

# A History of the Wooden Plate

Filmmakers, children's book illustrators and lifestyle magazine writers seem to share the idea that we all used to eat from wooden plates in "the olden days" whether the setting be Saxon, Medieval, Tudor, or poor Victorian. Like most common ideas there is an element of truth here, but the full picture is much more complicated.

The vessels that people eat from tell us much about their way of life. Mealtimes are so important and can range from a group of friends and family sharing food from a common large vessel to the sad solitary consumption of TV dinners. Vessels can tell us about how people ate in the past, for instance round bottomed bowls from Anglo Scandinavian 10<sup>th</sup> century York almost certainly were held in the hand or on the knee for eating. Plates are not good vessels for this use and work best when people are eating from tables.

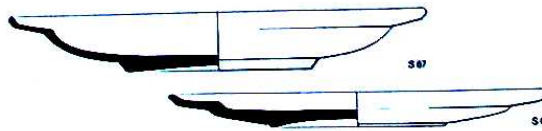
The earliest wooden vessel that I know which could be described as a platter or perhaps a dish is from Stanwick, Yorkshire and is dated to the first century AD. This is a large serving vessel, finely carved from oak, and its elaborate shape copies earlier Bronze



▲ square platter from Hampton Court Palace c1700

dishes. It is similar in size and proportions to turned wooden dishes used as communal serving vessels in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I would imagine that diners sat around the dish and helped themselves to its contents, though we shall never know.

The Romans had very fine, large silver and pewter platters turned on the lathe and carved with elaborate decoration, several of which are on show in the British Museum. They are clearly rare, high status objects and normal people of the period would probably



▲ from St Mary Spital, London; 1286 (top) 1463 (bottom)

have eaten from bowls of wood or imported "samian" ware pottery. Wooden vessels of this period are rare finds, probably due to the amount of pottery which was imported, though it is also perhaps also due to fewer waterlogged Roman domestic sites being excavated.

The Angles, Saxons and Vikings all ate exclusively from turned wooden bowls. Whilst some shallow bowls could perhaps be called a dish, I have not seen anything from this period that I would call a plate. Most bowls seem to be 7"-8", ideal for holding in the hand and holding an individual meal.

After the Norman conquest things seem to have changed a little. The commonest archaeological finds are still



▲ a scene from the Bayeux tapestry

the standard one person bowl, though dish forms become more common. We also see in illustrations of wealthy households of the period a type of formalised fine dining at tables. Sometimes in these illustrations there is neither plate nor bowl, but a small rectangular flat object called a trencher set before each diner. Some of these thin trenchers may have been of wood, some were of a specially baked wholemeal bread which records tell us was kept for four days then trimmed to shape with a special trencher knife, after use they would be fed to dogs. The trencher acted as a small cutting board, diners eating with knife and fingers. Large platters or chargers were used to bring food to table and diners were served from these.

Bread trenchers were sometimes placed on top of, or replaced by, wooden trenchers. It has been suggested that these wooden trenchers gradually evolved into plates by first having a hollow turned in them and then the square profile being removed to leave the plate as we know it. There are a very small number of early square trenchers with a hollow turned in them, some also have a second small hollow in one corner for salt. These attract

very high prices and are seen as something of a treen collectors "missing link". The evidence does not support this accepted theory. The trenchers of the medieval illustrations are all small, very thin rectangles or occasionally circles and a long way from the thick squares of wood which have the depression turned in them. It seems to me that during the sixteenth century the use of the trencher in high class dining died out to be replaced by individual plates of pewter or silver.

The words trencher and trencher plate were also used further down the social scale to describe individual wooden plates whether round or square. Looking at the archaeological record it seems to me that these flat plates gradually became more popular during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are a small number of plates in the treen collection found with the Mary Rose (1545), though the commonest form is a slightly deeper dish. Perhaps woodturners were led by following the fashion of pewter and silver; the Mary Rose pewter dishes are deep and later pewter flattened out to a plate form. Perhaps this change was brought about by

increasing numbers of people sitting at a table to eat, certainly I find in practical



▲ examining original Mary Rose plates

use today that a plate is best suited to eating from a table with knife and fork whereas a dish is well suited to eating off the knee. Several friends swear by wooden dishes for camping.

Soon after the plate had reached its present form, wood began to be used less. At the top of the social scale rapidly rising living standards in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant that more people could afford pewter. The bulk of people still ate from wood though until the start of the eighteenth century when European pottery factories discovered how to



▼ meal time at the Woods

make porcelain. Up until then the soft earthenware pottery had not been ideal for bowls and plates, being used primarily for jugs and cooking pots. The newly imported porcelain was fashionable and could be mass produced at a competitive price. With increasing mechanisation and cheap fuel for firing, porcelain became very cheap. Today you can afford to break ten porcelain plates for the price of one wooden one.

Wood still has many advantages. It is durable; I have many wooden bowls and a breadboard that have been in daily use for over fifty years. Wood is a natural insulator as

▼ my plates based on the Mary Rose design



well so it keeps the food warm without having to warm the plate. It also seems to me somehow to be in harmony with natural food in a way that hard porcelain can never be. It is a sensual experience eating from a wooden plate, there is none of the scratchy, clattery noise of metal on pot which, once you have lived without it, tends to grate. Perhaps this is why wooden plates were still in use in the college dining hall at Winchester in the 1930s or perhaps, as with many places, it was just the sense of a link with the past.

Today of all the things that I produce my favourite is a simple plate, the design of which is based on an original from the Mary Rose. I make them in Beech and Sycamore both of which stand years of hard daily use and scrubbing in hot water. Some people worry about what they can or can't eat from a wooden plate, some people use them just for picnics. At home we have them for everyday use, eating everything from curry to kippers off them and they wash up perfectly. To me the dinner table is the heart of a home where good food is shared with family and friends. It makes me very happy to know how many people eat from my plates every day and in so doing are linked to a quieter, slower past.

© Robin Wood June 2002  
Please ask my permission if you wish to reproduce any part of this article.