

Rearward Reflections

Everyone experiences an occasional reflection about the “good old days”. Let’s take a peek a bit farther back in time to the really good OLD days – say, about the 1500’s...

Most people got married in June because they had taken their annual bath in May, and still smelled reasonably good in June. However, they were starting to smell, so brides carried a bouquet of flowers to mask their growing natural fragrance. Hence, the custom of carrying a bouquet when getting married.

The annual bath began with a big tub filled with hot water. The man of the house went first, with the nice clean water, then all the other sons and men of the household. The women were next, then the children – with all the babies at the end of the parade. Of course, by then, the water was so dirty someone could actually get lost in it. Hence the saying, "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water."

Most roofs were thatched, made of thick layers of straw, with no boards underneath – just a few support beams. The thatched roof was readily accessible from the ground, and the only place for animals to get warm, so all the dogs, cats and other small animals (like mice and insects) lived in the roof. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof. Hence the saying "It's raining cats and dogs."

There was nothing to stop things from falling out of the roof, inside the house. This posed a real problem in the bedroom where bugs and other droppings could really mess up your nice clean bed. Building a bed with big posts and a sheet hung over the top afforded some protection. That's how canopy beds came into existence.

Without central heat, the room was cold at night, so the wealthy added curtains around the bed to help keep in the body heat.

Most floors were dirt. Only the wealthy had something other than dirt. Hence the saying "dirt poor."

The wealthy had stone floors that would get slippery when wet, especially in winter. They spread straw (thresh) on the floor to make them less slippery. As the winter wore on, they kept adding more thresh. After a while it would build up to the point where it would start falling out the door. A piece of wood was placed at the bottom of the doorway to hold the thresh inside. This piece of wood became known as a "threshold."

In those good old days, most families only had one large cast iron cooking pot which was kept near the fire. Every morning, they rekindled the fire, and added fresh food to the pot. They ate mostly vegetables, along with any “road kill” of the day, when available. The left over food was kept in the pot – they didn’t have good old “Tupperware” or refrigerators, and the cooked food

would keep reasonably well over night in the pot. Some residue from previous meals could linger in the mix for days. Hence the rhyme, "Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old."

Occasionally they could obtain pork, which was quite special. When visitors came, they would hang up their bacon to show it off. It was a sign of wealth that a man "could bring home the bacon." They would cut off a little to share with guests, and would all sit around and “chew the fat.”

Those with money had plates, which were usually made of pewter. Pewter was mostly tin with a little lead to improve its workability. Food with high acid content caused some of the lead to leach onto the food, causing lead poisoning and death. This happened most often with tomatoes, so for the next 400 years or so, tomatoes were considered poisonous.

Bread was baked near the fire or in crude stone ovens without thermostats and the baking temperature was difficult to control. The resulting loaf was divided according to status. Workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guests got the top, or "upper crust."

Lead or pewter cups were used to drink ale or whisky. The combination would sometimes knock them out for a couple of days. Someone walking along the road would take them for dead and prepare them for burial. They were laid out on the kitchen table for a couple of days and the family would gather around and eat and drink and wait and see if they would wake up. Hence the custom of holding a "wake."

England is old and small and the local folks started running out of places to bury people. They would dig up coffins, take the bones to a "bone-house" and reuse the grave. When reopening these coffins, they noticed about 1 out of 25 coffins had scratch marks because they had been burying people alive. The solution was to tie a string on the wrist of the corpse, lead it through the coffin, up through the ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would sit out in the graveyard all night (the "graveyard shift") to listen for the bell. Anyone buried prematurely could be "saved by the bell" or was considered a "dead ringer."

Presented for your enjoyment

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