

The Crumbs of History : Bread in the Archives

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Bread is a staple food the world over. In the Anglo-Saxon period, the word for a lord is generally thought to be derived from the term for loaf-keeper and the word for a lady to be derived from the term for bread-kneader. The baker in Aelfric's Colloquy says:

...without my skill every table seems empty
and without bread all food is turned to
loathing, I gladden the heart of men, I
strengthen folk.

You would therefore imagine that archival collections would be full of references to production and consumption of bread. In fact it seems to have left far fewer traces in the Birmingham City Archives than we might have expected. Not even enough for a sandwich course on the subject. Still, let us collect up some of those surviving crumbs from history's table.

We can begin with a recipe for a gingerbread loaf:

3 lbs flour, 3 lbs treacle, 1 lb butter, 1 lb sugar, 6 eggs, a desert [sic] spoonful of carbonate of soda, ginger, allspice, citron to taste

The butter & sugar are first beaten to a cream, then add the eggs previously well beaten, the rest by degrees and the soda last, it is set the night before the same as bread and baked in a moderate oven.¹

This from a recipe book which is probably from the 19th

Century and may have belonged to Sarah Anne Solomon, but has no known date or provenance. The recipe sounds timeless enough to turn out fine - though I haven't tried it.

The churchwardens' accounts for Birmingham parishes have not survived well and even where they exist are often in a terrible state of repair. However, a copy of those from Berkswell in Warwickshire for 1614 includes, as one would expect, payments for bread and wine for the communion service:

Layde out by me Richard Higgford,
Church of Barksweli, 1614
Imprim[is]: for the breade & wyne for the
first Communion the 23 daye of Julye
2s 6d
It[e]m: for bread & wyne the 9th daye of
October at the Communion 2s 3d
Item, laid out for bred & wyne for the
Communion upon the Sunday after New
Yeares Day 3s 1d

Such churchwardens' accounts are fascinating for the wealth of detail they include about the upkeep of the church - payments for mending the bells, burials, parchment, care of infants, keeping dogs out of the churchyard, for example. The spelling is often especially haphazard and amusing, as that of schoolhouse, which is here spelt 'scowlehouse'.² It suggests that the churchwarden did not enjoy his schooldays!

A further instance of bread in a religious context is a

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certificate of declaration by Sir Charles Littleton, knight, cup-bearer to His Majesty and Colonel of the Regiment of His Royal Highness the Duke of York, dated 18 April, 25 Charles II (1673). Sir Charles declares that he believes '...that there is not any Transubstantiation in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper or in the Elements of bread and wine'. This declaration was made as a consequence of an Act 'for preventing dangers which may happen from Popish Recusants'.³

The end of the 18th Century was an exciting time for the humble loaf in Birmingham. It was a time of bad weather and disappointing harvests and starvation for the poor in the city. The winter of 1794 / 5 was particularly severe and the year that followed remained cold. Food was scarce; food riots occurred and the Speenhamland system was introduced. Matthew Boulton wrote to his daughter on 9 July 1795:

I spent much of my time last week & all my time this week in attending meetings & obtaining Subscriptions to purchase Corn for the poor who are upon the brink of Famine & all we have done, or can do, I fear will not be sufficient to prevent great distress...I have ordered some Wheat & Rye to be Bought to day in Birm[in]g[ha]m Market for my own use & intend to eat none but Brown bread made of Flower ground all one Way & even some with the Bran in it; for unless the oppulent set the Example the poor of this neighbourhood are too fine mouthed & sausey to eat brown Bread. I intend every week to publish in Pearsons paper some observations upon the subject & endeavour to perswade the poor that Brown is more wholesome than White Bread & likewise perswade them to substitute other kinds of food in lieu of bread in a certain degree such as Pease, Beans, & other Vegetables, with Fat bacon which we shall buy in Quantities very Cheap. Boulton & Watt have subscribed for the Poor of Handsworth

200 pounds as a loan to buy Wheat when ever it can be bought Cheapest...I have also done the same at Birmingham.⁴



George Bayley with his horse-drawn bakery van in Coventry Road, Yardley c.1925

I'm sure Matthew Boulton, at least, would have benefited from the increased fibre in his diet ! The company of Boulton & Watt also profited from this interest in flour and bread as they were asked to provide a steam engine for the Birmingham Flour & Bread Company in 1796. The Company, which unhygienically met at the Coal Company's committee room in Newhall Street, was informed that a 16 horse-power engine would grind about five bags of wheat per hour with two pairs of stones. The full price for the engine was £993 8s 0d and the engine was installed by June 1797.⁵

Perhaps they were competing with the Union Mill, whose reports of sales of flour in the year 1800-1801 showed a saving of £2,206 16s 9 1/2d to the proprietors upon pecks of flour and similar savings on pecks of bread when the prices of the Union Mill and shopkeepers in the town were compared The report informs us that 'It will also be remembered that the Flour of this company is uniformly manufactured from unadulterated Wheat'. Reassuring, given some of the ingredients which could be used to adulterate bread.⁶

The shareholders may have been making a tidy profit, but the price of bread for the poorer customer did not

decrease, affected as it was by cold, wet weather and a poor harvest the year before and further severe storms in 1800. Matthew Boulton wrote to his daughter from Soho on 11 September 1800:

I am unwilling to be absent in these days of Riot and Distress. Birm[in]g[ha]m looks like a Garrison Town with Troops parading the Streets night & day. The Mob have attacked most of the Bakers & particularly Pickards Steam Mill & he in defending it shot & wounded several some of whom report says are dead. The Magistrates with Mr Legge & Lord Aylesford are on constant duty & by their Exertions with the Military Force which they have the command of I hope the Mob will be prevented from committing acts of desperation, but though they may be subdued by the Musquet & Bayonet, yet the cause will not be removed thereby, nor their starving Families be relieved or bread rendered Cheaper.⁷

One attempt to feed the poor was made by setting up a soup kitchen. In 1798 Charles Lloyd sent a copy of the 'Birmingham Soup Subscription' notice to his cousin in Norwich. Although his name heads the list of committee members, his letter begins with the nice irony of thanking his cousin for a brace of pheasants ! The soup shop had opened in the winter of 1797 / 8 and as a result of its success at this time was opened again in November 1798. Over 11,000 people bought a soup ticket for one penny for a quart of 'good meat soup' with a large slice of bread. The ingredients of the soup were listed as: beef, rice, peas, black pepper, cayenne pepper, ground ginger, onions, salt, celery, leeks, carrot, dried mint etc.⁸

When the charitable business of giving food to the poor was organised, bread was usually what was doled out. A table of benefactions to the poor of the parish of St Nicholas, Worcester, compiled in 1814, lists seven donors whose legacies were converted into the distribution of 'Bread on Sundays'.⁹ Among the parish records of St Mary, Moseley, in Birmingham, there is a volume which lists the recipients of charity loaves from 1850 to 1863. Details given include the name of the recipient, their age, the number of children and the number of loaves received. In 1850, Widow Davis, aged 90 years, received one loaf each fortnight from January to March. (Perhaps they used preservatives then after all !) John Williams, aged 48 years, with eight children, received four loaves every fortnight, whilst in 1852 there is a note:

Total number of loaves of Mr W[illia]m Fletcher gaive away at Moesley [sic] Chapel, 1852: 564

Mr Fletcher also supplied the loaves in 1853, when the cost per loaf is noted as fivepence.¹⁰

The records of the Poor Law Unions also concern themselves with bread. The minutes of the House Committee of Birmingham Union record the price of bread, flour and bran each week and the amounts purchased. The list of paupers acting as nurses or keepers of wards and so receiving gratuities in August 1842 includes one Samuel Wakelam, whose occupation is listed as 'bread cutter' for which he received one shilling a week.

On 31 May 1915, the Sectional Relief Committee No. 4 resolved that:

Rebecca Clarke (34) married with 4 dependent children residing at 16 Rupert Street be granted Out Relief to the extent of 12s, seven loaves and four qts of Milk weekly for four weeks. The total income is 2s by applicant and 7s from son Edgar who lives at home. The rent is 6s 6d. Applicant's family are all delicate and two of the children are certified as suffering from Phthisis. After payment of the Rent there is 19s including relief to maintain five persons being 3s 9d per head.

Out-Relief granted to many of the applicants included

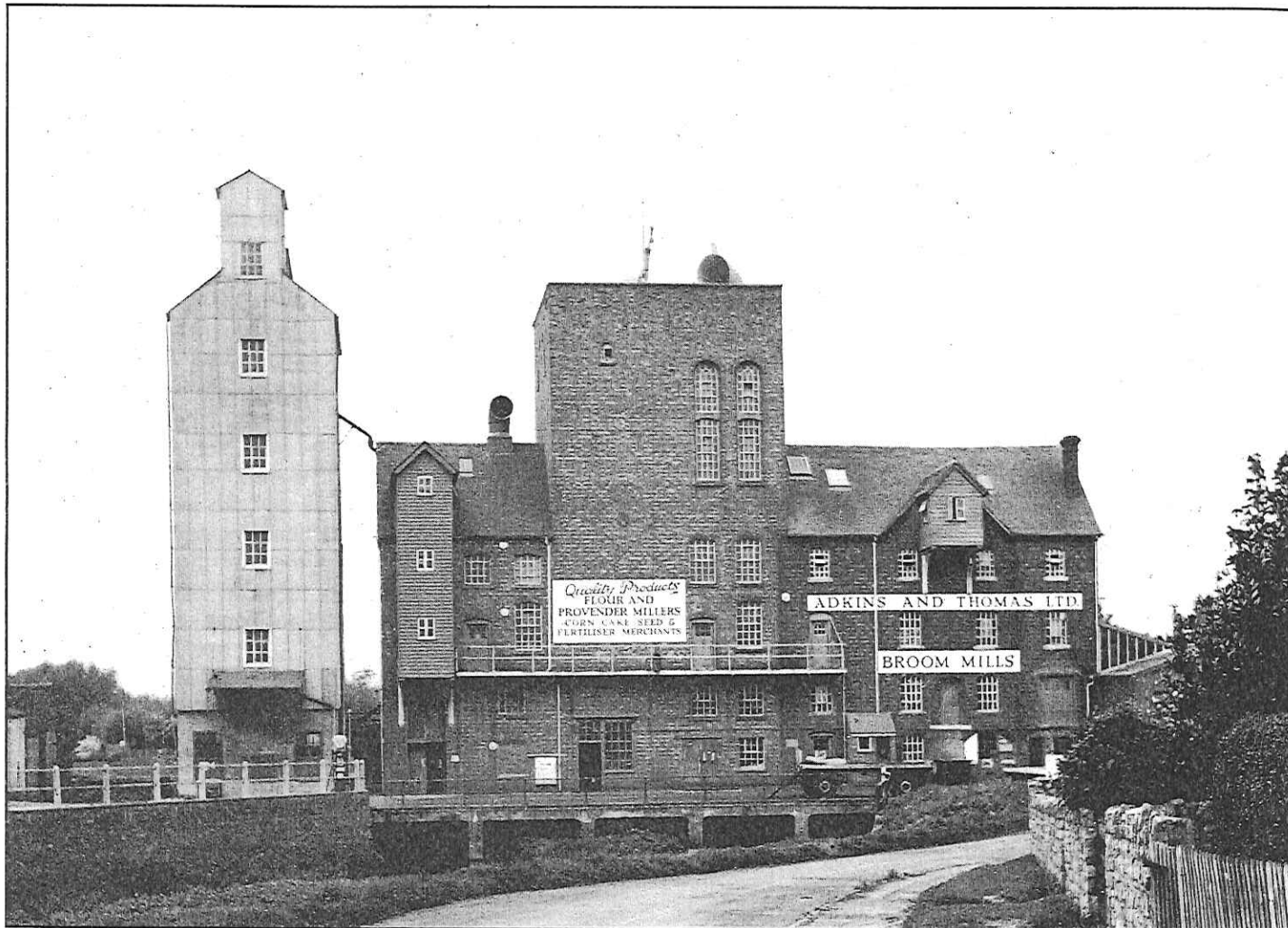


The Central City Flour Mill, formerly the New Union Mill, reputedly the first steam flour mill in the world. *Birmingham Magazine of Arts & Industries*, 1898.

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| Breakfast | 8 am | Coffee, Bread and butter |
| Lunch | 12 noon | Bread and butter or dripping |
| Dinner | 2 pm | Water or beer, 2 courses e.g. Beef, potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, Rice Pudding |
| Tea | 7 pm | Tea, Bread and butter |
| Supper (in place of luncheon on Saturday) | | Bread and butter |

Ever since the people have been paid in bread & flour here, it has been the custom on every Friday, with the Captains of the different Messes to give me lists of the names of their Messmaster & receive on the Saturday their provisions agreeably thereto - but it has frequently happen'd that with people return'd from the Hospital neglecting to apply to the Captains



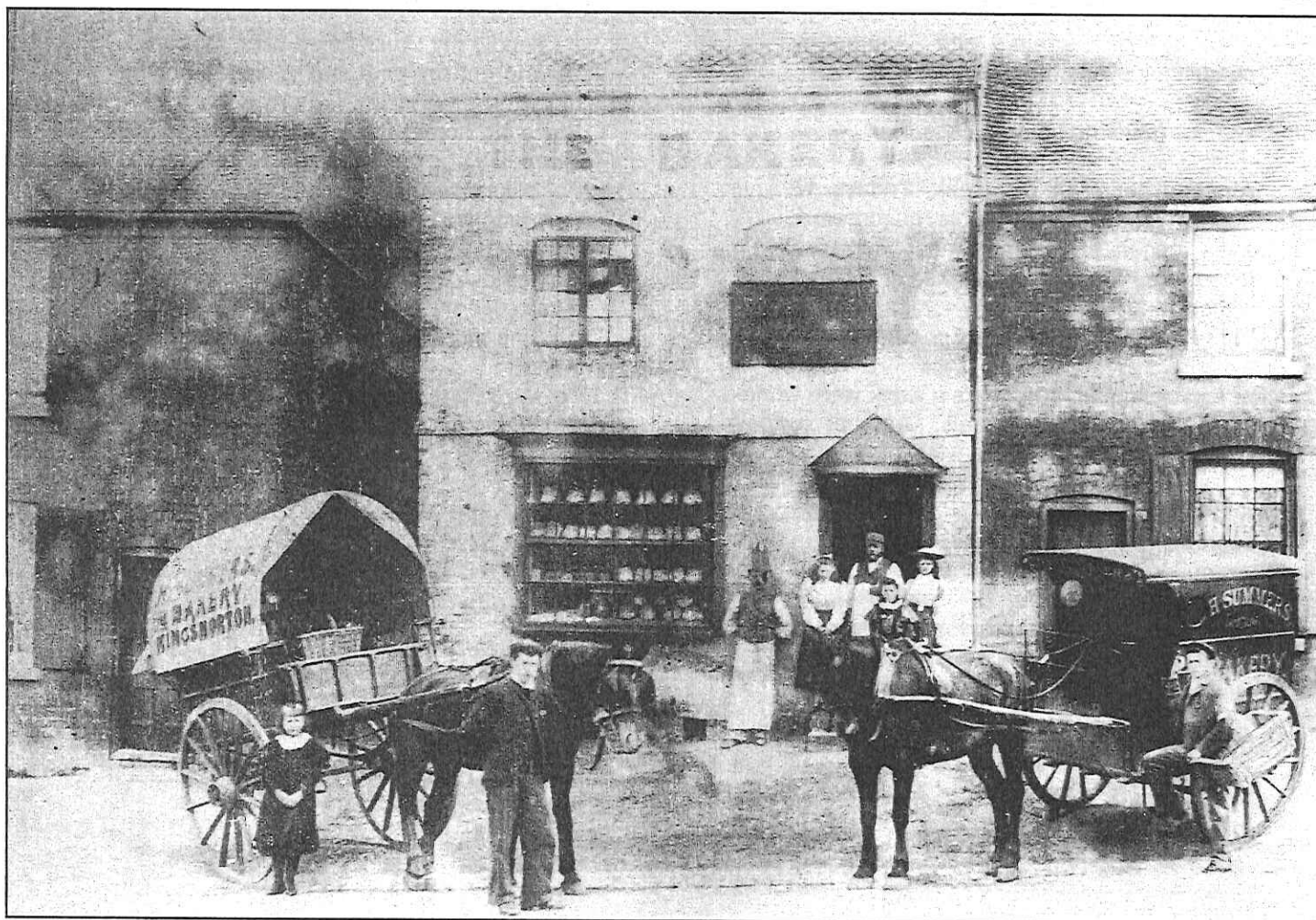
Flour Mill at Broome, Warwickshire. 1954.

Supper (in place of luncheon on Sunday)
Bread and cheese

I have to say that it doesn't really inspire the taste buds...¹³

A recent and exciting find in the City Archives has been a volume of the minutes of the Committee for the Relief of British Prisoners of War in Verdun, beginning in 1808 and previously listed as 'Correspondence' in the Matthew Boulton Papers. On 2 December 1808 Mr Brennan wrote to Mr Phillips in Verdun, with a problem of bureaucracy to deal with:

themselves, these lists have been incorrect & on Friday last owing to a Man of the name Allen not giving in his list regularly it happened that eleven were not served with bread, they of course applied to me for it on the following day...[there was a dispute, and a man named Farquhar said]...if I did not immediately order the Baker to produce the deficient bread, he would write against me to Verdun & did not care a farthing for me nor what I could do.¹⁴



Summers' Bakery on The Green, Kings Norton c. 1910

Another soldier, this time from the Boer War in South Africa, also left an account of his wartime experience. His name was George Herbert Cuming-Butler.

5 o'clock we are marched back, and dismissed only to fall in again for evening stables. The horses have to be led off to water and then fed and everything put right for the night. Then comes tea and the remainder of the day's bread - always a most uninteresting meal.

This next passage is too interesting to leave out - pretend the buns are bread !

I ought not to pass over the people I met in Pretoria without mentioning Miss Brooke-Hunt. Quite one of the features of this campaign has been the Soldiers' Institutes at the front organised by her. She came out from England as the only woman on the Chaplain's Department, and from that she struck out along a line of her own, which has proved immensely

successful, so much so that I have heard her jokingly described as second in command of the British army. Finally she appeared on the station platform when I was going away with a big parcel of oranges and buns - luxuries not easily procured in Pretoria...she sells 5,000 oranges a day ! Each week sees 1,000 gallons of tea and 10,000 mineral waters drunk, and 25,000 buns eaten.¹⁵

The last but one look at bread is an 'Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour in Bakehouses', undertaken by the Trades Council. The evidence from workers in the baking industry makes interesting reading. At No 3 shop the effect on health is described as follows:

Are usually affected by chest ailments; bakehouses not being well ventilated and very infrequently white-washed; sanitation is bad, closets and stables often found close to the bakehouse; inspection of same quite insufficient. Witness has been ordered by doctor to leave the trade on

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account of strain and unhealthy conditions; eyes affected by heat.

Another witness gave the hours of labour as:

Average hours 74 per week, Fridays 16 hours; night-work; two table hands work even longer; at holiday times hours are longer; on Xmas Eve worked 22 hours without any additional pay - Meal Times: Three breaks of 15 minutes per day.

At another establishment, 100 hours a week were worked with no time allowed for meals. Another witness described the circumstances of his work:

A bakehouse requires a heat of 80 degrees, which is injurious; the dust is detrimental to health, and there is a considerable amount of sulphur from ovens; there is always present excessive carbonic gas and windows cannot be opened in the winter; these circumstances make it necessary that bakers should work short instead of long hours in the interests of health.

Employer's evidence. Manager of Co-operative Society.

Hours 54 per week. Machine bakery.

Wages range from foreman 48s, first hand 34s, to 26s table hands, one at 24s; two temporary hands, 6s per night Meals. Provide mess room for meals, one hour allowed, those living near can go home.

Allowances. Each employee allowed one week in addition to Bank and other holidays. Baths provided and separate cupboards. Lavatory accommodation up to date.

Unionist. All men employed here are trade unionists.¹⁶

Most of the witnesses would, no doubt, have wished to work for the Co-op !

Let us finish with a verse from 'The Evening Brush; or a medley of the follies, vices, and absurdities of the age, performed off, and on, the stage by John Collins of Birmingham'. Collins, born c. 1738 and died 1808, was a staymaker and lived in Great Brook Street, Ashted. The 'Brush' was performed as an interlude at a performance at the Theatre Royal towards the end of the 18th Century.

The fourth verse of a 'Health to the Dutchess' reads:

If I handle my Brush as an artist for bread,
Let me eat my poor loaf without stooping
to flatter,
Since no sordid tints, on my canvas are
spread,
For alike I disdain to bedaub or bespatter,
For laughter with reason, is surely no
treason,
Proportion of grace, can have no cause to
blush;
And the sons of true spirit no grudge can
inherit,
To see rank imposters, run down with the
Brush.¹⁷

- 1) Birmingham City Archives MS809
- 2) 661681 (IIR 23)
- 3) 352022 (Hagley Hall Box 22)
- 4) Matthew Boulton Papers, 291139
- 5) MS 80
- 6) MS 690177
- 7) MBP292I45
- 8) MS 2038
- 9) 273983 (IIR 53), p. 116
- 10) EP771131111
- 11) Birmingham Union records
- 12) MS 24413
- 13) MS 383134
- 14) MBP153 Entry451
- 15) 426073 (IIR 53) pp. 41 and 165-6
- 16) Charles Parker Archive 3 112
- 17) 443402(IIR53)

All references are to collections in Birmingham City Archives