common vernacular cookeries, accessible even to peasants who desired to cook meals in the style after nobility. This further supports the argument that the people of lower class England began to dramatically change their cuisine.

The recipes found in these manuscripts offer unique insight into late medieval kitchens of nobility, which we can gather the peasantry may have tried to imitate as their tastes grew richer and desire to be like the aristocracy increased.⁷³ These cookeries began to eventually be geared towards well-to-do peasant women, who likely could discern the vernacular text which became common at the end of the fourteenth century.⁷⁴ Constance Hieatt's collection of original middle English recipes, *Curye on Inglysch*, provides a rich array of examples of late fourteenth and early fifteenth century recipes.⁷⁵ Hieatt notes that it is likely that these recipes had existed in oral tradition well before the fourteenth century, especially with *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth* mentioning several dishes which appear in later cookeries.⁷⁶

⁷¹Kernan, "For Al Them That Delight in Cookery": The Production and Use of Cookery Books in England, 1300–1600," ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2016,

⁷² Ibid., 58.

⁷³ Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," 14.

⁷⁴ Kernan, "For Al Them That Delight in Cookery," 33. Kernan explains here that medieval illiteracy tended to refer to inability to read Latin, and many lower-class people learned out of necessity to read vernacular English, in what is known as "pragmatic literacy."

⁷⁵ Constance Hieatt and Sharon Butler, *Curye on Inglysch* (London: Oxford University Press: 1985).

⁷⁶Hieatt, *Curye on Inglysch* (London: Oxford University Press: 1985), 6-7.

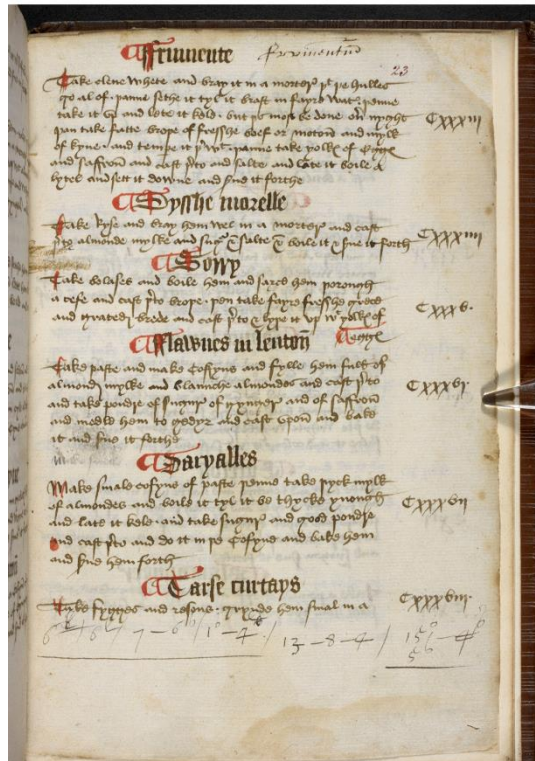


Figure 6. On Sloane 1108, fol. 23 r. 1 in Sarah Kernan, “For Al Them That Delight in Cookery”: The Production and Use of Cookery Books in England, 1300–1600,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 2016, 58.

Hieatt makes an interesting note about the recipes themselves, that earlier versions of the same recipe tend to be simpler, with less instruction, than later iterations.⁷⁷ An example is the classic medieval English dish “Mawmenny,” which is essentially a spiced, thick meat stew, like a medieval curry, and recurs regularly in cookeries. In the 1335 recipe, is about five lines long with basic ingredients of ground meat, wine, boiled and sprinkled with fried almonds, ground cloves and sugar, dyed indigo.⁷⁸ The 1381 recipe for Mawmenny is nine lines long, with more instructions, for instance cutting the meat into small pieces rather than ground, specifying “capon,” a type of castrated rooster, rather than any meat,

⁷⁷Ibid., 9.

⁷⁸ MS He, in *Curie on Inglysch* (London: Oxford University Press: 1985), 9.

thickening the wine sauce with rice flour, dyed yellow with saffron and sprinkled with mixed spice powder.⁷⁹ The 1425 recipe is 8 lines long, with detailed instructions and specific quantities, and the 1440 version twice as long again.⁸⁰

Heatt is simply noting how recipes change over time. It can be argued, however, that these changes to increased length and instruction are due to the gradual change in audience to include peasant home cooks, rather than professional chefs merely needing reminders. As the peasants change their diet to include more upper-class foods which they might now have been used to preparing, they would require more detailed instruction. This combined with the trend of lower cost production materials further supports the shift in peasant cuisine brought on by the Black Death.

Conclusion: The “natural order” overturned

Food in late medieval England was as much about identity as sustenance. C.M. Woolgar asserts the importance of food as gifts in societal customs and relationships, as food would be expected by lords as gifts certain times of year, such as poultry on Easter, and the lords would be expected to host the tenants at a large Christmas dinner.⁸¹ Large noble households held lavish feasts for the purpose of showing off their wealth, asserting their hierarchical position.⁸² Villeins starved during lean times, due to their position at the bottom of the social ladder. The huge demographic shakeup triggered by the Black Death, however, had dramatic repercussions in peasants’ attitudes about their right to more and better food, despite the dismay of the upper classes who saw their rights in culinary culture and hierarchies challenged.

⁷⁹ Bodl. MS Douce 257 (D), in *Curye on Inglysch* (London: Oxford University Press: 1985), 9.

⁸⁰ BL MS Add. 5016 (A); BL MS Harl. 4016, in *Curye on Inglysch* (London: Oxford University Press: 1985), 9-10.

⁸¹ C.M. Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," *Journal of Medieval History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 8-9.

⁸² Ben Jarvis, "Cuisine and Urban Identities in Medieval England: Objects, Foodstuffs, and Urban Life in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Hampshire," *Archaeological Journal*, 169, No.1.(2014): 473.

Prior to the Black Death, food shortages were commonplace. During these periods, the lower social strata were expected to consume meager, homely food of primarily cheap grain, and little ale.⁸³ When, after the Black Death, the peasants began to realize their ability to bargain for better wages, they also demanded better food, namely beef, ale, and white bread.⁸⁴ The lords were appalled, and complained profusely about the greed and laziness of the workers.⁸⁵ Beginning as early as 1348, several contemporary sources lamented the gall of the lower classes to demand the luxuries of their betters. William Dene, in the chronicle of the cathedral priory of Rochester, recorded this attitude as the Black Death transpired:

As remarked above, such a shortage of workers ensued that the humble turned up their noses at employment, and could scarcely be persuaded to serve the eminent unless for triple wages. Instead, because of the doles handed out at funerals, those who once had to work now have time for idleness, thieving and other outrages, and thus the poor and servile have been enriched and the rich impoverished. As a result, churchmen, knights and other worthies have been forced to thresh their own corn, plow the land, and perform every other unskilled task if they are to make their own bread.⁸⁶

Dene's words expose the upper-class mentality that the lower classes have no right to leisure, and that it is profoundly wrong for such lowly people to allow nobles to toil while demanding better pay. The newfound ability of peasants to require more pay and better food, previously only allotted to nobility—overturned what Dene called “the natural order.”⁸⁷ This shift was not quietly accepted by the upper-class who felt it challenged their identity.

⁸³ Dyer, “Did the Peasants Really Starve in Medieval England?” 171.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁸⁵ Hatcher, “England in the Aftermath of the Black Death,” 14.

⁸⁶ William Dene, *Historia Roffensis*, British Library, Cottonian MS, Faustina B V fos 96v-101. In *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series, trans. and ed. by Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 70.

⁸⁷ Dene, *Historia Roffensis*, British Library, Cottonian MS, Faustina B V fos 96v-101. In *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series, trans. and ed. By Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 71.

The Ordinance of Laborers of 1349 and Statute of Labourers of 1350 clearly illustrates the nobles' reaction to peasants' demands. These laws required all workers to receive the same wages as before the Black Death and made it illegal for employers to pay higher wages, in order to prevent the lower classes from creating perceived chaos. This measure failed. John Hatcher remarks that there is ample evidence from manorial records that workers were often openly paid wages above those set by the ordinance, and still others were paid "under the table," altering the accounts of wages in the records, and workers often received fringe benefits such as extra and higher quality food.⁸⁸ A decade later, in 1363, the crown issued a series of Sumptuary Laws in another attempt to restore the 1349 order, restricting the clothing that peasants could wear and food they could eat, stating:

Item, for the outrageous and excessive apparel of many people, contrary to their estate and their degree, to the great destruction and impoverishment of the whole land, it is ordained that lads (of the humblest level of servant or employee) shall have meat or fish to eat once a day, and at other times other food appropriate to their estate, such as milk, butter and cheese.⁸⁹

Rosemary Horrox, editor of this source, notes that nobles attempted to enforce these sumptuary laws repeatedly, but failed each time.⁹⁰ In the aftermath of the Black Death, population and social shifts allowed peasants to demand better food, and though the aristocracy and Crown were displeased by this turn of events, they were unable to stem the tide.

The contemporary literature of the time also reveals the disapproval of the new assertiveness of the lower-classes. William Langland's *Piers Plowman* reads as an allegorical diatribe against the audacity of peasants.⁹¹ First written starting around 1362—suspiciously close to the year of the Sumptuary Laws'

⁸⁸Hatcher, "England in the Aftermath of the Black Death," *Past & Present*, no. 144 (1994): 21-22.

⁸⁹ *Statutes of the Realm*, I pp. 380, in *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series, trans. and ed. by Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 340.

⁹⁰ Horrox, *The Black Death*, Manchester Medieval Sources Series, trans. and ed. by Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), 340.

⁹¹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Modern Verse Translation*, trans. by Peter Sutton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.: 2014),

passing— in Middle English, *Piers Plowman* criticizes the evil ways of the world while meeting allegorical characters, such as Sloth, Conscience, Money, Falsehood, and Reason, throughout a series of dreams. A nameless narrator describes his apparently divinely inspired dreams centered on the namesake, Piers the Plowman, an honest and Christlike figure to whom the reader should aspire. In the second dream sequence, readers are treated to the 1360s' upper-class view of laborers. Piers offers to take the narrator on a pilgrimage after he plants his land. His laborers, however, stop working and drink instead; they pretend to be disabled, then threaten Piers with violence and theft. Piers calls on the only one who can return order, Hunger, who beats them to near starvation. The workers then accept any food available, no matter how lowly, and get back to work. "To the hungry, horse-mash was milk and honey, Many beggars were content with the bean-and-bran bread, And poor men with pease for the pains of their hunger, Seizing like sparrowhawks on task that Piers set. So Piers felt proud as he put them to work And provided the food and the wages that were fair."⁹² The crux of the story; Peasants and laborers were expected to work and embrace poverty; the foods and leisure of nobles were not for them, until they gained the upper hand in labor relations after the Black Death.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* hints at a somewhat sardonic position of the post-plague world, though Chaucer mocks multiple levels of society. Chaucer is especially critical of hypocrisy in religious figures, such as the greedy, begging Friar in "The Summoner's Tale" and the Adulterer cleric Nicolas in the Miller's Tale.⁹³ The laboring Ploughman whom the narrator mentions in the preface—an introduction in which a slew of pilgrims are introduced—is somewhat idealized as honest Christians, like Piers Ploughman, though he does not tell a tale or do any lecturing, and does not compete for the free meal promised by the host. This seems to have been a gentle plea for laborers to be silent and

⁹² Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Modern Verse Translation*, trans. by Peter Sutton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.: 2014), 1520-1571.

⁹³ Gregory Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, translated by Burton Raffel (New York, New York: Modern Library, 2009), 205-222; 88-104.

do their work; be like the Ploughman.⁹⁴ Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* between 1387 and 1400, after Wat Tyler's Rebellion.⁹⁵ At least until the seventeenth century when the population finally reached pre-Black Death levels, Chaucer's plea went unmet.⁹⁶

The period after the Black Death saw unprecedented changes to English society. While life's struggles, inequality and poverty did not end, shifts in population led to shifts in work and social relationships and, as a result, considerable improvement to the daily standards of living of the lower classes developed. In particular, the cuisine and dietary habits of peasants significantly shifted following the Black Death, creating a more national culinary tradition. Manorial agricultural records indicate changing preferences immediately following the Black Death years, as shown by increased wheat production and animal husbandry; records of food provided to harvest workers at the same time show that laborers increasingly demanded more lordly provisions. Cookbooks of thrifty materials and instructional nature emerged, bypassing the earlier primary use as memory aids for professional chefs and suggesting a new peasant audience. Sumptuary laws and complaints by upper-class contemporaries express the fruitless resistance of lords and royalty to the perceived toppling of the "natural order." Deeper examination of seemingly trivial aspects of life could expose greater understanding of peasant life in late medieval England.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁵ Burton Raffel, "Translator's Foreword," in *The Canterbury Tales*, translated by Burton Raffel (New York, New York: Modern Library, 2009), xxxvi.

⁹⁶ F. R. H. Du Boulay, *An Age of Ambition: English Society in the Late Middle Ages*. (London: Nelson, 1970), 35-36.

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Figure 3. Campbell, Bruce M. S. (2007). *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491* <http://www.cropyields.ac.uk>, accessed 11/1/2018 Chronology 41.

Figure 4. Campbell, Bruce M. S. (2007). *Three centuries of English crops yields, 1211-1491*. <http://www.cropyields.ac.uk>, accessed 11/1/2018 Chronology 33.

Figure 5. Dyer, Christopher. "Changes in Diet in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of Harvest Workers." *The Agricultural History Review*, 36,1(1988): 25.

Figure 6. On Sloane 1108, fol. 23 r. 2 in Kernan, Sarah. "'For Al Them That Delight in Cookery': The Production and Use of Cookery Books in England, 1300–1600." *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*. 2016, 58.