

## Recipe Books: easily overlooked heritage

A paper given by Val Hewson, Chair of Reading Sheffield, on 28 October 2021 at Inheriting the Family's '[The Books That Bring Us Together](#)' seminar series. [Here](#) is a link to watch the seminar.

It's hard to imagine what it would have been like without books. So there is that aspect of reading. And I think there's the confidence that reading gives you actually. I think my life would have been less rich without reading. When I was about fifteen or sixteen I joined a reading club, a companion book club. Where you got a book a month, you didn't get any choice in those days, you got the book. Five a month it was and you finished it. I never had any other choice.

### Recipe Books: easily overlooked heritage

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Around 1953 the Good Housekeeping Institute published a set of booklets, generously illustrated, on thin paper, without covers. The booklets cost 1/6 each, about £2 or one dollar today. Each one covers a specific skill – cakes, pastry, preserving and so on. The booklets here belong to Jane, who remembers her mum using them in the 1950s and '60s. When her mum died, relatively young, Jane kept the books. She still, she says, consults the one on preserves. It has fallen apart - barely one page intact. Jane could write out the recipes, or source a better copy. But she has never done this. For her the booklets not only help her make good food but they also, in a way surely unimagined by Good Housekeeping, preserve her relationship with her mother.



Good Housekeeping booklets (1953)

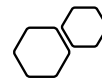


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The booklets were included in a recent exhibition curated by the Reading Sheffield group. This paper is an account of what we learned.



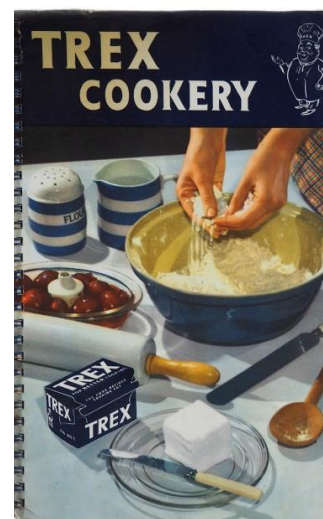
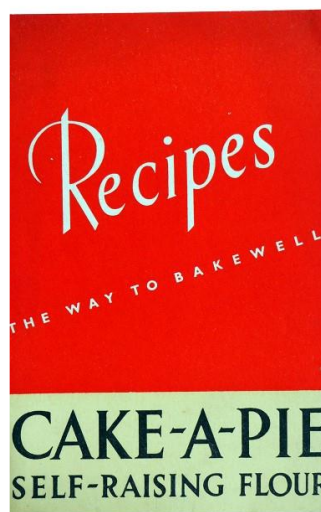
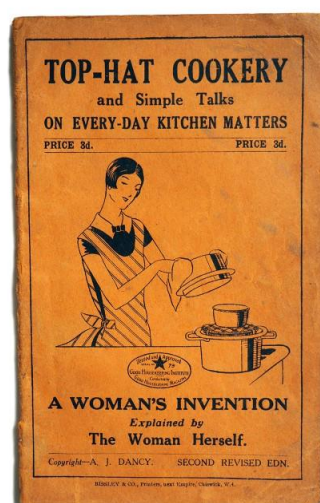
Heritage At Home exhibition  
Sheffield Central Library  
(September 2021)



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Our idea was to illustrate everyday, personal heritage. A heritage which is easily overlooked but which, when we examine it, makes us think about what we each carry from the past into the future, and why. But the exhibition also painted a picture of the society which generated the books. In other words, a shared heritage, as well as an individual one.

The books - we had about 70 - were collected simply by asking around in Sheffield. A few came from charity shops or eBay. Most people we spoke to turned out to have books tucked away. Enthusiasts had whole bookcases. Even those who, like me, claimed to be uninterested in cooking, often had something. This prompts the question: why do we keep books we appear to have little use for? Is it because they can conjure memory?



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The variety of books we collected surprised us. We had no particular expectations. We wanted random, not representative.



5

Most of the books are dated between about 1890 and 1970, with the 1930s and 1950s particularly well-covered.

- Instruction manuals for stoves and kitchen equipment.
- Booklets promoting flour, margarine, baking powder etc.
- Books from newspapers to encourage reader loyalty.
- Domestic encyclopaedias of the sort that used to be presented to brides.
- And books by yesterday's Delias and Nigellas. The exception is Mrs Beeton – her book turned up more often than any other, in various versions.



The many faces of Mrs Beeton

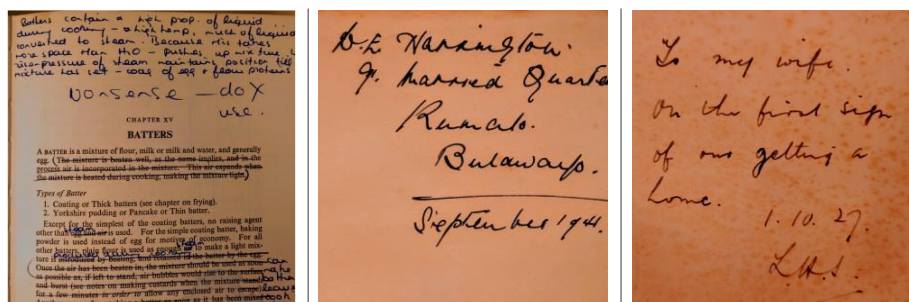
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Many of the books are worn – a few almost to destruction – and this may be not so much the effect of time as of use. There are mysterious stains and gritty or sticky pages.



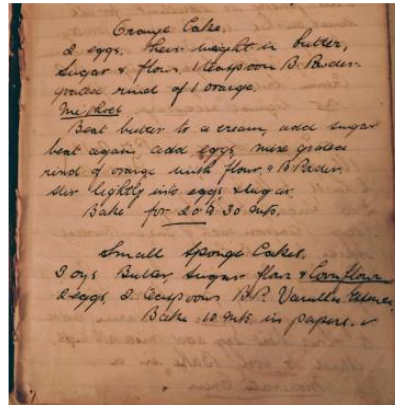
Occasionally scraps of paper are tucked inside, marking a page and then forgotten. Here, in a 1930s book found on eBay, we found a telegram sent to a house in Jersey just after the Channel Islands were liberated in 1945. In the same book was this carefully cut out drawing. Why? Was it an advert for silk stockings?

## Marginalia and inscriptions



In the margins of the books are handwritten reminders, explanations, comments. Sometimes children have crayoned over the pages. And there are names and addresses, like the wife of a soldier living in wartime 'married quarters' in what is now Zimbabwe. The book now belongs to their daughter. And sometimes there are inscriptions – here from the unknown LHS who wrote in a copy of Mrs Beeton: "To my wife on this first sign of our getting a home. 1.10.27. LHS."

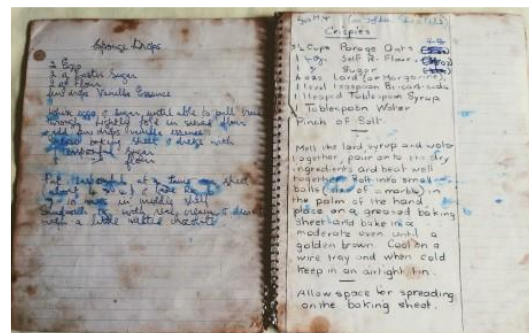
Most interesting for today, and probably the most treasured, are the often messy, homemade books.



Angela's recipes and Ellen's mother's notebook (1923)

Here for example is Angela's book stuffed as full as can be with recipes collected over 30 years. And the little exercise book in which Ellen's mother made notes for her cookery course in 1923.

Cookery course books belonging to Pam (1963) and her mum (1957)



And Pam's domestic science school book from 1963 and her mum's notes from an evening class in 1957. 'Good with a bottle of red wine' reads one of her comments.

That is the personal. What about the shared or societal? The books all, without exception, are addressed to women. Home-making is to be their vocation. Men are merely bit players, seen for example in illustrations, happily consuming delicious food.

Class is apparent too: the books range, in terms of style, ingredients and price, from the humble, through the aspirational, to the superior.

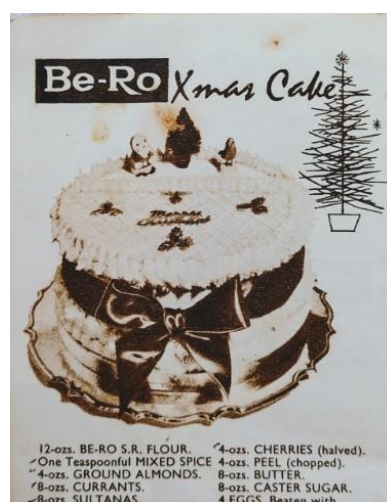
The recipes themselves are revealing too. Lard – animal fat for cooking, if you do not know – is a staple; oil is rarely mentioned. Sugar and salt are liberally used. Fruit and vegetables are both traditional and seasonal. Fruit cakes abound, and lemon drizzle is unknown. There are doubtful recipes for curry and spaghetti, but on the whole international cuisines are ignored. We found only one vegetarian book, dating from the 1930s and using the unattractive term ‘non-flesh cookery’.



It is apparent too that home-making is an onerous business. Dishes are prepared from scratch, with meat being cut up and trimmed – many of the books include detailed diagrams for jointing meat. Vegetables come still covered in soil. Puddings are steamed for hours. Cakes are elaborately decorated. A model schedule suggests starting work at 06.45am and stopping after 07.30pm.

Be-Ro

from 1957



Hand a few books round a group and tastes, smells, textures are recalled - and then incidents and people. Three neighbours of mine, all aged over 70, bonded over this Be-Ro

book from 1957. Be-Ro is a brand of flour well known in the north of England, and the company has long published recipe books. 'Making pastry!' 'I always made the easy chocolate cake for my children.' 'The thing about Be-Ro was it taught you the basic methods, and you could practise and then try more complicated things.' I was drawn in myself, as this Be-Ro book was the only recipe book my mum ever had, and I remember its excellent Christmas cake recipe.

These recipe books are ordinary, humble, probably not expected to have a long life. Yet here so many of them still are, some in use, others gathering dust. An easily overlooked heritage, but evoking our homes, one which appears to be tremendously powerful.