

Feasting in the Great Hall



The largest and grandest room in the castle was the Great Hall. This was where the lord would hold court cases, collect rent and sort out problems on the estate. Most of all, it was used for entertaining and feasting.

Who ate in a Great Hall?

The lord and lady of a castle, their family and guests would eat the main meals of the day, lunch and dinner in the Great Hall of their castle. On special occasions or when there were important visitors, the dinner would turn into a feast or a banquet.

What did the hall look like?

The hall was usually the biggest and grandest room in a castle. The stone walls were covered with wall hangings or tapestries to keep the room warm and for decoration. The stone floor was covered in straw and scented herbs and would have looked quite mucky to us – with scraps of old food or bones for dogs left lying around. Later people started to use rugs or rush mats. Usually there was a huge fireplace to warm up the room, and in very big halls there might be other fireplaces or a kind of portable fire in a metal basket, called a brazier. The hall was lit with candles or with flaming torches made from rope treated with a kind of tar.

Where did people sit?

At one end of the hall there was usually a raised platform called a dais. This was where the lord and the most important guests sat. It was usually the place nearest to the fire. Their table was known as the 'high board'. It was simply a board placed on trestles and was set up before the feast and taken down again afterwards. It was covered with a linen tablecloth and was set out with silver or pewter dishes, knives and spoons. In front of the lord's seat was a large silver container for salt called a saltvat. The lord was the only person who had a proper high backed chair. Most other people sat on benches, though some of the important women had stools with cushions. The rest of the guests sat on benches at trestle tables running down the length of the hall.

What kind of manners did people have?

There were set rules about the right way to behave and eat. Meals were announced by the blowing of trumpets in some castles. Servants would then bring round jugs of water and a basin, and each guest would wash his or her hands and dry them on a napkin. This became part of the ceremony of the feast. After washing, people would sit down, but in a very particular order. The most important guests, often church people, sat first at the high table. There was a correct way to do everything, from where

people sat to how many fingers to use in holding the joint for the lord to carve. It was rude to belch, to take very large helpings, to dip your meat in the salt or to put your elbows on the table.

What did people eat with?

People used their fingers to eat with a lot more than we do now. The more important guests had knives and spoons, but nobody used forks. Plates were made out of silver or pewter if you were rich, or wood if you were not so rich. Some people in the Great Hall would use a big slab of bread as a plate. This was called a trencher. After the meal the trenchers might be given to beggars. People often shared plates and cups. It was the custom then to offer your friends pieces of food from your plate.



What did people eat?

The first course was sometimes announced with trumpets. After saying a prayer, the food was carried in by servants. There were many courses: soup, roast meat, stuffed birds, baked fish and pies. In grander houses you might be offered roast swan, or a 'cockyntrice' – the front half of a cockerel stuffed and stitched to the back of a piglet! Savoury courses were followed by elaborate desserts: preserved fruits sweetened with honey; cheesecakes; and nuts. People at a feast drank wine.

Where did the food come from?

Most of the food was grown or produced locally. Many castles had orchards for growing fruit and vegetable gardens for growing oats, barley, onions and peas. There would also be cows, sheep, goats and pigs belonging to the castle. The people who lived on the castle estate would pay rent to the lord with bags of grain, live animals or other foodstuffs. Bread, cheese and beer would be made at the castle. Some food would be imported from abroad, like oranges and other fruit, spices and wine.

Where was the food cooked?

The food was cooked in the castle kitchens and was then carried up by servants. They would prepare the food for serving behind a wooden screen at one end of the hall. When the moment came, they would carry in the dishes. Sometimes the food could be quite cold by this time!

What kinds of entertainment was there?

Entertainment was a big part of a feast in the Great Hall. Some halls had a wooden gallery high up where musicians played while people were eating. Not everyone enjoyed the music – one visitor wrote unhappily that the music was '... like the bellowing of beasts; the loud bagpipe is their chief delight'. As well as bagpipes people played lutes, harps and pipes. There were also storytellers, singers, displays of dancing and jesters playing tricks and performing acrobatics.

