

Sketches of cutlery, Gemma Orton 2011
Sketch of blossom, Gemma Orton 2011

Commensality without tables

Sit down and feed, and welcome to our table.¹

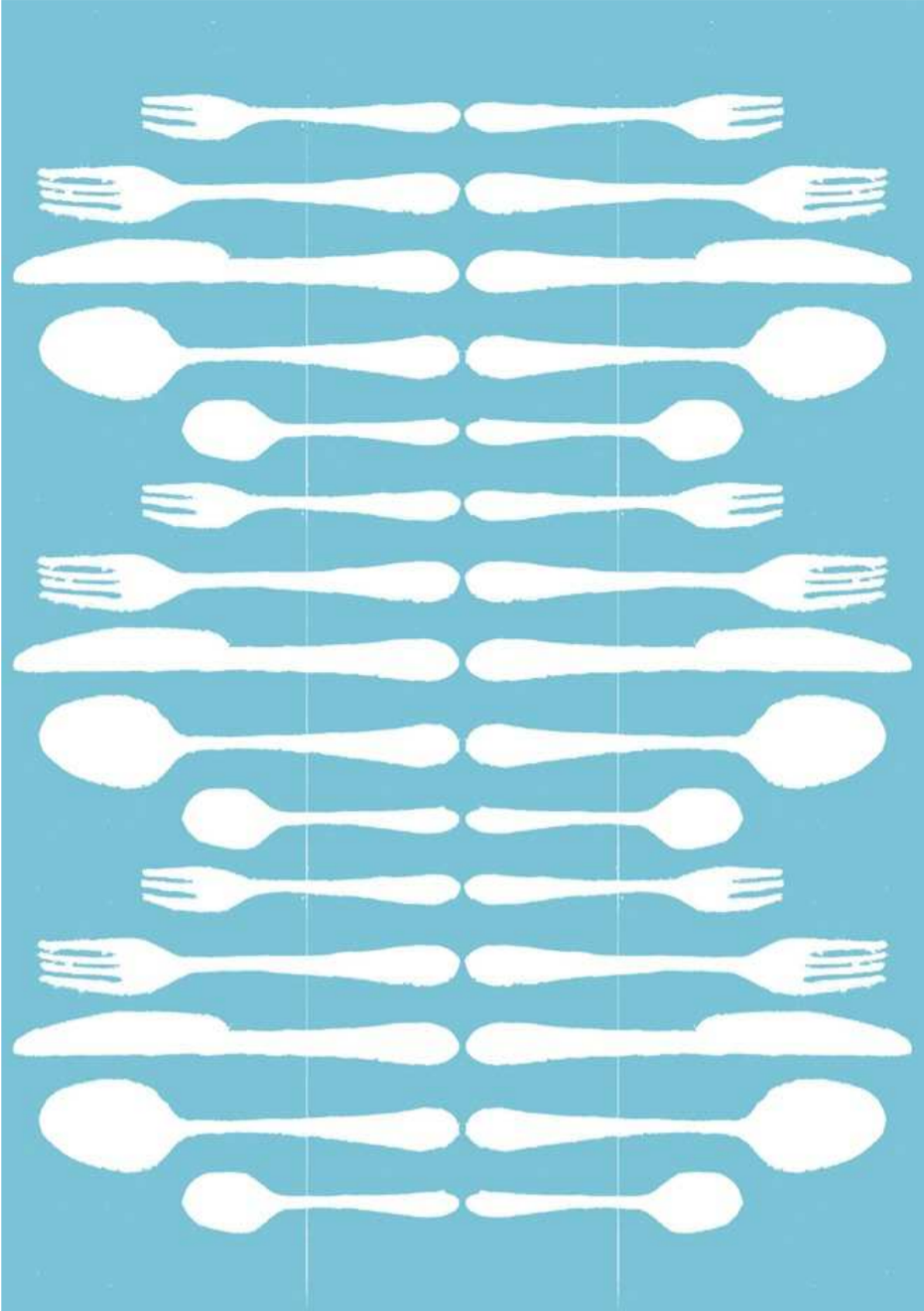
Food must have germinated community, early in our anxious pre-history. Morsels taken together serve to feed recognition and seed co-operation, stirring the chemistry of collaboration while meeting a need. Our shadowy anthropology reveals us as sharing language, group-minded in the firelight, knowing shared experiences, then gathering in the morning to make things together, shaping objects for communal benefit. Such as a table, for example: Latin, *'mensa'*: something solid to be returned to.

Meals require 'a table, a seating order, restriction on movement and on alternative occupations,' Mary Douglas tells us:

'The meal puts its frame on the gathering.'²

But picnic is different. At seaside family picnics as a child, I seldom sat – I ate wandering around or standing on the fringes of the group, not tempted to perch, kicking away the slack ropes of order and mealtime protocol. Picnic seems to offer an escape from 'the usual identities and hierarchical relationships in the group'.³

What then is commensality without tables? What sort of gathering, when community seems to spill out of its frame? The gaps between picnickers are not set by form or code, not by the logic of furniture, the shape of the room or the geometry of place-setting. We expect diners to be predictably ordered; but here they are not. There is a faint anarchic threat in their rejection of the table, a delinquent challenge to civilisation. What traces are there to follow?



'People don't carry stuff': the inconvenience of community

People brought things to Cumberland Market, but I didn't see any cumbersome handsome hampers. The standard approach is a few chosen provisions, adequate for the individuals perceived need on the day, transported in bags that can be folded or even discarded after consumption. If you had a hamper, you'd have to lug it round or keep an eye on it.

It wasn't just food that people brought along: Jessie was pottering around with a wheeled shopping basket, a football in one hand. She's lived here since 1939. Ethel joined her, telling me she came to live here originally because her in-laws owned the local dairy. Perhaps then there might have been cows grazing here in her lifetime. We joke lightly about cud-chewing customs.

Jessie enlisted me to attract the attention of the boys who were having a kickabout, as she wanted them to inherit her ball. She had lots of stuff in her basket and at home that she was trying to pass on to anyone who could use it. The personification of history, she stands offering her past to the indifferent future. What changes in community does she represent? During the course of the afternoon I came across her again, trying to distribute toys to a group of young girls. The picnic, Jessie? She loves it, listen to the rasp of her east London voice: 'It brings people together, there's all different nationalities.'

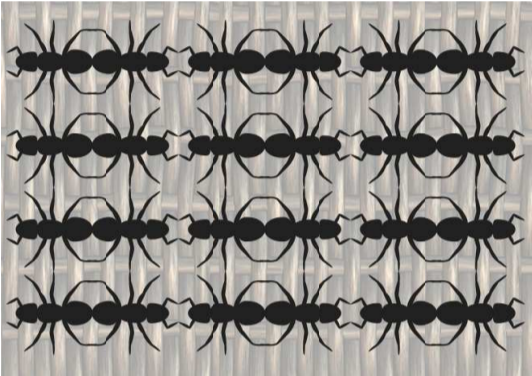
Nowadays knowing the conveniences around us we can travel light, and nineteenth century picnic paraphernalia would seem painfully labour-intensive. Here's an extract from Queen Victoria's record of jaunts during holidays in Scotland:

'We stopped, and while Grant ran back to get from a small house some hot water in the kettle, we three, with Brown's help, scrambled over a low stone wall by the roadside, and lit a fire and prepared our tea. The kettle soon returned, and the hot tea was very welcome and refreshing.'⁶⁶

Note it was not 'a kettle but 'the' kettle, which 'returned': they must have had one with them, precisely for the purpose. Let us hope that the diligent Grant got back around the same time as the kettle, although as a mere vassal he seems to be less valued than the vessel. Burnett notes that in the 1860s excursions might include taking your own tea and having a kettle boiled for 2d.⁶⁷ And then came the hamper:

'For the affluent, picnic-baskets could be elaborate affairs with compartments for bottles, a spirit stove, cutlery, unbreakable Betelware plates, cups and saucers and a folding table strapped to the outside...'⁶⁸

In the nineteen thirties motor-cars were manufactured with chrome racks for picnic hampers to be strapped to the boot. Picnic was absorbed by motoring, as was local community, and both survive, reshaped but recognisable.

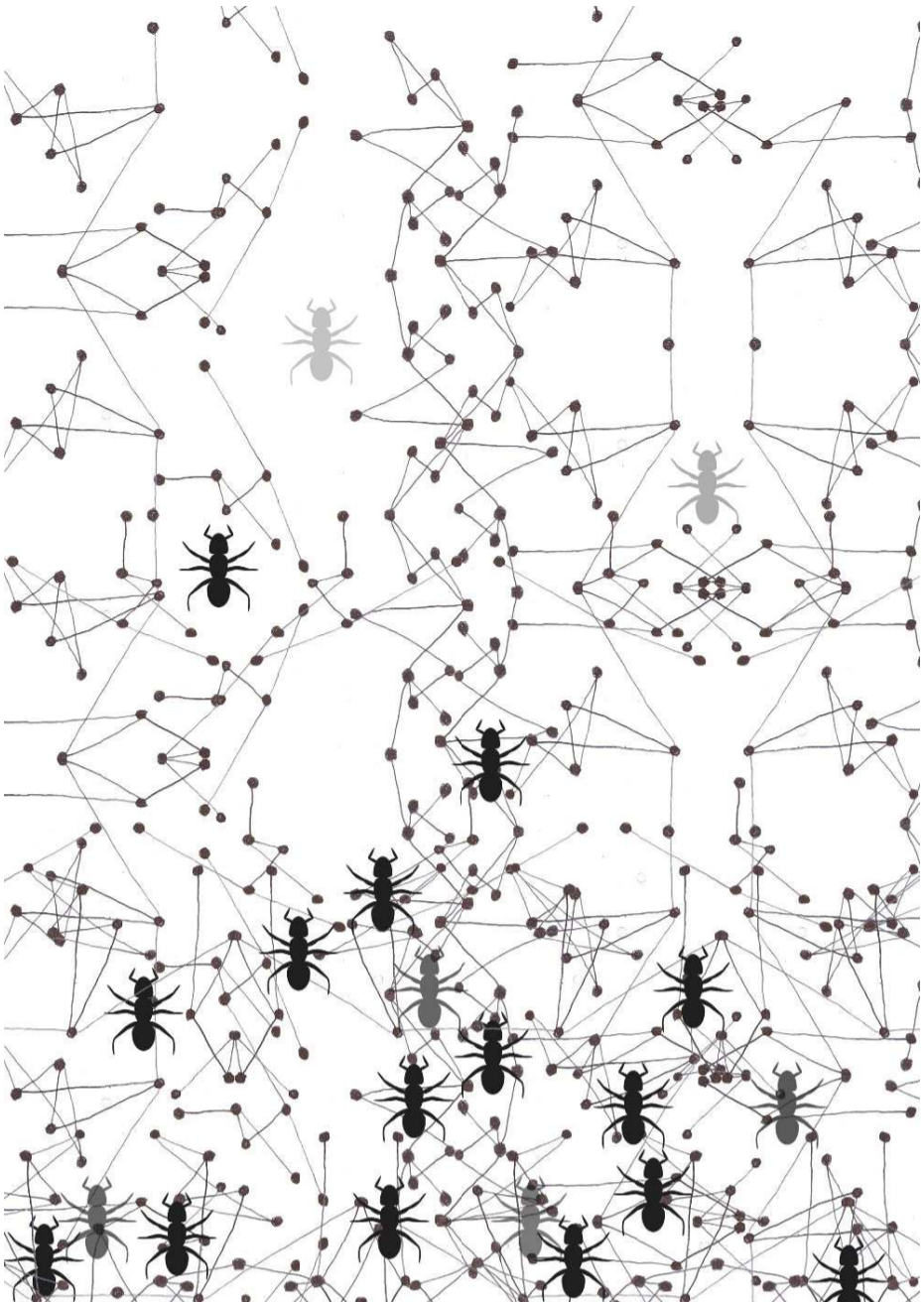


'Aunt Bessie', Gemma Orton 2011

66. Victoria Queen of England (2005). *More leaves from the Journal of our life in the Highlands*. Kessinger, p36.

67. Burnett 2003, p31.

68. Burnett 2004, p212. There's that table again.



In museum studies there have been efforts to associate the concept of community with radical democracy and resistance to dominant cultures.¹⁰⁰ But it is questionable whether we use museums - or our sense of belonging to community - in that way at all. Research suggests that

‘the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors will be those that resonate with their experiences and provide information in ways that confirm and enrich their existing view of the world... they certainly do not intend to have their narrative radically revised. Instead, they want their narrative to be confirmed.’¹⁰¹

Nowadays also, we tend to visit museums to meet up and eat or drink together, and the survival of many museums may depend rather too nicely on the café franchise: people eating in public while they’re here to look at things. We collect by the doorway, we peer and observe, we leave it all behind. Who’s stuff is this? Things that have been brought here from somewhere to be looked at, to be returned to.

I take and release the experience of drifting past the cupboards and curiosities, I take and release my own version of some droplets of knowledge, I practise a kind of sharing that is not about consumption. Museum turns private ownership into a curiosity. When I step outside again, public value cascades around me, making me feel connected. Community somehow works by piercing the source of private experience to reveal a sense of collective value. Momentarily it turns private experience into a curiosity.

Community as contact zone: ‘different is good’¹⁰²

Some scholars of museum studies have dwelt on the term ‘contact zones,’ which was coined by Mary Louise Pratt to describe

‘social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.’

She goes on to describe an educational example, where:

‘Virtually every student was having the experience of seeing the world described with him or her in it. Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom - the joys of the contact zone. The sufferings and revelations were, at different moments to be sure, experienced by every student. No one was excluded, and no one was safe.’¹⁰³

This requires what Pratt calls ‘ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the

100. Witcomb, A. (2007). ‘A place for all of us? In: *Museums and their communities*. Routledge: 133-156, p133.

101. Doering, Z. and A. Pekarik, (1996). *Visitors to the Smithsonian Institution. Visitor studies*, 9: 40-50, p47.

102. <http://youtu.be/ETf7FBvdw3Y>

103. Pratt, M. L. (1991). *Arts of the contact zone. Profession*, 91,33-40.



We should not be surprised to find picnic so loaded with intent and meaning. It’s a purposeful activity, which came to be practised widely later in the century by all social classes at a time when the English believed the sun never set on their empire. Using remarkable new technologies (bicycle, rail, eventually automobile) to travel into the countryside and take their meals there - humbly or with extravagance - would have been a way of partaking in and asserting this extraordinary sense of dominance over the planet.²¹

This idea of excursion, of travelling away while reasserting some home-based identity, hints at how community can be witnessed, may be better witnessed, off-site. Here is the picnicker playing temporary migrant, strengthening the belonging away from home’. What is it that requires us to be elsewhere in order to recognise and celebrate the *here* that we want to call ours? The question is complicated when picnic features in transnational reunions: among Mexican migrant hometown associations in the twentieth century, huge annual picnics drew as many as 3,000 participants. Fluid understandings of what is meant by home and domesticity, and being away from it symbolically, as well as transformations in the ways we find and share our food, will continue to influence picnic and hence what it tells us about community.²²

Shared pleasure? Of aunts and ants

Picnic may also be seen as a way of contriving temporary adversity in order to demonstrate how well it can be dealt with collectively. Some accounts are poignantly reminiscent of painful local meetings in draughty halls on wet evenings. Surtees and, later, Raverat offer us sombre tales of picnics that went wrong:

‘The aunts sat huddled in furs in the boats, their heavy hats flapping in the wind. The uncles, in coats and cloaks and mufflers, were wretchedly uncomfortable on the hard, cramped seats... it was still worse when they had to sit down to have tea on the damp, thistly grass... There were so many miseries which we young ones had never noticed at all: nettles, ants, cow-pats... besides that all-penetrating wind.’

Gerald Durrell joins in:

‘How I remember it from my youth! All the thrill of ants and sand in the food, trying to light a fire with damp wood, the howling gales, the light snowfall, just as you’re munching your first cucumber sandwich...’²³

Such memories represent what we might call ‘classic picnic’ in the twentieth century, group ventures that might bring delight or end memorably in shared disaster, in an age of disintegrating certainties. Csergo prefers to focus on the positive and brings us up to date with a simpler summary of picnic: ‘a moment of shared pleasure centring on a meal eaten in a natural setting’.²⁴ Make yourself comfortable.

21. Being in the landscape can be celebrated nowadays, and food taken the while, without any grasping for lofty meaning, since the romantics got that bit out of the way for us. My favourite micro-private version of picnic comes in an unsigned record of a solo night walk across the mountains of the fisherfield wilderness in Scotland (which I have covered myself, in daylight): At 4.00 a.m., I reached the beach under A'Mhaighdean, after a tedious and tricky descent down steep rocks from Ruadh Stac Mor. Dawn had arrived but it was still snowing hard. I ate an early breakfast of peanuts and felt much better (Wilson, K. and R. Gilbert (1980). *The big walks*. Diadem, p29).

22. Fitzgerald (2008). *Colonies of the Little Motherland. Comparative studies in society and history*, 50:145–169, p152; Morley, D. (2000). *Home territories*. Routledge; Adler, K.H. and C. Hamilton (2010). *Home and homecomings*. Wiley-Blackwell.

23. Raverat 1952, p280-281; Durrell, G. (1979). *The picnic and suchlike pandemonium*, Fontana, p18.

24. Csergo 2003, p155.

If the notion of totalising, concerted community is disconcerting, community can still be seen as a confirming device, like a newspaper, or a museum, which we turn to for reassurance in the way we see the world. Museum is commonly seen as possessing authority, expertise and some kind of privileged access to 'truths' in the cultural domain; just as 'the community' is constantly and misleadingly referred to as if it were 'an existing and unified structure, there to be consulted and relied on'.⁹⁹

Collective value: community as confirming

Survey questionnaires often ask if neighbours know each others' names, revealing particular assumptions about the formal nature of local ties. Contemporary neighbouring is surely far more dependent on informal visual recognition, but the knowing of names is regarded as fundamental to the determined rhetoric of cohesive community.⁹⁸ Is this the nonsense of the order-impulse again? The Wellcome picnic was certainly felt to represent a sense of community, but as one participant said, 'A lot of people here I know by sight but I don't always know their names.' Less intensity of social contact in local neighbourhoods may mean 'community different', but not necessarily community lost.

Henry Wellcome already offered many perks and unifying opportunities for his staff, including for example an orchestra. But the plans were never fulfilled, although the new town movement was more successful. Perhaps this aspiration to create the all-embracing community can be seen as part of the culmination and demise of the grand-scale, paternalistic, organisational approach to community. The idea that people *would choose* to get their support and socialisation through dense overlapping and reinforcing ties has since come into question. Later in the century Barry Wellman found community to have been more liberated than lost or saved, although it may not seem like that to all of us:

'Although urbanites have not lost their communal access to people and resources – and, indeed, may have increased their reach – for those who seek solidarity in tidy, simple hierarchical group structures, there may now be a lost sense of community.'⁹⁷

'A plan of the site, termed Wellcomeville, was drawn up in 1911. It shows the Chemical Works and research laboratories alongside cottages, and a clubhouse, sports field and park for staff.'⁹⁶

Kent. The vision, presumably inspired by Ebenezer Howard, included accommodation for his employees in a single location to form a 'live-work community':

What could we say, and what might enable us to talk in different ways, for example, about 'community' in English? It might enable us to talk in different ways, for example, about community as

- 'us *versus* them' (confrontational or excluding community)
- the people co-resident in a locality
- a disparate array of people who have in common something which they or others regard as significant and defining; or
- the process of discovery of differences and commonalities.

The popular narrative about community usually includes reference to assumptions about how, historically, individualism bullied community out of the way. The culprits are widely believed to be industrialisation and globalisation, which gradually choked out the lives of families, streets, neighbourhoods, whole towns. Institutions like factory, corporation, working men's club, church and municipal committees, philanthropic societies and so on emerged to play a role in shoring up what Raymond Plant refers to as 'the loss of the old communities' while nurturing independent ways of life. Plant argues that a current of thought had emerged and gained momentum long before the twentieth century, which sought the basis of human association not in tradition, habit and custom but in the contract of 'free' persons -

'palpable, free, self-conscious individuals who derived their freedom and consciousness of themselves precisely from the decline and loss of closer, communal forms of social relationship... The loss of community understood in this way was, therefore, a necessary condition of the emancipation of the self conscious, self-directing individual.'⁹³

Historians tend to be more cautious, while acknowledging the social impact of changes that came to define the early modern period - in the growth of the market and of literacy, the emergence of nation states, changes in religious practice, legal practice, property rights, childbirth customs, and so on - oh, and the preparation and consumption of food.⁹⁴ While the sense of cohesion may have been widespread and assumed in medieval and early modern neighbourhoods, it seems fair to say there was plenty of individualism to go round. I like to think that the Breughels and their predecessors confirm this: at their community events, people go round doing the oddest things. Community was always challenged by, and always has to make room for, irrepressible individualism. The two are not mutually exclusive, and the tensions between them are perennial.⁹⁵

Desirable to some but not to others, was the decline of confined community a lost cause? It seems Henry Wellcome did not think so. As an employer he demanded loyalty from his staff and he set out to sustain it, with ambitious plans for his company's drug production plant in Dartford,

99. MacDonald 2005, p219; Brent 2009, p245.

98. In a similar way, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion which reported in 2007 placed emphasis not on social interaction generally, but on 'meaningful' interaction, closing out significant areas of fundamentally important, seemingly trivial, engagement between citizens.

97. Wellman, B. (1979). The community question. *American Journal of sociology*, 84: 1201-1231, p1227.

96. Wellcome Trust, <http://is.gd/aqRoza>

seems to require spectacle?

'It's a sense of community. Everyone's here having a good time.'

At this point you can be sure Jim Royle was slouched before the screen grunting 'community my arse.'

A politician appears before the camera. Sydney needs the boost, we're told, tourist numbers are down. So picnic is a device for 'community', which in turn is used as a device for economic prosperity. This is community as attention-seeking. What is it about community that

29. <http://is.gd/caunZv>

28. <http://is.gd/XJlMS6>

27. <http://is.gd/ADbkeQ>

26. But we won't.

25. <http://is.gd/Xcmwnt>

'Parisians talked to one another. They talked to tourists. They shared their food with one another. They shared their food with foreigners.'²⁵

A BBC report described a lone participant with a large quantity of food because she wanted to share it 'in the spirit of the picnic' (now there's a phrase we might want to return to²⁶):

'There may be tourists, with just a sandwich. I can offer them mixed salad, cheese, 10 slices of ham, cherries and wine.'²⁷

More recently, picnic has been central to a choreographed international tourism promotion for New South Wales, as Sydney Harbour Bridge was taken over in 2009 by 6,000 ticket-winners for a photo-op complete with grassed-over roadway, fifteen cows being milked, professional entertainment, and television coverage: picnic at hanging bridge.

Each winning ticket holder will be offered complimentary NSW produce when they enter the grassed zone. This will include local and regional fresh fruits, breads and yogurt. They can also bring their own breakfast treats and picnic gear.'²⁸

The budget was said to have been \$1 million, with an anticipated value of ten times as much in tourism dollars. The traces back to the outings of Dorothy Wordsworth and her brother and friends seem faint, but the ingredients of food and excursion are there, backed up by a claim for 'community'. In the BBC's coverage of the harbour bridge event,²⁹ one of the first words you hear from a participant is 'community':

'Luncheon Bottles', Gemma Otton 2011, after Manet.

Two young friends described to me their kind of picnic. They would arrange to meet with a few others outside the supermarket in town. Then they would all go into the shop together, but select goods independently:

'everyone could get their own food – Tim was a vegetarian, I was vegetarian, the others weren't, it made it easier.'

Some items might be shared, fruit for example, as these were brought along in a plastic bag, the rest of us sitting on wet bums and passed round:

'everyone can get what they want but you can share as well. There were some things that only you would eat.'

They met up again beyond the checkout, and walked to the park half a mile away. They couldn't be bothered to take rugs and blankets:

'Mike would end up sitting on a plastic bag, the rest of us would have wet bums and accept it.'

The friends might do this once or twice every summer, while at school together or home from university. Others might join them as they became available or the mood took them, with numbers varying from four to about eight. The group was fully networked through the power of the mobile phone, which meant they were able to adjust their plans at short notice and still connect almost effortlessly as a group. The approach reflects relaxed anticipation of available and convenient food and company, and contrasts in very recognisable ways with the Victorian emphasis on *organisation*: being highly organised, and organising others, is simply inappropriate behaviour in the contemporary context. Being networked is far more important, and rather than standing out as a special occasion, picnic is 'a cheap alternative to going out to lunch together.'

The Victorian approach comes across in the first few lines of Mrs Beeton's 'BILL OF FARE FOR A PICNIC FOR 40 PERSONS':

A joint of cold roast beef, a joint of cold boiled beef, 2 ribs of lamb, 2 shoulders of lamb, 4 roast fowls, 2 roast ducks, 1 ham, 1 tongue, 2 veal-and-ham pies, 2 pigeon pies, 6 medium-sized lobsters, 1 piece of collared calf's head, 18 lettuces, 6 baskets of salad, 6 cucumbers.³⁰

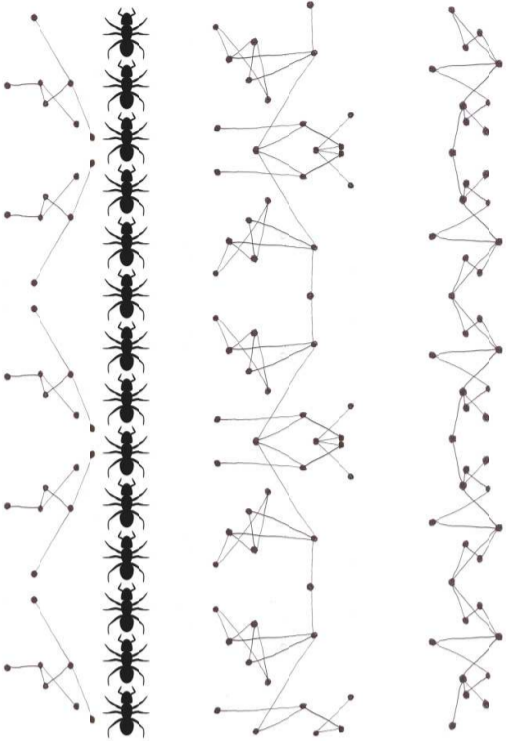
This is meat city: our young vegetarians might not have stayed long enough to get damp bums. 'Things not to be forgotten at a Picnic' according to Mrs Beeton, include a stick of horseradish and 'a bottle of mint-sauce well corked'. She adds reassuringly, 'Take 3 corkscrews.'

Nowadays the single most common item that picnickers would take is probably bottled water.

This might surprise Mrs Beeton, who notes:

'Water can usually be obtained so it is useless to take it.'

30. <http://is.gd/4WZu32>



Networking Ants', Gemma Oron 2011

Community and individualism, 'community different'

The contemporary media-political rhetoric on the C word is problematic partly because it finds community historically within reach, through the living-memory images peddled by the nostalgia industry. Our politicians and journalists invite us to do penance before the curling monochrome prints of streets where doors were always left open and everyone knew everyone else. The problem is not that this mythology is entirely misleading – it isn't, not entirely – but that it is packaged as universally flawless, somehow recoverable, and key to the resolution of expensive problems of social policy.

I have heard that some Australian aboriginal languages have four words for the concept 'we'. Speakers of these languages can simply differentiate, for example, the meaning 'us but not you' from 'us including you but not them.' Precision in language is not always an advantage; but there are times when it would be handy to know who was included in a phrase like 'we're going down the pub'.



Sharing food, chewing the cud

People interact around food. We use its preparation as the basis for shared experiences, as a social act. Food is inextricably interlinked with group membership and kinship.³³ The basis of companionship is revealed in the exchange of food to feature in people's accounts of mutual aid and social activities.³⁴ Participants in street parties, talking about diversity and cohesion³⁵ highlight the role of conversation-starter: 'People are proud of their food, saying "oh you know how much we eat it?"'

In *Consuming geographies*, Bell and Valentine connect food consumption with community in two ways: as a fundamental way of shoring up (usually ethnic) community identity, and 'as social glue' – through pubs as social venues, corner shops, barbecues, street parties and so on. Food, they note, 'can be a form of resistance, a form of discipline, of reward, of creating "community" or a way of refusing or denying it.'³⁶

Deborah Lupton carried out a study of childhood memories of food, and found not only that memories were generated around *meals* more than food, but also that:

'The event was generally not remembered for the unusualness of the food itself, but for the social relationships around which the food was consumed.'³⁷

But we do not always eat in company, and some people feel a sense of disquiet at the sight of a lone diner in the public realm, as if they were some kind of outcast. Perhaps this is provoked by the social energy associated with eating. Often pitied, sometimes preyed upon, rarely envied but just occasionally (as with restaurant critics) feared, the lone diner has become the focus of communitarian fervour. It's as if the accumulated distaste that anyone would go bowling alone³⁸ has found its more natural target. We can't have people dining alone, it contradicts the story we want to hear about ourselves as a society.

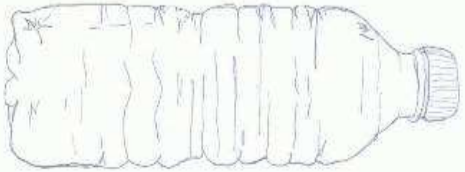
Increasingly, true commensality is promoted in restaurants by the introduction of – *naturellement* - the communal table. A representative of one London restaurant known for its communal tables is reported as saying:

'If you view yourself as a community restaurant then what you're doing is giving the community you serve the chance to meet and get into conversation with one another – a place for ideas to congregate.'³⁹

Perhaps this is a reaction to a transformation in sociability that is going on in and around the home, with many more single-person households and smaller new-built homes with tiny ill-equipped kitchens and dining spaces, or none at all. A study of time-use in Belgium found a

32. Breughel's first biographer, Carel Van Mander, published a short text in 1604 in which he noted: 'With this Franckert, Breughel often went on trips among the peasants, to their weddings and fairs. The two dressed like peasants, brought presents like the other guests, and acted as if they belonged to the families or acquaintances of the bride or of the groom...'
http://www.learn.columbia.edu/breugel/pdf/Breugel_van_Mander.pdf

31. Dickens, C. *American notes*, 1842, ch13.



Sketch of a water bottle, Gemma Oron 2011

Mrs Beeton in her short life epitomised both organisation and food. We need Dickens, a near contemporary, to celebrate the association of food and drink with conviviality. His irrepressible relish even records a picnic on the prairie:

'The baskets contained roast fowls, buffalo's tongue (an exquisite dainty, by the way), ham, bread, cheese, and butter; biscuits, champagne, sherry, lemons and sugar, for punch; and abundance of rough ice. The meal was delicious, and the entertainers were the soul of kindness and good humor.'³¹

In the 1860s it seems to have been unremarkable to contemplate a picnic for 40 guests (presumably not including staff), quite likely with a journey of some hours to a specific remote country spot requiring detailed organisation of the participants and of the fare, with or without Mrs B's incomparable guidance. One hundred and fifty years on, we are more likely to shop individually in a supermarket, without Beetonian forethought, and take our personal packaged items to a modest gathering in the local park, where our technology facilitates approximating with unspecified others. It's hardly far-fetched to suggest that over this period, the processes of casualisation and individualisation could similarly have affected attitudes to community.

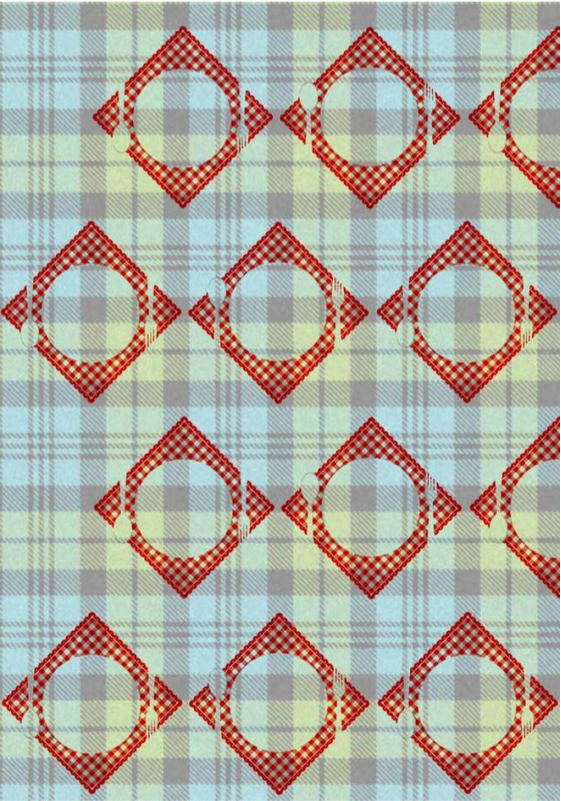
At Cumberland Market the picnic settles in sight of stalls of objects displayed and creative activities. People collect around specimens. They gather near the entrances, around the stalls, in charitree exploration.

Expectations of the Wellcome event had varied. Some thought there would be a barbecue, some anticipated more stalls or something like a market, perhaps food to buy or a system for sharing. And it's hard to get away from tables:

'I thought there might be a trestle table and you'd put what you brought on it and mix and share.'

I linger at the fringes watching, as the weather clears. After an hour or two it's possible to see the smiles, in the weak sunshine, reflecting across inviting gaps. Baby Tola plays trumpet on her bottle, cheeks out, eyes to the skies, three little fingers tapping at the top. A few dozen people straggle across the grass and stand at stalls that suggest edge without definition. Picnic takes place.

Let's take a moment to consider Pieter Breughel and his patron Hans Franckert, garbed in rustic style, gatecrashing village feasts in sixteenth century Flanders, the painter sketching furtively on the edge of a wedding party, at a village fair or pre-lent carnival.³² When he reports back in his painted works, we find he does not give us community in the simple singular. There is no fraud cohesion or ordered line to the dance. Breughel's community is asymmetric, partial and oblique.



'Placed', Gemma Orton 2011

Food changes hands, as ideas change minds. When there is conversation, our hands move morsels and shape the meanings that we want to share, that are shared with bits of us somehow still attached to them.

significant decrease in family commensality between 1966 and 1999, while eating became more individualised during the same period. The researchers put this down mainly to changes in living arrangements. Other factors such as the increased availability of products for self-catering, they claim, 'have little impact on commensality patterns in practice.'⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the notion that past generations were comparative paragons of virtue in the practice of domestic cooking is questioned in recent research.⁴¹

At the dinner table, cutlery adds its weight to the conversation and subdues our hands. At picnic, they are released: waving chunks of bread or clusters of grapes, our hands accompany. Meanings take shape. Even baby Tola, sucking at her bottle, is pushing or pulling at something in the same truly ancient language.

40. Westdag, I. and I. Glorieux (2009). Change and stability in commensality patterns. *Sociological review*, 57: 703-726.

41. Meah, A. and M. Watson (2011). Saints and slackers. *Sociological research online*, 16.

Eating in public: dining on the hoof

We are where we eat, say Bell and Valentine, and some people are all over the place. A grumbling *Times* columnist describes eaters in the street as "a potent cause of urban decay". Perhaps more likely symptom than cause, I suggest, but the very forcefulness of views on the topic can be revealing. In England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, 'eating in the street was unthinkable.'⁴² At the Wellcome picnic one lady in her eighties said,

'We had our meals and that was it. We didn't eat in the street.'

What's the problem here? Is it the smell or the litter (implied or visible)? Is it the aesthetically off-putting sight of a stranger's open mouth and putrid contents; or are we disconcerted by disrespect for the social meaning of the meal? In some circumstances, especially in fine weather, eating in public may be sanctioned. The pavement restaurant legitimises visible chomping under the eyes of passers-by. Spaghetti may flap its sauce against my cheek or I might draw a fishbone clumsily from my teeth at the last moment, with the embarrassment of of audience to contend with. I am paying for the privilege.

To the extent that there are taboos about eating on the street, Valentine notes how they imply particular understandings of 'public' and 'private':

'The street may be a site of consumption but only a particular disembodied form of consumption is civilised - tomato sauce dripping down the chin is not an appropriate public spectacle.'⁴³

Participants at the Wellcome event certainly thought that the practice had increased significantly in their lifetimes. Burnett identifies an increase in street eating in modern cities, noting that it is now less associated with work or poverty than in the past:

'The range now extends to burgers, hot dogs, pizza and chicken and even to packaged risotto, paella and curries: it is now apparently "cool" to eat such things and to drink from a can in city streets or on park benches.'⁴⁴

Maybe the economy depends on it. According to a BBC News report, the business intelligence company Datamonitor has warned that social convention may be constraining the trend for eating and drinking in the street: 'The firm says such stuffiness needs to be combated if busy Britons are to use their daily commute time - the longest in Europe - to refuel.'⁴⁵

So it's an urban issue and an economic one. Wait, here's another view:

42. Bell and Valentine 1997; *The Times*, 25 November 2003. <http://lis.gd/155fFu>; Burnett 2004, p163.

43. Valentine, G. (1998). Food and the production of the civilised street. In: *Images of the street*. Routledge: 189-200, p165.

44. Burnett 2003, p33; Burnett, J. (2004). *England eats out*. Pearson Education, p315.

45. <http://lis.gd/16lZ0h>

The idea of 'community' - far from being the magic solution to a long list of social problems which governments would like to see resolved by someone else at no cost - is possibly a minority interest. Most people are more concerned about house and family, with 'community' a distant third.⁹² English localism may have begun to move away from communitarian notions based on coerced consensus, but still the media-politics pistons are programmed to ram community down your gullet.

92. Richards, L. (1990). *Nobody's home*. OUP.

'Celebratory Feast', Gemma Orton 2011, after the film *Babette's Feast* by Gabriel Axel

91. Macdonald, S. (2005). Enchantment and its dilemmas. In: *Science, magic and religion*. Berghahn, 2005, 209-227, p224.

Enchanted looking: community as object, as endangered species

Occasions like street parties and the Wellcome picnic are displays, they invite us to look at community from outside. They give us the chance to repeat the mantra of community, to hear how it resonates, to listen cock-eared to our own reassurance, to gaze at glass-cased community with glassy eyes. Community as treasure:

'So often when we are being shown encased objects in an exhibitionary space, we are being invited to a form of "enchanted looking."⁹¹

Some public events present community as commodity, the manufactured community of the regeneration industry or Sydney Harbour Bridge. Sometimes community is exhibited as a curiosity to be learned from, as moral pointer, or as the endangered panda of our social impulse, that both calms us to reflection and startles us with scarcity. Fears of its impending extinction are easily raised.

90. <http://lis.gd/15gdcH>

89. Brent 2009, p241.

of disorder *invalidates* community. Brent rejected community as 'a claim to order' but wanted to see it replaced by community as a site of ambiguity.'⁸⁹

This brings us to another brace of concepts in tension - order and creativity - and here too we can gain insight from the ways in which we gather around food. Isak Dinesen's short story, *Babette's feast* - and more powerfully the film by Gabriel Axel⁹⁰ - rotates around the contrast between ordered and creative approaches to shared experience as expressed through commensality. Members of a small, puritanical sect in Norway, who defy indulgence in worldly pleasures, find themselves the subject of an expansive dinner prepared by a French maid. Their austere defences against the seduction of the senses are breached by chance, and the artificiality of some of their relationships is challenged. The feast that Babette contrives is an elaborate work of art performed on a bare stage, which contrasts drabness and colour, control and expression, limitation and discovery, caution and adventure, disguise and revelation, stability and transformation. One of the insights on offer, which can be credited to the power of commensality, is that it is folly to construe community as something set and impregnable.

for so long that they took it as a sign of their own failure. It took a while for them to see that the self-by date. Reflecting on how weakly communitarian policies connect with young people when they have to 'behave' (please) to prove their innocence and when they will disrupt things as they assert themselves, he notes: 'Community involves, and is not an answer to, conflict.'⁸⁵

Attempts to sanitise community are part of an ancient politics of association. Historians note that even in late medieval England, generally thought to have been characterised by harmonious and tight-knit over-lapping local relationships, community 'did not preclude conflict':

'On the contrary, conflict was intrinsic to such relations, and the precepts and practices of community were invariably crystallised through attempts to resolve or contain it.'

So when it came to the convivial medieval banquets, according to Rosser, 'countless rules allude ominously to the perils of drunkenness and to the unacceptability of clamor or violence.'⁸⁶ I write this as news comes in of widespread looting in the streets of London (August 2011). Apparently absurd causeless violence has shattered the fragile façade of civilising assumptions. The establishment makes furious effort to repair that part of social reality we want to see, and to deny and stifle the rest as a temporary aberration. The disturbances in fact began with a display of community - collective expression of concern over insensitive policing - but all subsequent behaviour was insistently *contrasted* with the norms and ideals of community. Mattijs van de Port, who studied wildness and violence in war-habituated Serbia, notes this as a repeated theme of anthropology. We seem unable to tolerate stories that challenge our sense of meaning and significance:

'Stories that convey meaning and significance must be kept free of ambiguity, equivocality and multiple interpretations.'⁸⁷

Another instance is the myth of exemplary social cohesion during world war two, a time of widespread looting and corruption when the crime rate in London increased by 57 per cent.⁸⁸ It is unhelpful to screen such reality out of our history. We need an understanding of community that acknowledges wildness and does not exclusively privilege order.

Neither Sennett nor Brent explains the human appetite for community, nor does either make much of the fulfilment, the positive difference it makes to people or the achievements with which it is credited. How explain the craving for community, even as we grasp at individual freedoms that discourage it? It is undeniable that through collective endeavour, individuals are empowered; and that empowerment is enriching individually *and* for society.

For Brent, incompleteness, division and changeability are part of the context of community, and denying them is counter-productive. But unlike Sennett, he is not persuaded that the necessity

86. Withington, P. and A. Shepard (2000). Introduction. In: *Communities in early modern England*, Manchester UP, p6; Rosser 1994, p441. This age of neighbourliness was characterised by rates of lethal violence far higher than we see today. 'Typical estimates referring to the late Middle Ages range between 20 and 40 homicides per 100,000, while respective data for the mid twentieth century are between 0.5 and 1 per 100,000.' Eisner, M. (2001). Modernization, self-control and lethal violence. *British journal of criminology*, 41(4), 618-638 (p628).

87. Van de Port, M. (1998). *Gypsies, wars and other instances of the wild*. Amsterdam UP, p105.

88. Campbell, D. (2010). London in the blitz. Observer, 29 August 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/Aug/29/blitz-london-crime-fourish-blackout>

This caustic message, suggesting that community is a failed contrivance – elsewhere Sennett calls it 'destructive *gemeinschaft*' – has sat at the back of the community development cupboard since the 1970s. It is inescapable that the people involved in this desire for coherence *actively* seek their own slavery and self-repression.⁸⁴

It seems remarkable that this text was published more than thirty years before the UK's Anti-Social Behaviour Act. Sennett explains community as a myth of solidarity developed as a way of 'resolving the fear of otherness.' 'People who share very little with each other, he writes, can express solidarity in a counterfeit sense of community in order to avoid new experiences, 'in order not to be hurt':

'Having... so little tolerance for disorder in their own lives, and having shut themselves off so that *they* have *little experience of disorder* as well, the eruption of social tension becomes a situation in which the ultimate methods of aggression, violent force and reprisal, seem to become not only justified, but life-preserving.'

Richard Sennett's famous attack on community in *The uses of disorder* includes a sermonlike passage in which he links the modern compulsion for 'the purified myth of community' with the disproportionate use of vindictive violence by communities against delinquents:

Richard Sennett's famous attack on community in *The uses of disorder* includes a sermonlike passage in which he links the modern compulsion for 'the purified myth of community' with the disproportionate use of vindictive violence by communities against delinquents:

Social animals can take order to disconcerting extremes. In the unlikely event that army ants were to encounter a picnic, even one of Beetonian proportions, their efficiency would engulf it swiftly. Army ant colonies are super-organisms and by over-populating their neighbourhoods they create environmental disorder on such a huge scale that they have to emigrate daily. Humans, widely believed to be social animals also, benefit from having checks on the impulse to high levels of organisation. Picnic seems like a modest way to celebrate disordered community, ideally without decimating our environment.

Order and community: a site of ambiguity



Network 3, Gemma Orton 2011
Sketch of apple core and cherries with ants, Gemma Orton 2011

'When, for example, it was proposed that a small party should include residents from another street, the organiser was very uncertain whether or not to agree, 'because she did not know what sort of people lived down there,' and feared that 'there might have been an "upset" if the "wrong sort of people" were allowed to come to the party.'⁸³

In an age when people tended to be more localised, territoriality could be intensely re-enforced. In these accounts there are no echoes of today's yearning for 'community' in the sense of neighbourliness. Community cohesion seems not to have been part of the rationalisation for street parties. The traditional notion of a street party fitted comfortably on to neighbourhoods that were assumed already to be cohesive.

Typical images from the mid-century events show children sat at a row of tables along a street. Bunting and flags distinguish the occasion. Adults, mostly if not exclusively women, stand round, usually at the children's backs, policing the territory. The menfolk, we're reminded in reminiscences, had performed their roles in securing the bunting, sorting the wiring for loudspeakers, and setting up the tables, and were most likely down the pub by tea-time.

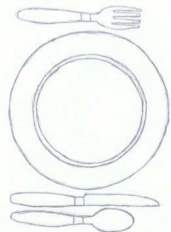
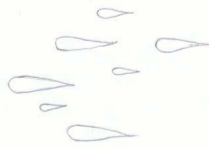
Scanning these images, it's difficult to discern many smiles on the children's faces. This adds to the niggling impression that they have been corralled into this arena, been told that they will enjoy themselves, are prohibited from escaping or improvising their own entertainment, and afterwards, will have been told that they had enjoyed themselves. And surely, for many, that's how the world was. There were hierarchies of authority which knew what was best for you (government, council, church, teachers, extended family, parents, and other institutions such as the BBC and the police) and it was culturally eccentric to question them to any extent, inviting the swiftest retribution. The world had an order to it and street parties conformed, like almost everything else, to that order. Community was how you experienced the prevailing social order.

I was once invited to a street party which came to be dominated by square dancing, hay bales and all. The militarism was overwhelming – ordinary conscripts willingly submitted to orders from a commander and performed drills in step. It is an exaggerated illustration of how street parties can be experienced as a form of order imposed as a condition of membership.

84. Sennett, R. (1971). *The uses of disorder*. Penguin, p45, emphasis added; p41, original emphasis.

48. Dixon, J. et al. (2006). Locating Improperly. *Political psychology*, 27: 187-206, p191, emphasis added.

Sketches of place setting and raindrops, Gemma Orton 2011



47. <http://gu.com/p/2bhmik>

46. Kass, L. R. (1999). *The hungry soul*. Uni Chicago Press, p148.

'A man eating as he walks down the street eats in the face of all passersby, who must then either avert their gaze or observe him objectifiedly in the act.'⁴⁶

A participant at the Wellcome picnic acknowledged that 'it doesn't always look good, seeing people eat.' Felicity Cloake wrote on a *Guardian* blog of 'watching a woman eat a bowl of cereal on an early tube into work. And I wondered, is it ever acceptable to eat on public transport?'⁴⁷ Her article sparked numerous comments, some defending the practice with libertarian vehemence, others berating it. Among them, this fizzing rebuke:

'Eating fried food that stinks of shit makes people feel ill, or even worse, really hungry. Craving for reconstituted battery farmed chicken deep fried in lard is really unpleasant. I have paid my fare. What are my choices?... Fried food that stinks of shit usually comes in layers of packaging. These are invariably left behind by the fat, selfish bastards that eat it. That packaging billows around the bus or train, making the place resemble a landfill site. That puts people off using public transport, who otherwise drive on their own in a car, contributing to congestion and carbon emissions... Fried food that stinks of shit gets trodden into the seats of the bus or train, creating a cleaning cost to the bus or train provider. That cost is passed on to all passengers, whether they contributed or not to the cost in the first place.'

The opposing views expressed in comments on Cloake's article reflect the contrast between the 'live-and-let-live' school and those who refer to an ineluctable need to take the presence of others into account. Hence the ongoing *collective responsibility* for public space, articulated by one of the participants at the Wellcome picnic:

'Everybody has the opportunity and to some degree a responsibility to make the area a better place.'

This vague but deeply-felt need to defend the quality of the public realm drives much 'public-spirited' behaviour, yet remains unformulated in our education and is seldom articulated. The collective use of public space, for picnic or other purposes, would become impossible if behaviour was not moderated by consideration for others:

'Public life presupposes life-in-public and thus a constant engagement with, and evaluation of, others' presence, actions, and entitlements. This process inevitably raises a range of concerns for the ordinary users of public spaces. Among other things, such concerns have to do with the maintenance of personal safety, the reconciliation of personal rights and desires with the rights and desires of others, and... *the preservation of the kind of social space in which public life remains possible*.'⁴⁸

Certainly, eating in public can be sanctioned by convention. The Japanese traditions of 'flower-viewing' (*hanami*) and 'moon-viewing' (*tsukimi*) are celebrated by large party outings of families and company colleagues, admiring the cherry blossom in spring and the moon in autumn, with appropriate 'flower-viewing' or 'moon-viewing' food. If there were to be a 'community-viewing' food in England – not the burger, please – could the Wellcome cup-cakes be the start of a tradition?

Commensality and conviviality

Gabriele Weichart observed mealtimes in Indonesia and noted that while sitting at tables 'facilitates communication during the meal', when a buffet is served, conversation is constrained by the balancing acts required with plates on knees and awkward configurations of chairs. In such situations,

'Eating is normally done quickly in a few minutes several plates of cooked food as well as a couple of sweet dishes would have been consumed. Once the body and mind are satisfied, a person is ready to move over to relatives or neighbours for a conversation or jokes.'⁴⁹

To be sure, commensality is not to be confused with conviviality,⁵⁰ as a moment's reflection on the monastic convention of silence at mealtimes will remind. Perhaps that tradition amounts to little more than an enforced routine kind of penance. Grim occasions they must have been, and the practice appears paradoxical, given the the status of the monastery they must have been, community of place, faith and practice all in one. The point is surely that conviviality will arise from commensality, if it is not suppressed. For Leon Kass 'it is shared speech, even more than the shared food, that makes a community of diners'.⁵¹

'You're inclined to think of going on a picnic *with* somebody, not on your own, so it's social isn't it?' (Wellcome picnic participant)

Let's be bold then and claim that picnic is essentially convivial. A cluster of picnickers spills conviviality across the careful carefree distances, within hearing and view, as crumbs from a flapped rug. A toddler unharnessed will bridge the gaps, bread crumbling from her fingers, smiles opening up before her.

'Picnic Blanket', Gemma Orton 2011, after O'Neil



Curtains in the countryside: on social change

Who are the picnickers? Nineteenth century gatherings such as those described by Surtees and Chekhov brought friends and extended families together in a socially-charged context where behaviours, clothes, taste and conversation were all part of the fierce mutual examination. Being somewhere specific together, with a clear purpose like eating, focuses or refocuses attention on the relations of the participants:

‘Consuming food and drinks together may no doubt activate and tighten internal solidarity; but it happens because commensality first allows the limits of the group to be redrawn, its internal hierarchies to be restored and if necessary to be redefined.’⁵²

In other societies, the wealthy who could afford to be waited on may have established codes of behaviour at picnic, albeit codes less stringent than those for meals at table. Few Victorian picnics would have jeopardised the upholding of propriety (unlike *le déjeuner sur l’herbe*): in nineteenth century England, maintaining the distinction between backstage and frontstage most certainly mattered. Surtees hints comically at one of the ways in which the distinction was maintained:

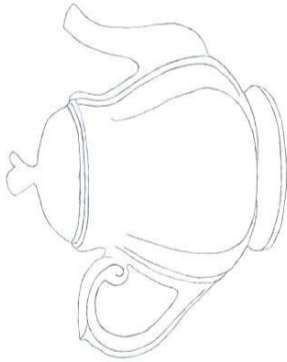
‘Presently a battue of corks proceeded from the curtained corner where the warm-water jug for the knives was concealed from public view...’⁵³

Here as everywhere in Victorian England we find the consuming themes of separation and trying to be beyond corruption. It would have required devices such as curtains in the countryside to defend the sturdy structures of social class from the risk of subversion, so that community could remain in its place - being just about caste; and just-about chaste. Massive feats of engineering and religion arose to keep corruption at bay. What chance that a curtain could defend the social order, *en plein air*?

If social change is going to play out, then the consumption of food is an obvious site to watch. It might not be picnic to begin with: Burnett found nineteenth century picnics to be ‘extensions of a domestic party in the controlled setting of people of one’s own class, for example in the separate enclosures at race meetings or at shooting parties where the “guns” and their ladies were served at distance from the beaters.’

But elsewhere he describes eating and drinking in English pleasure gardens ‘where music, dancing and entertainment accompanied tea and light refreshments’ often ending with fireworks displays.⁵⁴ On these occasions ‘visitors brought their own food and drink or bought refreshments served in booths or supper “boxes”’. This was surely not picnic, being too closely associated with

Sketch of a teapot, Gemma Orton 2011



52. Grignon 2001, p24.

53. Surtees, R.S. (1860). *Plain or ringlets?* Methuen, p28.

54. Burnett 2004, p163; Burnett 2003, p30.

We must pass over the combination of ‘shells’ and ‘bursting’ as a perverse peculiarity of the language of armistice. At first glance we seem to be in the familiar mythology of the home front, which has taught us that the experience of a protracted and devastating war was in itself, largely, a cohesive experience for those left at home. In shared adversity, people would be motivated to interact and support one another. And yet apparently, at least in this case, neighbours were ‘previously barely acknowledged’ and it was the street party which signalled permission for inhibitions to be shed. A review of coronation street parties in Liverpool confirms that local social relations in mid-century England could be laced with tension:

82.

<http://photosforthefuture.thehistorychan.net.co.uk/>, <http://timewitnesses.org/english/~alsmit-h.html>.

‘Neighbours burst from their shells to talk to other neighbours, previously barely acknowledged, arms around shoulders, munching, swigging, adding to the laughter or quietly remembering special thoughts.’⁸²

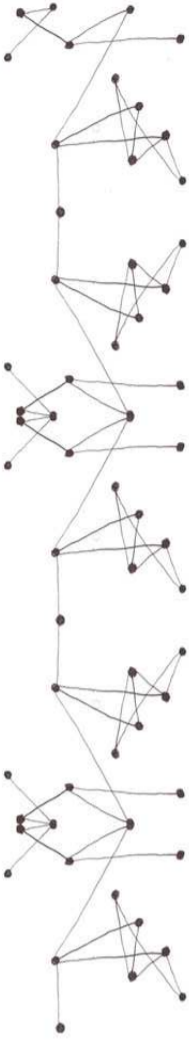
Furthermore, these were primarily events for children. The description for one image depicting a street party in Birmingham, at the end of the second world war, mentions the intention of ‘giving the children something to remember.’ And indeed many memories are held and valued, like this one from Romford, Essex:

81.

See Harris, K. (2008). *Older people and neighbourhood: the role of street parties*. Streets Alive, <http://is.gd/bpw1r1M>.

‘Some older people expect a more traditional sort of sit-down children’s party. Some were bemused because there was not “royal cause” for the event.’⁸¹

‘Network’ Z, Gemma Orton 2011



Street party

The Wellcome picnic resembled a street party in part because the conditions of invitation were similar: if you’re from round here, you’re included. Most picnics have a more deliberate sense of selection. And although there are factors obviously influencing who lives near whom in our neighbourhoods, street parties must offer greater potential for generating community cohesion.

In twentieth century England the street party was predominantly a celebratory device which enabled ordinary people to participate, at an appropriate distance, in the grander affairs of the nation, connecting themselves momentarily to history without necessarily feeling part of it. Occasions like VE day, the festival of Britain, the coronation, royal weddings, and the royal jubilee would be legitimate justification; as was the so-called ‘millennium’ in 2000, for many people.⁷⁹ In Liverpool, numerous street parties took place in 2007 for the city’s 800th anniversary, and in 2009 the ‘Big Lunch’ was launched as an attempt to stimulate neighbourhood street parties nationwide in what was called ‘a simple but profound act of community’. There were claims that the promotion of street parties associated with the 2011 royal wedding were welcomed by republicans who took the opportunity to stage anti-royalist street parties.⁸⁰ The dominant tone is invariably traditionalist and patriotic though, and the nationalist rallying summons to community recalls Hubbell’s analysis of the Romantic picnic, using food and gathering in the cause of cohesion.

Consistent with the modern tradition of street party, older people in particular tend to expect some kind of officially-decreed justification for a public event, such as the outbreak of peace, a royal commemoration, or a significant civic occasion. Where there is no such official branding, there seems to be a sense of discomfort, as these comments from street parties held in 2007 suggest:

‘Network’, Gemma Orton 2011

79. This is not the only tradition of street parties. Others have emerged for instance where the climate and relaxed social cultures have encouraged outdoor gatherings more similar to picnics (eg Australia); where topographies encourage communal activities in ‘blocks’ (USA); where town or city festivities take on a local dimension (eg Brazil) and more recently in association with a political movement (Reclaim the Streets).

80. <http://www.thebiglunch.com/>, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/apr/30/octetle-royal-wedding-republicans>

Communities of interest sometimes appear to be similarly snug and well-selected, and are usually to be distinguished from monster-meetings, being neither spectacle nor co-extensive with 'public'. Could this effect be carried off at local level, say, in your street?

78. *Chambers Journal* for 6 June 1857, cited by Battiscombe (1949, p90-94).

Community may seem like a response to disorder, but Richard Sennett wants to have a word with us about that in a moment. Before he does, here's an anonymous contributor to *Chambers Journal* offering a view one hundred and fifty years ago:

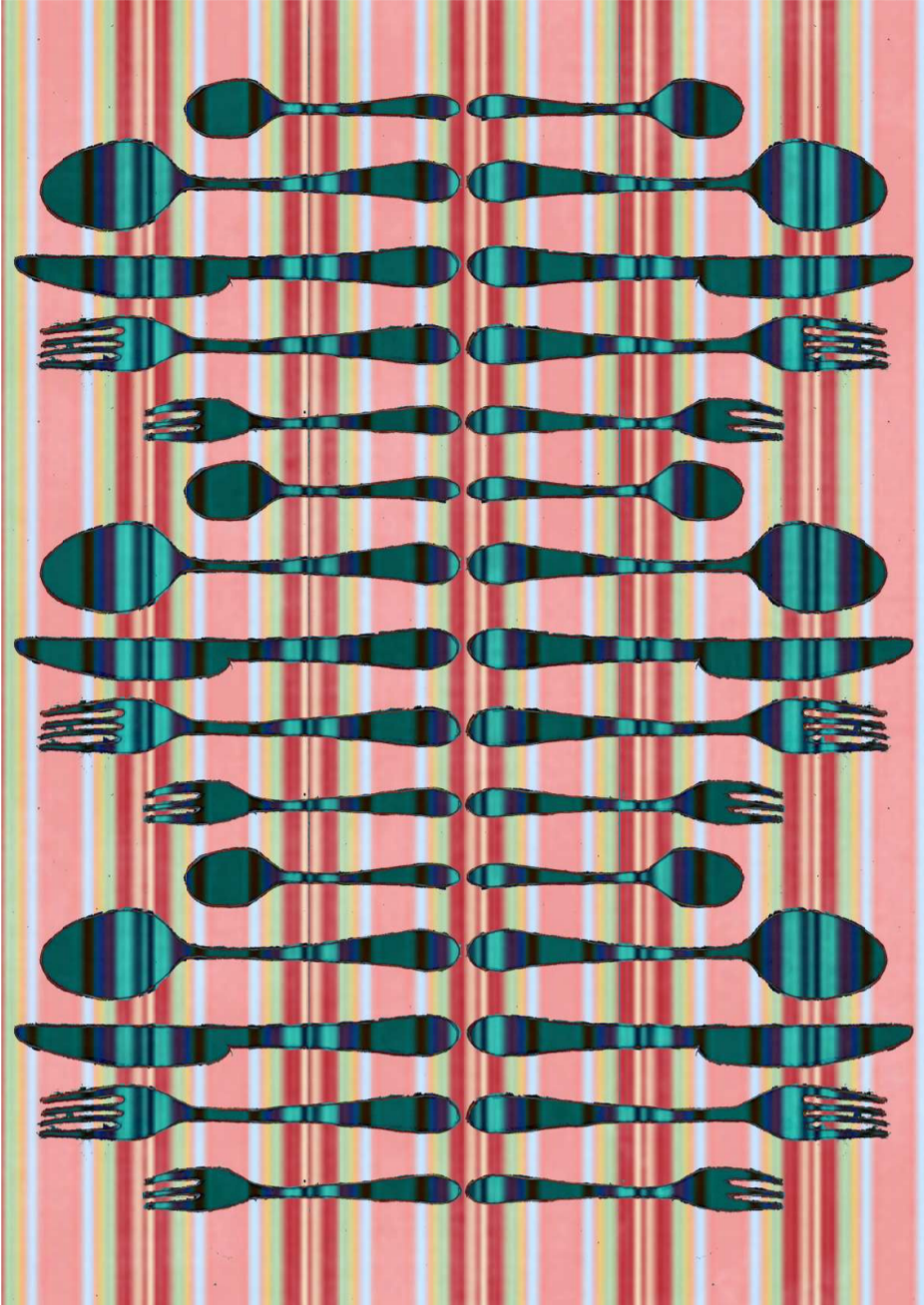
77. Surtees 1860, p27, Chekhov 1929, ch.7.

Something snug and well-selected

Nineteenth century accounts of picnics betray the age's preoccupation with organisation, as if the idea of picnic was invented to test society's ability to keep the mess at bay. An advance colony of servants marches across fields and rocks to prepare the site. Writers like Surtees and Chekhov suggest how the well-to-do seem to be pushing the limits of their dependence on servants, tempting themselves to disorder:

'... though there were a few of the usual casualties of moving, such as the salt coalescing with the sugar, and the pickles bursting into the pie, the servants had the rectification of such matters, and there was no scrambling for plates, no begging for forks, no two people eating with one spoon.'

'As is always the case at picnics, in the mass of dinner napkins, parcels, useless greasy papers fluttering in the wind, no one knew where was his glass or where his bread. They poured the wine on the carpet [carpet?] and on their own knees, split the salt, while it was dark all around them and the fire burnt more dimly, and everyone was too lazy to get up and put more wood on.'⁷⁷



'Ants', Gemma Otton 2011

60. Rosser, G. (1994). Going to the fraternity feast. *Journal of British studies*, 33: 430-446, p438, 432.

59. Thomas, K. (2009). *The ends of life*. OUP, p223-224.

58. Wrightson, K. (2007). 'Decline of neighbourliness' revisited. In: *Local identities in late medieval and early modern England*. Palgrave, p34.

the spectacular, the commercial and, significantly, the *public*. But it illustrates how distinctions between social classes might become eroded in urban public space around food and drink:

'Pleasure Gardens were a significant social development in that they were patronised by both sexes (though not by respectable unaccompanied ladies) and open to all classes who could pay the usual 1/- admission charge.'⁵⁵

We would hardly expect our social institutions to remain unchanged over time; nor should we expect picnic or community to evade the influence of those changes. Robert Putnam claims that picknicking trends in America betray particular social changes:

'In 1975 the average American went out to a picnic 5 times per year. In 1999, the average American went on two picnics per year. Reductions of that order characterize almost every single measure of social activity in this survey: playing cards; having friends over to the house; dinner parties; having dinner with your family; going to club meetings; card games, and so on.'

Elsewhere Putnam concludes with alarm: 'informal outings, like picnics... seem on the path to extinction.'⁵⁶ But hey, it's just possible that picnic will accommodate social change, be reinvented, and persist; and in so doing, will continue to reflect fluid understandings of community.

Home and privacy: community is outside

The home has a gravitational role in local social relations. It is point of departure and return, for community as it is for picnic.

Through most of human history, the limitations of dwellings have meant that the sharing of food at home could only be at best an uncomplicated affair. Even in the later medieval period, homes were equipped to do no more than boiling and perhaps roasting. Baking and other processes required interaction with others beyond the home and in many cases would have been communal. In the free towns of late medieval Europe, even the bourgeois house comprised little more than a work area and living quarters, and the living quarters consisted of a single large chamber: 'in constant use, for cooking, for eating, for entertaining guests, for transacting business, as well as nightly for sleeping.' In the absence of restaurants, bars, and hotels, houses served as public meeting places for entertaining and transacting business.⁵⁷

The notion of a 'family home' was still to come, emerging in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, bringing with it the associated innovation of privacy. It would be surprising if these profound social changes left no impression on people's experience of community. In England

from the mid-sixteenth century on, 'the prevalence of attitudes inimical to the practice of good neighbourliness was very much part of the reality of the times.'⁵⁸ Keith Thomas, reflecting on social developments in early modern England, notes the effect of the privatisation of the home:

'the middle classes increasingly separated themselves from the collective celebration of the local community and moved towards the selected company of family and friends at Friday night suppers or Sunday dinners... Their houses, once so ill-equipped for domestic entertaining, were now designed with differentiated room space, and equipped with all the necessary apparatus, in the form of dining tables, linen, glasses, cutlery, and tea sets.'⁵⁹

So here again we find questions of community implied in a table setting. Sometimes it had the place of honour; it could be purpose, process and outcome, as with the fraternity feasts of medieval England, ritualised and yet socially opportunistic. According to Gervase Rosser, these occasions amounted to social politics action:

'The feast's defining rhetoric of honorable equality and commensality enabled new relationships to be legitimately forged, often between participants of markedly different background or economic status.'⁶⁰

And as if alluding to nationally-templated street party days, devised to stimulate harmonious and cohesive local social relations through commensality, Rosser makes clear that the medieval fraternity feast was demonstrably *not* a form of social magic worked to bring about a 'historically impossible harmony'.

56. Putnam, R. (2001). *Social capital*. OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/25/6/1825848.pdf>, p6; Putnam 2000, p100.

57. Mennell, S. (1983). All manners of food. Blackwell, p47-48; Rybczynski, W. (1996). *Home*. Simon and Schuster, p26-28.

55. Burnett 2004, p4.

