

# MEDIEVAL PLEASURES: DINING AND TRAVELLING WITH THE EARL OF OXFORD

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*Two fragments of medieval household accounts compiled for the Earl of Oxford have survived: both concern manors he held in Buckinghamshire. They have survived because they were re-used to record charters. One is held in the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies and the other in the Essex Record Office. The former was part of the household accounts and specifies the purchases of exotic spices and cloths needed for a grand meal. The latter lists the expenses incurred by the travelling household on a rather extended trip. The contents of the two fragmentary accounts are unpicked to show what was going on at the meal and in the course of the journey. The two events are described in the context of their times.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Record Offices of Buckinghamshire and Essex each possess a document giving, on one side, a fragment of the household accounts of the Earls of Oxford. The documents have been cut from much longer account rolls and their other sides have subsequently been used to record charters, which is the reason for their survival. If the account rolls had not been cut up and re-used, they would almost certainly have been thrown away: in fact, most extant accounts of this kind have survived because of their re-use, often for writing a charter on their blank back (Mertes 1988, 11; Greatorex 2010, 51). The document held by the Essex Record Office is identified by the reference D/DPr 136: that held by the Centre for Buckinghamshire studies by the reference D/BASM/18/359. These documents are of interest because they concern the Buckinghamshire manors of Chesham and Whitchurch, both of which belonged to the Earls of Oxford, and also because they show how even the less-rich manors of an Anglo-Norman aristocrat fitted into his scattered but rather large collection of manors, as well as how he used them.

The Buckinghamshire document is illustrated in Figure 1. Its catalogue entry is among those for the Chesham manorial documents and reads as follows:

'Accounts [fragmentary] [Dorse has copies of two charters temp Edward III, re Gambon family

and property in Chesham. 2 mm B.A.S. 2/63] not dated [14<sup>th</sup> century]'

This description is accurate but, in the circumstances, a little misleading, as it is the charters that relate to the manor of Chesham: the accounts are neither for a manor nor for Chesham. Further, the purchases accounted for were explicitly stated to be for the kitchen, and were largely but not solely for food, so there is no doubt that these are kitchen accounts. The date is as accurate as it could be: the accounts are presented in a style that, according to Mertes (1988, 14), has not been found in use earlier than 1299, while the names of the people and the property mentioned in the earlier charter appear in Chesham's manor court records during the 1330s and 1340s. The account can therefore be dated to the first third of the fourteenth century.

The Essex document is illustrated in Figure 2. The heading of its catalogue record is: 'Payment of account of expenses of Earl of Oxford'. The body of the record lists the various places visited on a journey, including Chesham and Whitchurch, and notes that the purchases were mainly of food. After this it states: 'On dorse: 6 deeds enrolled', and proceeds to summarise their contents. All concerned transactions involving either Hugh de Vere, who was the fourth Earl of Oxford from 1221 to 1263, or Robert de Vere, who was the fifth Earl from 1263 to 1296. Unfortunately, none of the deeds was dated. These accounts were for the travelling household. They were written in the style

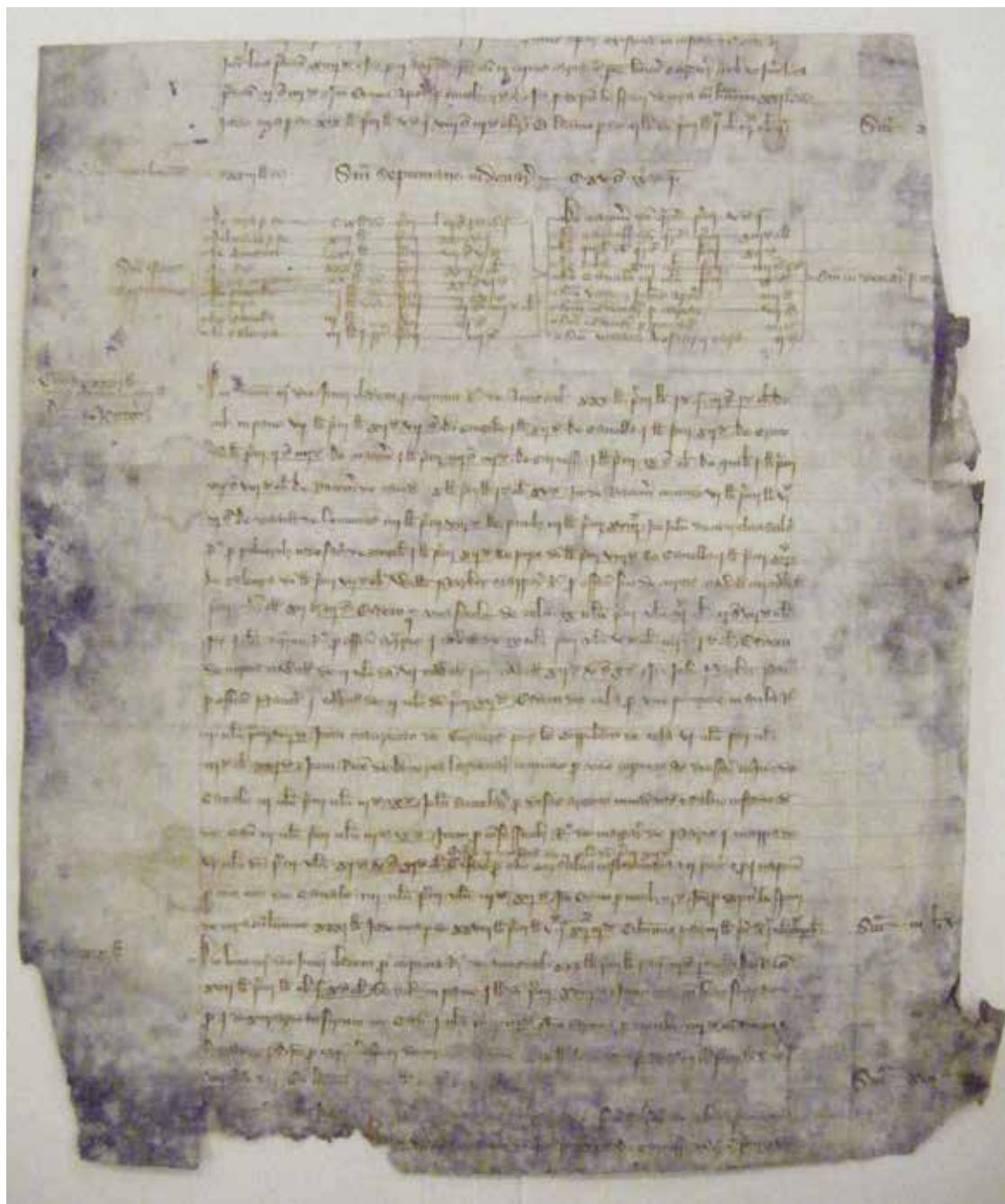


FIGURE 1 The kitchen accounts

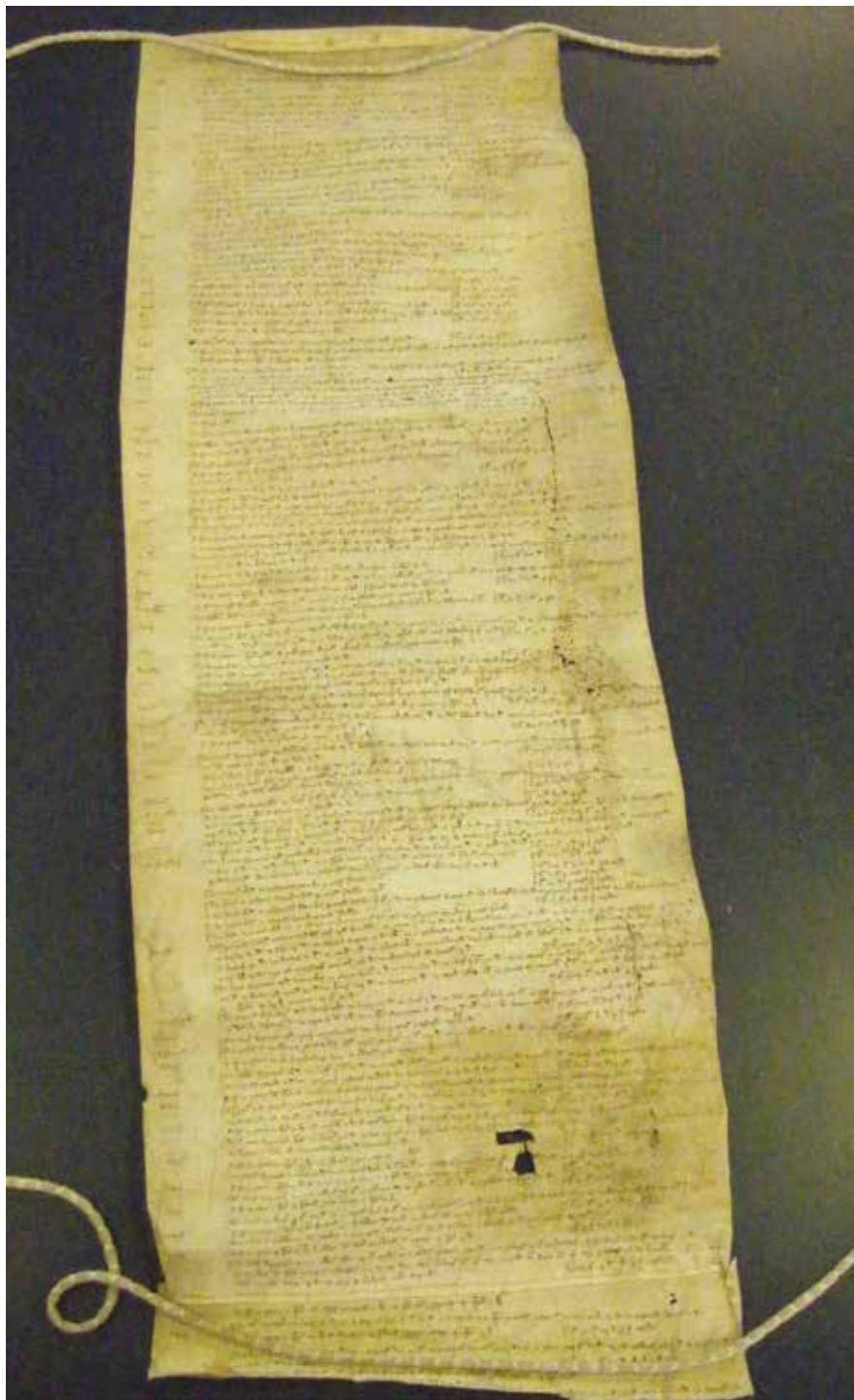


FIGURE 2 The travelling household accounts

that was in use prior to the innovation of around 1299: they almost certainly date to the second half of the thirteenth century and their most likely date is 1273.

Both documents show part of the daily accounts of one of the household departments into which the Earl of Oxford's household, based at his Norman castle at Castle Hedingham in Essex, was divided. A daily account was simply a running account made purchase-by-purchase and day-by-day of all relevant expenditure. The innovation introduced in about 1299 was that after each week, which was taken as beginning on a Sunday, the weekly expenses were totalled and summarised. Among other things, this made the calculation of the total annual expenses much simpler. The household of a thirteenth century aristocrat was divided into departments, such as the kitchen, the wine cellar and the wardrobe, each of which had to account for its own expenditure, thus making them, in modern terminology, cost centres.

The purpose of the daily accounts, as implied above, was to support the production of an overall annual account of household expenditure, so that the Earl would know how much had been spent and, perhaps, make decisions on future expenditure accordingly. The annual account was created by reconciling the daily accounts of all the household departments. Once the annual account had been produced there was no need to keep the daily accounts. They could have been thrown away or, as in these cases, kept to be re-used.

The following sections, first for the Buckinghamshire document and then for the Essex one, will describe the contents of the accounts and elaborate upon the purpose of the expenditure they detail.

## THE KITCHEN ACCOUNTS

The major responsibilities of the Kitchen Department were quite clear, and included the purchase, preparation and serving of food. Responsibility was less clear in matters which interfaced and overlapped with those of other departments, such as using vegetables grown in the lord's garden or cleaning up after a large meal (Mertes 1988, 19–21). The fragment of the kitchen accounts provides a systematic account of the day-by-day expenditure on items to do with the preparation and serving of meals over part of a

three-day period. The acquisitions, reflecting the department's responsibilities, were mainly food, but also included cloths and towels to be used when serving food, and lamps to light the kitchen and the banqueting hall. The period covered consisted of the latter part of the last day of one week, all of the next day 'Sunday, June 3', which was the first day of a new week, and part of the next day. In the following, we examine the food that was purchased, the preparations for the meal at which the food was to be eaten, and the meal itself.

### The Food

Table 1 gives a translation of the weekly summary detailing the purchases for the week ending on Saturday June 2. The summary itself may be seen near the top of the document in Figure 1.

We begin by looking at the food purchases. They included a variety of spices, each of which had been bought in abundance. Ginger, cinnamon, galingale, mace, cloves and pepper would all have been imported from distant lands. Their rarity and cost, not to mention their quantities, would indicate that they were being bought in preparation for something special – a rather fine meal, in fact. The rice and almonds were used to thicken and generally add bulk to dishes such as stews and puddings. The amount of sugar, bought in conical 'loaves', indicates the sweet tooth that influenced medieval cuisine. The purchases made on Sunday June 3 included dried fruit, such as raisins and dates, which were another important, and sweet, ingredient. The other expenses in Table 1 went on lamps to provide light, on linen and hemp to be used to cover tables and in the serving of a meal, and on the transport of the acquisitions. The total expenditure was £5 15s 9¼d, and it might be noticed that this was only a small part of the expenditure on the forthcoming meal.

The ingredients of two simple medieval dishes (Brears 2008, 271 and 230) illustrate not only the way that the ingredients were combined, but also the pretension of the dishes. Pottage of Raisins was made from raisins, almond milk, rice flour, ginger, galingale and apples, all of which were, or were made from, expensive imported goods except for the main ingredient which could have been picked in the lord's garden. Actually, the dish is essentially spiced-up stewed apple. Meat Stew, from a Sergeant to a King was prepared from beef, lean chicken, onions, honey, currants, ground almonds,

TABLE 1 The purchases for the week ending June 2.

For wax	109½lbs	53s 1¼d
For lamps	14lbs	23¼d
For almonds	22lbs	7s 6d
For rice	30lbs	22¼d
For sugar loaves	20½lbs	21s 6d
For ginger	3½lbs	3s 6d
For pepper	2½lbs	3s 4½d
For cinnamon	3lbs	3s
For galingale *	3lbs 1 quart	4s
For mace	Half a quart	5¼d
For cloves	Half a quart	13½d
For black pepper	Half a quart	12d
For linen	14 ells	4s 1d
For hemp	3 ells	9d
John the apothecary's account		4d
Total for carting		7s
Total for carrying		4d
For keeper of the wardrobe		2d

\* Galingale: an Indonesian spice with some similarities to ginger

cloves, pepper, ginger, mace, saffron and herbs. Again, the ingredients are a mixture of exotic spices and home-grown meat and herbs, and the dish is, as its name declares, a spicy meat stew.

The preparatory purchases, then, included much by way of flavouring and seasoning but little to be flavoured or seasoned. The previous paragraph hints that the core ingredients, such as the meat, vegetables and fruit were home-grown. A typical menu for a great feast, such as that shown in Table 2, will confirm this. The table is taken from Brears (1988, 472) and is presented in a slightly abbreviated form in that the number of dishes comprising each course has been somewhat reduced.

If the Earl's feast was something like this, the meat and game would have come fresh from his own lands. The main meat was venison, and its prominence would have made the point to the guests that they were being presented with something that a lord could hunt and eat, but that almost all of them could not (or at least should not). The proliferation of dishes based on birds large and small, also from the vicinity, suggests that nothing

that could fly was safe in medieval England.

It was not intended that anyone should eat all the dishes on offer during a course. In fact, a number of dishes were made for display only, and birds in particular were modelled in life-like poses and occasionally gilded. The highest quality food was offered to the top table alone, while those at the lower tables ate what was left over after the higher ones had taken their choice.

The person hosting this feast was, one of the de Vere Earls of Oxford, who, as an earl, was among the cream of society. In 1307, there were just eleven earls in England (Horrox & Ormrod 2006, 36), so that Robert de Vere, the sixth Earl of Oxford and the Earl from 1296 to 1331, was one of a small élite group. He is also the most likely candidate for the host. He had close connections to the royal family, holding the post of Royal Grand Chamberlain, and having officiated at the coronation of Queen Isabella, wife of Edward II. He was expected to live in a manner that demonstrated his status. Ostentatious display played a large part in this, determining, for example, the way he dressed, the

TABLE 2 Menu for a great feast.

FIRST COURSE	
Brawn & bustard with malmesey	Swan in galantine
Venison with frumenty	Roast capon and goose
Salt hart for standard	Baked venison
Roast cygnet	A great custard, planted, subtlety
SECOND COURSE	
First, jelly	Roast woodcock
Venison in break	Roast plover
Peacock in his hackles	Bream in sauce ponnyuert
Roast partridge	Dates in molde
THIRD COURSE	
Blank desire	Roast larks
Roast Bittern	Leach baked
Roast rabbits	Baked quinces
Roast quail	Champlet viander, subtlety
AFTER DINNER	
Wafers and hippocras	

place where he lived and the expensive manner in which he entertained.

The de Vere's Norman castle was built in about 1140, and the keep of the castle still stands today. The castle has been described as having 'a tower of vertiginous proportions' that was 'among the most sky-scraper-like of all twelfth century keeps' (Saul 2011, 249). Its main room, which occupies the floor above the entrance to the tower, is illustrated in Figure 3: it was, and still is, a large banqueting hall. This was where the Earl hosted his feasts, which were intended to impress as much as to nourish.

### Preparing for the Feast

The kitchen accounts also include a number of items concerning the purchase of cloths, some of which are listed in Table 3. Table cloths, serving cloths and napkins were being obtained in profusion to ensure that the feast was presented with proper ceremony.

The table also provides the titles of some of the household servants, while giving an idea of their specialised roles in making the preparations for a meal or in serving it. The larderer was responsible for the contents of the larder and the naperer for

the napery; the ewerer poured water, whether for drinking or washing hands, and the bread server attended to the bread. Each servant carried, and sometimes wore, distinctive serving cloths, so that his role might readily be identified by a guest needing his services. The appearance of some of the servants is illustrated in Figure 4. The table shows that the acquisitions included towels for the various servants, hemp to support hot and greasy pots and pans, and table cloths for the tables. The expensive table cloths from Paris were probably for the high table. Evidently, only brand new cloths could be used for the occasion: they were probably disposed of afterwards.

So, in preparation for the feast, the food had been bought and the menu decided upon. On the appointed day, the kitchen would have been busy with food preparation and cooking, while the hall servants set out the banqueting hall, laid the tables and placed the lord's best gold- and silver-ware prominently on display. The high table would have been covered with the new cloths imported from Paris, the place settings arranged in pairs, and the salt prominently displayed. The other tables became progressively less grand the further they

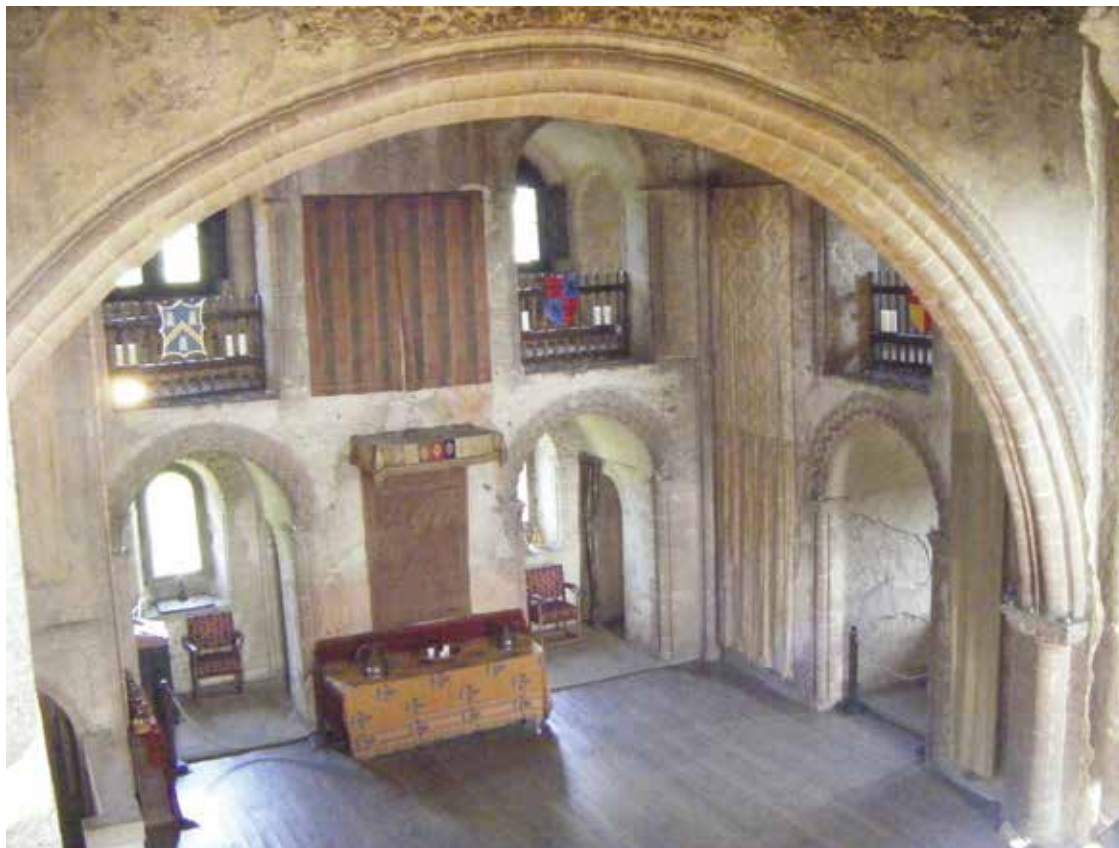


FIGURE 3 The banqueting hall at Hedingham Castle today

were from the high table, reflecting the status of their intended occupants. Those who were to sit at the farthest tables may well have been given a briefing on how to behave based on a so-called book of courtesy, which would have told them not to put their elbows on the table, not to talk with their mouths full and to keep their dogs under control (Brears 2008, 437; Saul 2011, 171). With all the preparations in place, the serving of the meal was intended to proceed with the discipline and precision of a military operation and something of the ritual of a religious service.

### The Feast

When the steward was satisfied that the banqueting hall was ready, he would have opened the door to admit the guests. When they were settled and, hopefully, behaving themselves, the Earl and his important guests would have filed in to have their

hands washed by the ewerer before taking their places at the top table, with the Earl and his wife, Lady Margaret Lennox, daughter of the Earl of March, in the centre. Then, at the steward's signal, the first dishes would have arrived, carried with ceremony by suitably be-towelled servants and displayed to all present for their admiration before being taken to the high table where the food was cut into small pieces, tasted by the assayer to see that it was satisfactory, and offered first to the Earl. Then it was offered to the rest of the high table and, progressively, to the next ones until no more remained. The dishes reaching the lower tables would be the least grand, but would still be superior to the fare normally enjoyed by those seated there. The procedure would be repeated until all the dishes comprising the course had been dealt with.

Between the courses there were musical enter-

TABLE 3 Some of the purchases of Sunday June 2.

To William Parker naperer for small towels – 3 towels at 12d per towel	3s
To John the ewerer for serving water – 1 towel of 9 ells at 5½d per ell	4s 1½d
To John Parker bread server for serving bread – 1 towel of 9½ ells	12d
To the same for cloth for a table covering in the main Hall 2 ells	6d
To Maurice of Gervers for the linen cupboard – 6 ells at 3½d per ell	21d
Also to Richard of Dover kitchen larderer for a copper pot for holding hemp for use in the kitchen – 3 ells at 3d per ell	9d
To John the dish steward for silver dishes for the cleaning and storage of the hemp – 3 ells at 3d per ell	9d
To the same for the storage of hemp at meal times for 2 trays and 1 cloth to cover both of these – 4 ells at 3d per ell	12d
Providers of table cloths from Paris 1 cloth of 6½ ells at 11d per ell	5s 11½d

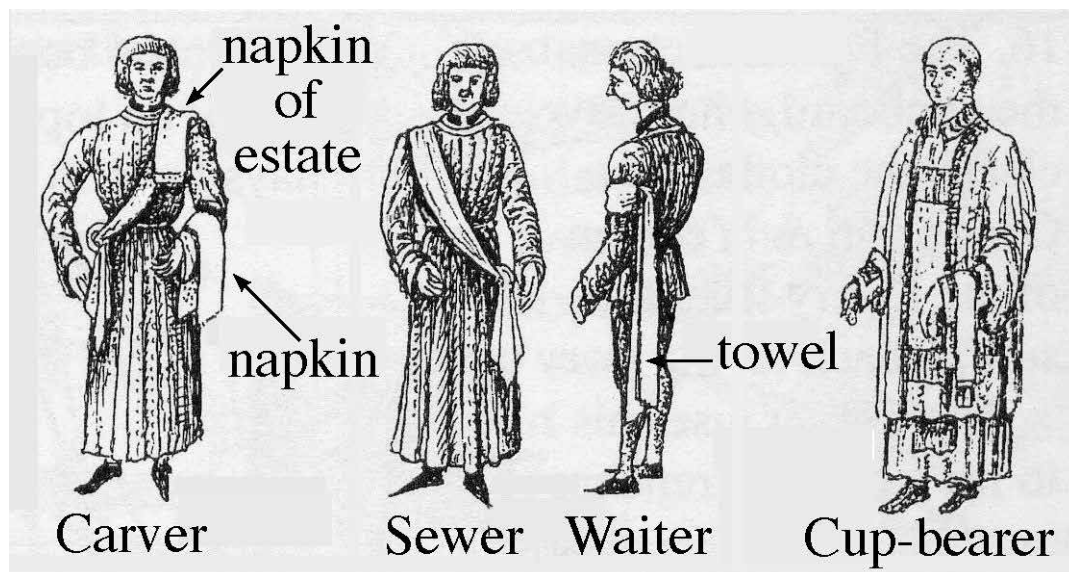


FIGURE 4 Servants with their distinctive towels, based on Brears (2008, 475)

tainments and formal ceremonies that demonstrate the Earl's status, such as the delivery of money collected from his manors. At the end of the day, any representatives from Chesham and Whitchurch could return home to tell their fellows of the wealth and grandeur and generosity of their lord.

#### THE TRAVELLING HOUSEHOLD ACCOUNTS

The Travelling Household, that is the retinue that accompanied the Earl on his travels or journeyed to take care of affairs on his behalf (Mertes 1988, 11–16), usually took to the road to visit the Earl's houses and manors. At first sight, that appears to be their motivation in this case but, as we shall see, there were other reasons.



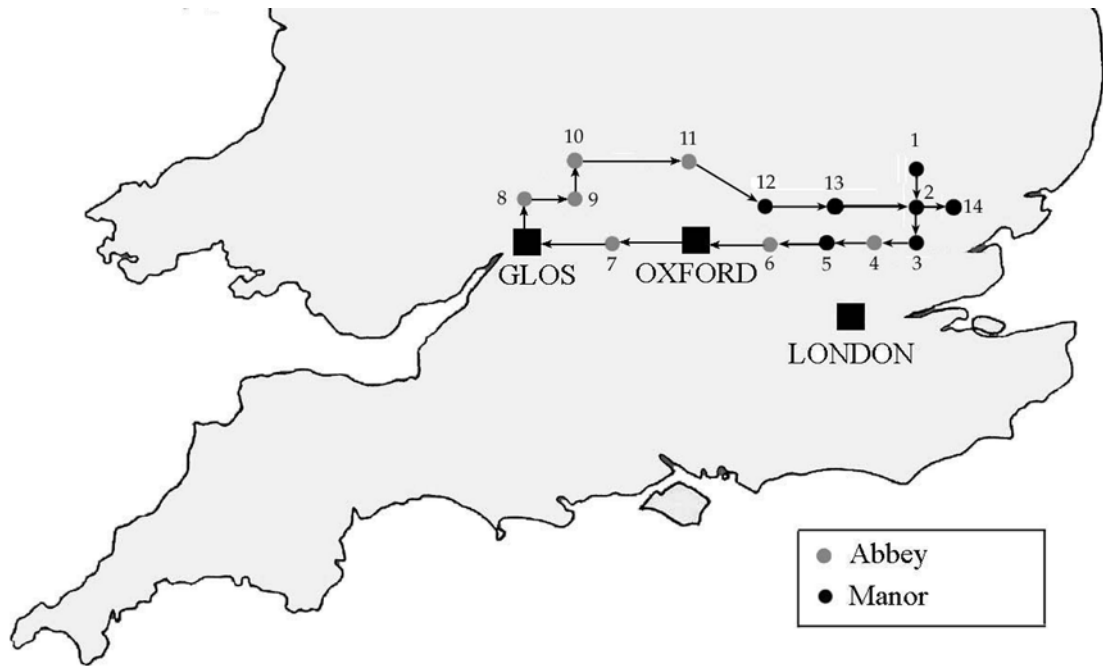


FIGURE 5 The route of the journey

Key: 1. Heddingham; 2. Canfield; 3. Woolston; 4. St Albans; 5. Chesham; 6. Thame; 7. Witney; 8. Tewkesbury; 9. Winchcombe; 10. Evesham; 11. Banbury; 12. Whitchurch; 13. Castle Camps; 14. Colne.

The expenses incurred were mainly for food for the travellers, and fodder and straw for the horses. In the course of itemising them, the document records where they were incurred and so provides the route of the journey. It started at Heddingham (now Castle Heddingham) and took them to Canfield (now Great Canfield), Woolston (now in Chigwell), St Albans, Chesham, Thame, Witney, Tewkesbury, their westernmost stop, and Winchcombe, where they stayed much longer than anywhere else. From there, they returned via Evesham, Banbury, Whitchurch, Castle Camps and Canfield to Colne (now Earl's Colne). Each of these places was either one of the Earl's manors or the site of an abbey or other religious house of some kind. A map with a schematic depiction of their route is shown in Figure 5.

What follows treats, in order, a description of the journey as revealed by the accounts, the route of the journey, the accommodation made use of

during the journey, and the number and composition of the travelling party.

#### A Description of the Journey

The entry for each day in the running accounts of the travelling household begins with either the day of the week or the phrase 'on the next day'. Occasionally, the day is identified with a feast day, so that the date can, reassuringly, be confirmed. The year, however, is not present: it was presumably given at the start of the document and it was not thought necessary to repeat it for each day. It can, however, be one of only a small number of years in the second half of the thirteenth century, due to the way that the weekdays fall and the fact that the Earls of Oxford held one of the manors, Woolston, only from 1249 to 1296. According to Eland, Mr F G Gurney, who was the first to transcribe these accounts 'was satisfied that the date of the journey was 1273' (Eland 1949, 7).

Unfortunately, he seems not to have published his justification for this assertion but, as we shall see, it does sit comfortably with events.

Here, we extract from the accounts the basic details of the journey itself. The description is essentially an abbreviated and rather free translation of the original document.

The description begins with the travelling party's return to Hedingham, the site of the Earl's stronghold, from his manor at Lavenham. At Lavenham they had acquired a huge amount of produce including fish, meat, corn and live animals, so much, in fact, that they straight away returned to Hedingham. On the next day, the party set off again on a tour that lasted almost three weeks. The preparation for this journey and its progress proceeded as follows:

***Monday, August 3.***

They returned from Lavenham, presented their expenses, which showed that they had eaten very well, and withdrew from the store-room for their next journey a good deal of food, including sugar, two-and-a-half pigs' carcasses and a number of hens and chickens for themselves, and fodder for 46 horses. They spent the night at Hedingham.

***Tuesday, August 4.***

The next day, they paid for their meals and for two hand-carts and an ordinary cart, took some more sugar and pigs, as well as fifty herrings from the store-room along with fodder for 44 horses. Later that day they started their new journey by travelling to Canfield, another of the Earl's manors, which was not far away on the other side of Braintree. They took some sugar for themselves and fodder for 40 horses from the store-room, before spending the night there.

***Wednesday, August 5.***

They travelled to another manor, Woolston, where they paid for a good deal of beer and meat, as well as salt and pepper. They withdrew sugar, cheese and butter from the store, as well as fodder for 40 horses, and spent the night there.

***Thursday, August 6.***

On leaving Woolston, they bought some fish from Richard of Chigwell and proceeded to St Albans where they bought straw, hay and oats for 23 horses, and spent the night.

***Friday and Saturday, August 7 & 8.***

They left for the manor at Chesham, where they paid for beer and fish; took from the store some sugar and cheese for themselves and fodder for the horses; and left for Thame. There, they paid for wine, beer and fish for themselves and oats for 25 horses. They settled their expenses for two days, as they stayed for both Friday and Saturday nights.

***Sunday, August 9.***

They went on to Witney, where they paid for their wine, beer and meat, and litter and fodder for 24 horses; and spent the night.

***Monday to Saturday (Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary), August 10 to 15.***

They travelled to Tewkesbury, where they paid for wine, beer and chickens as well as straw and fodder for 28 horses before moving on to Winchcombe. There they paid the expenses due to the religious community and spent the night, as they did for each of the following five days.

***Sunday, August 16.***

They moved on to Evesham, where they paid for their bread, wine, beer and meat, and for oats, hay and litter for 24 horses; they settled up for various small items including feeding a falcon and bringing a horse from Tewkesbury to Evesham; and they spent the night.

***Monday, August 17.***

They left for Banbury, where they paid for the usual fare for themselves and the horses, and stayed the night.

***Tuesday and Wednesday, August 18 & 19.***

They left for Whitchurch, a manor, and paid for the usual fare for themselves and the horses, and stayed for two nights.

***Thursday, August 20.***

They went to Castle Camps, a manor, paid their expenses and spent the night.

***Friday, August 21.***

They returned to Canfield; paid for beer and herrings; took some sugar, dried fish and fodder for 25 horses from the store; and stopped for the night.

**Saturday, August 22.**

Their travels ended in Colne.

In this description we can see the party preparing for its journey by stocking up with food and acquiring the carts needed to carry it and other items obtained along the way. The first leg took them to Canfield, where the Earl of Oxford had another castle (Eland 1949, 10), which acted as the logistical start and finish point for the forthcoming journey. Canfield and two of the following three stops, at Woolston and Chesham, were all his manors. At each they took food for themselves and their horses from the store, which incurred no cost since, as the produce of his manors, it already belonged to him. To judge by the number of horses, almost all those who had been to Lavenham continued to Canfield, but on the day they arrived there and on the next day at least half of them dispersed, so that a group half the size of that which had been to Lavenham left from Woolston. The size of this group fluctuated over the following days as the odd horse came and went. During their stops at Canfield and Woolston, they took food from the stores to ensure that along their way they would eat in the manner to which they were accustomed. After leaving Woolston, they bought some fish, presumably for the next day, which was a Friday. At Chesham, they had a meal, but did not stay for the night, perhaps because there was no suitable accommodation. At each of these places, and later at Whitchurch, it was noted that they paid their expenses to the reeve, a manorial official, of course. At the other stops, which were religious houses, they paid the chapter: their purchases included not only food but also white candles to be lit in the abbeys, particularly, as we will see, at Evesham.

The route from Chesham was carefully planned to bring them in easy stages to Winchcombe, where they stayed for five days, the last of which was the feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary and, as such, was the climax of a week of festivities for which the abbey was renowned at the time. The journey home was equally well planned to bring them back via Evesham and then Whitchurch and Castle Camps, the two manors they visited on the return leg, without undue effort.

The description, then, shows clearly two of the purposes of the journey, which were to visit several of the Earl's manors, including the outlying ones in Buckinghamshire, and to go to Winchcombe

to take part in the festivities associated with the festival to celebrate the birthday of the Virgin Mary. There was, however, a third purpose.

**The Route**

Thirteenth-century England had a road system, and the part of it extending westwards from London was better developed than most (Hindle 2012, 6). A map of the journeys undertaken during his reign by Edward I (Hindle 2012, 24) illustrates the point. Edward reigned from 1272 to 1307, so that his travels took place at much the same time as the Earl's travelling household was making the journey under consideration here. In consequence, the map also shows that the places the Earl was visiting, or somewhere quite near to them, were not only accessible but also capable of providing accommodation for a King, let alone anyone else.

The clearest instance of the Earl's party taking advantage of the existing road network is probably the part of their route from Thame to Tewkesbury, which could have followed roads marked on the Gough map of 1360 (Hindle 2012, 31–35): the first led westwards from London to Wycombe, before passing close to Thame, through Witney and on to Gloucester, from where another road marked on the map went to Tewkesbury. Since it was also recorded in 1317 that the old road running east from Thame led to 'parts of the Chilterns', finding a route from Chesham to Thame would not have been too difficult.

Canfield was a good starting and finishing point for the journey, as it was close to the places where the members of the Earl's household lived and also had easy access to the market town of Braintree, which, in turn, was connected to the road network to its west. It seems clear that the outward journey from Canfield to Winchcombe was relatively undemanding. Deciding on the course of their return, however, was not so straightforward. It would have been a simple matter for them to retrace their steps and, even if they had to visit the manors at Whitchurch and Castle Camps, they could have returned via Thame from where it was little more than ten miles to Whitchurch via Aylesbury. But they took a different route because the Earl was intent on visiting the abbey at Evesham. The reason for this lay in the fact that Robert, the fifth Earl and the Earl in 1273, had been a follower of Simon de Montfort, whose tomb was there. Robert had been taken prisoner at Kenilworth and so had not been

present at the Battle of Evesham where de Montfort met his end. A visit to de Montfort's tomb, at a safe remove from events given that Henry III had died in 1272, would have been a way of paying his respects to his former leader (Eland 1949, 7). After this, Banbury, with its abbey, was an obvious stop on an old east-west trackway. It is hard to be sure of the next leg: the Gough map is conspicuously bare of roads in the area, although the journeys of Edward I criss-crossed it. They could have made their way to Buckingham, and from there to Whitchurch, using the old road to Aylesbury. From Whitchurch various tracks, none any better than another, led eastwards towards Castle Camps, from where home was almost in sight.

### The Accommodation

As we have seen, the travelling party stayed at religious houses and manors. Most of the former were Benedictine abbeys, as at St Albans, Tewkesbury, Winchcombe and Evesham. All religious houses were subject to the monastic obligation to provide hospitality, and by this time both royalty and aristocracy were prone to treat them as convenient places to put up for the night during their travels (Wood 1955, 101). The obligation did not extend to members of the party not belonging to the highest classes in society, however, and in any case the abbeys did not have enough space to accommodate all the members of a large party. Those who could not be provided with a room had to sleep in the open or, if they were lucky, in tents they had brought with them or that were provided by the abbey (Ohler 2010, 84). This helps explain why most journeys, including this one, took place in the summer months. It also explains why the party took the precaution of bringing food, and food of good quality, with them.

The festival of the birth of the Virgin Mary, which the party had come to Winchcombe to celebrate, was re-introduced in England starting in the 1120s as part of a liturgical re-alignment that took place after the Conquest. It was introduced at Winchcombe in 1126 (and, incidentally at much the same time at St Albans) (Knowles 1949, 510–11). The success of this festival in attracting pilgrims to Winchcombe largely accounts for its prominence in the thirteenth century. The abbey coped with the consequent increased demand for hospitality by acquiring accommodation nearby

and large amounts of pasture on which it kept extensive flocks of sheep.

The manors they visited included Chesham and Whitchurch, both of which had been acquired by the marriage of an earlier Earl to Isabel de Bolbec, the last of her line. The Bolbec's castle was at Whitchurch, where it controlled the road from Buckingham to Aylesbury (Page 1925, 442–449). It was probably here that the travelling party was entertained, perhaps in a manner not dissimilar to the way they were treated at the abbeys. Whitchurch had, however, been in decline since the death of the last Baron de Bolbec, having had no great lord in residence. This, and the fact that the Earls of Oxford had not treated it well, renting the manor to its villeins at an excessive rate, and then forfeiting it for rebellion, suggest that their treatment may not have been as grand as they could have wished nor their welcome as warm.

At Chesham, they ate a mid-day meal but did not spend the night. The meal included pike and eels (it was a Friday) accompanied by beer. It may have been eaten in the manorial *curia*, or manorial complex, recorded in the Inquisition Post Mortem of the fourth Earl, who died in 1263 (The National Archives, C132/31/1). The decision not to stay overnight might suggest that the buildings were not adequate to accommodate the party.

### The Travelling Party

Both the Earl and his Countess, Alice de Sandford, were in the travelling party (Eland 1949, 8). This is clear from the travelling household accounts themselves, as when they record that at Canfield nine bushels of grain were withdrawn from the store with five for provisions, one for the kitchen and three to be carried to the Earl (Eland 1949, 8–9). They had been in the party that came back from Lavenham, which would have included the travelling household and a number of men to load and transport the considerable amount of produce they brought back.

The travelling household would, of course, have continued on the next trip. There is evidence to show that in about 1290 the Earl of Oxford's entire household consisted of around 45 people and that most of them remained permanently at Hedingham and the Earl's other homes (Mertes 1988, 35). This would indicate that the travelling household was normally small. On his occasion it was swelled by the Earl's and the Countess's attendants.

Otherwise, it always included the cook (Mertes 1988, 141) as well as the Marshall, as the person in charge of the horses; some grooms to care for the horses; valets and maids as necessary to attend to any other aristocratic members of the party; a few men to deal with the carts and do the heavy work; and, in all probability, an accountant.

There were 46 horses in the party that returned from Lavenham, but by the time the group making the round trip to Winchcombe departed from Woolston, leaving the Earl's cluster of Essex manors behind, it had 23 horses. Allowing that a few people may have joined the new party, this implies that a minimum of 23 had been taken back to their Essex stables. They represent the excess of horses needed for the Lavenham trip over what was needed for the Winchcombe tour. During the tour the number of horses shrank or grew by one or two on most days as people joined or left, reaching its largest at Winchcombe, where 28 horses were stabled even though one had been taken directly from Tewkesbury to Evesham. The number of people in the party was probably always somewhat larger than the number of horses, as some of the grooms, valets and working men would have had to walk.

After accounting for the Earl and Countess, their attendants, the travelling household and the men needed to transport the provisions and the wardrobe, there could have been few other people in the party. This would seem to reinforce the idea that one of the reasons for the trip was the Earl's essentially private desire to pay his respects at de Montfort's tomb at Evesham. This he did by lighting a candle as tall as himself, for which, the accounts reveal, he paid fifteen pence.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Two fragments of the household accounts of the Earls of Oxford, both of which survive because of their subsequent re-use, have been interrogated to reveal much about the life of one of the small number of earls existing in the latter part of the thirteenth century and early fourteenth century. In passing, they have something to tell of what was happening in the Earls' two Buckinghamshire manors at Whitchurch and Chesham.

The fragmentary kitchen accounts reveal, beneath their exemplary surface, the lengths to which the Earls went to entertain and impress their

contemporaries, rich or poor, aristocratic or unfree. The basic ingredients for the meal that was to be the centre-piece of a grand occasion, the meat, vegetables and fruit, came from the Earl's garden and demesne farms. The accounts reveal the great expenditure on exotic spices to be added to these ingredients in the preparation of dishes intended to impress as much as to be eaten, and also on cloths of various kinds that, in their formality, would contribute to the ceremonial grandeur of the presentation and serving of the food.

The need to impress was typical of the time, when the earls as a whole were in danger of losing their position at the top of secular society, and also their influence as the closest advisors of the King. Their social position had been under pressure from the classes immediately below them for some time (Crouch 2011, 37). Their royal influence had reduced as Kings consulted more widely (Prestwich 2005, 131–133; Saul 2011, 70–74): this was not helped by the reduction in their numbers as they fell in battle or died without an heir (Prestwich 2005, 357–361). In the end, such displays of wealth and status did not prevent the erosion of their position and influence.

The expedition described here begins and ends with visits to manors belonging to the Earl of Oxford, giving the impression that its purpose was to check on the administration of the Earl's lands and to collect the money due from them (Greatorex 2010, 55). However, the travelling party then extended its visit well to the west of the furthest manor, and eventually came to Winchcombe Abbey where it spent the week leading up to the feast of the Birth of the Virgin Mary, a week of celebrations for which the abbey was well known. So the expedition had a religious purpose as well as being a tour of manors, although the week at Winchcombe undoubtedly offered social as well as religious opportunities. But there was a further reason for the expedition in the Earl's desire to pay his respects at the tomb of Simon de Montfort at Evesham. It may be that the other, more obvious, reasons for the tour helped to disguise this personal and slightly dangerous one.

The route had been carefully planned to take them by easy stages to Winchcombe and back and, when not spending the night at a manor, they stayed at religious houses, which were obliged to give accommodation to aristocratic visitors. This would have eased the journey for the Countess

and any other aristocratic ladies in the party, while raising problems for the abbeys, which, all the same, would have had to submit to aristocratic requirements (Wood 1955, 101).

Late medieval royal and aristocratic households could be almost continually on the move (Hindle 2012, 17–19), but at the time of this journey they were becoming more settled (Mertes 1988, 15). This was true specifically for the Earls of Oxford who, over the period, were also acquiring more manors, to the point that it was becoming less practical to visit all of them, and more sensible for their representatives to come to him.

The expedition did include visits to the Earl's Buckinghamshire manors at Whitchurch and Chesham, both of which had been acquired from the de Bolbecs. They spent the night at Whitchurch, but stopped only for a mid-day meal at Chesham, which reflected the fact that Whitchurch had been the de Bolbecs' home base.

We are fortunate to have both of these fragmentary accounts. The survival of the kitchen accounts is a great stroke of luck, for their presence among Chesham's manorial records is entirely due to their re-use for the recording of charters, and has nothing to do with their being accounts. The travelling household accounts are extremely rare in giving an account of a great lord's tour of his manors.

All in all, the two fragmentary accounts considered here provide a basis for showing how the Earl of Oxford's Buckinghamshire manors fitted into his large but scattered collection of

manors, and how he used them to demonstrate and maintain his status.

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