

Men that munch

There is an air of genteelness and decay in the expression 'ladies that lunch', conjuring up as it does images of bulbous matrons with hats speaking in loud voices (the matrons, not – usually – the hats) and laughing like various forms of wild animal.

In this world where almost everything to do with the law is grey, grim and depressing, I used to resent those who had time to enjoy themselves by having prolonged lunches during the working day. Why did these people have smiles on their faces and rosy cheeks? Why were they not sitting in dim offices grafting like the rest of us?

Most solicitors I know seldom pause for lunch. They either dash out to the nearest sandwich shop and are back at their desks three minutes later, spilling crumbs onto their keyboards while they dictate with full mouths as they desperately seek to make up the time recording hours that some heartless managing partner has imposed on them, or they produce a stick of celery and a bottle of low-calorie water from a plastic container and glumly pore over their files while their empty stomachs rumble discontentedly.

Lunchtimes gone by

It was not always that way. In the last century there was a strange phenomenon among local solicitors in west Norfolk. It was called lunchtime. Unbelievable though it may seem, large numbers of solicitors put down their pens (you can tell it was a long time ago: NOBODY had computers on their desks. Keyboards only played music and mice were kept in cages or caught in traps) and gathered in Antonio's wine bar or the Wenns public house and actually sat down with knives and forks and ate lunch. They even occasionally drank a glass of beer or wine during the working day. They frequently took more than an hour for lunch.

In King's Lynn it had all started with an anarchic young solicitor who worked with us for a while and insisted that lunchtime was time for lunch. The virus spread and eventually the entire local legal profession was doing it, to the pleasure of local publicans and restaurant owners and to the consternation of clients who found that it was impossible to get sense out of any of us

after 2pm. The anarchic young solicitor then departed for a South Sea Island where he fathered numerous children and to this day no doubt enjoys a lunchtime tradition among the palms.

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previous generation of solicitors (as exemplified by my father) were able to drive home, eat a full lunch (in our case lovingly prepared by my mother who no doubt fitted the preparation of lunch in between a morning surgery and delivering a baby), read the paper, have a nap, feed the chickens and still be back at their desks within the hour.

But whatever solicitors did in those halcyon days was nothing compared to the activities of barristers. On my rare visits to the High Court, counsel (along with juniors, pupils and hangers on) would eat gourmet lunches, washed down with bottles of Sancerre as though they were mineral water – and still appear reasonably articulate before his lordship when court resumed. Nowadays even counsel are more restrained, confining their lunchtime imbibing to just one bottle each.

Then followed (and we have to talk here in epochs – or at least quarter epochs) 25 years when everything changed. We turned frugality and long hours into a virtue. Lunch, holidays and normal working days all gave way to wall-to-wall work. Even the tradition of the office Christmas lunch was abandoned.

Distressed elderly orphans

But when my brother and I became orphans the lure of lunch once more became appealing. We two wretched creatures bereft of parental support were

forced together and made to take lunch in some far flung hostelry. To conceal this clandestine activity our diaries showed that we were attending meetings of the Distressed Elderly Orphans Society – and everyone beamed with approval at our dedication to such a noble cause.

Then another orphan appeared on the scene. Well he is not quite an orphan but his parents have passed their sell-by date. My former best man and I found that we could gain pleasure from talk about past battles fought and won (or lost – mainly lost). My diary reflects this subtle change. The entry for those lunches reads that I am chairing meetings of the NQO Trust. If anyone asks, I lower my voice and say that it is part of my public work, omitting to mention that the initials stand for 'Not Quite Orphans'.

Thus every few weeks I have an old-fashioned orphan-flavoured lunch during the working day. We do not yet wear hats or laugh like hyenas, but we are working on it. Now all we need to do is put a smile on the face of the rest of our beleaguered profession. All are welcome to nominate a lunchtime charity and join us. How about the SKCA? You will have to log onto the online version to see what this stands for.

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16 May 2011



By [Richard Barr](#)

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Postscript:

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