

Dining in our first Hall

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Marc Meltonville, the Hampton Court Historic Kitchens Co-ordinator, and a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, was asked to speak, at a recent Meeting at Pewterers' Hall, about the style of dining that Pewterers would have enjoyed in their first hall, the one built in Lime Street in 1470 and rebuilt in 1668 after the Great Fire.

We thought it would be interesting to run this article, adapted from that talk, alongside Part II of the late Ron Homer's article on the food that was eaten at the time

"Our forebears were real people; people who lived and worked in the city, cared for their families and only wanted live a good and comfortable life. Nothing much has changed! Many things we do today would be familiar, at least in part, to those gone before; and much of what they did is understandable to us.

True, we don't have to ask the Master for permission to leave the City anymore!

They did though. On finishing building the first hall in 1495, a wonderful set of buildings in Lime Street in the City, have immediately to look for others to hire the hall for meetings, feasts and weddings, to try and get some of the funds back. They also realised that good men ate from good pewter, and rented 'garnishes' of pewter out to other Companies so that they could dine in style.

So what then, of a feast in the first hall?

The diners would sit at long tables, with a top table containing the Master, higher ranking members and guests. The diners would most probably go bare-headed; but the Master would have been in his cap. If it were cold and the Master mindful of the diners' comfort, he might have suggested that they covered their heads, but not before Grace had been said.

The table would have been laid with many fine pewter dishes, platters, chargers, plates and saucers (for sauce), goblets, salts and trenchers. The trenchers were the oddity. Small, normally about 7" across, they were the plate for each diner. Their small size would have made it look, to the modern diner, that he or she was not going to get much for supper, but it was not so.

The very essence of fine dining in the past, in fact up to the early 19th century, was choice. How dare a chef tell you, the diner, what to eat! Even the Master, as host, should not give you just a plate of food; he should offer you a choice. The diners chose the meal they wanted, not the meal they were given. This was luxury.

Thus all meals served in the first hall would have been in the form of a buffet. Not the stand up and walk to the end of the hall affair we might use today, but a small selection of dishes placed in front of four diners. These four people made up one 'mess'; the table contained many messes. Each mess might have the same dishes, but more likely there would have been a hierarchy. The best and largest selection on the top table and the least choice at the lower end of the hall.

Once you had sat down to dine and made your choice from the dishes in front of you, then good manners came into play. We eat when we are hungry; dining is all about show and

knowing how to behave. The manners of the first hall were, or at least I hope were, also quite refined.

We have many surviving manners books from the 16th century and they all pretty much agree that we, mankind, are not animals, and should not behave as such.

We eat slowly and politely, we do not grab, we do not gnaw on bones like an animal, but cut meat from the bone onto our trencher and there, add a little sauce before eating it. We break bread and use it to clean our fingers, spoons and knives. We do not put our elbows onto the table, nor do we pick our teeth with our knife.

Gentlemen are reminded that it might be best to loosen their belts before sitting down to dine; and all are told not to take a drink before eating anything, "lest you seem too eager for the wine"!

All these manners seem sensible us; not to take food from across a bowl, but take the morsel nearest you, or take salt only with the tip of you knife, not dip the food in it.

The odd ones just seem odd; Men were asked not to hook their leg over the leg of the gentleman next to them (why you might have wanted to escapes me!).

All in all a thoroughly decent meal, enjoyed by polite diners.

Toasts were made and wine taken with each other, and unlike today, no-one would have thought of leaving the table without hearing another Grace."

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See also, in this Volume, part II of the article (*The Good Old Days*, about what they ate in those

The Pewterer, Volume 4, number 4. December, 2013.

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Published by Alan Williams, 21 Elder Street, Spitalfields, London E1 6BT and endorsed by the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, Pewterers' Hall, Oat Lane, London EC2V 7DE

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days) adapted from the late Ron Homer's research into the [Search of 1702](#),