

F.A. Gasquet. English Monastic Life. Methuen & Co. London, 1904.

Public Domain text transcribed and prepared "as is" for HTML and PDF by Richenda Fairhurst, historyfish.net. July 2007. No commercial permissions granted. *Text may contain errors.* (Report errors to oscar@historyfish.net)

CHAPTER X

THE PAID SERVANTS OF THE MONASTERY

No account of the officials of a medieval monastery would be complete without some notice of the assistants, other than the monks, who took so large a part in the administration. Incidentally something has already been said about the paid lay officers and servants ; but their position requires that their place and work should be discussed somewhat more fully. They were all of them lifelong friends of the monks, whose interest in the wellbeing of the establishment with which they were connected was almost as keen and real as that of the brethren themselves. On some of the greater houses their number was very considerable, and even in small monasteries the records of the dissolution make it clear that there were, at least in most of them, a great number of such retainers. In many places the higher lay offices, such as steward, cook, etc., because in process of time, hereditary, and were much prized by the family in whose possession they were. It was also possible, of course that by default of male heirs, the position might pass to the female line. Thus in one case the office of cook in a great Benedictine monastery was held by a woman in respect to her inheritance of the last holder. She became the ward of the

---201---

superior, and he had thus a good deal to say to her marriage, by which she transmitted the office to her husband as her dower. Among the various paid officials the following were most important.

I. THE CATERER, OR BUYER FOR THE COMMUNITY

The caterer, says one Custumal, "ought to be a broadminded and strong-minded man : one who acts with decision, and is wise, just and upright in things belonging to his office ; one who is prudent, knowing, discreet and careful when purchasing meat and fish in the market or from the salesman." Under the kitchener, the caterer had to look after the cook and his assistants, and every day to see that the expenses were properly and faithfully set down. He had to watch that the right things were given out to those who had to prepare them, and at the daily meals of the community it was his duty to stand at the kitchen hatchway and

see that they were served up in a fitting manner. In the market, the buyer for the superior always gave way to the caterer for the community. In the case of Edmundsbury at least, it was settled by Abbot Sampson that this was always to be so. Under the conventual caterer were to servants always ready at his call to carry the provisions he purchased in the market to the monastery. The stipend of the caterer was whatever had been agreed as just, and he usually had clothes "according to his station," and certain provisions at his disposal.

2. THE ABBOT'S COOK

This official held more the position of a steward, or valet to the superior, than that of a cook. He had to go each morning to the abbot or prior for orders, and

---202---

to find out what would be required for the superior's table for the day, and he had then to proceed to the kitchener to inform him what had to be provided. He helped in the kitchen on occasions such as great feasts, when he was asked to do so by the kitchener ; and as a matter of course, when there were many strangers or other persons to be entertained and the work was consequently heavy. For this and such-like services he received a stipend from the kitchener ; but his ordinary payment came from the superior, who also furnished him with his livery. He was told by the Customals to remember that, although he was the abbot's cook, he had, nevertheless, to obey the kitchener in all things, and to look conscientiously to try and prevent waste and superfluity in spices and such other things as passed through his hands.

If he needed help, the abbot's valet could have a boy to run on errands and generally assist ; and they were both warned that in the season for pig-killing and bacon-curing they, like all other servants, were to be ready to help in the important work of salting. He had, as part of his duty, to keep a careful list of all the spoons, mugs, dishes, and other table necessaries, and after meals to see that they were clean ; and, if not, to clean them before the close of the day. Once each year the inventory had to be shown to, and checked by, the kitchener.

3. THE LARDERER

The larderer should be "as perfect, just, and faithful a servant" as could be found. He had charge of the keys of all the outhouses attached to the great larder of the monastery, which in one Customnal are specified as "the hay-house, the stockfish-house, and the pudding-

---203---

house." These keys, together with that of the outer larder itself, he had always to carry with him on his girdle, as he alone might be responsible for their safety. In all matters he, too, was to be under the kitchener, and not to absent himself

without his permission. Amongst his various duties a few may be mentioned here. He had to grind and deliver in powder to the cook all the pepper, mustard, and spices required for the cooking of the conventual meals. When the convent were to have "bake-meats," such as venison, turbot, eels, etc., the larderer had to prepare the dish for the cook, and to sprinkle it over with saffron. All the live animals intended for the kitchen, such as sheep, bullocks, calves, pigs, etc., had to pass through his hands. He had to see to the killing, skinning, and preparing them for the spit ; the tallow he kept in order to provide the treasurer with material for the winter candles. The larderer also had to see that the live birds, such as pheasants, partridges, capons, hens, chickens, pigeons, etc., were fed properly, and were ready for the table when the kitchener should need them. In the same way the store of fish, both in the stews, and salted in the fish-house, were under his charge, as were also the peas and beans for the convent pottage.

4. THE COOK

For the infirmary, and especially for the use of those who had been subjected to the periodical blood-letting, there was a special cook skilled in the preparation of strengthening broths and soups. He was the chief or meat-cook of the establishment, and had under him two boys, one as a general helper, the other to act as his "turnbroach." He was appointed to his office by the

---204---

abbot, and at least in the case of some of the greater houses it was secured to him for life by a formal grant. It was his duty to provide those who had been "blooded" with a plate of meat broth on the second and third day, and also to give them, and the sick generally, any particular dish they might fancy. Moreover, he had to furnish the whole community with soup, meat, and vegetables on all days when meat was eaten by the whole convent.

He had also to see to the process of salting any meat in the proper seasons, or whenever it might be necessary. He also prepared the various soups or pottages for the community ; for instance, "Frumenty" on all Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, from August 1st to September 29th ; or "Letborry," made with milk, eggs and saffron on fish days, from July till October ; or "Charlet," the same composition with the addition of pork, for other days during the same time ; or "Jussel," from Easter to July ; or "Mortews," in which the quantity of meat was increased, and which was served on all days, except those of abstinence, during the winter months, from All Saints' day to Lent.

One English Custumal warns the cook to reflect often that his work in the kitchen is necessarily heavy and tedious ; and that he should endeavour to keep up a goodly feeling between himself and his assistants, for "without this mutual assistance it is difficult" to do what his office requires of him for the good of others. For his trouble he had a fixed wage and a house ; and many recognized perquisites, the chopping of joints, and two joints from every other chine of pork, as well as half the dripping that came from the joints roasted for the community.

5. THE GUEST-HALL COOK

The cook to attend to the needs of visitors was appointed by the cellarer, and had under him a boy to help in any way he might direct. His office was frequently for life, and certainly, once appointed, he could be removed only with difficulty. He had to get everything ready for the entertainment of strangers and of the parents of the religious, whenever they came to the monastery and at whatsoever hour of the day or night. Besides this ordinary work he had to assist, when disengaged, in preparing the meals for the monks, and in the season for salting, the pork and mutton, to help in that work with the chief cook and the larderer. He was to be in all things obedient to the kitchener in the matters of this office, and in the times of his service was not to absent himself except with the permission of that official. His wages were paid by the cellarer according to agreement ; and he had the usual kitchen perquisites of choppings and dripping.

6. THE FISH-COOKS

In the large monasteries, such as, for example, Edmundsbury, there were two cooks for the fish-dishes ; the first was properly called the “fish-cook,” the other was “pittance-cook.” Their appointment was made for life, and by letters-patent signed by the abbot in Chapter, with the prior and the community as witnesses. Though called the “fish-cooks” these servants had also to attend to the general work of the kitchen, even on days when meat was eaten, and to cook the meat and make the gravy required ; whilst the “pittance-cook” was specially detailed to fry or poach the eggs required for the extra portions, or to

prepare whatever else took their place in the dishes served as pittances to the community, or to individuals such as the president of the refectory, and the priest who had sung the High Mass. These two cooks also had to help in the satling time, and in other common work of the kitchen.

7. INFIRMARY COOK

To serve the sick a prudent, skilful cook was to be chosen by the infirmarian, who, besides the knowledge of his art, should have compassion and feel pity for the sufferings and afflictions of the sick. Like the officers previously named, the appointment of the infirmary cook was for life ; but though he could not be moved at the whim of a superior, he was not formally appointed in Chapter, but by a letter from the infirmarian. Day and night he was to show himself solicitous for the welfare of those in the infirmary, and be ready at all times to make for them what they needed or might fancy. He, too, had to help in the general kitchen, and he had to obtain thence all the requisite food for those who were having their meals in the infirmary. Like the rest of the above-named

officials, he had to give what help he could in the kitchen in the seasons of great pressure, and in particular at the time of the winter salting, about St. Martin's Day.

When the infirmary cook or servant came to die, for his faithful service he was borne to the grave, like all the other servants of the monastery, but the whole convent. His body was met at the great door of the church by the community in procession, and after Mass had been celebrated for the repose of his soul by the sub-sacrist, the monks carried his remains, as that of a good and faithful servant gone to his reward, to his last resting-place. In

---207---

some houses there was even a special portion of the consecrated ground dedicated to the burial of monastic servants : at Bury, for example, it was called "Sergeant's hill," and the Customnal says that in the "venerable monastery" such old friends "shall never be forgotten in the prayers and devout supplications of the community."

8. THE SALTER

The salter, who was also called the *mustardarius*, was appointed by a letter of the kitchener ; and like the rest he was irremovable after his appointment, except for grave reasons, and then only with difficulty. By his office he had to see to the supply and preparation of all the mustard used in seasoning the dishes and by the brethren in the various places where food was partaken, such as the refectory, guest-hall, infirmary, etc. This was by no means the unimportant office we might in these days be inclined to consider it, as it was then considered useful if not necessary to take mustard with all salted food, flesh or fish. The quantity thus required in a large establishment was very considerable. The salter was also expected to make some, if not all, the sauces required for certain dishes. At Easter, for instance, he was to prepare "vertsauce" with vinegar for the lamb, if the herb could be found for it ; by which it may be supposed that "mint-sauce" is meant, except that this particular concoction was supposed also to go with mackerel as well as lamb!

9. BELL-RINGERS AND CHURCH-SERVERS

On all days when the great bells were rung and the services of the church were more elaborate than at ordinary times, the ringers and servers had their rations and some

---208---

extra portion from the conventual refectory. In a great place like Bury St. Edmunds these days amounted to some two and forty in the year.

10. THE GARDENER

The gardener was appointed by the cellarer at his pleasure. His chief duty was to keep the convent supplied with herbs on four days a week in winter and spring, and with other vegetables in their season. He was frequently to visit the kitchen in order to learn what was required from him, and he was always to bring his vegetable and herbs cleaned and prepared ready for cooking.

11. THE CARRIERS

The carriers were servants who were continually occupied in the work of provisioning the establishment. They had to be at hand to carry to the monastic stores whatever the caterer bought in the market. Also in the time of the great fairs, they attended the cellarer to take charge of his purchases of spices, almonds and raisins, ling and stockfish, and salted herrings, red and white, and to convey them to the monastery. On ordinary days they were occupied in bringing to the cook the wood he required from the various officials ; in carrying in the fuel and keeping up the fires, and in carting away the refuse to the waste-heap. These carriers had a money wage and numerous perquisites ; amongst other things, they could claim all the little barrels in which salmon, sturgeon, and salt eels had come to the monastic larder, and they might take and use what they could for their own meals of every pig that was brought to the salting-tub and found to be “measly.”

---209---

12. DOOR-KEEPERS

In most great monastic houses there were naturally several porters or door-keepers. The *kitchen-porter* was in some ways the most important, as so much of the traffic from the outer world to the cloister came this way. He was set there for the purpose of preventing any unauthorized person gaining access to the kitchen so as to disturb the cook ; and at all times he had to check the coming in of seculars, or of begging clerks, or of the neighbours, unless they could show leave or business. He had to receive and distribute all the daily alms of food for those waiting at the gate. The *porter of the great cloister gate* had to watch over the main entrance of the house, to open the door to visitors, and at once to acquaint the guest-master of their arrival.

13. THE BRIEF-BEARER—BREVIATOR

The *brief-bearer*, by his office, was intended to carry the notice of the death of any of the brethren in the monastery round to other monasteries and religious houses in England. The abbot appointed this official, and the office was held for life. In Benedictine abbeys, according to a provision of the General Chapter of Northampton, the bearer of the mortuary roll was to be received with honour and entertained until he had obtained his roll again and could pass on to the next house on his list. Besides his regular wage and portion of food from the monastic kitchen, on the death of any monk he could claim as his right the

mattress of the deceased brother, or in lieu of it a sum of six shillings and eightpence.

Besides the above-named officers there were, at least in

---210---

the greater houses, many minor paid officials and retainers. For example, the *discarius*, or server of dishes in the refectory, was bound always to be at the kitchen-hatch whenever conventual meals were in progress, and it was his place to wait upon those who took their meals at the second table. He was a kind of lower servant to the kitchen ; he had to help in bringing in the fuel, and to see that the wheelbarrow for the waste was in its place, and was emptied when it was necessary. After the meals, the *discarius* washed the plates and dishes, and saw that when dry, they were stacked in their proper cupboards ready for the next occasion.

Another minor official was the “turnbroach”—a boy chosen by the cellarer for his activity. He had to be always ready when required to turn the spits on which meat or fish was cooking. He helped in carrying fuel for the kitchen and elsewhere ; and when ordered, he had to go to the ponds and stews to help to catch fish for the conventual meal.

In some places, for example at Edmundsbury, there were certain women employed at times by the monastery for the making of pastry, etc., called *pudding-wives*. They had a house or chamber near at hand to the kitchen, called “Pudding-house.” These women were chosen by the larderer with the assent of the chief cook ; they lived in the neighbourhood and came up to the outer kitchen offices when their services were required. Great care was taken in the selection of these servants, and it was directed that they : be always married, sober, of good repute and honest, that all danger of detraction from evil tongues be avoided.” At all times when animals were slaughtered, in particular about St. Martin’s Day,

---211---

and when pigs were being killed, the services of these women were required to make black puddings. At other times, if the cook desired, they were to be ready to make pasties, and other things which seemed to require the gentler touch of a female hand. Among the women servants there were, of course, also laundresses for the washing of the clothes of the community and others for the infirmary, the guest-hall, and the church linen. All these were selected with care and upon the same principles which guided the selection of the above-mentioned pudding-wives.

---212---

End Chapter.