

A New College Pun Revisited

There are two celebrated New College puns.

The first is the peewit pun. In the eastern window of the Old Bursary, there is a small roundel of late fifteenth-century stained glass which depicts a peewit. Our peewit is a lapwing, a bird denoting some affluence on account of its membership of the plover family and the precious and delicious eggs which it yields. It holds in its mouth an invoice, with the words ‘redde quod debes’, a bursarial cry throughout the ages.

The plain English injunction is ‘Pay it! Pay it! Pay it!’

The second is the Warden pun, which recently has been revisited in horticultural form. Its origins lie in the Wardenship of Warden London (1526–1542), a controversial trimmer. A Papist in the late 1520s, he dealt brutally with one of his troublesome Fellows, John Quinby, an inveterate Protestant. Quinby was imprisoned in the Bell Tower until he died, a process accentuated by the absence of nourishment and the presence of cold. When, supposedly, he was asked by his friends what he would like to eat, he replied that ‘his stomach was gone from all meate except it be a warden pie’ (Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*).

Vicious as this request was, albeit amply provoked, Quinby evidently had a grim sense of humour, since he coined a pun. This pie was not a macabre anticipation of those of Mrs Lovett, but a highly popular pear pie made from wardens.

As the story went on, “I wolde have but two wardens (quod he) baked: I meane to be playne, (said he) our Warden of Oxforde, and our Warden of Wynchester, London and More; for suche a warden pie might do me and Christes church good; whean other wardens from the tree can doo me no good at all.” Thus jestyng at their tyranny thorow the cheerfulness of a safe conscience, he turned his face to the wall in the said belfry; and so after his prayers sleapte swheetly in the Lorde’.

Wardens are pears which barely have survived into the twenty-first century, but which, like other pears, were introduced to England from the continent. They are exceptionally hard pears, and can only be eaten cooked (and after being cooked for some considerable time). They are related to continental hard pears, notably the French ‘poire de livre’. The name warden possibly comes from the Anglo-Norman word ‘warder’, meaning ‘to keep’. So the pun has another level, that of warden (keeper) and Warden (guardian or ‘custos’). Wardens really were keepers, their firmness allowing for long periods of storage through the winter.

Hard pears were associated with Worcestershire, and known as ‘Black Worcesters’. Supposedly, their keeping qualities took them all the way to Agincourt as military rations. They were often roasted. In Beaumont and Fletcher’s play *Cupid’s Revenge* a form of execution is described as being ‘roasted like a Warden in brown paper’. But they were also baked in pies. In the contemporaneous *Winter’s Tale*, the clown recites to himself a list of ingredients of the dishes for the sheep shearing feast, and says ‘I must have saffron to colour the Warden pies’. Saffron was used to colour the pastry which was made with a water crust. The saffron has two attractive impacts: it is an antidepressant; and its golden colour symbolises longevity. So a Warden pie would offer Double Longevity.

With the passage of time, wardens had become associated with Bedfordshire as much as with Worcestershire. There they revealed another level of punning, as they were famously grown at the village of Old Warden, by the Cistercian monks of Warden Abbey, the warden here being an Anglo Saxon ‘watch hill’. The abbey of Old Warden carried this pun through to its Coat of Arms where three pears were represented on an azure ground.

Wardens became part of Bedfordshire gastronomy, and in the Michaelmas Fairs at Bedford the hawkers cried: ‘Who knows what I’ve got, in my pot? Hot baked wardens, all hot!’

Warden pies disappeared from popular taste in the last two hundred years, and were altogether supplanted by apple pie, made with ‘short’ pastry, and not the much harder water crust.

Old Warden is now the home of the Shuttleworth Agricultural Research Station, while the vestigial Old Warden Abbey was purchased by the Landmark Trust, founded by New College alumnus, John Smith. Inspired by Bedfordshire pride, the College in 2013 started propagating warden pear trees. Subsequently, a Heritage Lottery Fund grant has enabled the project to DNA test these wardens, and compare them to the *Pyrus* 'Black Worcester', which survived in places in its own county. The results show that they are in fact, identical.

The current Warden, brought up and educated in Bedford, a town with which New College has been connected through the Grammar School since 1552, approached Shuttleworth College in 2017 to see if they had any spare wardens, on the basis that it would be amusing to have one planted in the Warden's Garden. They generously supplied two saplings, the blessing of the Garden Fellow was received, and they have, after one winter, flourished. The Warden hopes that home-grown (but not home-slaughtered) Warden pie will be served on High Table before the end of his tenure.

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