Feeding Mediaeval Ludgershall; Fish Ponds, Dovecotes and Pillow Mounds

The population of Ludgershall in Mediaeval times did not have the benefit of supermarkets, on-line shopping or indeed of any recognisable shops in the village at all. Life in Ludgershall was what we might term today a ‘green’ lifestyle with no carbon footprint. Almost all that the villagers ate, save for some spices, was produced within the village.

There were two strands of society within the village at the time; one was the manorial and ecclesiastical strand. This comprised of the lord of the manor and his immediate family and also those from the ecclesiastical community who ran the hospital within the village. The other strand, much the larger in terms of percentage of population was the peasantry. The two sections of the community had, as we shall see, very different diets. They also got much of their food from different places within the village.

The upper classes, the manorial and ecclesiastical classes, had a much better as well as a much richer diet. Much of the diet centred on fish. This was due mostly to dictate of the Church which forbade the eating of flesh on many days throughout the year but allowed the eating of fish. Indeed fish was eaten throughout Lent and on every Feast day which amounted to over two hundred days throughout the year. To provide the amount of fish required for this the fish pond was devised. These were, as the name suggests man-made ponds created solely to produce fish. They were typically rectangular and had a flat bottom. Often they were fed by a nearby stream which helped to keep the water fresh and oxygenated. Almost all have been lost due to the changes in farming practice throughout the country. However in Ludgershall the last vestiges of at least two fish ponds are still visible. In the field to the east of the church the pond surrounded by trees and bushes was a fish pond, and in the field to the west of the church adjacent to the Old Rectory there are also traces of a fish pond. Both these ponds would have been near to where it is thought the hospital may have been located. It was usually the case that such structures were sited near domestic buildings due to poaching which was a common occurrence. Thus ‘fish farms’ can be shown to have been a mediaeval concept not one of the twentieth century as we so often think.

The fish farmed in these ponds were not those which we would commonly expect to eat in the present day. In inland areas such as Ludgershall there was some trade in sea fish such as cod and herring, but more commonly the fish would be what are termed coarse fish such as carp, bream, tench and pike as well as trout. Fish today which are caught as sport and then thrown back. In the mediaeval times these fish constituted a major part of the diet of the upper classes who lived in Ludgershall. The peasantry did not have access to the fish except if there were a glut and then manor sold them off, however as been mentioned before poaching did occur and I am sure that at least part of the peasant’s diet consisted of fish at various times throughout the year. Some of the farmed fish was either smoked or salted for use in the winter; fresh fish was often presented in stews, in a pie or fried. Some fish was given a more elaborate treatment, Pike, for instance, was steamed and then served with a cinnamon and ginger sauce on feast days. Perhaps this effectively screened its rather muddy taste.

Another source of food for the upper classes was the dovecote. These were often well built structures, either of stone, brick or wood. They were constructed so that there were nesting holes in the interior walls, sometimes as many as a thousand. In these nesting holes the doves or pigeons were encouraged to lay eggs and to rear their young. Doves and pigeons mate for life so their rearing
is quite simple requiring no great input of husbandry on behalf of the owner. To encourage this the owners of the dovecote provided the birds with some grain, however much of the diet was provided by the birds themselves as they foraged throughout the countryside. In return the owner received eggs, meat, feathers and dung, all of which were of great value in mediaeval times. In Ludgershall there was a dovecote situated in the field to the south of the Old Rectory. We know this to be the case because there is documentary evidence of its existence, but also because it is recorded on old maps as ‘dove house field’ it is known to some villagers as ‘duffers’ which is merely a contraction of the longer name. Pigeons then were not thought of as vermin to be eradicated as they are today, but just another useful food source.

Rabbits were introduced into England by the Romans. It was perhaps Romans travelling along the Roman road which passes through the north of the parish who introduced them to Ludgershall. They were not in early times able to withstand the harsh English winters and to achieve good stocks they were colonised in constructions called warrens. These gave the rabbits some cover and also allowed the warrener, the name given to those who bred the rabbits, a limited amount of control over them. It was only in much later times that the mass escape of rabbits into the countryside caused the population to increase so much and cause major problems to growing crops. One form of warren was known as a ‘pillow mound’, primarily because its shape was similar to that of a pillow fashionable at the time. It is possible that Ludgershall has the remains of one of these pillow mounds in the field adjacent to the hairdressers in the High Street. It is just visible in the triangle of the field to the right as you climb over the stile. One other factor which may give further credence to this assumption is the thatched cottage nearby called ‘The Warrens’. It’s possible that the cottage may have been given this name at a much later date but in general all names are indicative of what happened in their location. This historic use of names is often very useful in the study of an area and can often give many clues as to land use and type.

Rabbits as a food source were again mainly for the use of the upper classes. Their fur too was used to trim the clothes of the rich rather than the poor. It is also interesting to note that yet again a food source was used not just for food but also to serve another purpose. As food rabbits were roasted, stewed or cooked in pies. The poor also had rabbit but only when they were able to poach it from the manorial lands. The poaching of rabbits was difficult to suppress, especially in very remote rural areas, thus the punishment was often, when viewed through modern eyes, draconian.

As can be seen from the descriptions above of the way in which Ludgershall village obtained some of its food the upper classes were very well provided for. As well as the fish ponds, dovecotes and rabbit warrens they were also in a position to have serfs grow food in their fields or gardens. There is no doubt that the rich and those associated with the church lived, albeit modest by our times, on quite good food. Not so the poor old peasant, unless by dint of crime, he had no access to such riches. The peasant and his family lived on what they could grow in the small area attached to their dwelling. Here they could grow brassicas, leeks, onions and garlic. They could if they were able to afford them rear chickens and a pig. Small birds and rabbits were strayed onto this small piece of land were snared, all to end up in the peasants pot. Meat however played a very small part in their diet. Peasant workers did well at harvest time when as part of their payment for working on the Lords land they were given a small amount of meat. This was not totally altruistic; a starving worker was not able to work as well as one with a full stomach, thus the Lord of the manor made the gift with a view to his own needs. Carbohydrates, which in later times were supplied by potatoes, were
eaten in the form of bread. This would not generally be wheat bread but the cheaper bread made from oats of rye grain. White bread was only for the Lords table. However the main source of the peasant’s diet was the pot which hung above the fire in their home. To this was added any vegetable they had and occasionally perhaps some meat in the form of a rabbit, small birds or parts of the family pig. Sometimes too, if the pottage was of a soup-like consistency, they added bones to give just that little addition of flavour. Peasants lived very much a hand to mouth existence, nothing was ever wasted, and nothing was ever thrown away if it could be used in some way. This ‘nothing wasted’ philosophy is perhaps best illustrated by the peasants pig. When the peasants pig was killed at the end of the year it was said that the only thing that was not used was the squeal. Every other part of the pig was used to its fullest extent, that which was not eaten at the time was either salted or smoked to preserve it, and fed the family for much of the winter when other foods were scarce. As we can see the diets of the rich and the poor were significantly different, Ludgershall was not untypical in this respect in fact having all three types of food production methods may have made the diet of the village just that little faction better than some of the others villages in the vicinity.

Coming next; The Black Death and Ludgershall 1603