

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 individual's 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:

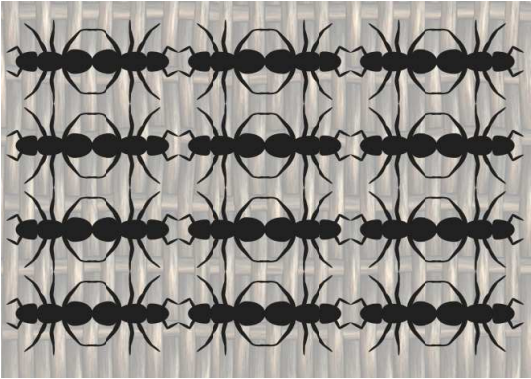
'We stopped, and while Grant ran back to get from a small house some hot water in the kettle, we three, with Brown's help, scrambled over a low stone wall by the roadside, and lit a fire and prepared our tea. The kettle soon returned, and the hot tea was very welcome and refreshing.'

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.<sup>67</sup> And then came the hamper:

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

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

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

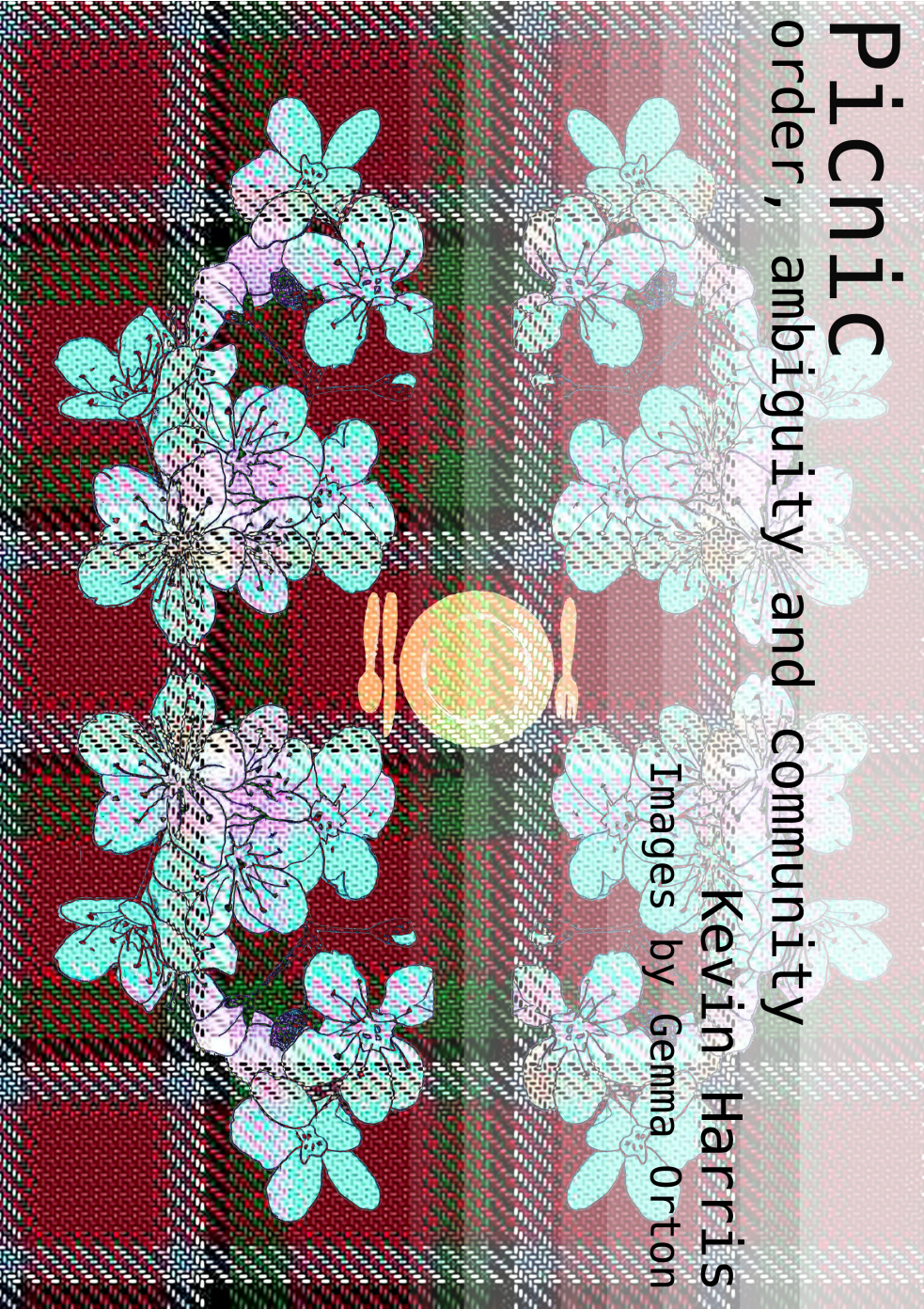
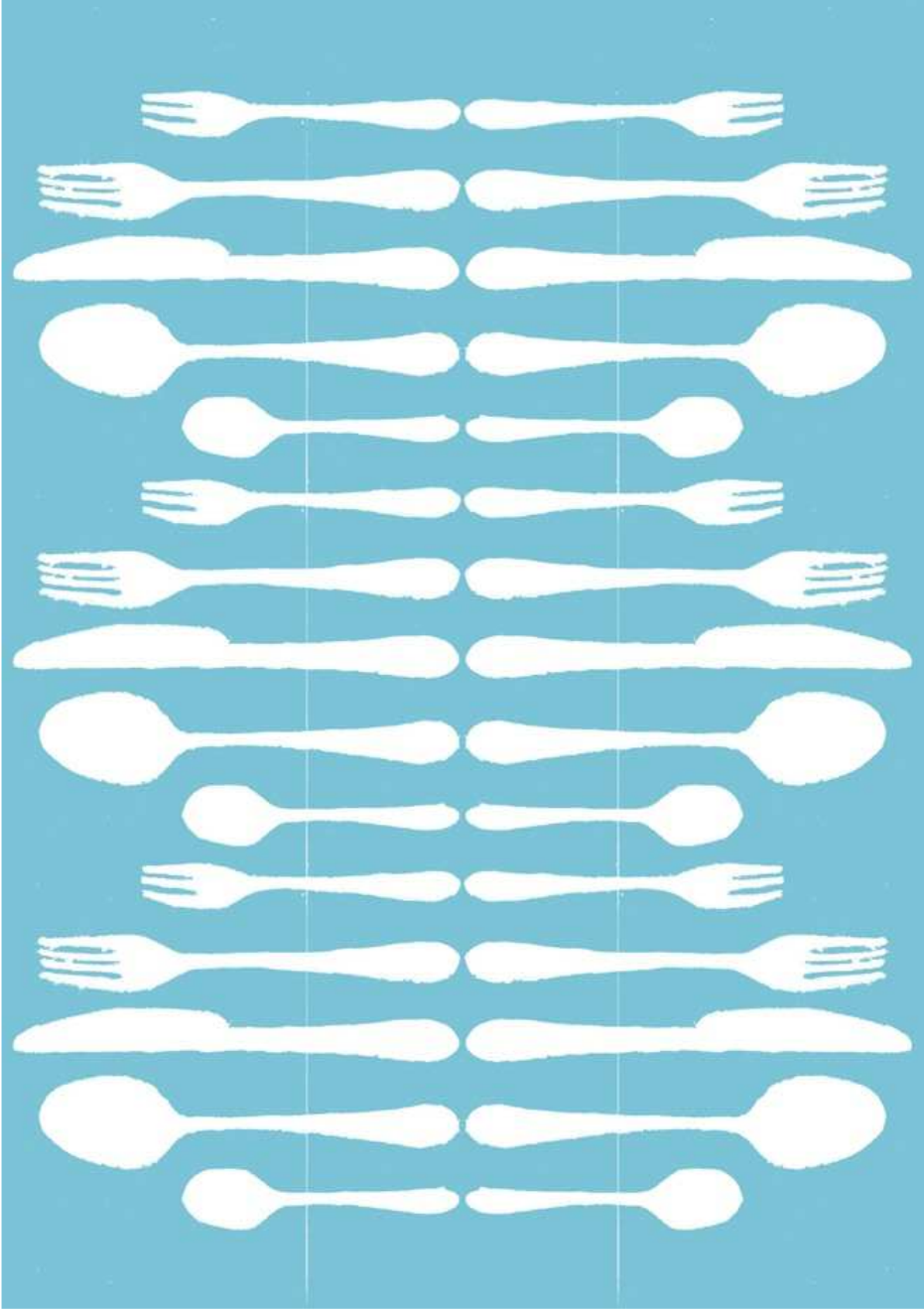


'Air Basket', Gemma Orton 2011

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.



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

Short format references are given here. For more information see [www.local-level.org.uk/picnic.html](http://www.local-level.org.uk/picnic.html)

1. Shakespeare, W. *As you like it*, 2. 7.

2. Douglas, M. (1972). Deciphering a meal. *Daedalus* 101: 61-81, p66.

3. Hubbell, A. (2006). How Wordsworth invented picnicking and saved British culture. *Romanticism*, 12: 44-51, p48.

Commensality without tables

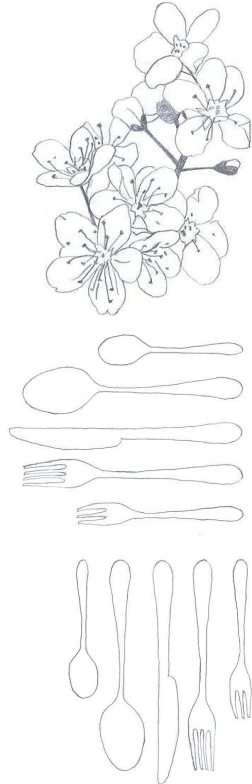
Food must have germinated community, early in our anxious pre-history. Morsels taken together serve to feed recognition and seed co-operation, stirring the chemistry of collaboration while meeting a need. Our shadowy anthropology reveals us sharing language, group-minded in the firelight, knowing shared 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.'<sup>2</sup>

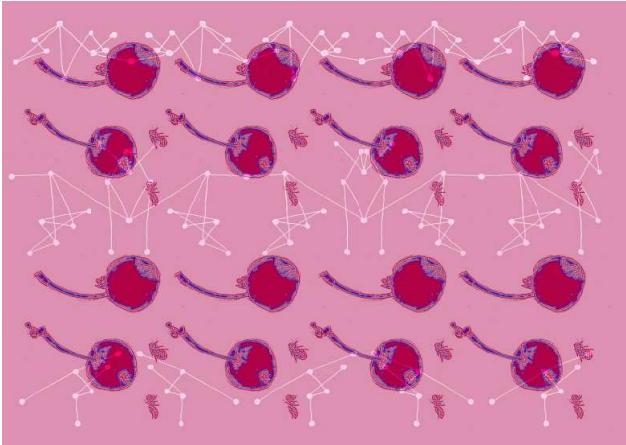
But picnic is different. At seaside family picnics as a child, I seldom sat – I ate wandering around or standing on the fringes of the group, not tempted to perch, kicking away the slack ropes of order and mealtime protocol. Picnic seems to offer an escape from 'the usual identities and hierarchical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

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?

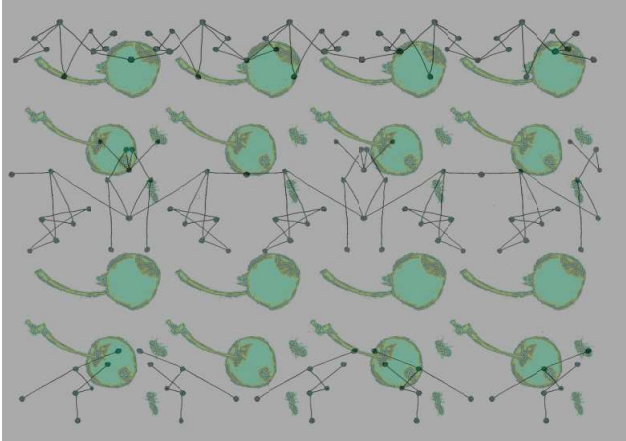




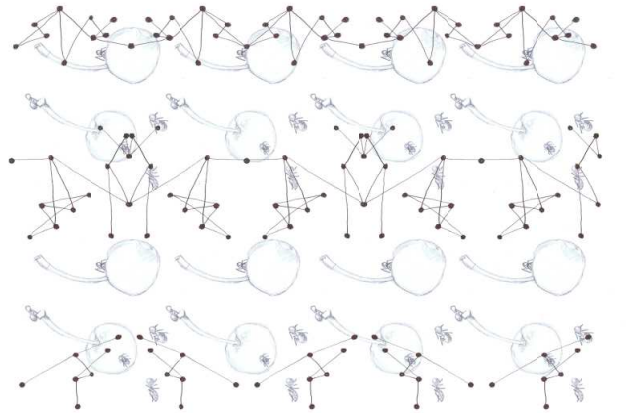
'Cherries 3', Gemma Orton 2011



'Cherries 2', Gemma Orton 2011



'Cherries', Gemma Orton 2011



10. Tailion, P.M. (2002). 'What we want is good, sober men.' *Journal of social history*, 36: 319-338, p329.

9. McDougall, M.L. (1978). 'Consciousness and community: the workers of Lyon,' *Journal of social history*, 12: 129-145, p139.

8. Yeo, S. (1977). 'A new life: the religion of socialism.' *History workshop Journal*, 4: 5-56, p28.

7. Trotti, M.A. (2011). 'The scaffold's revival: race and public execution.' *Journal of social history*. 45: 195-224, p204.

6. Pettigrew, J. (2006). *The picnic*. Jarrold; Sitwell, O. (1944). 'Picnics and pavilions.' In: *Sing high! Sing low!* Macmillan; Burnett, J. (2003). 'Eating in the open air in England, 1830-1914.' In: *Eating out in Europe*, Berg: 21-37. Gwen Raverat offers a variation on the water picnic in the 1890s, in this case travelling by water to a picnic and having to be rowed past naked boys bathing in the river: 'The Gentlemen were set to the oars... and each Lady unfurled a parasol, and, like an ostrich, buried her head in it; and gazed earnestly into its silky depths, until the crisis was past, and the river was decent again.' Raverat, G. (1952). *Period piece*. Faber, p108.

### Collecting and sharing

In June 2009 a picnic took place in [Cumberland Market](#), a large square surrounded by mixed medium-rise housing in a diversely-populated neighbourhood in north central London. It was announced as:

'an event for the local community at which local residents will display their collections on stalls designed by artist duo Juneau Projects and inspired by Henry Wellcome and his collection. There will be activities for adults and children throughout the afternoon, and visitors are invited to bring food to eat and share.'

Reflecting Wellcome's involvement, the theme of the event was 'collecting and sharing'. In the centre of the square is an area with play equipment, a fenced area for ball games, a community building known as the H-Pod (the home of West Euston Time Bank), and a section of grass about 70 by 50 metres. With the H-Pod as the base, the grassed area was taken over for stalls and activities on the day.

Stalls offered watercolour portraiture; jewellery created by local people, in small display cases; an opportunity for young people to make their own cardboard electronic guitars and xylophones for a quick creative blast; specimen jars (an allusion to the sponsoring museum) of pickled vegetables for immediate or subsequent consumption; an invitation for participants to make their own flower pots (with seeds to plant); and a grander stand offering a glimpse of the treasures of the Wellcome Collection itself. The event, food and all activities were free of charge. About 300 cup-cakes were prepared by Time Bank volunteers and provided for participants.

### Defining picnic: variations on a theme

Opening our *jonquette* we find that picnic reaches us from the past with a disordered clutter of ingredients and accoutrements. Originally it was an indoor contributor party, which somehow combined with the tradition of a meal for a hunting party, to become a convenience meal for the well-heeled in outdoor pursuit - before the regatta or rugby match for example or even before the opera. It can be a meticulously programmed or choreographed set of social encounters, or an uncomfortablely impromptu refuelling. It is part *fête galante* with a tinge of bohemian decadence, *un déjeuner sur l'herbe*; part seasonal occasion of celebration or family outing; part expression of freedom and return to nature. It might mean a rare escape for stunted working class children from the stifling tenements, a Sunday School outing perhaps; or simple sustenance during an excursion by rail, automobile, bicycle, or in the pioneering footsteps of Dorothy Wordsworth.

<sup>10</sup> improvidence.

- picnic as a morally- uplifting or pro-social distraction. Picnic seems to have been part of the moral rescue of the railroad brotherhoods of late nineteenth America: 'the pages of brotherhood journals were filled with announcements of and reports on dances, picnics, concerts, ice cream socials, and train excursions. By organizing "wholesome" entertainments, auxiliary wives encouraged husbands to spend their recreational time with the families where women could maintain a watchful eye and steady hand on men who otherwise might backslide into intemperance and improvidence.'

- picnic as a site for politically-charged awareness-raising and fund-raising. In Glasgow in 1895, a labour movement picnic is reported to have involved 1,000 participants.<sup>8</sup> This role might carry implications of offstage subversion. Mary Lynn McDougall has studied the lives of working class militants in the suburbs of nineteenth century Lyon, some of whom 'used stories, songs, games, and picnics to spread their message among uneducated workers' - 'In the suburbs, one could easily walk to a pleasant spot in the countryside for a picnic - or a meeting of a secret society'.<sup>9</sup>

- outings for formal clubs or associations such as student groups, scouts and guides, workers associations and so on. This was developed to the point where some associations had 'Picnic Committees':

Less surprisingly, among the undercurrents of this history can be found:

outings for formal clubs or associations such as student groups, scouts and guides, workers associations and so on. This was developed to the point where some associations had 'Picnic Committees':

In 1879, some of the reports of a double execution in New Kent County, Virginia, included commentary that the blacks behaved more like it was a picnic than a hanging, complete with a negro minstrel entertainment, patent medicine sales, food providers, and even ending with a ball that night.<sup>7</sup>

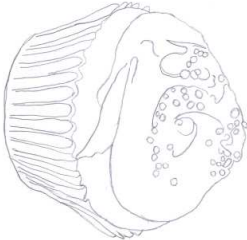
Picnic has often been integrated into other activities and politics have all been associated with health, education, sport, religion, gender relations and picnic has been associated with eating in company in a natural setting. Picnic is a social activity by which people associate and sins of *spectacle*. This might be just a co-location of different activities, with people sharing prepared food as they await the action. But the contrast can be quite sharp, as in the case of public executions:

This confused for all the English tradition of public execution, and the contrast can be quite sharp, as in the case of public executions:

Just the other day, in the suburbs, one could easily walk to a pleasant spot in the countryside for a picnic - or a meeting of a secret society'.<sup>9</sup>

4. The event was produced by General Public Agency for Wellcome Collection, and presented in association with [West Euston Time Bank](#).

Sketch of a cupcake, Gemma Orton 2011



5. Dickens, C. *Pickwick papers*, 1836-1837, chapter 4.



## Picnic: order, ambiguity and community

Kevin Harris

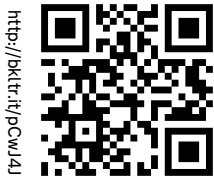
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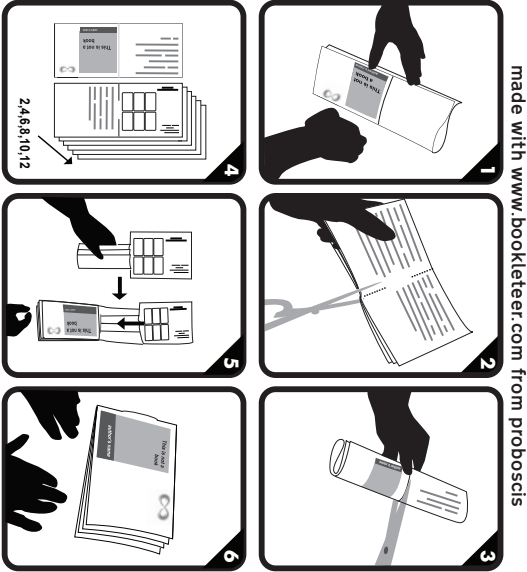
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Images: Gemma Orton

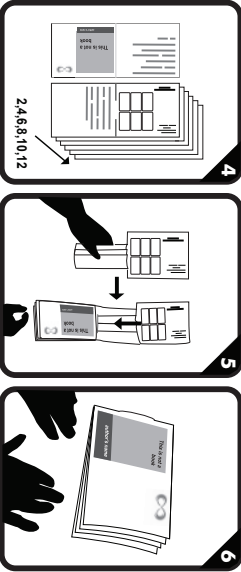
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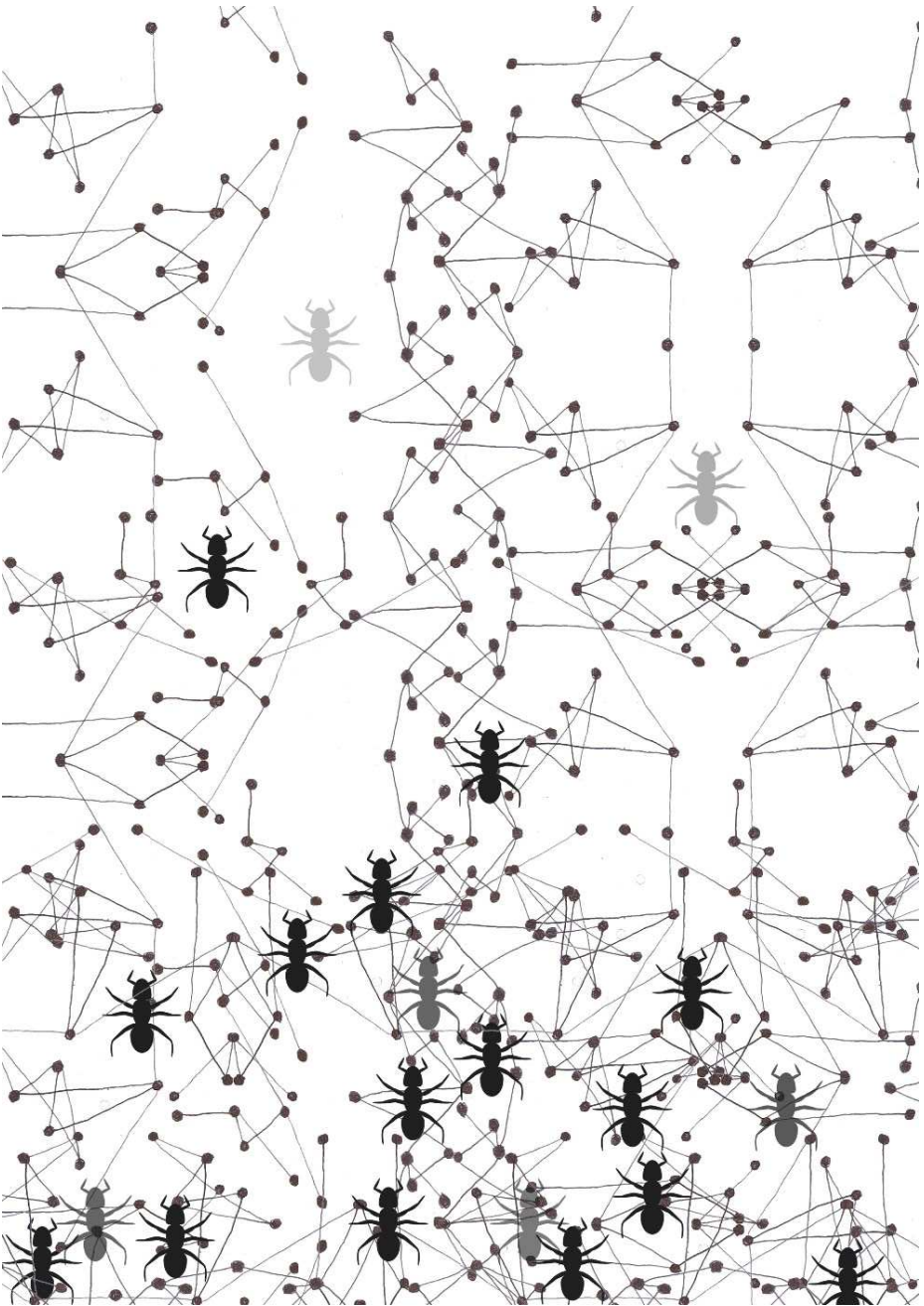
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In museum studies there have been efforts to associate the concept of community with radical democracy and resistance to dominant cultures.<sup>100</sup> But it is questionable whether we use museums - or our sense of belonging to community - in that 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.’<sup>101</sup>

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’<sup>102</sup>**

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.’<sup>103</sup>

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/ET7FBwxdw3Y>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

**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...’<sup>23</sup>

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.’<sup>24</sup> 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 a 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.

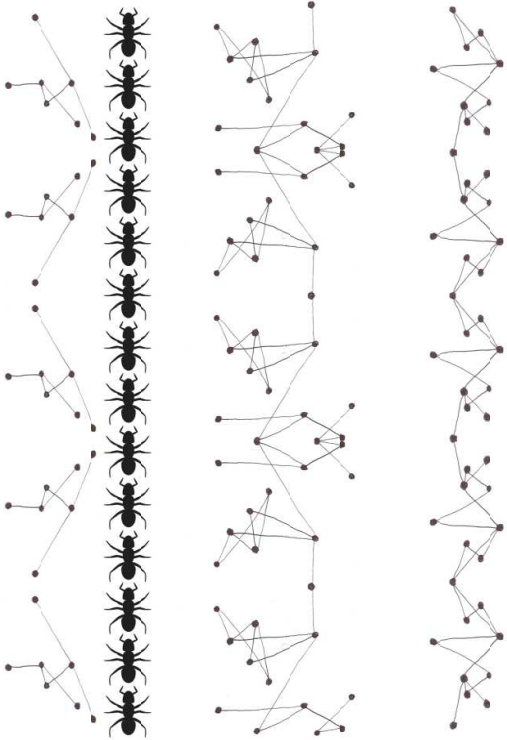
23. Raverat 1952, p280-281; Durrell, G. (1979). *The picnic and suchlike pandemonium*, Fontana, p18.

24. Csergo 2003, p155.









Networking Ants', Gemma Oron 2011

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'.

Community and individualism, 'community different'

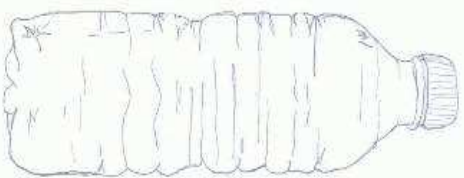


I linger at the fringes watching, as the weather clears. After an hour or two it's possible to see the smiles, in the weak sunshine, reflecting across inviting gaps. Baby Tola plays trumpet on her bottle, cheeks out, eyes to the skies, three little fingers tapping at the top. A few dozen people straggle 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.

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

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/f/Breugel\\_van\\_Mander.pdf](http://www.learn.columbia.edu/breugel/pdf/f/Breugel_van_Mander.pdf)



Sketch of a water bottle, Gemma Oron 2011

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 charityfree 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.

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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 humour.'<sup>31</sup>

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.

Sharing food, chewing the cud

People interact around food. We use its presence to signal shared experiences, as a social act. Food is inextricably intertwined with group membership and kinship.<sup>33</sup> The basis of companionship is revealed by the way in which we share food together.

It's common for the exchange of food to feature in accounts of mutual aid and social activities.<sup>34</sup> Participants in street parties, talking about diversity cohesion<sup>35</sup> highlight the role of conversation-starter: 'People are proud of their food, they know how to 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, a way of creating "community" or a way of refusing to deny it.'<sup>36</sup>

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.'<sup>37</sup>

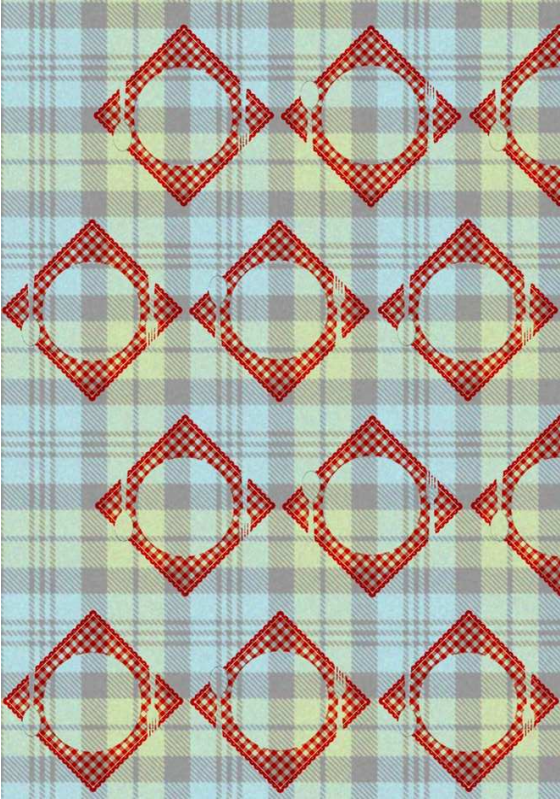
But we do not always eat in company, and some people feel a sense of disquiet at the sight of a lone diner in the public realm, as if they were some kind of outcast. Perhaps this is provoked by the social energy associated with eating. Often pitied, sometimes preyed upon, rarely envied but just occasionally (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 alone<sup>38</sup> 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.'<sup>39</sup>

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





'Plated', 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.

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.

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

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

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.'<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, the notion that past generations were comparative paragons of virtue in the practice of domestic cooking is questioned in recent research.<sup>41</sup>

### Eating in public: dining the hoof

We are where we eat, say Bell and Valentine, and we are all over the place. A grumbling *Times* columnist describes eaters in the street as 'a potent force of decay'. Perhaps more likely symptom than cause, I suggest, but the very forcefulness of the view is eating in public may be revealing. In England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, 'eating in the street was unthinkable.'<sup>42</sup> At the Wellcome picnic one lady in her eighties said, 'We had our meals and 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 aesthetic disrespec 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 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.'<sup>43</sup>

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.'<sup>44</sup>

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.'<sup>45</sup>

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://is.gd/155F1U>; Burnett 2004, p163.

43. Valentine, G. (1998). Food and the production of the civilised street. In: *Images of the street*. Routledge: 189-200, p195.

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

45. <http://is.gd/161Z0h>

community down your gullet.

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

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

with glassy eyes. Community as treasure:

### 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:

90. <http://is.gd/159gdt>

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.'<sup>89</sup>

for so long that its label took you a work practitioner, Jeremy Brent, to take it out and check the sell-by date. Reflecting on how weakly communitarian policies connect with young people when they (the young people) have to 'behave' to prove their innocence and when they *will* disrupt things they assert themselves, he notes: 'Communitarity involves, and is not an answer to, conflict.'<sup>89</sup>

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.'<sup>86</sup> 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.'<sup>87</sup>

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.<sup>88</sup> 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

85. Brent, J. (2009). *Searching for community*. Policy Press, p261.

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-flourish-blackout>









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.’<sup>52</sup>

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:

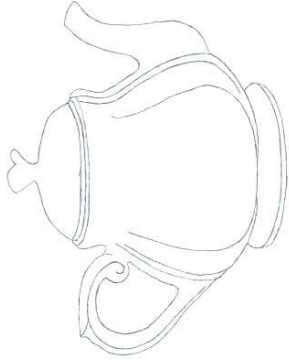
‘Presently a battue of corks proceeded from the curtained corner where the warm-water jug for the knives was concealed from public view...’<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup> 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. Gignon 2001, p24.

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

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

that local social relations in mid-century England could be laced with tension:

We must pass over the combination of ‘shells’ and ‘bursting’ as a perverse peculiarity of the language of amity. 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

82.

<http://photosforthefuture.thehistorychan>

[nel.co.uk/](http://www.nel.co.uk/)

<http://www.kimewitnesses.org/english/~alsmit>

[h.html](http://www.nel.co.uk/).

81. See Harris, K. (2008). *Older people and*

*neighbouring: the role of street parties.*

Streets Alive, <http://is.gd/bpwr1M>.

Network 2, Gemma Orton 2011



‘The older people were all supportive but some would not come. It reminded them of royalty events mainly. Some would say “It’s for the kids.”’

‘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.’<sup>81</sup>

For many of that generation, public events had to be externally ignited: ordinary people didn’t generate public events themselves, it was not their place to do so. They might play a role in organising a day-trip or a street party, with the implied or explicit consent of others of their class and standing; but the *justification* had to come from some established higher office. In this sense, the commemorative street party would have been reactive, not proactive. As a treat for the masses, it served to reaffirm the status quo. This is community as echo.

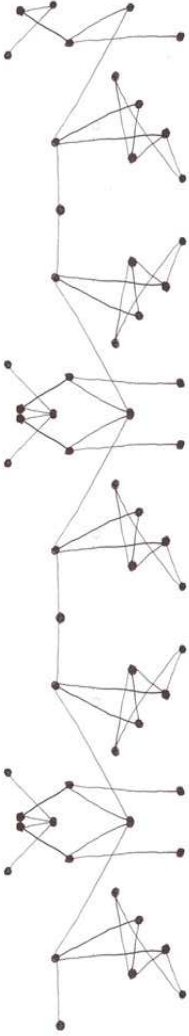
Furthermore, these were primarily events for children. The description for one image depicting a street party in Birmingham, at the end of the second world war, mentions the intention of giving the children something to remember’. And indeed many memories are held and valued, like this one from Romford,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

‘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.’<sup>82</sup>

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

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).

‘Network’, Gemma Orton 2011



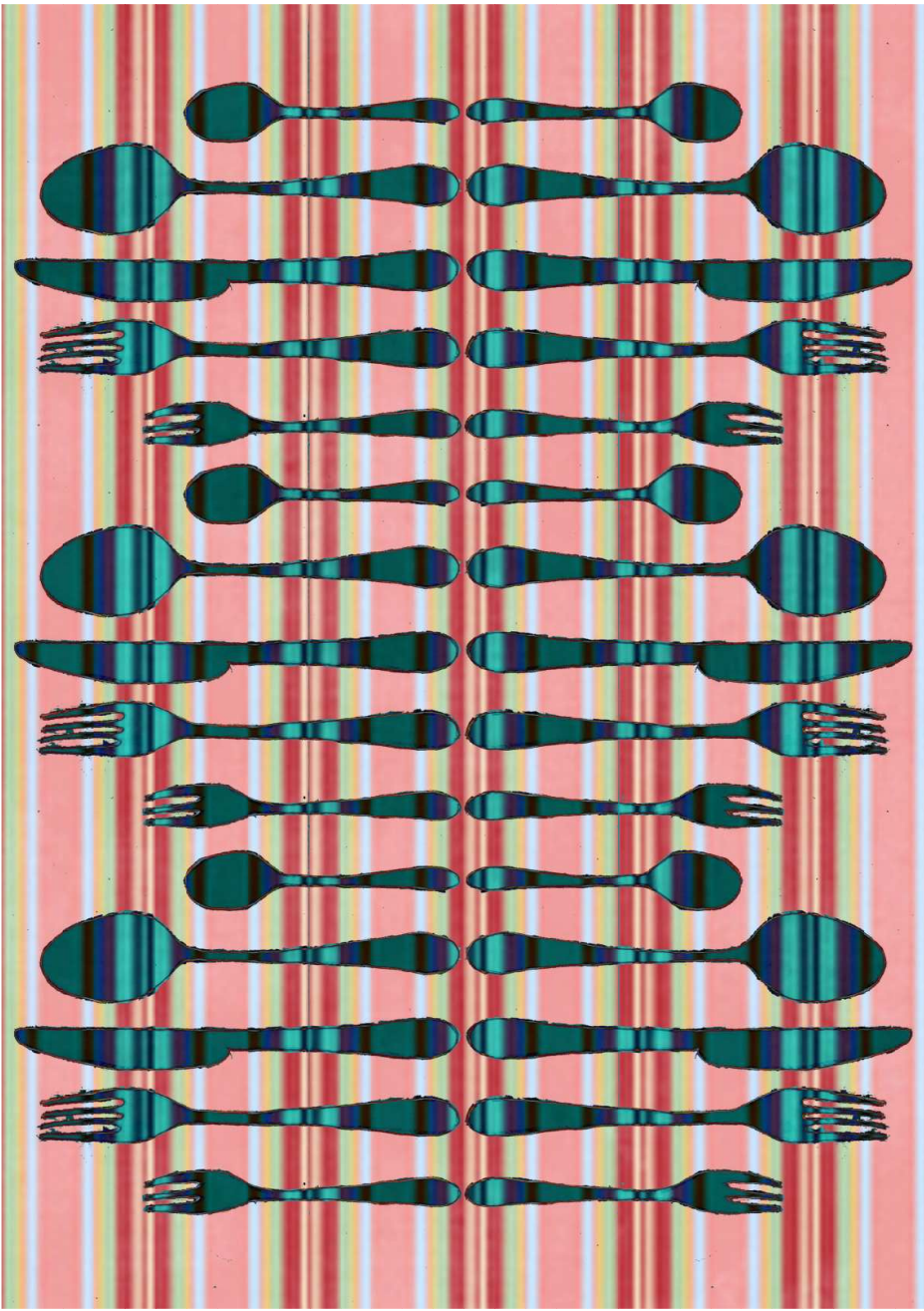
Street party

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.<sup>79</sup> In Liverpool, numerous street parties took place in 2007 for the city’s 800<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> 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:





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, spilt 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.’<sup>77</sup>

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:

‘I have sat at rich men’s feasts, which were partaken of in the open air, whereat powdered footmen have waited upon us decorously, and a bishop said grace; where everyone had a cushion to sit upon, and a napkin folded upon his plate: but I scarcely call that picnicking... I have been one of a party of three hundred, whose various contributions to the common stock have been decided three weeks before the day of the meeting, at a lottery... And I have joined mighty pleasure-companies of the people, where everybody kept his food in his pocket-handkerchief... but these things too, I consider foreign to the picnic, which seems, somehow, to signify something snug and well-selected, and quite at variance with monster-meetings of any sort.’<sup>78</sup>

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?

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

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



‘Ants’, Gemma Orton 2011

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’.

‘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.’<sup>60</sup>

occasions amounted to social politics in action:

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 in 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.’<sup>60</sup>

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

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.’<sup>55</sup>

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 picnicking 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.’<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

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

56. Putnam, R. (2001). *Social capital*. OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/25/6/19825848.pdf>, p6; Putnam 2000, p100.

55. Burnett 2004, p4.

57. Mennell, S. (1983). All manners of food. Blackwell, p47-48; Rzyckiński, W. (1986). *Home*. Simon and Schuster, p26-28.



This line of thinking is still surprisingly widespread. Where does the assumption come from that 'real' community, whatever that is, requires 'sweaty hard work'? There seems to be a confusion between, on the one hand, lifestyles that are characterised by some forms of particularly gruelling collaborative labour, mining for example, which came to depend on and were supported by certain forms of community; and on the other, the notion that commonality implies responsibilities. Detachment from such communities was almost always harder to achieve – the sanctions and suppressions could be fierce. These are perhaps more easily avoided online. Will Davies has encapsulated a sense of how digital media puts pressure on our understanding:

'community depends on some sense of continuity and co-dependence, and a sense of the inescapability of social relations... The assumption underlying the digital model of progress is that we want fewer obligations, more immediate satisfaction, less contact with strangers in public spaces and more with those we already know.'<sup>69</sup>

This helps us to recognise that while social relations in general may be 'inescapable,' in any healthy form of community, detachment needs to be a realistic option. We need only refer to the awkwardness of being gay or disabled, or experiencing domestic violence, in traditional tight-knit communities, where 'an outer conformism smothered individual tragedies':

'Women hid their bruises and denied the cancer eating their body until days before it killed them, people endured years of intolerable relationships, sometimes retreating into total silence against their partner. None of this was ever avowed in public.'<sup>75</sup>

This is community by denial. The escapability of the structure does not necessarily invalidate the experience of community.

Davies suggests that what is needed is an ethics of *inconvenience*, even though inconvenience is precisely what we expect our designers to eradicate. It seems that resistance to the seductions of comfort can add value to common interests and shared energies: we *invest* something of ourselves and allow others to have a claim on the common result. This is community as resilience. As Alison Gilchrist puts it, communities are 'actively constructed by their members, not merely arising from local circumstances.'<sup>76</sup> The question arises, is there an expectation that people put themselves to some inconvenience, to make their experience of community somehow valid? Usually these nuances of community are underpinned by a robust theme of commitment, and stable, predictable co-presence. Perhaps this is connected historically to a protestant ethic that leads us to value some things according to the effort put into them. It seems eccentric to question that insistence.

75. Seabrook, J. (2005). The end of the provinces. *Granta*, 90, 225-241, p237.

76. Gilchrist, A. (2004). *The well-connected community*. Policy Press, p2.

74. Davies, W. (2006). Digital exuberance. *Prospect*: 32-35.

69. Surtees 1860, p27.

70. A more recent commentator relates the disappointing story of 'an inexperienced group who carried five pounds of potatoes for a week around Dartmoor, but never found the energy to peel and cook them.' Rowlandson, J. (1993). Food and the fellwalker. In: *Food, culture and history*, v1, London Food Seminar, 17-28, p23. The story was originally reported in *The Great Outdoors* magazine).

71. Kilvert's diary, 13 Oct 1871, cited by Battiscombe (1949, p107); Chekhov, A. (1929) The duel. In: *Select tales of Tchekhov*, v2. Chatto and Windus.

72. Well I haven't.

73. Sardar, Z. and J. Ravetz (1996). *Cyberfutures*. Pluto, p29. The term 'genuine community' is used by Zygmunt Bauman, to mean 'comprehensive and lasting' (Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity, p201).

'Comprehensive?'

The effort involved in in a full-scale traditional picnic is off-putting to the contemporary urbanite. Choosing to eat out of doors when 'one has a home' implies 'investment in an unacceptably high degree of hassle and a calculation that it is an acceptable investment in an inconvenient inconvenience':

We hold that a pic-nic is not a pic-nic where there are well-arranged tables and footmen to wait. It is merely an uncomfortable out-of-door dinner. A pic-nic should entail a little of the trouble and enterprise of life, gathering sticks, lighting the fire, boiling the pot, boiling or stealing potatoes.'<sup>69</sup>

Wait, *potatoes*? Yes indeed, people took the basics and had time, energy and inclination to prepare a meal as if in their own kitchen.<sup>70</sup> Food takes energy as well as providing it. The diarist Francis Kilvert describes 'rival attempts to light fires' during a picnic party in Herefordshire, in order 'to boil' potatoes which had been brought with us'. Picnickers in Chekhov's *The duel* were consuming fish soup, and I'm ready to believe it was prepared on site.<sup>71</sup> Nowadays, few of us can be bothered with the labour-intensive boy-scout approach:

'I've been on many picnics over the years. They'd be with extended family. Everybody'd bring something to share. Culturally food is a big part of our [Jewish] lives. It's probably not as strong a tradition as it was, because of the availability of purchased food everywhere. I don't think people are so keen on the idea of carrying stuff. People don't carry stuff.' (Wellcome picnic participant)

Surtees' reflections on the need for picnic to entail a little trouble and enterprise raise a question about the appeal of awkwardness. Today we can pop in to a supermarket or corner shop and choose (collectively or individually) from a wide range of prepared food and drink. We don't need to lug spuds round the countryside, or steal them, nor do we need to collect kindling and timber, prepare a fire and cook them. We're no more likely to do this than we are to read Wordsworth's lengthy poem.<sup>72</sup>

Some commentators believe that the same attitude should determine our understanding of community, perhaps distinguishing 'genuine community' from superficial or 'inauthentic' forms. These arguments swirled around the unexplored new world of virtual space, in the 1990s, with numerous claims like this:

'cyberspace provides an easy simulation for the sweaty hard work required for building real communities... In a cyberspace community you can shut people off at the click of a mouse and go elsewhere. One has therefore no responsibility of any kind'.<sup>73</sup>

'Comprehensive?'

'genuine community' is used by Zygmunt Bauman, to mean 'comprehensive and lasting' (Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity, p201).

'Comprehensive?'

'SpoonFork', Gemma Orton 2011

'SpoonFork', Gemma Orton 2011

Like many attempts to prescribe community, this comes across as the organisation of informality, implying a degree of organisation of collective life which our Young contemporary picnickers would struggle to match. Today we store picnic in a dry place, between inappropriately should drink, some joke, some play, in short, do all manner of disport and gladness.'<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps it is helpful to consider the limits to the formalisation of picnic. In medieval France it was *de rigueur* to record the stylisation of social activities. Not having a table, a *tableau* was sure to help. Thus a hunt gathering was described, as if all observed behaviour were programmed, by Gaston de Foix in *Le livre de chasse* in 1387:

'Some should eat sitting, and some standing, and some leaning upon their elbows, some should drink, some joke, some play, in short, do all manner of disport and gladness.'<sup>62</sup>

The Wellcome picnic took place under the aegis of a community organisation, and was able to exploit most if not all of the assets that Watson cites for markets, without resorting to spectacle. As far as residents were concerned, this was in contrast to previous council-owned events in which trouble had been 'pre-empted' by importing 'three van loads of police'.

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'markets have the potential to offer precisely such a space, in their haphazardness, serendipity, physical openness, a typically long local association with a local community and place, the lack of a profit-driven company in charge and an often-limited overarching design or strategy.'<sup>61</sup>

The Wellcome event was a temporary occupation of public space without the sense of coercive control or some hidden persuader's agenda. The space was not engineered, sanitised or antiseptic. It satisfied the instinct for an unmanipulated experience of outdoors-with-others, against the trend of stimulus diversity. Parks and markets also offer this value, where space and its uses are under-prescribed:

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## Outdoors in company: disport and gladness

The Cumberland Square venue was ideal for the Wellcome picnic, attracting passers-by who had some business within the neighbourhood, without risking an unmanageable influx of free-loaders from across the city. Low railings surrounding the park allowed the bustle to attract attention, and if people came to see what was going on, there was nothing off-putting to discourage them. The style of the event implied no expectations on the participant that they would have to do anything other than behave in a civil manner towards fellow-citizens. This non-territorial, welcoming, non-prescriptive 'feel' can be hard to create at neighbourhood level.

I spoke to Ethel, now in her nineties. She remembered as a child just having 'a bit of bread and butter and a penny bottle of lemonade in the park,' with her friends. That was picnic.

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61. Lofland, L.H. (1998). *The public realm*. Transaction, p216-217; Greenhalgh, L. and K. Worpole (1995). *Park life*. Comedia; Watson, S. (2009). The magic of the marketplace. *Urban studies*, 46: 1577-1591, p1590.

62. Gaston de Foix, *Le livre de chasse*, 1387, translated between 1406 and 1413 by Edward Duke of York as *The master of game*. Quoted by Battiscombe (1949), p23.