

# A Conceit of Coney: Britain's First Television Food History Programme and how Philip Harben pulled a rabbit out of a castle to imagine what food broadcasts may have looked like in Elizabethan times

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**ABSTRACT:** We almost take for granted today that 'food history' on television is a commonplace and well-established genre of its own, with programmes taking us back to imagine food production and consumption through the ages. We think nothing of seeing Annie Gray, Lucy Worsley and many others pulling on the costumes of the past to ignite our imaginations and bring the past to life through food. However, little is known about the history of food history on television. Where and how did it all begin? How were the earliest examples used to inspire what we see on screen today?

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This paper will examine the first food history programme in Britain, broadcast by the BBC as part of an inventive celebration of all things Elizabethan to coincide with the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 (Radio Times 1953). For the 'Elizabethan Evening', Harben wore a fantasy Elizabethan outfit to create his own version of an Elizabethan dish – A Conceit of Coney – live on television, imagining the past for his imagined audience at home.

By analysing an intact archival copy of the *An Evening's Diversion* broadcast (APTS 2021), together with additional primary sources, this paper will examine the look, feel and outcome of the programme – the way Harben dressed, talked, inspired and educated, but most of all entertained as he introduced food from the past.

This paper will argue that television allowed for a visual representation of imagination which was, and remains, a perfect vehicle for food history, helping audiences at home to imagine themselves in Elizabethan times and seeing the television cooks of the day (should they have existed) cooking a vision of spectacular feasts.

I will conclude that the imaginative recreations of food history owe much to Harben and his imagery of the Conceit of Coney, which may not have been the most historically or culinary accurate representation but was nonetheless a spectacle aimed at sparking the imagination of television viewers in 1953 – a legacy which remains today. This will be a unique, and entertaining, contribution to food history, television history and the intersection of food history on television.

## Introduction

Today, we can happily switch on the television and choose from a myriad of options to settle down and watch. Even within genres, there are endless choices and sub-genres. If we are interested in watching programmes about food, we are not limited to learning about the preparation of ingredients solely. We can discover where food comes from, how supermarket products are made, what effect different foods have on our bodies or watch ordinary people or celebrities compete to produce the biggest, best, worst or strangest concoctions. We can also choose to watch food history. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the schedules without Annie Gray and Lucy Worsley dressed-up and ready to explore kitchens of the dim and distant past, bringing them to life before our eyes. We are transported back in time regularly to see modern-day families cook, eat and enjoy (or otherwise) food from the past. It may seem like a relatively new thing, with an explosion in food history programmes since *The Supersizers* went Edwardian in 2007, closely followed by an Elizabethan adventure in 2008.

So, the idea that food history form part of our televisual habits is not new, but just how old are the ideas? Where did food history on television begin? What elements of food history on television today have been borrowed from television history? Has the mix of television entertainment and education that we can enjoy watching in *The Supersizers*, with Annie Gray and Lucy Worsley or through the eyes of families on *Back In Time For...* been a new twist, or does it have its roots in the past?

Although early television programmes in Britain are often considered to be basic in nature, several the programmes broadcast after the war were more experimental in nature, attracting audiences who simply enjoyed watching without learning, or realising that they were being entertained. Must-see television broadcasts which would lead Guy Debord in the 1960s to coin the phrase 'Society of the Spectacle' to represent the relationship between the audience, and wider society, with the images and messages they were receiving more and more through mass media such as the television (Debord 1994). Audiences became consumers of media and society itself became more consumer focused, using the spectacle to convey messages about what the consumers should 'have' and 'want' in their own lives. These cultural changes noted by Debord had a background firmly focused on history, which he proposed was at the heart of culture, and society.

This paper will look in detail at one such 'spectacle' broadcast in 1953 by the BBC to coincide with, and celebrate the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, to look more closely at the imagined past being explored through television screens and consumed by eager audiences at home. *An Evening's Diversion* (Radio Times 1953) included the very first television food history demonstration by the then 'television cook' Philip Harben (ONDB 2021a). Did he unwittingly inspire a boom in food history programmes, dressing up and an explosion of imaginative interpretations of food from the past?

## Context

Reinterpretation of historical events, and historical food, was obviously not new by the time television broadcasts began. Some may argue that all written recipes are historical documents which are then reinterpreted by those who cook at home, recreating what others before them made. The idea of understanding history more through re-enacting events is also well understood as a valuable and performative tool for historians and those interested in history and food archaeology (Gray 2010). As food played a central role in all lives, modern and historic, the re-enactment and re-discovery of food, recipes and menus from the past has enabled people to understand and define periods of history better (Long 2004). Television cooking shows can act as a vehicle for storytelling, sharing and interpreting experiences entertaining and education simultaneously (Matwick and Matwick 2019).

When television services began again in Britain after World War II, the popularity of television sets in the home increased greatly (Scannell 1996). Prior to the war, television services and transmission were limited primarily to London and considered in retrospect as 'experimental' for the BBC, at that time Britain's only broadcaster (Briggs 1985). Television broadcasts had ceased completely in Britain during the war, with radio broadcasts continuing. Radio was considered a vital communication lifeline for the people of Britain, and television much less so. It was only after the war, perhaps, that television would be considered as something useful for households (for a wider discussion, see Scannell 1996). A useful distraction, a source of entertainment, a place to receive information and also, crucially, a provider of education to a nation focused on family survival and resilience for a number of years.

Television of the late 1940s and early 1950s is often characterised as radio enhanced by visuals (Lyon and Ross 2016) with the assumption that previously tried and tested programmes, formats and ideas broadcast via radio were simply transferred to the television studio, recreated and set loose into the homes of Britain as a somehow secondary form of national broadcast. However, much of these early broadcasts are lost to the world as many were transmitted live, not recorded and not considered at that time to be in any way valuable as artefacts to be preserved in archives (Gorton and Garde-Hansen 2019). Television was mostly, at that time, produced, consumed and forgotten about even. In particular, programmes deemed 'ordinary' in their scope (which often in reality meant lifestyle programmes produced mainly for a female audience watching from home during the day as they completed their housework) were low on the priorities for recording and discussing (see Bonner 2003 and Sullivan 2005).

Television itself can be seen as part of everyday lifestyle culture (Sullivan 2005) which has grown and developed since the beginning of television broadcasts in Britain. Britain moved from 'television scarcity' in the 1940s, where television was a cultural novelty, to a period where television symbolised a 'new modernity' in the 1950s (Carnevali and Strange 2007).

However, it was not until the 1960s, when television was less of a novelty, that a historical understanding of the place of television in lifestyles can be recognised (Benson 2005). This led to a more established genre of lifestyle programming and channels in the 1990s.

Due to the archiving policies of television companies (see Baker and Terris 1994), and the assumed lack of interest or significance of 'lifestyle' programmes aimed at women in particular (Bell and Hollows 2005), as well as early television programmes being broadcast live, without any recording (Briggs 1985), complete programmes from before this are hard to find. Issues of analysing television programmes prior to the establishment of clear archiving policies from the major institutions have been the subject of several recent discussions (see Gorton & Garde-Hansen 2019; Lison et al 2019 and Scannell 2010).

Fragments of information, from programme listings in *The Radio Times*, reviews in *The Listener*, publicity materials, photographs and interviews published in newspapers and other resources become invaluable in piecing together what programmes may have been like, beyond the basic descriptions often relied upon.

History in itself was a popular subject on television from the very beginning, whether the history was part of the broadcast or a subject within it (Hilmes 2003). From the earliest broadcasts in 1936 on the BBC examples of 'history' were shown. The BBC had a remit to inform, educate and entertain and their early historical output reflected this with variety (Briggs 1985). History featured in drama, such as *The Mask Theatre* in 1936 (*Radio Times* 1936). Musical programmes with a historical background were broadcast, such as *The Orchestra and Its Instruments* (*Radio Times* 1937a). History featured in comedies focused on important historical events, most notable was the early screening of a version of events from 1066 (*Radio Times* 1939). Documentaries followed subjects such as the fire service and provided a historical background to the development of these services (*Radio Times* 1938). Educational programmes such as *Living History* which suggested using models and miniature figures to bring the teaching of history to life (*Radio Times* 1937b).

Food and cooking also were quick to transfer to the 'new' medium of television. X Marcel Boulestin is often credited as the 'first' television cook, but others appeared in the early months of 1936 before he made his first appearance in January of 1937 (see Geddes 2021). Following the resumption of television broadcasting in 1946, after a seven-year break during the war (Briggs 1985), cooking programmes also resumed their place in the schedules (*Radio Times* 1946a). Some broadcasts included food and advice linked to information from the Ministry of Food, as food rationing was still in place. Cooking presenters such as Marguerite Patten and Joan Robins, who both had food demonstrator backgrounds with the Ministry, began regular presenting duties on cookery and food programmes (ODNB 2021b and c).

These programmes reflected the expected audiences with names such as *Designed for Women* (*Radio Times* 1947b), *For the Housewife* (*Radio Times* 1948) and *Housewife in*

the Kitchen (Radio Times 1947a). However, the ten-year period after the war included a broad range of cookery programming which covered the BBC remit to inform, educate and entertain, not simply to encourage housewives to cook more efficiently (see Geddes 2021).

In the next section I will discuss Philip Harben who cooked alongside Marguerite Patten and Joan Robins on the BBC from 1946 and who hosted the *An Evenings Diversion* programme discussed later in this paper.

### Philip Harben

Philip Harben arrived on radio at the BBC, and indeed to cooking itself, partly by accident. A series of coincidences led him to first of all manage and then cook at the *Isobar* restaurant, in the now iconic *Isokon* building on London (Daybelge and Englund 2019). Untrained, he quickly learnt 'on the job' and his skills were in demand with the British Overseas Airways Corporation as their canteen manager (Bateman 1966, 8). It was during a propaganda press event, with the BBC in attendance, where Harben was called to demonstrate an omelette made from reconstituted egg (9) which led to him being asked to appear on radio. In 1943 he gave a talk about his experiences as a catering adviser in wartime (*Radio Times* 1943a), which led to regular appearances for the next few years on *The Kitchen Front* programme, giving talks aimed at cookery beginners (*Radio Times* 1943b).

140 Philip Harben began his broadcasting career giving a radio talk for the BBC about his experience as a catering adviser during wartime, broadcast on 26th September 1943 (BBC Genome 2021). This led to a regular series of talks for the *Kitchen Front* (BBC Genome 2021) programme, and others, before a series entitled *Cookery* for BBC television in June 1946 (BBC Genome 2021). Each week, he guided viewers through a different dish, beginning with Lobster Vol-Au-Vents, homemade noodles and coffee before progressing to the use of dried eggs, 'emergency' bread and how to bottle fruits for the larder (for example, *Radio Times* 1946b).

Harben published his first cookbook, *The Way to Cook*, in 1945 (Harben 1945) which he insisted was not a recipe book, but rather a book to explain the ideas and principles of cooking, which he would then go on to exploit on television. On screen, he was presented as a 'lively, tubby, bearded little man in a butcher's apron, who makes difficult dishes look simple in his brisk, well-planned demonstrations' (Bateman 1966). Despite his appearance, presentation style and lack of formal training, Harben became a 'personality' (Bateman 1966) credited with turning food into a form of theatre (Humble 2005). Harben cultivated his personality through appearances on variety shows before moving from the BBC to join the newly formed Independent Television (ITV) in 1955 (Andrews 2012), where he also established consumer culture connections with products, industry and advertising, establishing his own range of cookware, Harbenware, which had an annual turnover of £100,000 (Bateman 1966). His television cooking programmes, such as *The Grammar of*

*Cooking* and *The Tools of Cookery*, ran regularly on Independent Television until 1969 (TV Times Project 2021), with associated cookbooks published alongside (Harben 1965; 1968). Harben chose to wear a butcher's apron tied high over his 'substantial' stomach on screen, with a grey shirt and paisley-patterned tie (The Liverpool Echo 1958). His look created controversy, as it was not 'correct' for a cook or a chef, coming at a time of change in British society. However, Harben later clarified that it was his 'trademark' and chosen as it was right 'for the camera' (The Yorkshire Evening Post 1953). Reviews of his demonstrations on television drew attention to his ability to bring things 'down to brass tacks' while other presenters maintained a 'quite maddening air of lofty superiority' (The Sketch 1949). Despite this, by 1951 Harben himself claimed to have given over one hundred and twenty television demonstrations (Harben 1951a), rising to over one hundred and thirty in other publications that year (Harben 1951b), and regularly referred to himself as 'the television cook' while other publications referred to him as 'the television chef' (Harben 1951c), which may have indicated a level of cultural capital attached to the growing ownership and consumption of television.

### An Elizabethan Evening

On Tuesday 7th November in 1953 the BBC devoted its schedule over the course of one evening to one subject, "An Evening's Diversion" which transported viewers to an imagined studio in Elizabethan times, as if there had been television at that time (Radio Times 1953). In 1953, with the Coronation of Elizabeth II, a new Elizabethan era brought with it a revived interest in Tudor times. Costumed announcers explained that the evening was 'Proffered On The Anniversary Of The Session Of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I', setting the scene with the words "Now we ask you to imagine that in 1596 the Elizabethans had a television service of their own, and join us as we put back the clock....." inviting those at home to engage with their imaginations to view events and entertainments presented historically and for modern eyes simultaneously. The 'news' became a 'Chronicle of the Times', entertainment was provided in the form of song and dance, documentary-style information was presented on new inventions of the time, and 'concerts' were given, purely for leisure, featuring fashion, shopping, comedy and song.

Befitting of such a historic and Royal occasion, the entire Evening was telerecorded. This was unusual at the time, although this of course now means that the programme still exists in the archive to view today. This allows us to see directly how the television of the time in the 1950s sought to portray history, and this particular early example of food history.

The cookery segment of An Evening's Diversion was provided by BBC resident 'television cook' Philip Harben, styled as 'Master Harben' 'the cook' who contrives a Conceit of Coney. The BBC studio set contained one grand kitchen where Harben swapped his useful cooking outfit for something more Elizabethan, and talked the audience through the



cookery demonstration, as he imagined it would have been presented in Elizabethan times. The next section considers his broadcast in the context of the first food history on television in Britain, and what, if anything, this innovation lends to television food history today.

### A Conceit of Coney

#### *Suspension of Imagination*

The Mistress for the Evening, the usual Alexandra Palace continuity announcer who would normally appear on screen, in the studio, to provide live links between programmes, Jeanne Heal, dressed as a courtier or perhaps as an imagined Elizabeth I herself, introduced Master Harben following the Interlude in the evening. She would later remind the audience that 'rightly is Master Harben known as the Epicure of Cooks', establishing him as an authentic voice for both food and history. Harben invited the audience to suspend belief and imagine they were watching him as an Elizabethan cook, holding a pair of rabbits high in one hand. The scene was set for an instruction in food history.

#### *Setting the Scene*

Harben set up his cookery table in front of a grand brick fireplace within the studio, to resemble the kitchen of a palace or castle which he might have been cooking and broadcasting from had this really been Elizabethan times. Behind him and across the table are an array of cooking equipment, wooden bowls, pewter plates and apothecary bottles, placed more to conjure up the times than for any historical accuracy or reference. Harben tends to the cooking conies throughout, sitting in a three-legged iron pot 'upon' the fire 'there it will keep hot and there it will thicken', he reassured the audience.

Harben dressed in an Elizabethan ruff and outfit more suited to court than kitchen, with puffed sleeves and a tightly tied apron. Harben traditionally wore a striped butcher's apron while on television, itself an imagined representation of a cook's outfit, however this switch of outfit maintained his style, remaining easily recognisable as the familiar face of cookery on television at the time. Harben looked directly down the camera lens and spoke in his usual clipped, clear and precise voice. His hands motioned towards the audience at home to ensure that they remained engaged with all he had to say. Harben began by reading out the ingredients for the recipe he would demonstrate, in the same familiar way that he would during normal broadcasts, signifying that this too was a 'normal' cooking programme, albeit set in the imagined world of Elizabeth I.

The cookery segment was broadcast live, as the entire evening was. Harben was skilled at presentations, and worked between two cameras, often directing a camera to focus on details by signalling 'if we look closely here' while completing a task. Harben modulates his language and voice throughout the demonstration, using scripted phrases such as 'bear

with me my fair gentles if I seem ware of this work', 'mark you gentles' and 'this pie crust is as frail and insubstantial as a young mans' vows' to illustrate an entertainment value as well as use of perceived historical phraseology.

Harben ultimately creates a castle from pastry to encase his coney, or stew. Building the castle walls from pre-prepared pastry cut to resemble turreted walls with windows and doors, Harben admits 'this work is fraught with possibilities of danger.' Although at one point it seems as if 'disaster has overwhelmed' Harben with a breakage, it allows him to reassure the audience that he has spare parts prepared just for this occasion, stating 'fear not, I have another yet' in place of 'here is one I prepared earlier.'

### *Harben-isms – was this broadcast about history, or about Harben?*

Harben cannot, however, resist including a few trademarks of his own style and persona to the demonstration. From the word go he is honest with the audience that this 'conceit of coney' is by his 'own devising', swapping the instruction to 'take four chickens' from the supposedly real original recipe, declaring boldly 'I am using coney' without any given explanation. Harben carved a particular niche on television for cooking using a frying pan (which he later would go on to develop his own range of known as Harbenware, with other kitchen equipment, for sale) and during this segment instructs 'put them into the frying pan' and 'place them on a baking sheet' out of character and time, but as Harben would have during an ordinary modern-day broadcast.

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Any illusions of historical accuracy are gone when the time comes to beat eggs to add to the dish, as Harben does this with an ordinary kitchen fork, folding them into the pot with an ordinary domestic wooden spoon.

Harben keeps a long, pointed knife tucked into his apron belt. He brings this out performatively to chop parsley with more than an exaggeration and also a lemon sliced with vigour. Harben pours wine (for the recipe) from a small 'fair round brass pot' which he says his daughter Jenny had bought him as a present when she visited the Isle of Guernsey, more in line with the added commentary he might add to a more normal broadcast than offering anything of historical accuracy, being unlikely that the daughter of an Elizabethan cook would make such a journey.

### *History or Entertainment – was Harben aiming for Authenticity?*

Harben lends an air of authenticity to his broadcast by referring to supposedly real-life characters from history, which viewers may recognise or at least would recognise as sounding probable. The conies which Harben held aloft at the outside were described as coming from 'My Lord Oxford' to prepare. Lord Oxford may have been the real-life courtier in the Elizabethan era most prominently linked as a potential alternative author for the works of Shakespeare, although no defining details of him are given during the broadcast. Harben



prepares his dish to 'lay before Lord Oxford and those who he may honour' signifying a different role for the food than merely for enjoyment. The Elizabethan meal was as much theatre just as Harben's demonstration of it was.

Harben states that he has devised this 'conceit of coney' for Lord Oxford, but also that he has made some changes to the original recipe to include a few things Harben thought 'my Lord Oxford would prefer' – things which were richer and sweeter. Harben holds an old book in his hands, and looks as if to read the recipe from it as he mentions that it has long been a 'favourite in my master's family' to emphasise to viewers the perception that this recipe – which he refers to as a receipt to signify the language of Elizabethan times – is historic, established and authentic. Harben puts the book down, again emphasising that he is now in control of the recreation, and tells viewers 'up until now I have faithfully followed my Masters recipe ...from now on this is where my conceit shall start.'

Harben adds several herbs and spices to his dish, many of which evoke historical connotations. By using 'thyme, winter savoury, sweet marjoram, cloves and mace' and also pepper, bashed to a ground in a pewter mortal, and powdered nutmeg from a large jar, he gives the impression of history to the viewers by underlining the unfamiliar.

At the end of the demonstration, Harben breaks open his pastry castle 'conceit' and tastes a piece of the pastry to show viewers how delicious it was. This felt more like a 'normal' end to a Harben cookery programme than in the way in which an Elizabethan cook would act.

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### Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed interpretations of food history, and although these undoubtedly took place prior to the arrival of television in Britain, I have shown that their own history stretches back much further into television history than those of recent memory. Philip Harben presented the first television historical interpretation of food and cookery in 1953 as part of a wider celebration of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, itself an important and historic occasion. Harben's imagined culinary tourism to Elizabethan times was part fantasy, part entertainment, part self-promotion and part inspiration, perhaps encouraging audiences to gain a mere flavour of the past enabling them to explore more.

Like most innovations, there was no blueprint or example to follow, however Harben's broadcast shares many familiar aspects of television food history today, elements which we would expect to see if we watched *The Supersizers*, Annie Gray and Lucy Worsley or the *Back in Time For...* programmes. He set is performance in a credible location, indicating 'history' if not an entirely credible Elizabethan location. His usual studio and performance setting was replaced with artifacts and items which again suggested 'history.' Harben's costume was instantly recognisable as Elizabethan, albeit in more of a fancy-dress way than as an authentic cooks' outfit of the time. He performed using dialogue and phrases which

conjured up images of the past while still connecting himself to, and not alienating himself from, his present-day audiences. Harben referenced books, recipes and people from history to give his performance some legitimacy and authenticity.

Ultimately, Harben's performance and demonstration would be unlikely to stand up to close scrutiny and standards by historians who may be part of, or acting as consultants, on the programmes we consume today, nor would his broadcast fool 'serious' historians watching for a documentary type of food archaeology. The programme was intended to inform, educate and entertain as per the founding principles of the BBC. It succeeded in firing the imagination of audiences at the time, and subsequent writers, presenters and consumers of food history on television, who have more to thank Philip Harben for than they realised.

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