

Prototype Vegans



John Davis, Manager and Historian of the International Vegetarian Union

We all know that the word 'vegan' was invented in 1944, but there were people following the same diet and ethics much further back than many vegans today might imagine.

Back in 1815, Dr William Lambe, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, wrote in his book 'Water and Vegetable Diet': "My reason for objecting to every species of matter to be used as food, except the direct produce of the earth, is founded on the broad ground that no other matter is suited to the organs of man. This applies then with the same force to eggs, milk, cheese, and fish, as to flesh meat."

Lambe adopted his new diet in 1804, and soon became part of a group of like-minded people, including one of his patients, John Frank Newton, author of 'Return to Nature' in 1811. Newton's sister-in-law, Harriet de Boinville lived in a country house in the then rural Bracknell, Berkshire, and their circle of proto-vegan friends moved between their two homes.

All of this might have passed unnoticed if it were not for their newest recruit, 20 year-old budding poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. He adopted what he initially called 'the Pythagorean system' in 1812 while in Dublin - as a classics scholar, fluent in Latin and Greek, he probably learned about the diet from the original texts. On returning to London he met with the radical socialist philosopher, William Godwin, who introduced him to Newton, and to Godwin's 15 year-old daughter, Mary



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(later Mrs Shelley). Many years later Shelley's close friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, who remained a meat-eater, cashed in on his moment of fame by publishing a biography:

I conformed, not through faith, but for good fellowship. Certainly their vegetable dinners were delightful. Flesh never appeared; nor eggs bodily in their individual capacity, nor butter in the gross: the two latter were admitted into cookery, but as sparingly as possible, under protest, as culinary aids not approved of, and soon to be dispensed with. Cheese was under the ban. Milk and cream might not be taken unreservedly; however, they were allowed in puddings, and to be poured sparingly into tea, as an indulgence to the weakness of neophytes.

We have to remember that this was decades before the invention of margarine, and long before anyone in the West ever heard of tofu or soya milk, so the change cannot have been easy for them. But it was not just about health matters, in 1813 Shelley published his first epic poem 'Queen Mab', to which the preface was 'A Vindication of Natural Diet', and the poem included the lines:

*...No longer now
He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,
And horribly devours his mangled
flesh;...*

The group remained close for several years, William Lambe's daughter eventually marrying Mrs de Boinville's son, but they gradually scattered, with the exception of Dr Lambe who re-appears later.

In 1817 we first find James Pierrepont Greaves adopting the vegetable diet, and almost certainly the totally plant-food version of it from the outset. Details of his early life are sketchy, but we know that at one time he lived in London, next door to the publisher of many of the aforementioned books, so he may well have read them. He spent some years in Switzerland studying with the radical educator, Pestalozzi, and planned to open his own school in London. He heard about a similar school in Boston, USA, run by Bronson Alcott, and was sufficiently impressed to write to Alcott, and to name his new school for him.

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this group who first began to call themselves 'vegetarian', the first known printed use of the word was in their April 1842 journal, but showing it was already familiar to the readers. We have also proved that by 'vegetarian' they meant 100% plant food, and nothing else. They grew most of their own fruit and vegetables, and their only drink was water – as recommended many years earlier by Dr Lambe who was now a visitor to the school to see his ideas fully implemented. Their records also show strong objections to 'cultivating the breed of animals for amusement or use', so these were strongly ethical plant eaters.

Bronson Alcott visited Alcott House for four months in 1842, and took two of the staff back with him to found another community near Harvard, called Fruitlands. This was short-lived, but also plant-food only and banned the use of animal labour. It is mostly known today from the presence of his 10 year-old daughter, Louisa May Alcott who later wrote '*Little Women*'.

Alcott House closed in 1848, after a remarkable 10 years which included the founding of the Vegetarian Society in 1847. Two of the staff continued as Secretary and Treasurer for a couple of years, but the new society would soon have folded if they had not had the foresight to elect the wealthy James Simpson of the Salford Bible Christian Church (BCC) as their first President. Unfortunately that also meant adopting the BCC version of the 'vegetable diet' which was merely 'abstaining from flesh'. Their vision was of the promised land 'flowing with milk and honey' (and eggs). The resulting confusion continued for another hundred years – until a group within the Vegetarian Society decided they had to make a clearer distinction, and founded the Vegan Society in 1944. Déjà vu.

For a very detailed account of how Alcott House first used the word 'vegetarian', with links to all original sources, see: www.ivu.org/history/vegetarian.html



Alcott House, from the Wilderspin Papers