



Memories of Pig Killing in the 1920s by Phyllis Crowson

When I eat bacon today my memory often goes back to my childhood during the 1920s when many of the villagers kept a pig to supplement their diet and also to have 'something by' if friends or relatives should visit unexpectedly. A young pig would be bought either from the local market, easily transported home by a carrier or farmer who had taken something into market to sell, or it could come from someone in the village who had a breeding sow.

This small animal would soon start to grow if fed properly – small potatoes boiled in their skins, (lovely to eat straight from the pot with a shake of salt), mixed with other scraps and barley meal, which was ground at Maxey Mill. Pigs were only killed between October and March, the colder the weather the better, so when the pig weighed about 16 stones it would be killed – a very gruesome affair before the days of the humane killer.

We had our own pig killer in Helpston, named Butty Chambers who lived in a cottage in The Nook, now gone. He would arrive at about 8 am, complete with a very large tub, knives and meat chopper, all pushed on what looked like an extra long wheelbarrow without sides, know as 'The Scratch'. It was long enough for a large pig to lie on.

After killing, the pig was put into the tub and gallons of very hot water poured over it then scraped all over until all the bristles were removed. It was then strung by its hind legs onto a good stout beam and opened completely from head to tail, the 'bellies' removed – later to be cleaned (a very smelly job) and then used for sausage skins. The pig was then left for several hours for the meat to cool until Butty Chambers returned later in the day. The heart, kidneys, liver, head, lungs (known as leaf fat) were removed – in fact almost everything in the pig is edible. The carcass was jointed into gammon hams, shoulder hams and flitches. These were then put into a large wooden trough (sometimes lead lined) and covered with salt, bought in huge lumps some weeks before, cut up and crushed. The hams were rubbed in the thickest part with salt petre and brown sugar as well as salt to ensure deeper penetration for a good cure, more salt would be added during the next 3 weeks; the flitches were then removed but the hams left for another week. The cured meat was then brushed and lightly washed and dried and either stored, packed in lime, in a large wooden chest or tied up in white bags (like pillow cases, and hung on a wall – hams on beams. We had a long, cool passage which was ideal, bacon kept in lime never became 'rancid' as some home cured bacon can.

The offal taken from the pig was used as follows – some of the liver, melt, brain, kidneys and heart were covered with a veil-like fat, (called caul), and cooked in the overn – this was called ‘pigs fry’; part of the head, trotters and most trimmings were made into brawn, the other part of the head was roasted as chaps; the remains of the liver, heart, lites etc were minced and mixed with leeks (never onions as they give the wrong flavour) and made into faggots then covered with caul and baked, sausage was made from the trimmings of the meat mixed with herbs. The leaf fat (the best in the pig) was cut up and put into a pan to be rendered down to make home cured lard, which was lovely to eat on bread or toast, the remains after the rendering were left to cool and then eaten, known as ‘scraps’ – they were delicious.

Pig killing entailed much hard work, but the rewards made it all worthwhile.

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