Digital Lakes,
Richard Who?, Commemorating the First World War, The type-set of choice, A Portuguese in Barrow, Find the wall, The persistence of poverty, Could you manage a pudding?
Lancaster University opened its doors to in October 1964, with eight library staff, fourteen administrative staff and forty-five academics, of whom thirteen were professors. One of these last was Professor Austin Woolrych, the founding professor of the Department of History, designed to be the leading arts’ subject at this new university. While the university and the new university movement of the early 1960s reflected the optimism and promise of the age, Woolrych was a rather old-fashioned person, but far from conventional academic.

Professor Woolrych died in 2004, but his Department is still going strong, and so this year celebrates its fiftieth year along with the University itself. To mark it, and to provide another way to tell those both inside and outside the university what is happening within its new (rather austere white) walls (we moved buildings on campus two years ago) we have put together Clio50, a magazine of writings by members of the History Department, University of Lancaster.

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Helvetica, 1957

You see it everywhere: every day. It’s so common you probably don’t notice. Aristotle Kallis unveils the typeface so ubiquitous it became a mundane background.

Clio50 apologises to Aristotle for this fancy font: pcs don’t do Helvetica.

It leads a discreet life in all our desktops, notebooks, and mobile devices. For decades it has been the typeface of choice for many designers: posters and advertisements, corporate logos, some of the most extensive signage systems. But it has also given material existence to all sorts of text documents, exchanged by hand and over the internet. Helvetica carries a Swiss passport but is very much a citizen of the world. Its spectacular success is mystifying or infuriating to some and plainly obvious to others. Few typefaces have divided opinion so spectacularly. Some swear by it and have used it in a near-exclusive way; others hate it viscerally as the closest that graphic design will ever come to ‘totalitarianism’. Helvetica is the closest we have to a universal popular language of modernism. It is

In Clio, Vol.1, issue no.1, 2014. All articles and artwork provided by staff within Lancaster University History Department, and any and all permissions have been secured. This edition has been edited by Sarah Barber.
The traumatic experience and consequences of the Second World War cast the darkest of shadows on this optimism; but it did not weaken the aspiration that underpinned it. As Europe started to come out of the post-war devastation in the 1950s, trying to look to the future by turning its back to the previous decades of bitter division and conflict, modernism emerged once again as the shared language of simplicity, function, clarity, purity - a kind of design without (‘unnecessary’ as they saw them) adornments, freed from the weight of history. Their inspiration came from a unique sense of opportunity - to innovate, to develop international and universal forms of communication, to rediscover simplicity in design, unfiltered by norms and legacies of the past.

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The wall that graces the cover of this edition isn’t any old brick wall .... (but it is a metaphor).

I love SU
Well, yes, I do. But I have a love/hate relationship with South America’s least-known country. The general population of the UK is now much more au fait with matters Surinamese than it has been for 350 years. I blame ‘Pointless’. There were several series when my knowledge of obscure parts of the Caribbean stood me in good stead, but now all manner of people happily shout ‘Suriname’ and its capital ‘Paramaribo’ at the television, though they still get their Guianas muddled up with their Guineas.

Suriname is a fascinating country. Its history means that it is the most ethnically diverse place on earth. Several indigenous American peoples were joined in the sixteenth century by European adventurers in search of El Dorado. These in-
cluded Sir Walter Raleigh who built two ‘houses’ on the banks of the Para River, but there were French and Dutch and Spanish and Portuguese and Jewish settlements within the Guianas, and several specifically Irish attempts to settle there.

In the seventeenth century the English and then the Dutch carried Africans into slavery there. Britain’s first known English female playwright, Aphra Behn, wrote a novella about a slave rebellion amongst the English settlements, led by the Akan prince and eponymous hero, Oroonoko. From the seventeenth century on, slaves who escaped the plantations along the rivers could utilise Suriname’s undeveloped rain-forest interior to avoid recapture, re-Africanise their society, and create autonomous ‘maroon’ communities. Also developing their own semi-autonomy was the Jewish community at Jodensavanna. With the abolition of the slave trade, the need for labour was met by indenturers. In the case of Suriname, the labour came from a far wider afield than often the case. Along with the considerable population of Indian and Chinese, Suriname’s place in the Dutch empire meant a sizable influx from south-east Asia, particularly Java and Indonesia, and there were Libyans, Lebanese and Korean. With miscegenation came a different name for the offspring of any combination. The result is a fantastically vibrant culture, with little racial tension, though there is some sense of grievance that indigenes lack the recognition they have received in other South American countries, and the maroons have a long-standing sense of exclusion.

So, where is this wall?

The wall on the cover is a mixture of seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century bricks and makes up a section of what is now a free-standing part of the defences of the city of Paramaribo, close to the estuary of the Suriname River. Just along from it is Fort Zeelandia, a section of which, rebuilt in 1784, is shown above. The Dutch took over the fort in 1667, before which it was known as Fort Willoughby and Surinam was called - by its English proprietor, Francis Lord Willoughby of Parham, at least - Willoughbyland. Suriname has a long history of overbearing dictatorial rulers.

The first times I visited Suriname was in the Spring of 1991. It was less than three months since Desire ‘Desi’ Bouterse had taken power (again) in the so-called Christmas Eve coup. With his control of the military, he was able to override effective parliamentary and representative government. The military also played a big part in a vicious civil war - largely between the indigenous and maroon communities but mediated, brokered, (maybe engineered?) by the military and elements in the government. Despite its antiquated look, the sturdy brick-built Fort Zeelandia assumed massive significance as a symbol of government. For the supporters of elective government it represented liberty: for the Bouterse military it was a haven. In 1991 it wasn’t possible to photograph Fort Zeelandia; to make the point, there were signs of people being shot in the back.

But in 2009, then President Venetiaan unveiled a plaque at Fort Zeelandia (see below) to the fifteen martyrs for democracy - lawyers, journalists, academics - and the Surinamese government began proceedings against its former leader for their murder. The US government attempted to have Bouterse extradited on drug-trafficking charges.

These photographs were taken in the spring of 2012. In many ways, not least that Fort Zeelandia has been re-opened as a museum and was struggling to run a cafe, Suriname has changed. Businesses have started to exploit Suriname’s bauxite-rich earth and there are plans to develop the tourist industry. I am still staying in some places which are not quite covered by the word ‘basic’, but there are now hotel options which did not exist twenty years ago. The visa office in Amsterdam, is now crammed with potential returnees. But they are overseen by a photograph of their President, described by Al Jazeera as ‘one of Suriname’s wealthiest men and most popular politicians’. Despite being wanted by Interpol and indicted for murder, Desi Bouterse was re-elected in May 2010.
Lancaster’s History Department is the home of a European Research Council five-year Spatial Humanities project. Its Principal Investigator is Ian Gregory, working with a team of five in different areas.

Here, Team Member Chris Donaldson introduces some graphics which show what can be done to analyse that most distinctive of spaces, the Lake District.

Whereas Gray and Young visited the region once, in 1768 and 1769 respectively, Pennant passed through it twice, once in 1769 and again in 1772.

Image 1:
This series of maps displays the Lake District tours of Arthur Young (a), Thomas Gray (c.) and Thomas Pennant (b. and d.).

Image 2:
This set of maps of England and Wales as a whole shows the distribution and the frequency of places associated with cholera, diarrhoea and dysentery in the annual reports of the General Register Office for England and Wales between 1840 and 1880.
Image 3: Here is depicted the distribution and frequency of places associated with the poet William Wordsworth in a sample of two dozen Victorian Lake District tourist publications.

To learn more, visit the project website:
<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/spatialhum.wordpress/>

**Rooting kingship**

As rare as hens’ teeth, Sarah Barber managed to get a ticket for her favourite Shakespeare, *Richard II*, with in the title role ... David Tennant.

Shakespeare is very clear: do not treat lightly of the ground. If there is a hero in *Richard II*, it is the ground itself. The hierarchy of territory is everywhere: in the humble garden and the ‘other Eden’, this ‘demi-paradise’. The only thing to emerge with its reputation unscathed is England itself as rivals claim to act in the name of its soil (even from exile) and only end up besmirching it in civil broils.

The Barbican seems an odd venue, all concrete, plastic and tunnels. Surely it would have looked more fitting in the main RSC theatre in Stratford. And the audience is much younger than the usual Stratford crowd. And far more women than men: an unusual number of Scots. Was this the entirety of the London Scottish community or had they travelled down to see a Scot play the English play. Ahhh... the Tennant factor.

Tennant’s Richard has been described as capricious. He’s not quite fey, but it is mannered, placed and occasionally distracted. His early decisions in the Bolingbroke versus Mowbray dispute must be changeable and a sign of failing lordship in that they are arbitrary, but do not impose the king’s will; display mercy as a chief instrument of authority but this Richard lacks the power to enforce any decision. And in failing to delineate or protect his boundary, he allows Bolingbroke to break exile and to become the one whose will exceeds law.

The curlicues, flourishes and bon-mots of Richard’s sophisticated prose were the Doctor’s dismissive falsetto. And thus they earned a ripple of recognition, appreciation, familiarity from the Tennant factor, but they weren’t the way to earn sympathy for Richard’s character. The set pieces which chart Richard’s lack of authority are all in the mouths of famous actors here, and performed in an actorly way. Jane Lapotaire’s Dowager Duchess of Gloucester is magnificently distracted by her grief ... to the point of bemusement. Michael Pennington is Richard’s uncle Gaunt. He therefore gets to set up the ‘this earth, this realm, this England’ speech of disappointment at the state of his nephew’s stewardship. Here, it is not a soliloquy, and an understated, but nevertheless mannered performance.

Thus, the three key ‘Ricardian’, poetic statements of the morality of nobility and breeding are ‘Frenchified’, as Bolingbroke’s soldierly plain speaking is made to sound like the voice of the honest yeoman. They failed to get over the play’s ambivalence for me. Richard does not get to earn the audience’s sympathy at the end, and Bolingbroke is insufficiently cast as a usurper. When Richard says ‘let us sit upon the ground’, in order to chronicle the trials and dangers of kingship, I can’t believe Shakespeare intended the audience to be amused.

Sarah Barber is just starting work on a new book on the idea of planting in English early-modern culture, which will explore plantations in Ireland and the Americas. *Richard II* is the best Shakespearean example of metaphors for planting and rooting flora, authority or the soil.
Where does poverty stand within an historical perspective?
I guess I’m really trying to show three things. One is to show how ideas of intergenerational continuities have appeared almost in every decade, in a slightly different form, from the 1880s to the present day. And then I want to show how this cyclical ideas enter the policy debate, and finally show what their consequences are for policy development.

Why do these ideas keep coming back?
There’s an interesting balance between continuity on the one hand, but also some discontinuities, because in a way these are moulded by the particular historical periods in which they come around. But it seems to be they come around not for any reasons of evidence but really for ideological and political reasons; that the ideas are useful for the policy-makers who put them forward.

What effect have they had on public policy?
I think the main effect is that they’ve limited the policy debate, often moving the focus away from wider interventions which might be more about economic and social change. They’ve moved them inside the home, focused on parenting and children and the thing that strikes me about the current day is the focus on practical help in the home.

Is this a particularly British phenomenon?
In order to make my argument that there is this chain of ideas going back to the 1880s we have to cross the Atlantic at two points: first of all in the 1960s to the ‘culture of poverty’ debates, and then secondly in the 1980s when debates about underclass started in the United States and subsequently moved into Britain. It seems to me ‘the underclass’ is a particularly British and American concept.

And does this debate attach morality to poverty?
There’s a clear moral dimension to the debate: it’s a debate about culture rather than economic change, poverty, environment. I think there’s a belief that ‘if only we can make these people behave differently then we will solve the problem’. It doesn’t address the question of why people behave differently, which is as an adaptive response to the circumstances they find themselves in.

The British underclass is a hot topic right now. But as John Welshman argued at a recent conference organised by the Poverty Alliance, “The Generation Game?” Family, Poverty and Unemployment, it’s a topic that comes around with regularity.

As public debate and political point-scoring continues to colour discussions about the appropriate ways in which to commemorate the First World War, Corinna Peniston Bird has a wish list for the activities of the year ahead.

The first is that we should not allow the understandable attention to the Western Front and the 5.4 million British troops who served there to drown out the experiences of troops in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Palestine, Salonika, Italy. Their warfare could well be more fluid, their lives more vulnerable to disease, the consequences of injury exacerbated by distance - and of course it could also involve the most glorious experiences of travel and foreign climes denied to most people of that era: In our PhD student Martin Purdy’s book on Gallipoli, he cites a soldier from Todmorden writing home from Egypt: “Tha weant know so mich about this land o’f Pharaohs … well, its’ reet enough. There’s some bloomin’ fine mosques and two or three pyramids up and down. Fools talk about goin’ to Pendle Hill to see ‘sun rise, why they may as well dig I’bed. By gum, I’ve never seen nought to touch it in all my puff. I think it’s worth being riddled wi’ bits of lead to ha’ seen what we han. I’ve never regretted the step I took in joinin’ th’ 6th Lancashire fusiliers an’ never shal do.”

The second is to re-evaluate the emphasis on trench warfare, not only to ensure coverage of naval and air warfare, but also in terms of understanding the lives of the men who served. It is the front trenches which dominate the popular imagination – understandably so as that is where the most dramatic stories of the war are so often located. Yet we also need to consider the tooth-to-tail ratio, that is, the number of men in the military needed in support roles and not in combat. In the First World War, the rear had a growing appetite for men, and the non-combatant proportion of the army rose from 16.3 per cent on 1 September 1914 to 33.45 per cent on 1 July 1918 – that’s low by modern standards, but it still means that by the end of the war a third of all serving personnel did not see combat: what are their stories?

The third challenge is how to negotiate the powerful hierarchy of sacrifice and specifically the dominance of the stories of those who died over those who survived. Blackadder’s survival rates are misleading. We’re never going to have uncontroversial figures, but of the 8.7 million men who served in the British Army at some point, 956,703 were killed in action, died of their wounds, disease or injury, or were missing presumed dead, (of whom 704,803 were from the British Isles). In other words, statistically you were far more likely to survive the war than be killed in it, a fact you would be hard pressed to glean from most cultural representations of the war, and a message reinforced by war memorials listing the dead, in preference to those who served. The emphasis on naming the dead, however, mitigates
against analysis of the returning men and their ability to reintegrate into society, build or sustain relationships, find or hold down work. If we find first-hand accounts of any veterans or their families describing those challenges, how exciting that would be.

However, the people who are most forgotten, most excluded from narratives of the war, are not a minority. It is the majority, and the majority of men whose stories we have yet to tell, indeed, yet to seek. The male British population in 1911 was 17,445,608; over the course of the war 5,704,416 were to serve from the UK alone: under a third of those men. Those who remained were composed partially of those too young or too old or too infirm to enlist. But the majority of men who stayed at home, stayed at home because their roles there were deemed too important. Up until 1916 of course, service in the Forces was voluntary, or at least not mandatory. But the majority of men were vulnerable to the accusation of being shirkers, just as their ability to progress in their workplace was at stake. As a result, the vast majority of men who stayed at home were those who remained were composed partially of those too young or too old or too infirm to enlist. But the majority of men who stayed at home, stayed at home because their roles there were deemed more important. Up until 1916 of course, service in the Forces was voluntary, or at least not mandatory. But the majority of men were vulnerable to the accusation of being shirkers, just as their ability to progress in their careers was at stake. So where does that leave us? With the challenge to find evidence of the returning men and their ability to reintegrate into society, build or sustain relationships, find or hold down work. If we find first-hand accounts of any veterans or their families describing those challenges, how exciting that would be.

The most neglected category is the first, and yet the significance accorded these roles can be read in the aftermath of the war: from 1923, a committee met to ensure that in the event of a future war men performing such roles would not be allowed to join up, neither to volunteer or under conscription: As the final report of The Committee of Imperial Defence, Sub-committee on Manpower, National Service in a future war, argued, ‘The experience of the last war shows how difficult it is to get men into their right places once they have got in the wrong ones.’ Unlike the First World War, conscription was in place prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, and so too was the schedule of reserved occupations.

Because of their capacity to disrupt conventional narratives of service and conventional hierarchies within the gender order, the mundane majority remain largely invisible. Civilian men have only tenuous access to memorialisation, echoing contemporary suspicions of their commitment to the war effort – such men were vulnerable to the accusation of being shirkers, just as their ability to progress in their careers was at stake. So where does that leave us? With the challenge to find evidence of the returning men and their ability to reintegrate into society, build or sustain relationships, find or hold down work. If we find first-hand accounts of any veterans or their families describing those challenges, how exciting that would be.

Sonnets from the Portuguese: Álvaro de Campos’s ‘Barrow-on-Furness’

Barrow-in-Furness lies on the eastern edge of the Furness Peninsula; for more than 400 years the domain of the monks of St Mary’s Abbey, who moved their order to this remote coastal plain in 1123. The town takes its name from the Norse word barri, or ‘bare island’, which seems apt considering that as late as 1845 the hamlet that stood on the spot was home to scarcely 68 souls. But that was to change in 1850, when a team of prospectors discovered the Park haematite deposit: a nine-million-tonne bed of pure iron ore that launched the local community into the industrial age.

By 1879, it was home to 40,000-plus people, an expanding naval construction yard and the largest steelworks in the world. By the early 1920s, shipbuilding had outstripped steel as Barrow’s principal industry, with the Sheffield-based company of Vickers Ltd. employing most of the town’s male workforce. The men on Vickers’ payroll were Irish, Scottish or from Lancashire; but their number also included men from Staffordshire and Cornwall, as well as a few migrants from further afield. One of these, as various sources attest, was a bemocked Portuguese poet and engineer named Alvaro de Campos.

Highly regarded by Lisbon’s literary vanguard, de Campos was not known as a poet in Britain during his stint at Vickers. But the series of five sonnets he composed towards the end of his stay put Barrow on the map of European modernist verse: or nearly. They didn’t come to light until the publication of the Ática edition of de Campos’s poems in 1944, and then not under the title ‘Barrow-in-Furness’ but ‘Barrow-on-Furness’.

Critics puzzle over the source of this seemingly infelicitous slippage in de Campos’s geography, which leaves the reader to infer that Barrow lies not on the seaward side of the Furness Peninsula, but on the banks of an imaginary river named Furness (which, incidentally, puts de Campos’s sonnets on a par with Barrow’s other literary claim to fame: Wilbert Awdry’s The Railway Series, whose ‘little’ North Western Railway joins the British mainline at Barrow.) But de Campos’s sonnets repeatedly invoke a ‘rio Furness’.

According to de Campos’s own inextricable testimony, he composed this sonnet series while ‘sitting atop a barrel on an abandoned dock’ after ‘finishing a job of tonnage’. This claim accords with what little is known of de Campos’s biography. But, its credibility is compromised by the fact that de Campos did not, in all actuality, exist—his identity is muddled by the fact that de Campos did not, in all actuality, exist—his identity being a product of the pen of his creator, the poet and critic Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), who, though an ardent Anglophile, never set foot in the UK.

Pessoa is known to have written under the guise of some seventy heteronyms, two of which (or, perhaps, one should say of whom) composed in English. But, English-speaking de Campos provided Pessoa with a Portuguese voice through which to align himself with the Anglo-American literary canon. ‘Barrow-on-Furness’, though written at a later phase of de Campos’s career (and in a decidedly more minor key) also
constitutes a kind of poetic saudação, or salutation, to a doyen of Anglo-American poetry, but the salutary gestures it makes are somewhat more oblique.

The five sonnets that comprise ‘Barrow-on-Furness’ are fundamentally English compositions. They include English sonnet types (Petrarchan, Spenserian, and Shakespearean), and are peppered with allusions to canonical English sonneteers. The concluding line of de Campos’s first sonnet, ‘Acaba lá com isso, ó coração!’ ['Stop all that right there, heart!'] negates the conclusion of Sydney’s Astrophil and Stella: ‘looke to thy heart and write.’ But it is not only by way of such intertextual echoes that ‘Barrow-on-Furness’ achieves the uncanny effect of writing English sonnets in Portuguese.

The rivers featured in the riparian sonnets of Warton and his imitators are, like the ruins that dot the landscapes of so much eighteenth-century verse, spatial embodiments of passing time. In de Campos’s sequence, where the quayside of the make-believe river Furness provides the speaker with a stage for dramatizing feelings of intrasigence and exile. ‘Run on, you damned river,’ the poet exclaims in sonnet ‘III’, ‘carrying my subjective indifference out to sea… What does your disdainful presence have to do with my thoughts or me?’

Once we recognize the role the river plays in facilitating the poet’s tortured self-interrogations, Pessoa’s fictionalization of Barrow’s geography begins to make perfect sense. Not only does this invented English river provide the perfect counterpart to de Campos’s song of existential consternation, but it also aligns that song with an established literary pedigree. And yet, for all that, one is left wondering why Pessoa should have selected Barrow as the locus for de Campos’s lyric sequence.

Any answer to these questions must be tentative. But, it seems most likely to me that Pessoa pinned Barrow’s name to de Campos’s sonnets because, in doing so, he was effectively writing himself into the landscape of one of the masterworks of the English riparian tradition: William Wordsworth’s sonnets to the River Duddon. Published in 1820, and set on the borders of the Furness Peninsula, this series of 33 (and later 34) sonnets has long been recognized amongst Wordsworth’s most significant works.

Now, it is well known that Pessoa encountered Wordsworth’s poetry in his childhood, and that he regarded him as an important creative resource. As early as 1911, for example, he had translated three of Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy’ poems for the Biblioteca Internacional de Obras Célebres. In 1914, moreover, he borrowed the theme of Wordsworth’s ‘The Solitary Reaper’ for his ‘Ela Canta, Pobre Ceifeira’ and, in doing so, placed his precursor’s poem in the collective conscious of Portuguese verse. It therefore seems reasonable to conjecture that Pessoa’s decision to set de Campos’s lyric sequence within the wider landscape surveyed in Wordsworth’s sonnets, bespeaks a desire to occupy the same physical and imaginative terrain as his Romantic precursor.

‘Barrow-on-Furness’ is thus, it seems to me, a work rich in geo-specific intertextuality: a sort of topographical conversation poem that, in creatively cohabitating with Wordsworth’s sonnets, lays allusions to canonical English sonneteers. The concluding line of de Campos’s first sonnet, ‘Acaba lá com isso, ó coração!’ ['Stop all that right there, heart!'] negates the conclusion of Sydney’s Astrophil and Stella: ‘looke to thy heart and write.’ But it is not only by way of such intertextual echoes that ‘Barrow-on-Furness’ achieves the uncanny effect of writing English sonnets in Portuguese.

The setting of ‘Barrow-on-Furness’, with its invocation of an otherwise non-existent river, aligns de Campos’s sequence with the quintessentially English tradition of riparian lyric poetry. This can be traced back to Drayton’s Poly-Olbion, and came of age during the latter half of the eighteenth century, when Thomas Warton’s much-imitated sonnet ‘To the River Lodon [sic]’ established the river-bank as a popular topos for meditation and self-reflection.

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Naturally, as other critics have observed, the town accords with the biography Pessoa invented for de Campos, who as a Glasgow-trained naval engineer spent time in most of the UK’s major ports, including Newcastle, Cardiff and Liverpool. But this only makes us wonder all the more at the poem’s setting. Indeed, why set these sonnets beside a make-believe river in Barrow, and not on the Tyneside or Merseyside, or along the Severn, the Ely or the Taff? Why go to the trouble of inventing an industrial river when one already has so many from which to choose?

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Afterword

With only 300-odd days left till Christmas, Andrew Jotischky takes a retrospective look at one of our best-loved (unless you hate it) puddings.

On Christmas Day most of us will sit down to a large dinner made of the same kind of food: turkey and stuffing, various trimmings, brussels sprouts, followed by Christmas pudding and mince pies. We take it for granted that this is traditional Christmas food, even if we are aware that turkey replaced goose only in the twentieth century, and that there is a huge variety of other kinds of seasonal foods, including spiced beef and ham. Europe has a huge variety of Christmas bread and cakes from the Greek christopsomo to the Swedish julbröd, and these days we can find Italian pannetone in our supermarkets. But if we want to eat something typically English and traditional to the Christmas season, nothing but plum pudding will do. How English it really is, however, how old the tradition of eating it at Christmas is and even what it really consists of, are not so simple.

The French cook Alfred Suzanne, who published his La Cuisine Anglaise in 1894 after having worked as chef to the duke of Bedford, described in awed tones the Christmas preparations in a typical grand English household, which included ‘hetacombs of turkeys, geese, game of all sorts .. and mountains of plum puddings, ovens full of mince pies.’ His contemporary Philiás Gilbert (1857-1942), denied that the English had invented plum pudding, or even that there was anything particularly English about it. But as he said, the English have so few dishes of their own that they can be allowed to claim this one. Another French food writer, Bourdeau, thought that the prototype for ‘English’ plum pudding was an ancient Greek dish described in Athenaeus’ account of a wedding feast in the late second century AD.

Plum pudding goes back to the late Middle Ages. Originally it would have been very different from the steamed pudding brought to the table with a halo of flames to which we are accustomed. For one thing, it would have been served not at the end of a dinner but at the start. In fact, it is referred to in fifteenth-century sources as ‘pottage’, and it would probably have resembled a thick soup rather than a pudding. These early types of plum pudding or pottage reflected the medieval taste for mixing meat and fruit in the same dish. Typically they contained chopped beef or mutton, onions and sometimes a root vegetable such as turnip, dried fruit, and breadcrumbs, which were usually used to thicken stews in medieval recipes.

A fifteenth-century Middle English manuscript in the British Library (Harleian MS 4016) contains a variant in the form of a seasonal Christmas recipe for ‘grete pye’, containing beef, capons, hens, duck, woodcock or other game birds, all chopped into small pieces and mixed with suet, then baked in a ‘coffin’ of pastry with dates and currants, and seasoned with mace, cloves and saffron. ‘Plum pudding’ is a misnomer, because these dishes did not contain plums at all. ‘Plum’ in late medieval usage could mean any kind of dried fruit, and although plums were cultivated in medieval orchards, raisins, currants and dates were usually used instead. At some point in the sixteenth century meat seems to have disappeared from these puddings, though suet remained. It was probably around this time as well that pottage became pudding, partly because more homes began to have ovens where food could be baked, and partly because of the invention of the pudding cloth in the early seventeenth century – before this a steamed pudding was usually made in the lining of a pig’s stomach.

Originally plum puddings were not specifically associated with Christmas, and they looking for the earliest recipe that conforms to our notion of Christmas pudding, we have to look no farther back than the nineteenth century, the age when so many of our supposedly venerable traditions really began.