

The Great Eater of Kent

by Henny Shotter

Did you know that gluttony, overeating, is one of the seven deadly sins? You didn't? That said, after a traditional Christmas dinner, several drinks and chocolates, most of us feel that over-eating can be deadly indeed!

Still, your and my overeating is nothing in comparison to the 'achievements' of Nicholas Wood from Harrietsham who was a competitive eater in the early 1600s. A contemporary story claims¹ that he ate a whole sheep

..uncooked!...and another time he gulped down 30 dozen pigeons which is hardly believable!

As a local celebrity, he was invited into the houses of the local gentry.



When he was a guest at Lord Wotton's Manor of Boughton Malherbe, he ate 84 rabbits. He was also invited by Sir Warham Ledger, who resided in Ulcombe Manor next to the church where he ate 'two loynes of mutton and one loyne of veal'. The landlady of the White Lion in Harrietsham (would be nice to know where this was !) confirmed that, in one sitting, he washed down a bowl of pottage and nine loaves of bread with three jugs of beer.

Nicholas Wood's fame was such that one John Taylor had in mind to take him to London to the famous bear garden near the Thames and make money by taking bets. Nicholas declined on the ground of his age and the loss of his teeth!

It was rare that Wood disappointed those who bet on him. In Lenham, one Robert Dale bragged that he could satisfy Nicholas' appetite for the mean sum of 2 shillings. He bought 6 pots of 'potent, high and mighty ale' and twelve loaves of white bread which he soaked in the ale. The result of this meal is described as it 'conquered the conquerer, robbed him of his reason, bereft him of his wit and blindfolded him with sleep.'

It seems that Nicholas Wood didn't see old age, dying toothless and impoverished in his forties.

Today, we are wiser. After overeating during the festive period, we annually embrace a new eating regime. Going on a diet is rather 'old hat': these days we embark on a new and healthier lifestyle which, nevertheless, only in very few cases lasts a lifetime. However, we can keep trying

¹ The great eater of Kent, or part of the admirable teeth and stomachs exploits of Nicholas Wood,... 1630 by John Taylor see: https://archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1475-1640_the-great-eater-of-kent-_taylor-john_1630/page/n23/mode/2up