Fattening Swans for the Tables of Epicures

Annual Upping in an Old English Cathedral Town—Care of the Birds—Some Recipes in Rhyme.

"Unto him I will discover
That swan's nest among the reeds."

THE swan upping which takes place at St Helen's swan pit, Norwich, England, is one of the most interesting customs that has survived the lapse of time. Tourists go there and look upon the cathedrals, wander about the old ruins, even visit the Old Men's Hospital, steep themselves with the ancient history of Norwich, and take their departure, little dreaming that they have missed one of the most interesting sights of the great cathedral city.

A "swannery" or "swan pit" is an artificial pond where young swans—cygnets, they are called—are fattened for table use. They are placed in the pit when about four months old, and literally stuffed, like the Strasburg geese, for another four months, when they are ready for the table.

St. Helen's swan pit is attached to the Hospital of St. Giles, more familiarly known as the Old Men's Hospital, in Bishopgate Street. The church is a quaint old building, far too large for the congregations that gather there for worship at the present time. Mindful of this fact the practical philanthropy of the citizens has converted a portion of the church into an almshouse for the aged and infirm. Two hundred or more old men and women are supported here, and the revenues of the hospital amount to about $35,000 a year.

The original of St. Helen's swan pit was undoubtedly founded by the monks, who earned considerable celebrity as trenchermen in the early part of the sixteenth century, for, according to historical documents, the city possessed three swan marks registered on the swan rolls in 1598. The present swan pit was restored and improved in 1793.

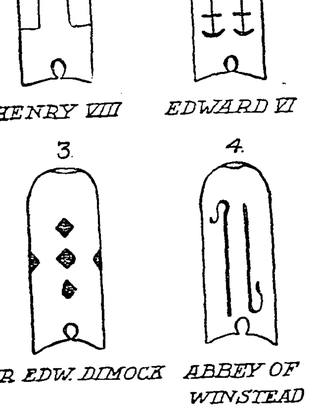
Swans, swan pits, and swan uppings are things of which the general public know little or nothing. The naturalist and the antiquarian are more or less interested in them, but information concerning the present or past history of the subject is very meagre, and for the most part to be found under cover of the history of something else; the student comes upon it accidentally, as it were.

Dainties for Epicures.

Roast swan and swan giblet soup are dishes known to the epicure only: the birds are too rare and expensive for ordinary eating, but the recent introduction of roast swan to the menu of a celebrated dinner in London has attracted notice to the swan as a marketable and edible creature.

Among the old papers of the city is found the following record: "Until the municipal reform act of 1835 the City of Norwich always had a swanner, usually one of the mace bearers, whose duty it was to search the river during the nesting of the birds, and to take up and duly mark the cygnets—and afterward to deliver them to the Master of the Great Hospital. The swanner's fee for these duties was two guineas."

At Abbotsbury, on the Thames, and in a few other localities in England there are a large number of swans bred upon the waters, but nowhere else are there so many cygnets reared as on the broads of North-



east Norfolk. St. Helen's swan pit is the only establishment for the systematic fattening of the young birds, with the exception of one or two private small ones, also near Warwick.

Form of Swan Pit.

This pit is situated in the meadow at the back of the hospital, and is solidly constructed of brickwork. To be exact, in the words of Mr. John Cox, the master, it is 74 feet in length, 32 feet in width, and 6 feet deep, the water rising to about the depth of 2 feet. Along the sides are floating troughs, which rise and fall with the alternating level of the water; they are kept in place by posts planted for the purpose. The food for the cygnets is deposited in these troughs.

At one end of the pit is a sloping stage which enables the cygnets to leave the water when inclined, and this gives them access to a railed-in inclosure, where they may rest and prune themselves. The tank has connection with the river, which is near, and the water rises and falls with the tide, being regulated by a sluice and valve. In this swan pit the birds are first fed on cut grass; then they are given barley, of which they are supposed to consume three or four bushels before they are fatted for market.

A Cygnet's History.

The life history of a cygnet as taken from the story of a naturalist is interesting. The swan is a monogamist, as when he has taken a mate he keeps her for life; occasionally the marriage is not a happy one, or a mate will die, then a new one sometimes is taken. The male swan makes a good husband; he takes his fair share of the work in selecting the spot for a nest and in helping to build it. When it is ready for the eggs he gets himself into it, and with the queerest sort of motions with his heavy body he shapes the nest with a hollow in the centre for the eggs. He helps guard the nest, and is ever ready to take his mate's place whenever she wishes for a change.

The number of eggs and birds hatched by a pair varies; there is record of one pair that produced in eight years eighty-five eggs and reared eighty-two cygnets, but the usual number falls far short of this.

The birds are of a dusky brown color when hatched, and do not put on their snowy plumage until late in the season. The mother proudly carries her brood of dusky babies on her back, arching her wings to keep them all together, while their queer little heads look funny enough peeping out from under her sheltering plumage.

If they had the least glimmering of what the future had in store for them they would dread the second Monday in August from the moment they stick their little heads out of the sheltering shell, for 'tis then their fate is decided.

A few are destined to live a life of freedom like their parents, but the majority of them are hurried off to the swan pit, there to undergo a course of gradual preparation which ends in the spit.

The mute swan is a royal bird, half domesticated, living upon the broad marshes of English rivers. From its introduction no subject of the Crown has been allowed to own swans at large, except by grant from the Crown. With the privilege was granted a mark by which the owner might know and claim his birds.

To learn the importance of these privileges one has only to read the histories of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the reign of Edward IV. we find it ordered that no person except the King's sons should have a "swan mark" or "game" of swans unless he possessed a freehold of the clear yearly value of 6 marks.

During the reign of Henry VII. the stealing of a swan's egg was punishable by a year's imprisonment and a fine at the King's will. Stealing a swan or getting a snare for a bird was punished far more severely.

An old history of England tells us that the Dyers and Vintners were at one time the only companies that were allowed the privilege of keeping swans on the Thames. Their swan mark was two nicks, probably intended for a demi-lozenge, on each side of the upper mandible, and a V for a chevron reversed. One of the regular stand-up toasts of the day was, "The Worshipful Company of Vintners with a V." At one time they possessed 500 birds, and the marking of the cygnets and the renewing of the marks of the old birds was no small task.

The King had a swanherd, who was called "Master of the King's Swans." No one owning swans was allowed to appoint a swanherd without a license from the King's swanherd, and every swanherd on the river was bound to answer his beck and call or to pay a fine. The King's swanherd was obliged to keep a book of swan marks, and the names of owners and their swanherds were registered in this book.

Among the owners of swan marks at the present day in Norwich and about Norfolk I find registered: The Corporation of Norwich, the Great Hospital of Norwich, where the upping takes place; Lord Bishop of Norwich, the Duke of Norfolk, Lord Rosebery, Lord Stafford, and others.

These marks are very curious and interesting, as an examination of the illustration will show. Nos. 16 and 17 were the royal swan marks of Henry VIII. and Edward VI., respectively. No. 18, with the two crosiers, one reversed, was the swan mark of the Abbey of Swinsted. No. 19 was the swan mark of Sir Edward Dimock of Lincolnshire, who belonged to the family of the royal champion, who held the manor at Scrivelsby by that tenure, to "come armed on horseback—or one in his stead—and in the presence of the King to proclaim and challenge any that shall affirm the King not lawful heir to the Crowne and kingdome, to fight with him bodie for bodie."

An Ancient Festival.

In ancient days the "swan upping" was a festival for country folk about the rivers, who used to come in great numbers to watch the catching and marking of the swans. For the swan owners and swanherds it was a day of pomp and ceremony. The hunt was preceded by a breakfast at one of the large inns and finished by a dinner, at which the Mayor presided.

The swanherds wore snowy feathers in their caps, and the companies made the swan voyage in their state barges with great ceremony. But most of the sentiment has departed from the day, although the plain, prosaic business transaction cannot be entirely bereft of its fascination when conducted in the midst of such romantic surroundings.

The morning of the second Monday in August having arrived the keeper of St. Helen's swanpit, who represents the corporation of the hospital, meets the representatives of the various other swan rights at Buckenham Ferry on the River Yare and breakfast with them. This finished, the procession of boats starts to take up the young swans.

Curiously enough the old birds scent danger on the morning air, or have a dim recollection of former raids, and they make the proceeding as difficult and as dangerous as possible. If they prove too intractible they are driven out of the water and secured. Occasionally a pair of old birds with infinite cunning will dodge in and out and give no end of trouble before they are captured.

When the parent birds are secured their "marks" are examined in order to ascertain to whom they belong. If by chance the birds are owned by different proprietors the brood of young ones is divided equally. If there is an odd young one the two owners "toss up" for it. All the young birds, whether intended for fattening or to replenish the breeding stock, are marked. Those who are to live out their natural lives as fathers and mothers of future cygnets are pinioned by removing a portion of the wing at the carpel point—a rough, but effectual, piece of surgery.

The "marks" consist of certain cabalistic signs, the ancient "swan mark" pertaining to the "rights of swans" cut upon their bills. This is done either by incising the skin or notching the side of the bill; the latter is the more permanent, but both must be painful to the tender young bird.

Swans and cygnets are captured by means of a long pole, with a kind of iron interrogation point at one end, somewhat like a shepherd's crook. This is passed around the neck of the bird, which is gently pulled into the boat by this means.

The swanherds call the male swan a cob, the female a pin; the young are technically cygnets only during the first year of their lives; the second year they are called gray birds; the third year they come out in pure white plumage and are considered grown up. The old male swan is sometimes very ferocious, particularly at the upping; apparently knowing that his young brood is in danger, he occasionally is so fierce that he boards a boat and attacks its occupants. While his blows are not likely to prove fatal, they are none the less dangerous, and some of the older broadmen tell of serious inconvenience arising from the blows administered by the stump of the pinioned wing of an infuriated bird.

The birds that are selected at the upping for the swan pit are tied with their feet turned on their backs and laid on a bed of rushes at the bottom of the boat. They soon become accustomed to the pit and seem to lead a happy life, with plenty to eat, good company, and water to their heart's content.

When the cygnets arrive at the swan pit they are worth about $2.50 each. When fattened they bring $10. It will be seen that roast cygnet is an expensive dish. Mr. Cox, the master of the hospital, receives cygnets for fattening at a charge of $5 each. At their prime they weigh sometimes as much as twenty-eight pounds, but the average is fifteen pounds.

Warwick swans are as famous as Norfolk turkeys, and in olden times a swan was served up at every great feast. They are expensive because they are edible only for a brief period of their existence.

Cygnets from St. Helen's swan pit are frequently sent as holiday gifts to the various crowned heads of Europe, and the Pope was the recipient of a fine one not long ago. Queen Victoria was often remembered, and King Edward has been the recipient of two or three especially fine birds. The following humorous recipe "done into verse" by a clever clergyman is sent with each bird:

To Roast a Swan.

"Take three pounds of beef, beat fine in a mortar;
Put it into the swan—that is, when you've caught her;
Some pepper, salt, mace, some nutmeg, an onion
Will heighten the flavor in gourmands' opinion.
Then tie it up tight with a small piece of tape,
That the gravy and other things may not escape.
A meal paste—rather stiff—should be laid on the breast,
And some whitey-brown paper should cover the rest.
Fifteen minutes at least ere the swan you take down;
Pull the paste off the bird that the breast may get brown.

The Gravy.

To a gravy of beef—good and strong—I opine,
You'll be right if you add half a pint of good wine;
Pour this through the swan—yes, quite through the belly—
Then serve the whole up with some hot currant jelly.

N. B.—The swan must not be skinned.

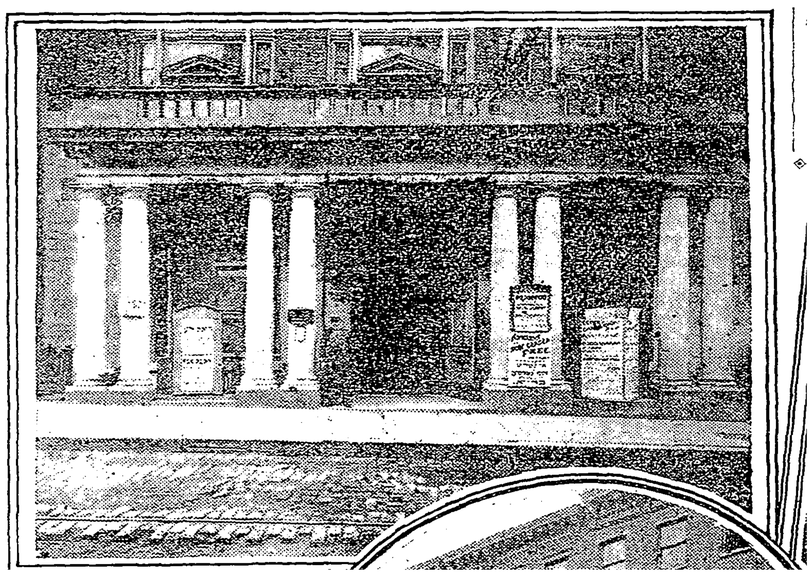
Another recipe is as follows:

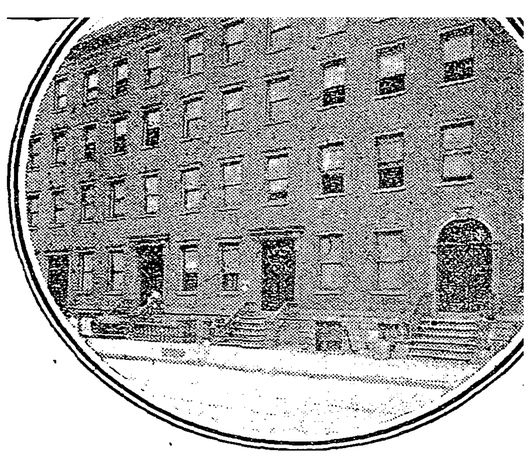
Take 2 pounds of rump steak, chop it fine, season well with spice, a piece of onion or shalot, and butter. Rub the breast both inside and outside with beaten cloves, then stuff with the above, taking care to sew the bird up carefully, and tie it up very tightly on the spit, so that the gravy may not escape. Inclose the breast of the swan in a meal paste, after which cover the whole bird with paper well greased with beef dripping. About a quarter of an hour before the bird is taken up, remove the paper and the paste, baste well with butter and flour till brown and frothy. A swan of 15 pounds weight requires about two hours' roasting, with a fire not too fierce. The swan must not be skinned.

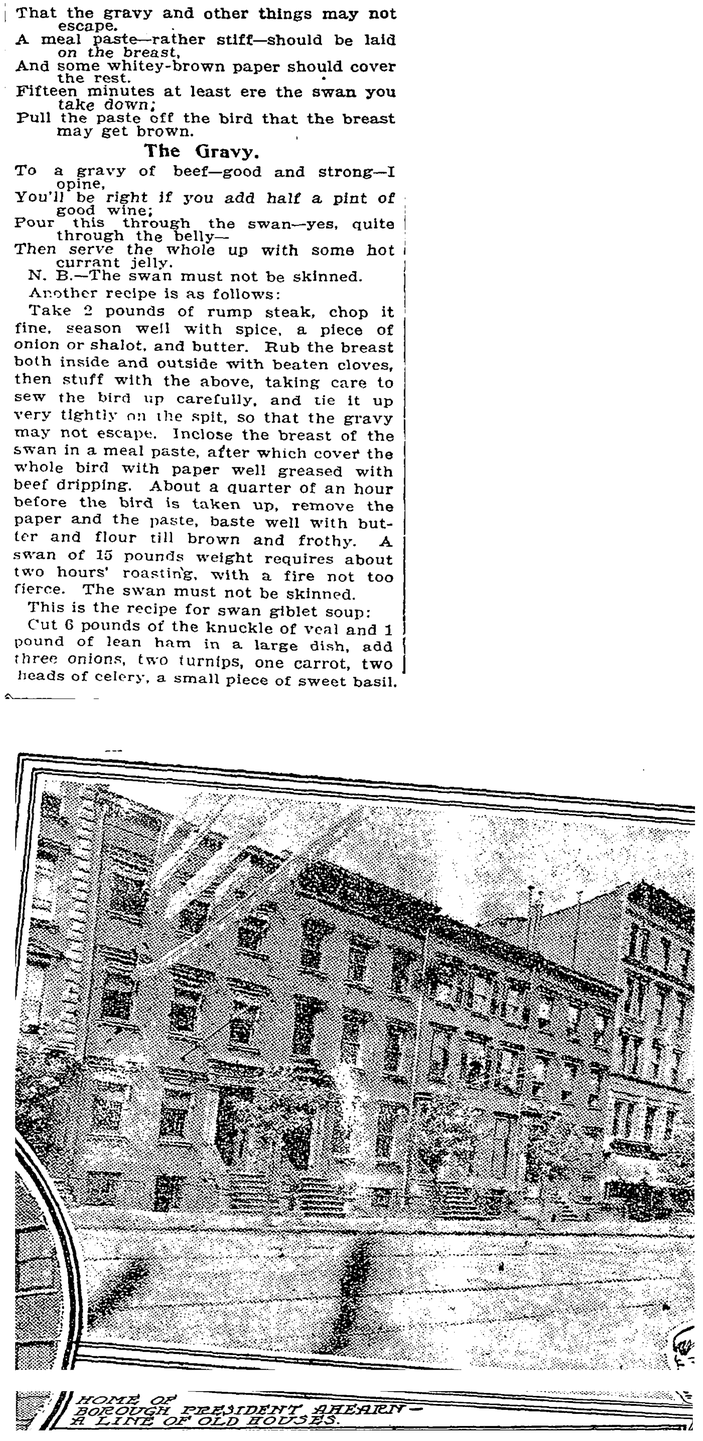
This is the recipe for swan giblet soup:

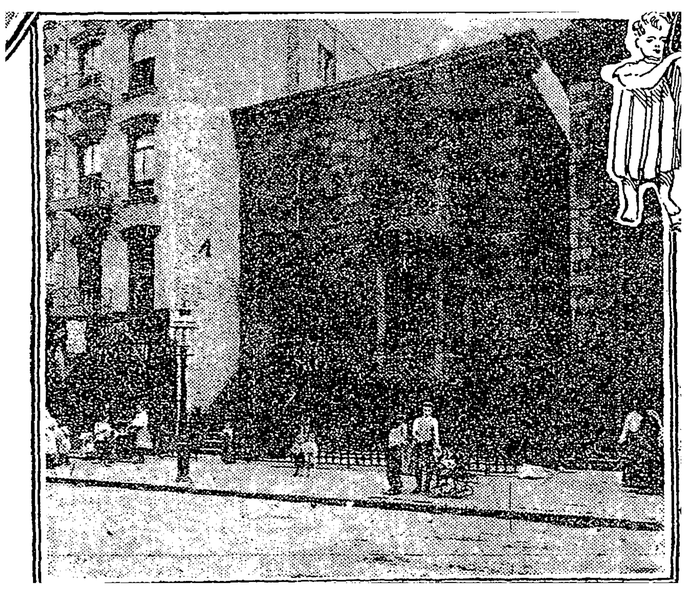
Cut 6 pounds of the knuckle of veal and 1 pound of lean ham in a large dish, add three onions, two turnips, one carrot, two heads of celery, a small piece of sweet basil, marjoram, thyme, parsley, and bay leaf, and a tablespoonful of salt. Butter a stewpan lightly, put in the whole of the ingredients, add five cloves, two blades of mace, and half a pint of water, stew it over a brisk fire about twenty minutes, when it becomes a nice light brown color add eight quarts of water; directly it boils place it at the corner of the stove, scald the giblets in boiling water, take them out and cut them into joints, the gizzard in four pieces, put them into the stock, and let them simmer gently until they are quite tender, take them out, strain the gravy through a cloth, skim off every particle of grease, put it into a clean stew pan with the giblets, and thicken it with arrowroot dissolved first in cold water, but do not make it too thick, finish by adding half a pint of sherry, the juice of half a lemon, and two grains of cayenne.

LAURA B. STARR.


CLINTON HALL, THE EAST SIDE DELMONICO.


ON ORIENTAL SQUARE—HOME OF M. J. ADRIANI, MILLIONAIRE AND RETIRED BANKER.

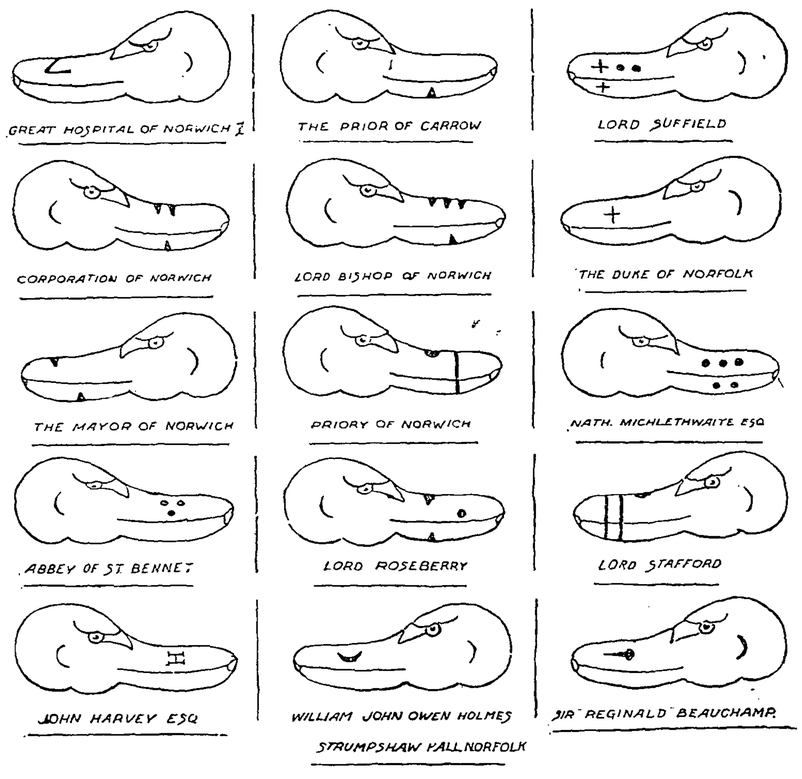

HOME OF BOROUGH PRESIDENT AHEARN—A LINE OF OLD HOUSES.


ALL SAINTS' PARSONAGE, NEXT DOOR TO A TENEMENT.


CORNER OF CONGRESSMAN HENRY M. GOLDFOGLE'S PARLOR.



Swan Marks.



Knew His Man.

Clinic (scanning the morning paper)—H'm! I notice our good old friend Sawbones has taken a wife.

Cynic—Whose?

The New York Times
Published: August 21, 1904
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