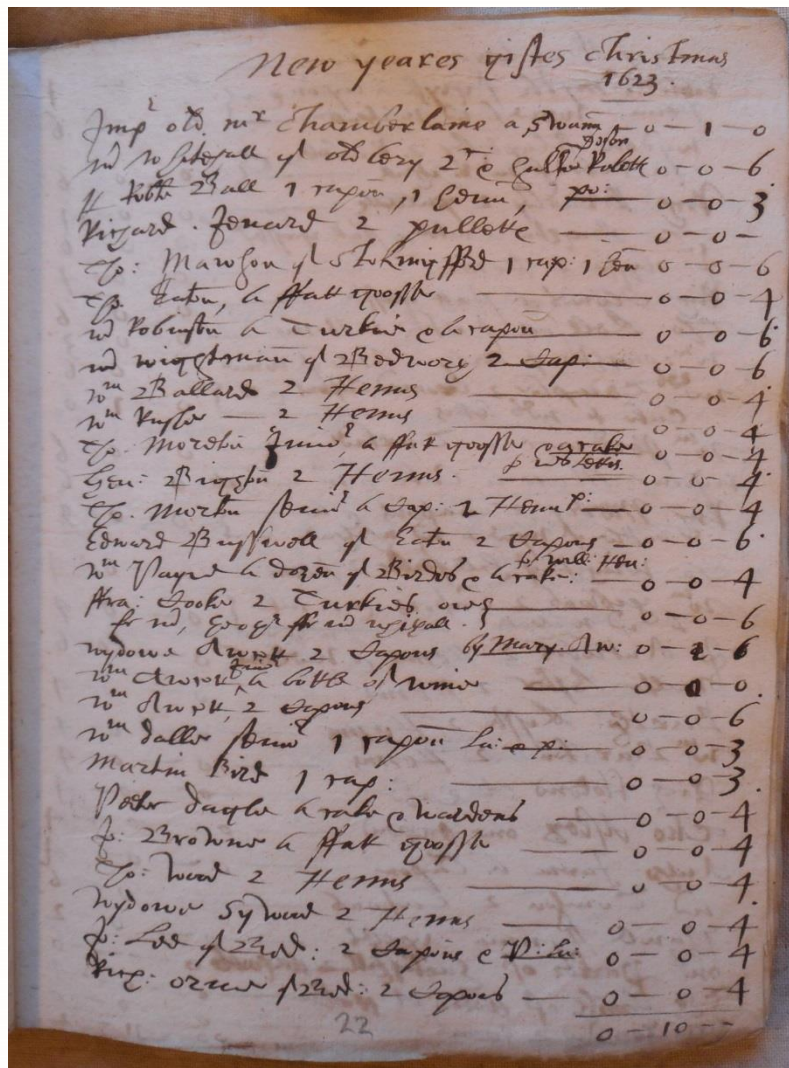


New Year's gifts: A tradition spanning the centuries

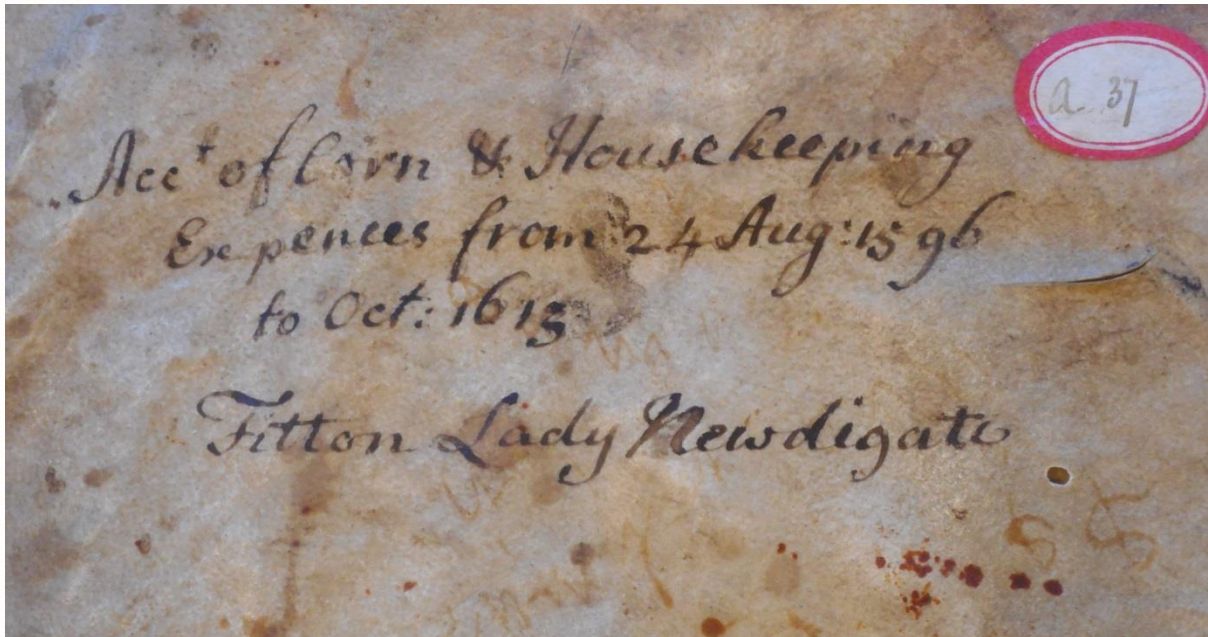
The winter festivities are over and the New Year has swept in, but while many of us gave presents at Christmas, how many gave gifts at New Year?



Warwickshire County Record Office, CR136/A37

This article highlights a tradition that has almost died out since the popularity of Christmas as a celebration increased. This volume of household lists and accounts belonged to the Newdegate Family of Arbury Hall, an estate to the north of Warwickshire.¹ Towards the middle

of the volume, we find lists of gifts given and received at New Year for the periods 1614-1617 and 1621-1625.



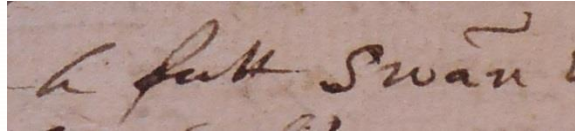
Warwickshire County Record Office, CR136/A37

Two swans a-roasting

New Year's gifts were often given to servants or employees as a thank you for their work over the previous year, as well as to neighbours. This document lists around 20-30 gifts given each year, most of which are some kind of poultry. Quite a few people were given hens, 'pullettes' (young hens) or 'capons' (cockerels). A couple of lucky people were given 'a fat goosse' and one person was given a bottle of wine. Presumably all of these birds are intended for the table, to roast up for a feast. The prices listed for many of these gifts are surprising; most are only 4 or 6 pence (around £1.60 in today's money).

By far the best present was for 'old Mr. Chamberlaine', who received the gift of a swan two years in a row. Once again, the price listed is surprising - only 1 shilling, or £4.80 in today's money. Immediately, the thought leaps to mind: 'I thought swans were the property of the Queen?' However, it seems that only unmarked swans on open water

were property of the Crown and nobility were able to apply for permission to own swans. Evidently, the Newdegate family were fortunate enough to own swans and chose to give one away each New Year.



Warwickshire County Record Office, CR136/A37

A crown will be enough

A later document in the archive shows that the tradition of New Year's gifts was still going strong a hundred years later.² In a letter to his father, young Charles Morduant of Walton Hall writes that he has forgotten his New Year's gift for his French master. Morduant would like his father to send the gift to him, but the younger Morduant seems a little tight-fisted. He comments how the other boys 'say they give him half a guin[ea] but I believe a crown will be enough'. However a crown in the early 18th century would be worth around £20 today, which is more than Mr. Chamberlaine's swan in 1623!

Sources

¹ Warwickshire County Record Office, reference CR136/A37

² Warwickshire County Record Office, reference CR1368/Vol 1/95