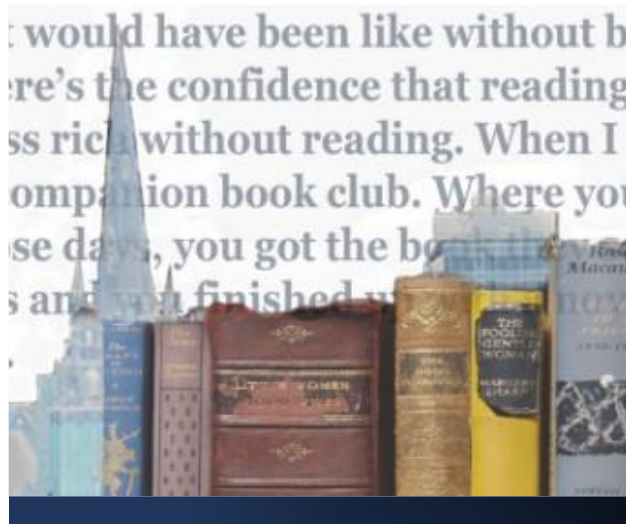


How did your Nan Cook Christmas Dinner? Exploring vintage recipe books

Slides and brief notes of a talk by Val Hewson, Chair of Reading Sheffield,
at Sheffield Central Library, on 7 December 2021



How did your Nan
cook Christmas
dinner?

Exploring vintage
recipe books

Val Hewson
Reading Sheffield
www.readingsheffield.co.uk

- Today I'm talking about vintage recipe books. I should say at the start that this is not a talk about cooking per se, but about what vintage recipe books – so easily overlooked – tell us about their time.



- Having said this is not a talk about cooking, I am starting with a recipe from one of the books I'm talking about. A recipe for a bread omelette. Ever heard of this before? What do you think? Almost everyone I have asked has been put off by this.



- The recipe is from Over 120 Ways of Using Bread for Tasty and Delightful Dishes. It's a paperback and now quite fragile. A collection of recipes to promote bread, it was published by the Millers' Mutual Association around 1934. It cost 6d old money, or 2.5p today. Trade bodies often seem to produce such books. Most of the recipes in this one are fine – bread pudding, sandwiches etc.
- Notice the design. The 1920s/30s kitchen, with a cooker from the period and the familiar blue and white basin. Also the rather suggestive expression and stance of the woman - naturally a woman, as we shall see. And the back cover, with the odd slogan 'Bread Built an Empire' and the wagon out of the Wild West.



Heritage At Home

Sheffield Central
Library
(September 2021)

- This talk – and the collection of recipe books owned by Reading Sheffield - comes from this year's Heritage Open Days festival. The theme of Edible England was a poser until we thought of recipe books.
- Sheffield Libraries kindly hosted an exhibition for us through September in the Central Library. Sheffield Archives kindly contributed two books, including one from 1814, which I'll tell you about later. The library staff tell us it was popular and got a lot of people talking about cooking and about their memories.
- Our starting point 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. We get a picture of the society which generated the books. This is both a shared heritage and an individual one.



- We collected the books simply by asking around in Sheffield. A few came from eBay and charity shops. Almost everyone turned out to have books tucked away. Enthusiasts had whole bookcases. Even those who 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?
- The books dated from roughly 1900 to 1970, with the majority from the 1930s and 1950s. The variety surprised us. We had no particular expectations. We wanted random, not representative.
- Shown here are books from, on the left, 1924-26 – the instruction book for a kind of early pressure cooker. Notice what it says 'A woman's invention, described by the woman herself'. Her name was Mrs Ada Dancy, but nothing else is known about her. The book is very 1920s, with line drawings. On the right, from 1954, a book from Trex, which is familiar from my 1960s childhood and still exists.



- Here is (i) a little book from the company making Atora beef suet, dated about 1938; (ii) GEC, stove manufacturers dating from 1951; (iii) from the Daily News newspaper company in the 1930s, one of many recipe books produced by newspapers to encourage reader loyalty, often given away free if you collected tokens from each day's edition.
- The examples shown so far are typical of popular recipe books – from food producers like Trex, newspaper companies like the Daily News, manufacturers of kitchen equipment like GEC and New World stoves.



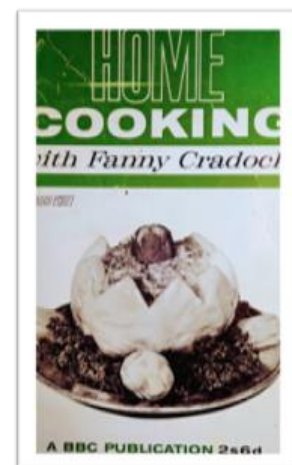
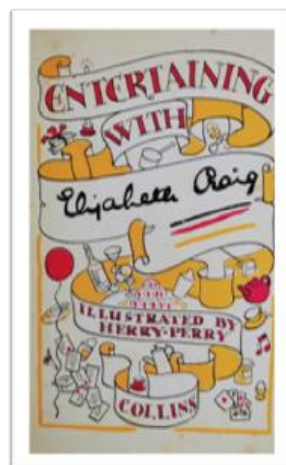
The many faces of Mrs Beeton

- Cookery attracts celebrities, icons. Today we think of Jamie, Nigella, Hugh, Delia. It was no different in times past. Here is the first real cookery icon, [Mrs Isabella Beeton](#). We collected more versions of Mrs Beeton than anything else. On the left is a 1980s

facsimile of the original and complete Mrs Beeton, published in 1861. In the middle, a cheap paperback 1920s edition costing 6d. On the right a version from 1900.

- Mrs Beeton is seen as a great Victorian, an expert housewife, the image of respectability and womanhood and probably an elderly figure like the Queen herself. The truth is very different. Mrs Beeton (1836-1865) was not so much a housewife as a journalist who wrote for her husband's magazine, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. Her book was largely a collection of readers' letters (which has led to plagiarism charges). Mrs Beeton died aged 28, due to childbirth complications. Her husband was forced to sell the rights to the Ward Lock company which made a lot of money out of the deal.
- Sheffield has a rival to Mrs Beeton. In 1802, Priscilla Haslehurst wrote *The Family Friend, and Young Woman's Companion, or, housekeeper's instructor*. The 1814 edition was lent to the exhibition by Sheffield Archives. Haslehurst wrote : 'the information ...is not carelessly copied from any similar work, but is really the fruit of twelve years of valuable experience, as housekeeper in very respectable families, and twenty years of diligent practice...'. She was a professional.

Yesterday's icons



8

- Here are more celebrity cooks of yesterday, now almost forgotten.
- On the left, Aunt Kate, a familiar name in Scottish newspapers and magazines, such as the *People's Friend*, from the 1880s to the 1960s. Obviously the material was written by several journalists, of whom only one is known - Flora Scrymgeour (1892-1982), who wrote from the 1920s. This book dates from 1932.
- In the middle is a book by [Elizabeth Craig](#) (1883-1980). She wrote many books about cookery, domestic management and needlework. This book, *Entertaining with Elizabeth Craig* (1933), is very attractive for its illustrations by Herry-Perry. It was bought by a vicar's wife to help with parish entertaining and is now owned by her granddaughter.

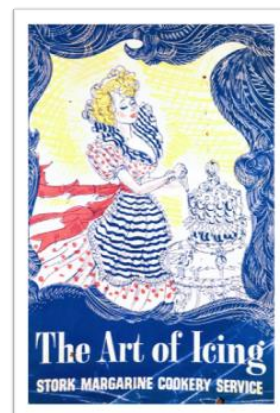
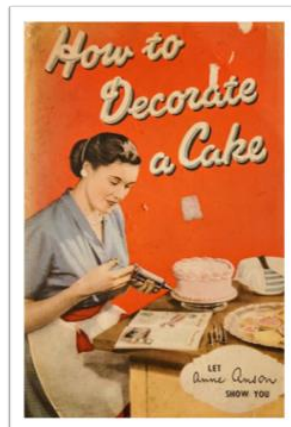
- On the right is a BBC book from a TV series starring [Fanny Cradock](#) (1909-1994), a formidable personality whose television career ended abruptly when she criticised an amateur cook and the public turned against her.

Glamour



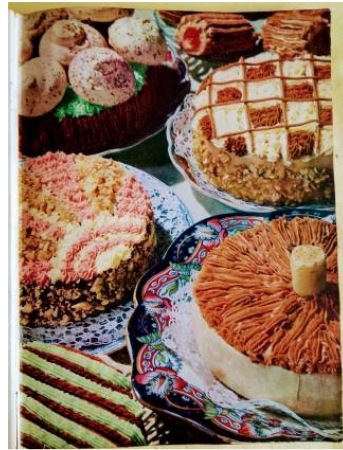
- Here is one more example of a celebrity, Hollywood star [Merle Oberon](#) (1911-1979), using glamour to sell herrings. The book dates from 1937, and is a piece of marketing from the Herring Industry Board.

The audience for all this?



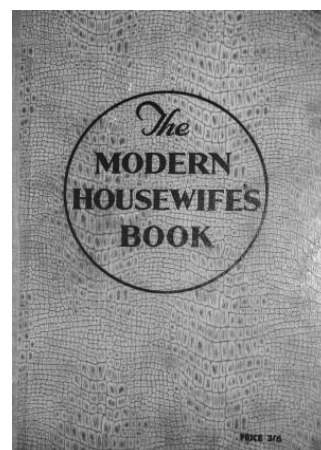
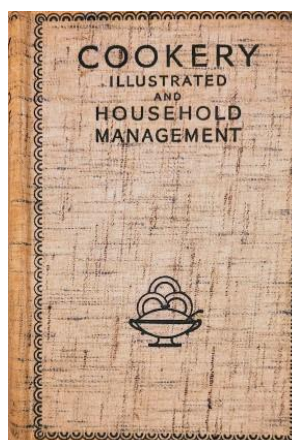
- These books are from the early 1950s. They illustrate an important point. All 70 or so books in our exhibition – from 1814 to 1970 – were addressed to women. Men featured, if at all, as consumers of food, as people to be looked after. And women were expected to be at home, not to have a job.

Fashions in food



- These images are from 1950s Good Housekeeping books, included to illustrate changing fashions in food. Notice how elaborate these dishes are – admittedly, they are occasion food, not everyday. On the left there are various cakes, including bottom right, a cake in the shape of a mushroom! On the right is lobster. Both of these would take considerable time and skill to produce. It says something about expectations on women, about how much time they were expected to devote to housecraft. Remember that there were no ready meals or microwaves.
- Ingredients might be different too. There was more sugar and salt. Lard was more familiar than olive oil. Vegetables and fruit were seasonal. ‘Meat and two veg’ was the norm. There seems to have been relatively little international food – some pasta and curries (of a sort – the recipes often specify sultanas and bananas).
- The terms ‘vegetarian’ and ‘vegan’ were not used. We found only one fully vegetarian book dated 1936, and it talked of ‘non-flesh cooking’, and called nuts ‘nutmeat’.

The housewife's lot

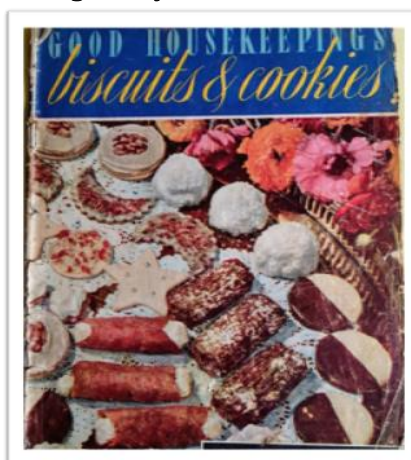
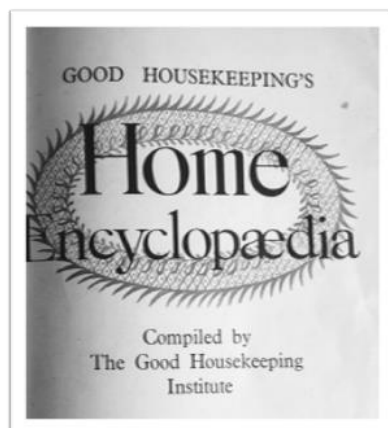


- Domestic encyclopaedias were common. On the left, *Cookery Illustrated* (1936), by Elizabeth Craig and on the right, *The Modern Housewife's Book* (1920) by Aunt Kate, both of whom we have already met. Such books were typically given to brides and newly engaged women. They covered: cooking, cleaning, basic maintenance, finance and legal advice, sewing, laundry and care of clothes, childcare, decorating and room layout. They are another indicator of just what it meant to be a housewife/woman in early to mid 20th c.
- Here is a typical daily routine from such a book (*The Book of Hints and Wrinkles*, Odhams Press Ltd, 1939).

Single-handed three-roomed flat, one baby of a year.

6.45am	Lift and give orange juice to baby; get tea for self and husband.
7.30am	Light your boiler; set breakfast table.
8am	Wash and dress baby.
8.15am	Baby's breakfast.
8.30am	Baby put in pram on veranda; prepare breakfast and serve.
9am	Wash dishes; sweep and dust dining room, passage, bathroom, kitchen and lavatory; strip and make beds; sweep bedroom; prepare baby's broth, etc.
10.30am	Special work (fortnightly turnings-out).
Midday	Baby's lunch; prepare own lunch and as much as possible of evening meal.
1pm	Own lunch; wash-up; rest and change.
3pm	Take baby out in pram; do shopping for next day.
4.30pm	Own tea.
5pm	Baby's tea; wash-up; set supper table; play with baby.
6pm	Put baby to bed; ironing; cleaning silver; finishing touches to supper.
7pm	Supper.
7.30pm	Wash-up.

Professionalising the job



- It's not surprising then that there were attempts to develop women's household skills and to professionalise and make valued the 'profession' of housewife. The Good Housekeeping magazine and its [Institute](#) were pioneers in this. The magazine started around 1885 in the USA and came to the UK in 1922. The Institute ran 'test kitchens', researching, perfecting and disseminating recipes and techniques. It also produced huge numbers of books and booklets.

Personal
heritage:

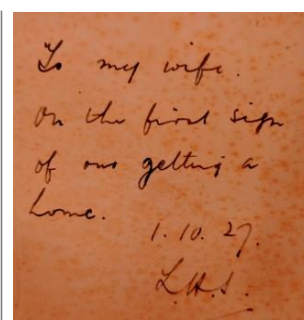
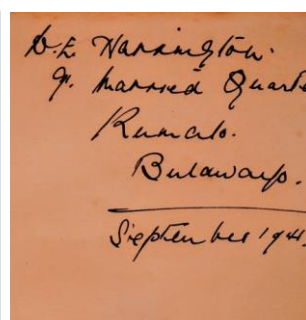
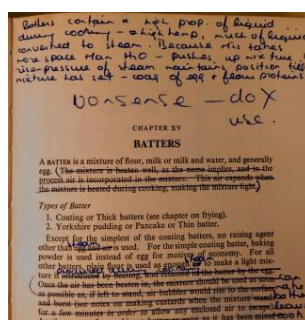
Good
Housekeeping



14

- Recipe books can have personal connections and can mark family and even national history. Also national history.. This is one of the brightly coloured booklets produced by Good Housekeeping in 1953 covering eg cakes, biscuits, pastry and home preserving. They must have been very popular because there are many still around. This one was bought by the mother of the current owner, who says she still consults it.

Marginalia, inscriptions and bookmarks



15

- Here are more connections. People write in cookery books. On the left, a book belonging to a trainee cookery teacher who has written 'Nonsense!' on one page. In the middle is an edition of Mrs Beeton owned by the mother of the trainee teacher. In wartime she

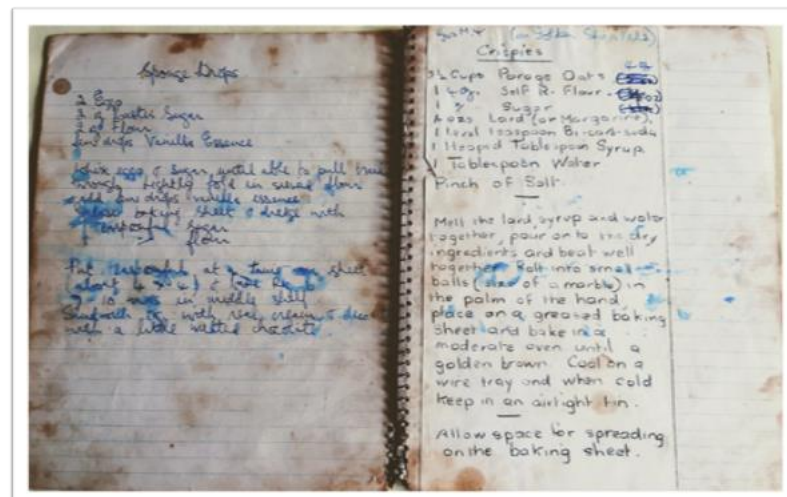
was living in Bulawayo, then Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. On the right there is another edition of Mrs Beeton, which dates from 1927. It is inscribed 'To my wife, on this first sign of our getting a home. 1.10.27. LHS.' We have no idea who LHS is, but the inscription is poignant.

Handwritten, cut out, crammed in, collected...



- This is another personal book – unique and handwritten. You can see how much is gathered here: recipe cards from supermarkets, recipes cut out of magazines and newspapers and the backs of food packets, typed, written out on scraps of paper in different handwriting.

Cookery course books



- This is another of the handwritten, personal cookery books. It was written by the mother of the current owner when she was doing a cookery course in 1923. They are often stained, sticky or gritty with use. They include comments – 'Good with a bottle of red

wine', reads one. They are intensely personal, and offer a direct link to the original owner.

Unexpected
and even
bizarre...



18

- Occasionally you find the unexpected in books. I bought this 1932 book on eBay. Looking through it, I found a telegram and a cut out figure between the pages. Presumably both had been picked up at random and used as bookmarks and then forgotten.
- The telegram is dated 20 June 1945 and sent to an address in Jersey. This was only a few weeks after Jersey was liberated. The content is not very exciting: 'Many thanks interesting mail received home today may suggest you acknowledge cheque direct to managing directors.'
- The cut out figure is glamorous. Is it a story illustration? Or maybe an advert for silk stockings? There are nothing to show the date or source, although the style looks 1930s.
- These are snapshots of a life, meaningful to the individual but now lost to us.

Personal
heritage:

Be-Ro
from 1957



19

- To finish on a note of personal heritage, here is one of the many editions of the Be-Ro recipe book. [Be-Ro](#) is a flour manufacturer well known in the north and Midlands but I think less so in the south of England. Be-Ro was originally a Newcastle firm, Thomas Bell

& Sons, and the name Be-Ro is a shortened version of Bells Royal, the name of their brand of self-raising flour around the turn of the 20th century. Be-Ro arranged recipe demonstrations and then published them from the 1920s onwards. This Be-Ro book is from 1957 and is the only cookery book I remember my mum owning. I have no idea what happened to our copy but I remember the cover image and the Christmas cake recipe.

Conclusion

- What do recipe books tell us then? They are very personal, even the ones which are mass-produced. They are repositories of individual histories but also evocations of societies, of cultures, which have faded away. They portray, for example, a time when women were to concern themselves only with the home, and food preparation and housework took more time and effort than they generally do today.
- And what is the future of recipe books in an age when it is so easy to Google recipes?