

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

23 February 2015

LATE WINTER BLUES?

Latest finds and some cultural musings

Although it is difficult to find mushrooms at this time of year, it is not completely impossible. I woke up to find a thin covering of snow on the ground this morning which most people would take as a sure sign there would be no mushrooms. Now of course it is true that fruiting bodies which are 93% water find it difficult to cope with expanding ice crystals within their cells, but one or two can manage it. Reader Dawn has found some oyster mushrooms in her wood pile and 10 minutes ago I found a fine crop of Jew's ears on a fallen elder branch about 50 yards from where I sit now.



There are still mushrooms around if you know where to look . . .

The quiet season also gives me the opportunity to outline my theories on why the British are almost universally mycophobic when their Continental neighbours suffer from the opposite condition.

Many people assume the reason is down to scarcity – that we simply lack the delicious species which so inspire Continental chefs. This is complete rubbish. Britain has the perfect climate for almost all the world's great mushrooms. So why are we so scared? The first element came to me when I reviewed a fascinating book on magic mushrooms, *Shroom*, by Andy Letcher. As he debunks the myths about witchcraft and psilocybin, he makes the very sensible observation that the penalties for eating the wrong mushroom can be dire. Because until 100 years ago there were no books on the subject (and most people were illiterate anyway), this meant would-be mushroom eaters required someone literally to take them into the woods and fields to demonstrate what was safe to eat. Even today generations of Poles, Italians and French learn by going into the woods – typically with a grandparent – to gather autumn mushrooms.



The British think all wild mushrooms are toadstools . . .

But this still requires an oral tradition – which is clearly lacking in Britain. I believe this is partly down to land ownership (in England and Wales much of the countryside has been divided up into relatively small privately-owned farms for centuries). As a result it has always been much more difficult to wander freely.

More importantly, we have far fewer woods and forests. When the Normans invaded, Britain had only 10% tree cover (even today Germany has 33%, France 31% and Russia 47%). Worse, the new rulers immediately set about excluding the public from that which remained. Most decent-sized woods (for example the New Forest and Epping Forest, Cannock Chase and the Forest of Dean) were declared royal hunting grounds. The harsh Forest Laws imposed stiff penalties on anyone caught harvesting from the wild, be it poaching game or even gathering firewood.



Forests were restricted to aristocratic hunting grounds in Mediaeval Britain

This whittling away at the links between people and land continued apace as the Industrial Revolution got under way and huge numbers of the rural poor drifted into the new manufacturing centres. Meanwhile, the need for wood and charcoal as fuel meant that the woods and forests which existed when the Normans invaded were slowly whittled away. Fortunately the discovery of plentiful coal supplies in the 17th century slowed the decline in tree cover but there was still barely 5% by the turn of the 20th century. And this was despite the gentry discovering the delights of shooting game and chasing foxes (to encourage both they planted a myriad of copses and spinneys). But to prevent poaching, spring guns and mantraps were placed in many. If these deterred burly men intent of snatching 'something for the pot', how much more impact must they have had on a babysitting granny?

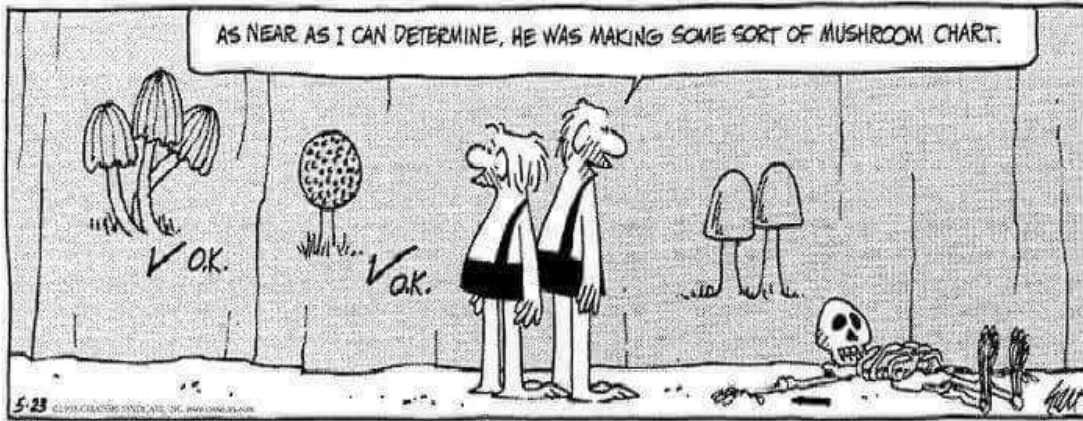
The final element to my thesis is that taken as a whole, Britain has had things remarkably easy for most of the past millennium. Well, all right, there was a fair amount of internal strife during the Middle Ages, culminating in our most costly war ever (something like a tenth of the population died during the English Civil War in the 1640s). In contrast, while the First World War might have killed a million Britons, this represented just 2.2%.



Although most people think of the Civil War as a series of campaigns, far more civilians than combatants perished

So, while the rest of Europe saw centuries of pestilence, rampaging wars and famines, life for most Britons was comparatively comfortable. During the 17th and 18th centuries the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions meant food was relatively plentiful and cheap – even in the burgeoning cities. So what's the point of all this? Well, it's the old adage of necessity being the mother of invention. If your larder is full then why on earth would you start testing the edibility of 'toadstools'? As Letcher points out in *Shroom*:

Given the high price of getting the decision wrong (a slow and painful death in the case of the death cap, Amanita phalloides), blanket avoidance of all mushrooms is the most sensible and reasonable option.



The price of early fungal experimentation must have been high

In other words, oral traditions are delicate things and if they are not nourished constantly, the chain breaks and knowledge is lost for good. It seems any British tradition was well and truly extinct by 1597 when the great herbalist, John Gerard wrote:

Few of them are good to be eaten and most of them do suffocate and strangle the eater. Therefore, I give my advice to those that love such strange and new-fangled meates to beware licking honey among thornes.

Half a century later Nicholas Culpeper dismissed field mushrooms as:

Inwardly [they] are unwholesome to eat and unfit for the strongest constitutions . . . it loads the stomach, distends the viscera, causes a nausea and causes vomiting.



Gerard and Culpeper were distinctly underwhelmed by mushrooms . . .

Roll on April and the St George's and morels!

Daniel Butler

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P.S. As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the list and I will do it forthwith.