

Edward Heardson and the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks

An 'out-take' from the work contributing to the recently published and new
A History of the Worshipful Company of Cooks

The dishes a nation cooks have always formed part of its patriotic identity. For the Scots it is haggis, for the Italians pasta, for the Germans sausage and for the English roast beef. This was especially true in the eighteenth century, when there were strong anti-French sentiments in Britain. In 1748 William Hogarth painted *The Roast Beef of Old England*, showing a well-built British cook displaying a huge side of roast beef to some scrawny French soldiers, who only eat thin soup. Three years earlier the Anti-Gallican Society had been founded to resist the import of all French goods and the Worshipful Company of Cooks conducted a long campaign against French *chefs* who came to England and took up places in some of the leading aristocratic houses of the day.

One aspect of this anti-French sentiment was the establishment in 1735 of The Sublime Society of Beef Steaks, started by John Rich, the well-known Theatre Manager of Covent Garden, together with his chief scenic designer, George Lambert. These two were frequently too busy in the evenings to stop for dinner, so they took to grilling steaks on the open fire in the room used for painting the scenery. Friends began dropping in to enjoy the splendidly cooked steaks and soon the Sublime Society emerged. Weekly meetings were held in Covent Garden and the Society, limited to twenty four members, became well-known, with new members including royalty, statesmen and soldiers: in 1785, the Prince of Wales joined. A uniform was devised, consisting of a blue coat and buff waistcoat with brass buttons bearing a gridiron motif and the words "Beef and Liberty". The steaks were served on hot pewter plates, with onions and baked potatoes, and were accompanied by liberal quantities of port.

As the Society became more established it was clear that a professional cook was required and the choice fell on Edward Heardson. He was a famed bare-knuckle boxer – reputedly the champion of all England - but what qualifications he had as a cook is less clear. He may well have been or become a member of the Cooks Company and the Sublime Society certainly won their approval. He was appointed in 1756 and held the office for thirty years. His steaks were prepared in a kitchen connected to the dining room by way of an enormous metal grill in the form of a gridiron, above which was the line from Macbeth: *If it were done, when tis done, then twere well it were done quickly* - a terrible pun as it refers of course to the murder of Duncan in the play. At the end of the meal Heardson came into the room to collect the money owed on a pewter plate, each member paying 5s for his steak and 10s 6d for any guests.

Such was Heardson's fame that a print was made in 1785, showing him in his cook's cap and holding a large kitchen knife above a plate of beef. The mezzotint (p.119) was made by John Raphael Smith, engraver to the Prince of Wales, in the year that the Prince joined the Sublime Society, so he may well have commissioned it. Eleven years later Heardson was sick and dying, but he stayed on at work, asking with his last breath that he be carried into the dining room to die. This was done and Charles Morris, known as the Bard of the Society, penned an epitaph for him:

His last steak done, his fire raked out and dead,
Dish'd for the worms himself, lies poor Ned.....
This room his heav'n! When threat'ning fate drew nigh,
And death's chill shade had dimm'd his ling'ring eye,
His fondest hopes, betrayed with many a tear,
Were that his life's last spark might glimmer here;
And the last words that choked his parting sigh,
"Oh, at your feet, dear masters, let me die!"

The Sublime Society of Beefsteaks survived until 1867, when it was disbanded because the membership had declined and hardly ever met. However, after only a short absence a new Beefsteak Club was established in 1876 and this continues to the present day, with premises in Irving Street, near Leicester Square. Beefsteaks may still be eaten there, though they are no longer the only item on the menu, and the members still include distinguished figures from the worlds of politics and the arts. Dining there it is easy to conjure up the ghost of Ed Heardson.

Kindly provided by Dr Alan Borg CBE FSA