

REGENCY SHREWSBURY – FOOD AND DRINK

Introduction

The Regency is the term used to describe the period between 5 February 1811 and 29 January 1820 when the Prince Regent, eldest son of George III, reigned on behalf of his father.

The term “Regency” is commonly used, however, to describe a wider period of the late 18th and early 19th centuries (approx. 1795-1837), e.g. Regency furniture, architecture, etc. may not correspond strictly to the years between 1811 and 1820.

I am going to consider what people ate and drank during this period, as a way of understanding their lives, but first of all, I thought I would make a few general points about what was happening nationally during this decade.

The bigger picture – national events in the Regency

The Regency decade was a time of great turmoil and change. England was in the middle of the Industrial Revolution, when the country moved from the largely agricultural, rural society of the 17th century to the huge industrial cities of northern England by the mid-19th century. There was instability due to the on-going Napoleonic wars, which finally ended in 1815 with victory for Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo. A long European war had led to shortages of goods and rising prices for the general population and the ruling class lived in fear of a British revolution, along the lines of the French Revolution of the 1790s.

Conditions for the majority of the population were appalling. There was mass unemployment and, in 1816, a particularly bad harvest. The poor lived in slum districts of the big cities, places where alcoholism, gambling, prostitution, thievery and violence were the order of the day.

The monarchy, too, was under strain. George III had been a respected, long-serving monarch, but in 1811 he was declared unfit to rule because of his poor health. He was kept in isolation at Windsor Castle, with no idea what was going on around him, only able to see his doctors. His eldest son, George, who had never got on well with his father, reigned as Prince Regent, but was kept well away from political and military matters. This left him to the pursuit of pleasure as his main objective in life, although he was also one of the leading patrons of the arts and architecture. For example, he commissioned the building of Brighton Pavilion. Naturally, all this was very expensive and neither the Regent nor the government could afford such projects.

Food and Drink for the Rich

The rich consumed huge amounts of food and drink, whereas the poor could barely afford to buy enough food to stay alive. The Prince Regent was the embodiment of all the excesses of the wealthy and an example of how he lived was the party he threw to celebrate becoming Prince Regent.

19 June 1811 – Celebration of the Prince Regent coming to the throne

The Prince Regent decided to celebrate his new status by throwing a spectacular party on the 19 June 1811 at his London home, Carlton House. Two thousand guests were invited and it was said to be the grandest and most extravagant party in the whole of Europe.

The main supper-table filled the 200-foot-long Gothic conservatory at Carlton House. To give you some idea of the grandeur of the occasion, here is a description of the main table decoration:

“In front of the Regent’s seat was a large circular basin feeding a stream, filled with goldfish, that meandered between banks of moss and flowers, past three picturesque bridges all the way to the far end of the table.” (Regency House Party, p. 71)

The tableware and serving dishes were made of solid gold and silver and the decorations consisted of thousands of lights and flowers. As well as the main table, some of the guests sat at tables in specially-made canvas tents in the garden, which were linked to the main house by canvas corridors. The food served included hot soups and roast joints, plus many cold dishes and puddings and many varieties of exotic fruit, with iced champagne to drink. The Times described a scene which was “inexpressibly delightful and even magically impressive.”

The aristocracy took their lead from the Prince Regent and it is likely that in all the stately homes around the country, grand celebration dinners were held throughout the summer of 1811, in honour of the Prince Regent coming to the throne. The nearest stately home to Shrewsbury was, of course, Attingham Park, the home of the 2nd Lord and Lady Berwick.

Regency Dining at Attingham

Let us imagine that we have been invited to Attingham Park to join Lord and Lady Berwick at a grand celebration dinner in the summer of 1811. What could we expect?

It is likely the table would have been set “a la Francaise”, a term which meant that all the dishes would have been arranged on the dining table before the diners entered. Guests would be expected to help themselves and their near neighbours to the food. If a desired dish was too far away, the diner would give their plate to a footman, who would take it to the guest nearest to the dish to fill, and then return the plate to the original diner. Footmen always moved around the table in an anti-clockwise direction. The best dishes were always placed nearest to the host and principal guests. The first course was usually a choice of entrees, side dishes and roast joints. These would then be cleared away, but the guests retained their plates for the second course, which would consist of a variety of savoury dishes and puddings. These would all be served and eaten together on the same plate.

Desserts, especially fruit and marzipan, were often displayed in fashionable pyramid shapes. At Attingham, pineapples were grown in a pinery (no longer in existence), near to the hothouses, and were used as magnificent table centrepieces and as a symbol of luxury and status. Sugar was thought to aid digestion and often a drink containing a spiced, sweet ginger was consumed at the end of a meal to help “close an overfull stomach”.

Dining “a la Francaise” was a complicated experience. It was common for some guests to be offered the same dishes two or three times, yet miss out entirely on other dishes. It was particularly difficult for those down the far end of the table. Conversation was difficult, too, because of the endless requests from guests and footmen to refill plates.

Over the course of the Regency, some hostesses moved away from serving “a la Francaise” to the new style of serving “a la Russe”. This meant that dishes were handed round in turn to each guest, which limited the number of dishes on offer, but was a fairer and easier system for the diners. William, the 3rd Lord Berwick, who inherited Attingham in 1832, had been a diplomat living in Europe for a number of years and it is likely that he would have been used to the “a la Russe” serving style. At Attingham, a style known as “demi-Russe” evolved – this meant that diners were served their main courses, but helped themselves to dessert. In all three different styles, the footmen served the wine to guests, with glasses being kept on a sideboard, not on the table.

Service “a la Russe” required more servants, silver, glass and cutlery and an entire system of etiquette developed around it. For example, guests entered the dining room by means of a procession from a nearby room, and everyone was lined up in descending order by rank. The order was:

Duke	Duchess
Marquess	Marchioness
Earl	Countess
Viscount	Viscountess
Baron	Baroness
Knight	

If two guests held the same rank, e.g. two Dukes, precedence was given to the oldest title. The placing of a title was also significant. “Anne, Lady Cousins” meant the title had been gained through marriage, whereas Lady Anne Cousins indicated the daughter of at least an earl. If there were two daughters with the same status, the older one would take precedence over the younger one.

It was said that the strict etiquette was in effect a “trial by dinner” for the nouveau riche unfamiliar with such rules and a way of the old aristocracy to continue to assert their authority. Pocket books explaining the rules were produced, telling guests, for example, that “all entrees, such as patties or mince, must be eaten with a fork only;” a knife and fork was required for sweetbreads, cutlets and game; and two forks in the case of fish. Woe betide the diner who got it wrong!

Here is an example of a Regency celebration dinner menu:

FIRST COURSE	SECOND COURSE
Leek and ham soup	Salmagundi (a dish composed of chopped meat, anchovies, eggs, onions, with oil and condiments)
Salmon baked in pastry	Raspberry cake
Fricassee of chicken	Boiled turkey with crayfish
Cabbage and spinach cake	Braised beefsteaks
Roast saddle of mutton	A raised game pie
Asparagus with butter	Syllabub
A boiled neat’s (beef) tongue	Wine and butter sauce
Potato pudding	

Drinking

Rich people in the Regency drank incredibly large amounts of alcohol, mostly champagne and wines, port and brandy. As you may expect, the Prince Regent led the way and on one occasion in 1814 he almost died of alcohol poisoning. He was described as being “dead drunk”. Many men were able to consume 4 or 5 bottles of wine in a single sitting and were

known as “4-bottle men” or “5-bottle men”. Although the size of a wine bottle in the Regency was equivalent to about three-quarters of a wine bottle today, that was still a large amount of alcohol. Young, rich men would often stay up all night, “drinking, swearing and singing” before being packed off home “in a hackney-coach, senseless, speechless and motionless”.

As well as drinking with every course at dinner, ale or claret was sometimes served at breakfast; mid-morning Madeira or sherry with biscuits was common; and men going out hunting or shooting would take a hip-flask of brandy with them.

For women, a glass of ratafia (a very light liqueur flavoured with fruit or almonds) was often served mid-morning. Other “ladies drinks” consumed during the day were orgeat, a non-alcoholic drink made of barley or almonds; and orange-flower water.

Water was never consumed on its own as it was often contaminated and therefore unsafe.

After dinner, the ladies left the dining room to the men and assembled in the drawing room, where a tray loaded with a spirit lamp and an urn of hot water would be provided to enable the hostess to brew tea for her guests. This custom was a very English idea which came about in the eighteenth century, when drinking tea became very fashionable.

The men re-joined the ladies an hour or two later, by which time the port had been passed around freely. Regency men were often in no fit state to join the ladies at all.

Meal times

Breakfast

Breakfast had been introduced into the beginning of the English day by the first decades of the eighteenth century. A Regency breakfast was a light, morning meal consisting of bread, often toasted, or rolls with jams, marmalades or other preserves, eggs and maybe ham or bacon. Tea, coffee and chocolate were commonly drunk at breakfast, although many Regency gentlemen consumed ale. This meal would be eaten between 8.00 and 10.00 a.m. This does not mean they had not got out of bed until this time. In fashionable Regency circles, it was common to get up between 8.00 and 9.00 a.m. and spend an hour or two reading, writing letters, meeting servants or walking before sitting down to breakfast.

Luncheon/Nuncheon

In the Regency period, even the meaning of “morning” and “afternoon” was not what we are used to. “Morning” in the Regency was defined as the period from dawn until the time of the main meal of the day, i.e. dinner. Dinner was typically served between 6.00 and 8.00 p.m. in the towns. As you can imagine, it was difficult for many people to go from breakfast to dinner with nothing to eat. In the decade prior to the Regency, ladies of the leisure

classes began to take a light meal around 1.00 p.m. This consisted of cold dishes, usually bread, meat, cheese, cakes and fruit. Picnics were also popular. Sandwiches were first seen around this period, although not as we know them. In the Regency, sandwiches were very small triangles of bread eaten with a knife and fork. Wine, tea or coffee would be drunk. This midday meal became known as luncheon or lunch – luncheon being the more upper-class and socially acceptable term. Nuncheon (pronounced noonshine) was the name given to the mid-day meal of the lower classes. Men did not eat luncheon with the ladies. Rich men might have a bird and a bottle at a tavern; a sandwich or pasty at their favourite coffee-house, or a cold collation at their gentlemen's club.

Supper

This was the name given to a meal eaten at the very end of the day, maybe 10.00 or 11.00 pm, perhaps after returning from the theatre or opera. It consisted of a warming drink or a light meal such as soup.

Let us leave the well-fed and drunken upper classes now and turn our attention to the ordinary working people of this time.

Food and Drink for the Poor

The diet of the farm labourer had not changed much since the eighteenth century. Bread and cheese were the staple items and ordinary people could not afford much meat, apart from maybe small amounts of fat bacon. Adulterated tea, used over and over again, was drunk in preference to milk or beer (home brewing got more difficult and few labourers could afford to keep a cow). Potatoes gradually spread into the diet and white bread became more fashionable than brown bread, such as rye or barley bread. In Shropshire in the 1780s and 1790s, weekly wages for labourers were about seven shillings, with an extra two shillings at harvest time. Sometimes employers provided meat, wood or small beer as part of the wage. On the hill-farms in South Shropshire, wages could be as low as four shillings a week.

From the 1790s onwards and into the Regency decade, the effect of the Napoleonic wars on the ordinary people was that they faced higher food prices. Another effect of war was that British manufacturers faced increased costs and reduced markets and this, in turn, led to lower wages and more unemployment for those working in the towns. All ordinary working people, therefore, faced a severe cost of living crisis: food cost more, but wages were going down and employment was more uncertain.

In March 1815, the situation for the ordinary working people deteriorated further, with the passing of the Corn Laws. (Corn meant any type of cereal crop, e.g. wheat, oats, barley).

The government was composed almost entirely of land-owners and the purpose of the legislation was to protect their agricultural interests. It was also aimed at reducing the influence of the industrial sector of the economy, which Tory land-owners viewed as being de-stabilizing and unhealthy. The legislation banned the import of foreign grain until the domestic price had reached eighty shillings a quarter, or ten shillings per bushel of wheat. This price was more than triple the wage of the average worker and it meant that, although the landed gentry would benefit from huge profits, the poor faced starvation.

Drinking

Over the course of the 18th century, the price of tea reduced significantly and it became common for tea to be drunk by the poor as well as the rich. By the end of the 18th century, it was said “even a common Washer woman thinks she has not had a proper Breakfast without Tea and hot buttered White Bread!” (English Society in the 18th century, p. 218).

As for alcohol, wine was too expensive for the working classes, who instead consumed ale, cider and mead. Ale could be drunk at every meal of the day, but it was usually “small beer”, a term used to describe a weaker form of beer, with an average alcohol content of only 0.8%. Small beer was made by brewing a second beer, after the first brewing had used up almost all of the alcohol from the grain. Small beer was consumed by everyone in society, even children.

Some Regency recipes

Meat featured prominently in recipes in the late 18th and early 19th century. A TV series 20 years ago recreated a Regency house-party in a stately home in Herefordshire. Here is a quote from one of the participants about the food served at the first dinner: “Dish after dish of meat and then more meat and then another bird and another animal and another mammal. It’s meat heaven in here. Occasionally they slip up and a plate of vegetables turns up.” (Regency House Party, p.58) Another feature of meals of this time was the way they presented dishes, e.g. roast hare (p.58) and roasted peacock (p.68).

Another book “Simmering Through the Ages” gave a recipe for French bean salad which came from the 18th century. The author noted that some people in this period were vegetarian, including Dr Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of Charles Darwin. He was so obese that his dining table had to be customised with an indentation to enable him to sit at the table!

In the coaching inns, favourite dishes might be forced leg of lamb or steak and kidney pudding with oysters. A popular recipe in the London gentlemen's clubs was liver and bacon with capers.

As for the very rich, the same book gives a breakfast recipe for sweetbreads on toast which was served to the Prince Regent at the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. It is noted that eating offal was more widespread at this time. This particular recipe involves sweetbreads served with bacon, sherry, butter and double cream – quite an elaborate breakfast!

In the larger country-houses, typical menus might include ribs of beef, pheasant with celery and cream or perhaps roast hand of stuffed pork.

Two examples of desserts of this time are fried pineapple with ginger and brandy and flaming apple flan.

Some Regency recipes from Attingham

Soups: Soup almost always featured in the first course at dinner. Generally, there was a choice of two soups, one strong and gamey designed to appeal to the men and for the ladies, a soup which was lighter in both colour and taste. Soups were often served with croutons, sometimes called sippets.

Soups were often cooked in quantity and then distributed to the poor and needy on the estate or local parish.

Winter Vegetables and Fruit

The Walled Garden at Attingham supplied the house with its vegetables and the gardeners were often skilled, knowledgeable men. The Head Gardener and the master of the house would decide which types of vegetables and fruits to grow. Of course, everything was seasonal at this time, not like today when supermarkets supply every type of fruit and vegetable at all times of the year.

Vegetables were cooked for a long time, because in Regency times, raw or undercooked vegetables were considered hard to digest. They even cooked cucumbers and lettuce! Vegetables were often served with melted butter or butter sauce, as butter was a sign of wealth.

Cakes and Biscuits

There were many specialist servants at Attingham who were involved in food preparation. As well as the kitchen itself, there was also a dairy, pastry room, bake-house, kitchen for meat and vegetables and a still room.

The still room was run by the housekeeper, helped by a stillroom maid. This room contained a still, which was used for distilling ingredients such as rosewater, or medicinal or cosmetic products, and also for fruit and flower wines.

At Attingham, the still room also has a rare confectionary oven. This would have been used by specialist confectioners to dry out sugar preparations, which would be displayed in the dining room.

The cakes and biscuits in the recipe booklet would have been served to morning callers, or to guests in the evening after suppers or assemblies. Servants who accompanied their masters to these events from other houses would congregate in the servants hall with the Attingham servants, where they would be given refreshment such as small beer, bread and cheese, and cake.

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