

Unjoynt that Turkey and Serve it Forth

[Published in "The Pale", Volume 46, Number 7, November 2008]

The great birds of the medieval table were carried to the English feast table with imposing ceremony. The carving instructions found in *The Boke of Keruyng* (*Book of Carving*) of 1508 directed that one should "Dysmembre that heron. Dysplaye that crane. Dysfygure that pecocke. Unjoynt that bytture." Later in the text one is told exactly how one should dismember, unjoint, or display the bird in question. These carving instructions were reprinted and reappeared in 1513, 1560, c1570, and in 1613. They were also included in numerous other culinary books, with one notable exception. While one might still be instructed to "unjoynt that Bitturne" in the initial rhyme, John Murrell then instructs the reader in the text "To cut up a Turkie or Bustard."

It's not quite as straightforward to say that the Central American or North American turkey of Mexico gradually supplanted the bitturne or bustard (*Otis tarda*) and other great birds in Tudor England. The African guinea-fowl had been reintroduced back into England in the late 14th or early 15th century. This smaller bird also bore the name of turkey. When the New World turkeys arrived on the scene in the late 1520's or 1530's, both guinea-fowls and these new birds shared the same name for a period of time. (The Strickland family of Boynton near Bridlington in East Riding is usually mentioned in connection with the introduction of the turkey into England.)

The American turkey, however, quickly became a status item and was rapidly being raised along with peacocks in many poultry yards. By 1541 the upstart new arrival had earned its place in the ecclesiastical sumptuary laws,

and by 1555 their price was legally fixed in the markets of London. By 1573 Thomas Tusser was writing that good hospitality at Christmastime demanded that the host provide “Good bread & good drinke, ... brawne pudding & souse & good mustarde withal. Biefe, mutton, & porke, shred pyes of the best, pig, veale, goose & capon, & **turkey** wel drest.” Various books on husbandry, including *Foure Bookes of Husbandry* and *Maison Rustique, or The Countrey Farme* gave instructions on the raising of turkeys.



illus. by Patrick of Eastwatch

By the time the Pilgrims arrived in New England they were well acquainted with turkeys. William Wood in *Nevv Englands Prospect* in 1634 would differentiate between the domesticated turkey of England and the native wild bird when he wrote that in New England “The Turky is a very

large Bird, of a blacke colour, yet white in flesh; much bigger than our English Turkey.”

The first systematic English work on the subject of ornithology was published in 1678. In that work John Ray and Francis Willughby would write an explanation that is still informative: “The TURKEY, Gallopavo seu Avis Numidica & Meleagris. Neither Turkeys nor Peacocks are native of England, but because they are tame fowl, and easily bear our Winters, and it is now a long time that they have been brought over, we may very well reckon them among English birds. . . . In English they are called Turkeys, because they are thought to have been first brought to us out of Turkey.” The book contains numerous illustrations. Amazingly enough, illustration XXVII includes on the same plate two views of the Peacock, the Turkey, the Guinea Hen and in the upper left corner there may be even be found another important bird. This is the famed Dodo!

And how did one prepare the turkey in Elizabethan and Stuart times? No doubt one used recipes and sauces for other poultry. The Tudor-Jacobean manuscript titled *A Booke of Cookery* simply lists “turkeys, Capons, partridge, pheasants, woodcock, tele, duck, plover, curlues, & quailles...” would be suitable for the recipe titled: “To make sause for foule.” Gervase Markham in 1623 would write “Capons, Pheasants, Chickens and Turkies you shall roast with the Pinions.” Jos. Cooper, chef to the late king Charles I, would simply record “Pea, Partidge, Pheasants or Turkey, which require lard and deep seasoning, with store of Butter.” One also encounters recipes that specifically call for turkey. Early culinary sources include the following recipes:

To bake Turkey Fowles,

Cleve your Turkye foule on the back, and bruse al the bones. Season it with Pepper groce beaten and salt, and put into it good store of Butter, he must have five houres baking. A.W. 1584, 1591.

To bake a Turkie and take out his bones.

TAke a fat Turkie, and after you haue scalded him and washed him cleane, lay him vpon a faire cloth and slit him through out the backe and when you haue taken out his garbage, then you must take out his bones so bare as you can, when you haue so done wash him cleane, then trusse him and pricke his backe together, and so haue a faire kettle of séething water and perboyle him a little, then take him vp that the water may runne cleane out from him, and when he is colde, season him with pepper and salt, and then pricke him with a fewे cloues in the brest, and also drawe him with larde if you like of it and when you haue made your coffin and laide your Turkie in it then you must put some butter in it and so close him vp in this sort you may bake a Goose, a Pheasant, or Capon. Pp 13-14. Dawson, 1587.

To bake a Turkey, or a Capon.

BOne the Turkey, but not the Capon: parboyle them, & sticke cloues in their breasts: Lard them and season them well with Pepper and Salt, and put them in a deepe Coffin with the breast downeward, and store of Butter. When it is bakte poure in more butter, and when it is colde stop the venthole with more Butter. Murrell. 1615.

So *Unjoynt that Turkey and Serve it Forth* in the tradition of the Great Medieval Birds of Olden Days.

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Note: For pre-1500 medieval feasts the turkey is often used to replace the "great" birds of old that are no longer available. The best examination of these great medieval birds may be found in Joop Witteveen's series in *Petits Propos Culinaires*. See:

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Heritage Turkey Foundation. <http://heritageturkeyfoundation.org/>

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