

How authentic is authentic? Reconstructing the Kitchens of King Henry VIII at Hampton Court Palace.

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Abstract

In 1991, the kitchens of Henry VIII at Hampton Court Palace were re-presented to the public to show them at the height of their function in 1542; as if the cooks had just left as visitors walked in. No longer empty spaces, or displays of kitchen tools from history, this interpretation was described as 'quite the most stunning exhibition of its kind in the world'; yet for all the historic objects and reproduction food it contained, this display still offered a static presentation, devoid of live action. It may have been the most stunning exhibition of its kind, but its kind were staid displays of the material culture of kitchens; the layout and arrangement of which owed more to the designer's pen than the lives of former occupants.

In 2006, these kitchens were re-presented once again, and used for regular live historic cookery demonstrations. The kitchens now formed a core component of the visitor offer to Hampton Court, and their interpretation had evolved to include recipe driven demonstrations of sense history, with a hands-on, "history where it happened" approach at its core.

In 2018 the kitchens have been represented once again with live cookery as a core concept and with the aim of delivering the most authentic version of the kitchens of Henry VIII's Court. But how authentic is authentic, and what makes it different to the 1991 approach?

This paper will discuss the interpretation of Henry VIII's Kitchens and ask how authentic an experience is it possible to present to visitors to this historic building.

In 1991, Historic Royal Palaces opened the kitchens of King Henry VIII at Hampton Court Palace to the public with a new and exciting interpretive scheme. Visitors were presented with an *authentic* version of the kitchens in operation in the year 1542, and would be able to imagine themselves walking through the space moments after the Tudor cooks had left. The kitchens had been open to the general public in some form or another since 1925, but it wasn't until now that they would be presented with a layout that would clearly show the form and function of the spaces created to feed Henry VIII's courtiers and staff.

The complex of rooms making up the kitchens had altered much since their original construction in the early sixteenth century, with alterations and adaptations to cater for new gastronomic and architectural fashions. From 1737 when King George II was the last monarch to use Hampton Court as a residence, the spaces that made up the kitchens were gradually converted into domestic residences for courtiers. New walls and floors subdivided the former cookery spaces and new, kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms were created. In 1978 after the last resident of the former kitchen areas left, all of the nineteenth and twentieth century alterations were removed paving the way for the eventual interpretation of 1991.

Given all of its previous history though, how could any visitor route through a building some 400 years old be considered *authentic*? What did authentic mean, and how has that view changed today with the latest interpretive scheme to fill these kitchens?

In 1991, the notion of authenticity was rooted in the originality of material and stemmed from William Morris' manifesto for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. This concept was reinforced by UNESCO's Venice charter of 1964¹ which said that the aim of conservation was '... based on respect for original material and authentic documents.' This definition, though debated within the heritage community, would not be redefined until the ICOMOS Nara document in 1994², so for the 1991 kitchen, the authenticity was in the originality of the objects. This meant a display filled with cookery items loaned from museums and collections, or purchased from antique dealers across Britain. After the Nara document of 1994, the concept of authenticity had begun to change. As World Heritage Site listing had moved beyond traditional European buildings and into Australian landscapes and Japanese timber architecture, the heritage profession began to accept that authenticity didn't simply lie in originality of materials. UNESCO now defined authenticity as related to use and function, tradition and techniques, location and setting and even spirit and feeling. At the same time, it began to be felt that the use of historic objects to interpret the kitchen space at Hampton Court, while valid at the inception of the design, was now sending the wrong message to visitors. Rather than Henry VIII owning a brand new, state of the art kitchen complex, filled with new tools and equipment, to visitors he owned an old building that was filled with a very small amount of old, antique equipment. The scale of production required to feed Henry VIII's Court of 450 people was simply not clear from the interpretation, the visual message from the kitchens was small scale, domestic cookery, not authentic to the spaces of Henry VIII's kitchens.

In 2006 a refreshment of the kitchens taking account all of the research that had taken place since 1991 was put in place. Replica replaced original throughout the kitchen spaces and a new, *authentic* Tudor kitchen display was opened to the public. Bronze and pewter would gleam anew, pottery would be unbroken and woodwork would be free of woodworm or repair, and lacking the dark patina of centuries of use. This display was intended to show the scale required in catering for Henry VIII's court, as visitors followed the flow of dishes through their processing from raw ingredients to finished recipes as they walked from one end of the route to the other.

While some would ask why the kitchen didn't look old anymore, the majority were happy with the new interpretation and the kitchen would remain virtually unchanged for another decade.

In 2014³ and 2015⁴ a series of surveys of visitors was commissioned by Historic Royal Palaces to discover public thoughts about the concept of authenticity. The output of this survey has informed the latest refresh of the kitchen interpretation at Hampton Court in

¹ ICOMOS. 1964. Venice Charter. http://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf (accessed 13 May 2019)

² ICOMOS. 1994. Nara Document. <http://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf> (accessed 13 May 2019)

³ Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, *They Trod These Stones: An Exploration of audience perceptions of Authenticity at Hampton Court Palace* (Unpublished internal report for Historic Royal Palaces, 2014)

⁴ Morris Hargreaves McIntyre. *Touching the Past: An Exploration of audience perceptions of Authenticity among HRP visitors* (Unpublished internal report for Historic Royal Palaces, 2015)

2018. As with all of the previous projects, this latest one would aim to present the *most authentic* experience for visitors. Visitors had many concepts as to what authentic and authenticity meant to them. These include the traditional thoughts that something must be old or look old in order for it to be authentic or that authenticity relates to the original purpose of an object or space, rather than any subsequent purposes. It showed that their response to authenticity is primarily an emotional one and that they want to *feel* that something is authentic and to *feel* that they are travelling back in time. That the human story associated with a place or object matters more to them than material authenticity. That context matters, visitors want to see original objects in their original setting, but that they understood that sometimes replica objects were required. Finally, that trust matters, Historic Royal Palaces has built up a trustworthy reputation, meaning that visitors and non-visitors alike trust the organisation to strike the right balance between preservation and visitor experience and to provide an authentic experience.

For 2018, we wanted to completely reassess our interpretation of historic kitchens and had much to consider. Historic Royal Palaces has used live cookery as an interpretation method for over 25 years and the notion of authenticity and this live work made the discussion more complex still. Should live cooking use original cookery artefacts or accurate reconstructions? If the latter, how accurate would they need to be to still give a sense of authenticity for visitors? Is the live cookery cooking or acting? What does the notion of authenticity mean when discussing food, and is that applicable in this instance?

Although live cookery has been used in the kitchens since 1991, it was considered as more of an add-on to, rather than integral part of the interpretation, cookery took place inside the kitchen, but did not form a part of it. Cookery was presented as a didactic demonstration of cooking techniques from the past and furniture, objects and props had to be removed to make space for the cooks. The public filed past a line of tables, visitors on one side and historic cooks on the other, with limited interaction possible. This created an artificial experience, far from the stepping back in time that visitors had told us they wanted. For 2018 we reconfigured the space to place live cookery at an island of tables in the centre of the largest room, within the crowd of visitors. This in the round experience allows the public to see things from the cooks' perspective, and enables more personal interactions to take place. Rather than being spread throughout the kitchen building, often resulting in the historic cooks being overwhelmed by visitor numbers and diluting the experience, the new interpretation sees the live cookery concentrated in a single room specifically designed to be occupied with live cookery. Rather than making space by moving objects and interpretation aside when cookery takes place, the space is designed to showcase live cooking, lit with this work in mind and filled with restrained interpretation that augments the live cookery rather than distracting from it, and vice versa.

In regards the question of cooking versus acting, this has always been clear at Hampton Court Palace, live cookery takes place in the third person⁵ as staff take on the actual role of cooks rather than the pretence of acting in a culinary theatre piece. Acting or pretence would remove the risk that comes with all cookery, that of failure of completing the dish, and with it the true frisson of an authentic kitchen. Research commissioned by Historic

⁵ Magelssen, Scott. "Making History in the Second Person: Post-Touristic Considerations for Living Historical Interpretation." *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): 292. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25069824>.

Royal Palaces⁶ in 2018 into the different methods of live interpretation used in the kitchen and service area, third person cooks versus first person courtiers, shows that visitors want to choose if and when to engage with live interpretation. This is difficult when presented with first person interpretation of characters as their tasks often form part of their performance. Without an audience to perform to, there is no task to perform and no authenticity to their presence. They need the visitor to interact with them, and they decide when that will be. The historic cooks do not require the public to be in the room for them to cook. They are cooking, and the processes and stages required to produce a finished dish take place with or without public viewing or interaction. This empowers the visitor to decide if or when they engage with the cooks; the choice is theirs, not ours. Although this engagement and conversation is completely modern, in both language and tone, it provides visitors with an authentic feeling in regard to their experience and their ability to travel back in time; *'I went upstairs and spoke to a man pretending to be the King, then I went downstairs and spoke to a cook'*. This sense of authenticity of feeling is augmented by visitors being encouraged to participate in many of the cookery tasks presented to them, to dive deeper into the experience than was possible before by using historic utensils or attempting particular historic techniques; their visit to the kitchens is one of participation not mere observation.

The questions posed, real versus replica, cooking versus acting, whilst essential to the thought process behind the use of the recreated kitchen, have actually been self-answering because of the choice of using live cookery as an interpretive tool. Real ingredients must be used if cookery is to take place; in spite of the numerous questions from visitors asking if the meat roasting in front of the fire is real or fake. Replica cookery tools must be used, if not to preserve rare and valuable historic artefacts, then from the simple expedient that these items would have been new, or virtually new, when originally in use. This also impacts on how these items are used, adding to the sense of the authentic as felt by visitors. If tools were original, they would need to be treated and used with great care and attention, something that is rarely the case in a kitchen today. Whilst every item used in modern kitchens has a value and worth, that is rarely considered by the user and items are treated or mistreated with familiarity and casual regard. By using modern replica tools this same casualness of use is replicated in the live cookery heightening the sense of authenticity.

Replica items installed in 2006 and considered too new and incongruous then (*'the shininess of the room doesn't sit well with the authenticity'*⁷) are now considered authentic, not because of their age, but rather their use in the live cookery and the wear and tear from this that they now exhibit. It is no longer merely the shape or materials used that lend them this quality, it is, as the Nara document describes, the use and function of them that makes them authentic. New items replicated for 2018 take advantage of the sense of authenticity from the traditional way that they are made. Using the same materials as his sixteenth century counterpart and working at the same rate, our modern potter strives to recreate items indistinguishable from the original workaday items that he is reproducing. Carts and barrows are replicated not by slavishly copying surviving items, but rather by applying

⁶ Worcester Polytechnic Institute. *Tudor Kitchen Evaluation* (Unpublished internal report for Historic Royal Palaces, 2018), 25-28

⁷ Ibid.

surviving techniques to create objects only seen in period illustrations, yet still they elicit a strong sense of the authentic.

When attempting to provide a credible authenticity in representing these Kitchens, it is impossible to ignore the function of the space and what this brings to the discussion of authenticity. As well as the material culture required such as pots, bowls, and furniture, there is the transient end product to consider, the food. The notion of authenticity when related to food contains a similar level of nuance. The modern concept of authenticity of food refers to one of two distinct thoughts. Firstly, are the ingredients genuine? If beef is supposed to be a key ingredient is it actually beef being used?⁸ Secondly, how true is it to the original? If the dish purports to be Cantonese chop suey, how close is it to chop suey served in Guangdong?⁹ Both of these are important questions in regard the live cookery at Hampton Court, but each in ways subtly different from their usual modern meaning, especially as visitors do not consume the finished product of the live cookery, that would make this catering and not the interactive display that is the intention of the work.

Much has changed in regards to food and ingredients over the past 500 years. Breed stock and plant varieties have been altered and improved, new ingredients discovered, culinary tastes have changed, production methods have evolved to accommodate new technology, and air, soil and water have all been transformed, for good and bad, by the alteration of their chemical and biological compositions both intentionally and accidentally. All these factors impact the taste of our food meaning that from the first perspective, it is impossible to produce authentic tasting Tudor food.

As for the second perspective, we have little to compare our reconstructive efforts to. Taste is subjective and difficult to describe in writing, and with no surviving sixteenth century foods or people, the words of the recipes are all we have to base our work upon. This lack of information means that from the second perspective it is again impossible to reconstruct a truly authentic Tudor dish. This though does not diminish the impact of live cookery on the authenticity of the visitor experience, for it is the sense of visiting the past that is crucial, rather than the exact replication of the food itself. The experience is augmented and heightened by the smells and sounds of an active kitchen, one where the tasks performed are authentic and experiential. Where food and its production add to the experience as a whole and are seen as essential components alongside the more traditional interpretive methods on show, as well as the more advanced.

The sense of an authentic, working kitchen is spread through the rest of the kitchen spaces by the use of subtle sensory cues provided by embedded smells and sounds, replicating those that would have been found there 450 years ago. Conversations between staff, the shouts and calls for more ingredients all add the human elements to the story when the human interpretation is a different room, and the sensory visit is heightened by the use of visitor triggered interactives that are provided within objects not in the form of buttons to push and screens to display.

⁸ Walker, Michael J, Malcolm Burns, and D Thorburn Burns. "Horse Meat in Beef Products- Species Substitution 2013." *Journal of the Association of Public Analysts*, 2013, 68

⁹ Liu, Haiming. "Chop Suey as Imagined Authentic Chinese Food: The Culinary Identity of Chinese Restaurants in the United States." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1, no. 1 (February 16, 2009).
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2bc4k55r>

How has this all been received? Do visitors consider this an authentic experience?¹⁰ Asked how the kitchens made them feel, one in five surveyed visitors responded "hungry" while others expressed feelings of warmth and cosiness. Overall they reported that they found the kitchen engaging and that "the sensory side was good and realistic". They were "excited to know how they felt back then", that "it feels like you have stepped back in time" and that they felt "like I was working in the kitchens for real". They were "absorbed by the atmosphere" and "felt transported back in time" in what many considered a "perfectly restored" kitchen! Most interestingly, no comments were made about or using the word authenticity, for our current visitors their visit is all about the feeling that they get and the emotional response they feel. For them that is how they determine how authentic is authentic.

¹⁰ Worcester Polytechnic Institute. *Tudor Kitchen Evaluation* (Unpublished internal report for Historic Royal Palaces, 2018), 25-28