The Birth of the English Kitchen, 1600-1850

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In contemporary understanding, a kitchen is a space which houses a heat source and appropriate utensils for preparing meals. How and why this kind of kitchen emerged in England between the 17th and mid-19th century is the story that Pennell set out to uncover. Although at first sight, this question might seem chiefly of interest to architectural, social, and food historians, it is in fact an important contribution to the broader history of England's industrialization and modernization.

Food as something that farmers work to produce has rightly received a great deal of attention from historians. Yet for farm products to become food that can be chewed, swallowed, and digested requires a long series of laborious energy-intensive operations, such as threshing, grinding, malting, sifting, churning, and curdling as well as final preparation into dishes. Although the English language has no collective noun for these processes nor for the spaces in which they took place, I often think of the latter as the 'extended kitchen.' From antiquity, large, elite establishments such as courts and religious houses dedicated much of their floor space to these extended kitchens for storing, processing and cooking food, work that occupied tens or hundreds of laborers. Non-elite dwellings varied. Some, such as tenements in cities, had no kitchens, their inhabitants depending on street food. Others might include small-scale food processing facilities such as bakeries. Others, in warm, dry climates, might carry on food processing outside, away from the enclosed sleeping area. Yet others, in the cold, wet British Isles, for example, by 1600, the start of Pennell's story, were built around an open, ground-level hearth, which supplied light, warmth and a place to cook.⁽¹⁾ A hole in the ceiling allowed the smoke out and a hook in the ceiling served to suspend a large pot over the fire for cooking pottage (a boiled mixture of broken grains, pulses, and vegetables). Other indoor activities – such as grinding grains, churning milk, spinning, sewing, childcare, animal care, grain and fuel storage, and sleeping, depending on the prosperity and location of the dwelling – took place in the same space.

By 1850, most of these activities took place elsewhere, the heat source had been moved to the wall and corralled in an iron box, and cooking transformed. The 'kitchen' – a term that derives from the Latin *coquina*, and which in some areas had been used for the main cooking location from 1000 AD – had now become established, at least in cities, as a recognized and necessary part of a dwelling. During the transition, the space where cooking took place was variously called a hall, a fire chamber, a buttery, or if it had multiple uses, the living or dwelling room. Conversely spaces used for preparing foodstuffs and storing cooking

equipment might be called kitchens even if they had no hearth. Pennell's argument is that the emergence of the dedicated space for a family kitchen antedates the late 19th-century systems for delivering fuel, light, and water on demand, until now the focus of much work on the modern kitchen.[\(2\)](#)

Drawing on a rich array of sources, including court cases, deeds, and probate documents, ephemeral advertising, architectural and cookery books, and surviving artifacts such as pots and pans, illustrations, and to a lesser extent literary sources, Pennell's work is meticulously documented. Though understandable given the expense, it's a pity that she could not include more illustrations and diagrams as readers will find it hard to understand the difference between a pot and a pan, or how a fire jack actually worked, or how the kitchen was laid out in relation to the rest of the house. Not always the easiest read, *The Birth of the Modern Kitchen* is a consistently rewarding one.

The emerging kitchen was helped along by a growing literature of household management and cookery books. Standardized frontispieces to 18th-century cookbooks show well-supervised servants in front of glowing fireplaces and prestigious dishes and equipment on kitchen dressers. Treatises on 'oeconomy', the system of ensuring an orderly household by managing both economic and moral resources, says Pennell drawing on Karen Harvey's research, saw the kitchen as both a microcosm of and a necessary foundation for the political economy of the nation.[\(3\)](#) Publications on efficient ranges and kitchen management by scientists such as Count Rumford at the turn of the 19th century made the the kitchen part of science- and technology-based rational reform of domestic life, indeed life more generally. Thus kitchen activities and objects alike carried moral freight. Proper and improper contacts between different social classes occurred there. Reformers hoped that re-designed cottage kitchens would raise the tone of farm laborer's lives. Ceramic kitchen ware and metal pots bore Biblical quotations.

The structural change that underlying a special space for meal preparation was the widespread adoption in the early 17th century of the brick, stone, or timber chimney. The hearth was moved to the wall and the smoke (or much of it) channeled up through the chimney. After a series of incremental changes, by the end of the 18th century, the range with a fully-enclosed fire, a boiler for water on one side, and an oven on the other, was standard in better off urban houses.

Paralleling and, at least in part, causing changes in the hearth were changes in fuel. Well into the 18th century, the favored fuel was wood. This was gradually replaced by coal shipped from mines near the coasts of northern England. As taxes were reduced, this became more affordable, so that by the early 19th century it cost about 40 per cent less than it had a 100 years earlier. Although coal burnt more evenly, gave out more energy, and was less bulky to store than firewood, it required a raised hearth to create enough draft and emitted unpleasant fumes, an important contributing cause of the experiments with hearths and with enclosed stoves. In turn, coal gas (that is, gas manufactured by the heating of coal in a limited supply of air), even with its dangerous pipes, replaced coal in the 19th century, avoiding the need for messy, bulky storage.

Cooking methods and foods changed along with the heat source and the fuel. With the wood-fired open wall hearth, one pot pottages gave way to meat roasted on a spit. Hams and bacon smoked in the chimney. With coal's penetrating smell, roasting was replaced by baking (what is now called roasting) in an enclosed oven. Smoking became impossible. Frying, braising and sauce-making became steadily commoner. By the late 18th century, as fine white flour and sugar became readily available, the baking of pastries enjoyed a boom.

Such newly elaborate cookery required a battery of equipment much larger than the huge pot or kettle that had previously ruled the kitchen. The handled saucepan for sauce making came on the market. Roasting jacks with mechanisms for turning the roast in front of the flame changed kitchen routines as surely as refrigerators and microwaves were to do in the 20th century. Tin plate (iron tinned prior to shaping) displaced crude earthenware for basic kitchen dishes and was formed into a host of handy new utensils such as roasters, dripping pans, pepper boxes, colanders, and funnels. Odorless, unbreakable, and nearly impossible for rats and mice to gnaw their way through, tinplate jars and boxes also served to store an increasing range of dry groceries in the kitchen, such as tea, pepper and other spices, and Carolina rice.

Strainers of wicker, cake hoops of paper, cloths for puddings, scales, stoneware, dressers, clocks, books, prints for the wall, and even weapons made the kitchen the most expensive room in the house to equip. A lucky few were able to buy the long list kitchen paraphernalia recommended in cookbooks new from the expanding retail trade. Most relied on hand-me-downs, second-hand pieces, auctions, piecemeal purchases from itinerant salesmen, pawn shops, or just plain theft.

By the mid-19th century, non-culinary activities such as spinning, needlework, ironing, and mending, work for pay such as laundry, the selling tea or coffee, and the plying of trades such as cobbling (ever present in the 17th century) were being squeezed from the kitchen. So were the dogs that guarded the house, the cats that watched for the ever-present mice and rats, and the children sleeping in their cradles. Increasingly the English regarded the central hearth kitchen, still common on the Celtic fringe, with its simple equipment, dim smoky air, and welter of activities as typical of uncivilized, backward societies.

As an aside, it is my impression is that even in England these changes were much more pronounced in the city than in the country. Much of the space in the the farmhouses of my prosperous South of England farming family just after the Second World War was still given over, though not exclusively, to food storage and preparation. The living room fire was used to make toast and grill chops, the hooks in the cellar supported flitches of bacon, hams, rabbits and pheasants, the pantry stored dry goods, the scullery housed wet muddy boots and outer wear, cabbages draining their melting coating of frost, and birds to be plucked and drawn, and the attic shelves were lined with apples on straw. The kitchen, besides being used for cooking, was used for washing eggs for sale, for preparing food for cats, dogs, chickens and calves, and, in the absence of running water, for bathing in a tin bath. The cheese room and the bread oven had been used until the War to make cheese and clotted cream and to bake bread. However, given that it was the urban population that exploded, the laggards in the country are minor exceptions to the broader trend.

Elite kitchens in fine town houses and capacious country houses examined by authors such as Peter Brears and Pamela Sambrook, may have introduced many of the technological changes that created the modern kitchen. It was, however, the cumulative effect of changes described by Pennell in ordinary kitchens in inns and farmhouses, in terrace houses in the growing towns and cottages on improving farms that changed the pattern of food preparation in England.⁽⁴⁾ As the kitchen became dedicated to family cooking, many of the food preparation chores of the 'extended' kitchen shifted to new locations and were organized in new ways. Grinding in England (unlike the Celtic fringe) had made the shift to mills in the Middle Ages. Now bread was increasingly prepared in bakeries, beer in breweries, cheese and butter in commercial farm dairies, bacon in factories, and sugar and tea in facilities as far away as China and the Caribbean.⁽⁵⁾

Pennell's research opens up the possibility that before long historians will be able to investigate the relationship between changes in the kitchen and the industrial revolution in 18th-century England. Craig Muldrew has argued that increased agricultural production in England, particularly grain production, allowed for a better fed and more energetic population in the course of the 18th century.⁽⁶⁾ Yet as I pointed out at the beginning of this review, agricultural products are not food. Changing them into food requires a great deal of energy and alters both the nutrients and the calories that they provide.

Analyzing, let alone quantifying what post-harvest processing contributed to the creation of industriousness is a huge task which will not be completed quickly or easily. Pennell's achievement is to have laid out one part of the change: the rise of more complicated cooking or final meal preparation along with the fall of more basic food processing in the modern kitchen. Did a separate kitchen, with its elaborate paraphernalia, simply mean more work for mother as the housewife directed time and energy formerly expended on processing to cooking more varied meals? Or were these meals, with their greater range of perhaps more digestible foods, more nutritious? To what extent did the growing industrialization of food processing with its division of labor and (often) employment of fossil fuel power increase efficiency, decrease prices, and make food more affordable? Difficult as it is, the challenge is to integrate the shift from the extended kitchen to the food processing plant, retail store, and modern home kitchen into the broader economic and energy history of England, and eventually of the wider world.

Notes

1. Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven, CT, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, NY, 1983). Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles, 1650–1950* (London, 1982).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2012).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *The Country House Kitchen 1650–1900: Skills and Equipment for Food Provisioning*, ed. Pamela A. Sambrook and Peter C. D. Brears (Stroud, England, 1996).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Peter Mathias, *The Brewing Industry in England, 1700–1830* (Cambridge, 1959).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Craig Muldrew, *Food, Energy and the Creation of Industriousness: Work and Material Culture in Agrarian England, 1550–1780* (Cambridge, 2011).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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