

## Christmas in Sawtry in Medieval Times

### The Manorial Christmas

As with the peasants, Christmas at the Manor House was one of the most important times of the medieval calendar but was a completely different affair. In the early medieval and middle ages, there were three parishes in Sawtry, All Saints, St Andrew and Sawtry Judith. Each had a manor and a Lord, or in the case of Countess Judith, a Lady of the Manor.

The Manor house for All Saints would have stood somewhere next to the Church. The Manor House in the centre of the village came later. The Manor House for St Andrews was believed to have stood next to St Andrews Church and the Sawtry Judith Manor stood at the bottom of St Judith's Lane in the field next to Archers Wood, near Coppingford. An image from Google Earth shows the imprint of the Manor Site in the field. There is also information from the 1979 Sawtry Judith Manor Dig held at our Archive and online at our Sawtry CCAN Digital Archive. After the building of Sawtry Abbey in 1147, Sawtry Judith Manor was later thought to have become a Grange (food production site) of Sawtry Abbey. (links below).

Huntingdonshire was always an important county to the monarchy in medieval times as Judith's daughter Maud (Matilda) Countess of Huntingdon became Queen of Scotland when she married David 1<sup>st</sup> of Scotland and they forged a dynasty of Scottish kings. Conington and the land where Conington Castle stood originally belonged to Countess Judith through her husband, Waltheof, Earl of Huntingdon (after his execution by King William) and has always been associated with the Scottish monarchy.

Usually held in the Great Hall of the manor house (or castle) the setting for the Christmas meal for the aristocracy after they had attended their morning Church services, was suitably splendid with colourful hangings on the walls and high wood-beam ceilings. There was a roaring fire, sometimes in the centre of the room and sometimes the larger manor houses and castles had another great stone fireplace for spit roasting the food in the food preparation area down one end of the room or in a room adjacent to the Main Hall. As architecture changed, the large stone fireplace, so often seen in later manor houses and stately homes, was built as a focal point on one wall of the Great Hall and would have been bedecked with festive garlands of holly, ivy and other seasonal greenery along with the rest of the hall. The tables were set with knives to cut the food, wooden spoons to serve and a thick slab of one-

day-old bread known as a trencher or manchet, to be used by way of a plate for meat, but everything except liquids was eaten with the fingers. Two diners shared a bowl for washing hands, another bowl for soups and stews, and a small bowl of salt. Salt was an expensive commodity so to have salt on the table was a sign of wealth. As the old name for Sawtry was “Saltreim” meaning Salters Stream, and later Saltrede and Salteria, I would imagine salt was in abundance at our local manor houses during the Christmas festivities. The table of the rich was adorned with exotic foods like roast peacock and swan. Another special Christmas dish the cooks might prepare to impress their master’s guests included a boar’s head on a platter.

Served as an early lunch, the first course was typically a soup, broth or weak stew with some meat at the bottom. The second course might be a vegetable stew (porray) of leeks and onions. The rich were fortunate enough to have meat as their next course on ordinary days, rabbit, hare and chicken, for example, but Christmas saw finer meat delicacies and fish such as salmon, herring and trout and seafood (eels, oysters and crab) courses were presented to the guests. Meats were spit roasted. Besides legs of beef and mutton, there was veal, venison, goose, capon, suckling pig, duck, plover, lark and crane, amongst others. Sauces added more flavour to many dishes and, thickened with breadcrumbs, they contained wine or vinegar, and herbs and spices.

Dessert consisted of thick fruit custards, pastries, nuts, cheese and luxury fruits like oranges, figs and dates. There were also entremets, various decorated nibbles glazed with sugar and honey, which were served before the dessert course at Christmas and other feasts. One Christmas treat was something called a Marchpane, a sweetmeat made from a paste of ground nuts, mainly almonds from where our Marzipan (almond paste) comes from.

Dessert might be accompanied by a jug of spiced wine and other drinks were consumed such as red and white wine (from a cup shared with one’s dining partner) which was drunk young as it had a short shelf-life. Wine was often mixed with water or sweetened with honey or sugar. Other beverages were cider and ale, although the latter, made from grains and fermented with yeast, was considered a lower class drink. Beer made using hops would only appear in the late Middle Ages and in Sawtry that time and up to the 1800’s there was an area known as Malt Kiln Square where the beer making process would have taken place. The street that stands on that site is now known as The Maltings.

While all this feasting was going in the Great Hall, the servants of the Manor were not forgotten as traditionally they were given better food at Christmas such as geese and hens. Finally, the leftovers of the feast were taken outside to the waiting poor.

The manor houses of Sawtry, as in all of England, would most probably have celebrated Christmas in this fashion however smaller manor houses did not celebrate in such grandeur as the larger castles and estates as although it was important to show your wealth, there was a hierarchy and they were careful not to outshine their wealthy aristocratic neighbours who might have more favour with the King, although I'm sure some did thereby suddenly losing their claims on their estates and possibly their head as well.

As we have seen throughout history and in books and television dramatisations such as the Jane Austen novels and Downton Abbey, many of the aristocratic traditions of celebrating Christmas have been retained from those early manorial feasts and passed down through the generations.

### References

The Ancient History Encyclopedia website

The Medievalists website

MedievalChronicles.com

The Museum of London website

British History Online

Victoria County History of Huntingdonshire

Part Three of these Christmas Articles is on The Church at Christmas