

## “Tea and Hot Water Provided:” Conviviality, Commensality, and Hospitality in the Rambling Notes of W.E. Hopkin 1930–1940

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**ABSTRACT:** The relationship between rambling and food in Britain in the 1930s is explored through the weekly newspaper column *Rambling Notes* by W. E. Hopkin, head of a ramblers group based around Ripley, Nottinghamshire. Hopkin describes the previous Sunday’s day-hike, and the shared meals with 15–25 other ramblers. British ramblers carried minimal food in their knapsacks, preferring to eat in pubs, and tearooms with signs that read: “Tea and Hot Water Provided.” ‘Tea’ refers both to the meal—sandwiches and cakes—and also the drink. The huge influx of ramblers into the countryside in the 1930s triggered a growth in tearooms, often improvised in farmhouses and private homes. Hopkin’s descriptions of communal meals locate tearooms as sites for creating and maintaining social relations and identities. The symbolic role of food in rambling is examined through the notions of conviviality, commensality, and hospitality. The tea experience was central to the conviviality of the ramble, creating social bonds between diverse rambling group members, reinforced by the commensality of eating and talking together, and the imagined traditional values of the English countryside embodied in the tearoom hostess, welcoming travelers back to an idealized rural past of abundant authentic food and farmhouse comforts.

Hiking or rambling, as it is popularly known in Britain, (and the term used in this paper), refers to the practice of walking for pleasure in rural and wilderness environments which in England began in the late eighteenth century with a line of rambling proponents that connects Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Thoreau, Emerson, and John Muir (see Chamberlin, 2016, Solnit, 2001). However, rambling did not become a popular leisure-time activity until the latter part of the nineteenth century as the forces of industrialization and modernization combined to develop the concept of leisure as we know it today. And it took until the 1930s in Britain for rambling to become the mass outdoor activity as we know it today.

In this paper, we explore the relationship between rambling and food in Britain in the 1930s published in the weekly newspaper column *Rambling Notes*, by W. E. Hopkin, head of a ramblers group based around Ripley, Nottinghamshire. Ripley is an industrial town that lies to the southeast of the Peak District, one of Britain’s most popular rambling destinations. Hopkin was the son of the postmaster in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, and a Town and County Councilor. He was famous throughout the

Midlands as an independent social reformer, writer, broadcaster, wit, poet and naturalist, and also a friend of D.H. Lawrence. Hopkin’s column appeared every Friday in the Ripley and Heanor News and Ilkeston Division Free Press during the inter-war years. In the column, Hopkin describes the previous Sunday’s hike and gives the destinations, times, and meeting place of the upcoming Sunday ramble. Hopkin’s descriptions of the previous week’s hikes provide rich insights into the symbolic nature of rambling food and the role of rural tearooms as sites for the representation of conviviality, commensality, and hospitality.

### Britain in the 1930s

A common perspective on Britain in the 1930s, was one of economic depression or the Great Slump as it was called—a joyless decade of economic stagnation, mass unemployment, and dire poverty as wages and unemployment benefits were cut. By the start of 1933 unemployment in Britain had reached 22.8% (Swann and Turnbull 1978, 578) and in some towns and cities in the north-east of England, unemployment reached as high as 70% (Mowat 1955, 465)). Although high unemployment persisted throughout the 1930s in older industrial areas of shipbuilding, coal, and iron and steel in the north of England, south Wales and Scotland, the second half of the 1930s actually saw an economic recovery in the country as a whole (464). By January 1936, unemployment stood at 13.9% nationally, and continued to fall. By 1938, it was around 10%, and even fell to 8% in some regions (Swann and Turnbull 1978, 578). In parts of the Midlands and especially in the South-East there was even an economic boom with the growth of new light industries like motor car manufacturing and electrical engineering and the spread of suburbia. Compared to other countries, the British experience of the depression could be considered as relatively mild. The decision to leave the gold standard in 1931 helped fuel higher economic growth rates in the UK compared with other European countries. This modest prosperity together with greater social stability and conservatism spared the UK from much of the social and political upheaval happening in many other European countries. (Stevenson and Cook 1977, 264).

### Leisure

The inter-war years were marked by an increase in leisure time activity not only amongst the middle-classes but also the working-classes. The processes of industrialization and urbanization had radically altered the notion of leisure

from a privilege of the upper classes to a mass activity which went on outside working hours; at regular times; in specially provided places (frequently one person's pleasure was another's profit) unequally distributed between classes and gender (Jones 1986 [2019, 3]). Although this concept of leisure emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it wasn't until the interwar years that leisure activity really expanded. It has been argued that the emergence of mass leisure in the 1930s in the form of the cinema, radio, sport, and outdoor recreational activities, etc., brought about more fundamental transformations than any other aspect of people's lives (3). The change was facilitated by an overall increase in real wages (purchasing power) as a result of declining prices, a reduction in hours of work to an average of 48 hours per week, the accessibility and affordability of transport systems, and the expanding provision of leisure time activities by community, government, and commercial organizations. All of these factors played into an increased involvement in leisure activities (9).

### *Rambling*

One leisure time activity that boomed in the interwar years and especially in the 1930s was rambling (Taylor 1997, 226; Staveley-Wadham 2020, para. 1)). Most ramblers arrived at trailheads by train or bus. Rail travel was available at 1d a mile in 1932 and railway companies regularly offered special ramblers' excursion trains that drew huge crowds. The 'Hikers' Mystery Express' run by the Great Western Railway drew a crowd of 2000 (Taylor 1997). *The Daily Mirror* claimed that 1931 was a record year for rambling with 3 million walkers rambling in Great Britain and Ireland, and on the continent, despite the deplorable weather (Peregrine 1931).<sup>2</sup>

One of the favorite regions for rambling in the 1930s was (and still is) the Peak District, an upland area in England at the southern end of the Pennines mountain range. Tens of thousands of walkers in the 1930s left industrial cities like Manchester every Sunday to ramble in the Peak District (Joad 1934, Prynne 1976). The Peak District was easily accessible by bus or train from a ring of dense urban populations—Manchester to the west, Sheffield to the east, and Stoke-on Trent, Derby and Nottingham to the south. The Peak District is further divided into the northern, wilder Dark Peak, dominated by gritstone edges and rugged moorland, and the gentler green pastoral dales of the White Peak to the south. Hopkin's weekly column appeared in the Ripley and Heanor News. Ripley is just to the south-east of the Peak District. The rambles Hopkin wrote about mainly took place in the White Peak which was the easier day rambling area.

Ramblers in the 1930s were mainly lower middle-class and working-class, predominantly young and of both genders. For the working-class youth, many of them unemployed, rambling was a mass sport. In the Manchester area in 1931, one in three adults was unemployed, so a ramble in the Peak District was a cheap escape from the

grime and boredom of the industrial city. The freedom of escape that rambling afforded is captured in Ewan MacColl's classic rambling anthem: *Manchester Rambler*. MacColl was one of those unemployed Manchester youths, a folk singer and activist, who participated in the 1932 Mass Trespass of Kinder Scout (in the Dark Peak), a political movement to force landowners to open up the moorland to ramblers instead of enclosing it for grouse hunting (Harker 2007).

I'm a Rambler, I'm a Rambler from Manchester way  
I get all me pleasure the hard moorland way  
I may be a wage-slave on Monday  
But I am a free man on Sunday

Although the lyrics are revealing of the social class and political views of many ramblers, the political affiliations of walkers ranged from communist (MacColl) to socialist (Hopkin) to conservative. Hopkin's rambling club, just one of many that thrived in the inter-war years, was decidedly more sedate in comparison to MacColl's. Hopkin describes the diverse social class membership of his club: "We number in our ranks in-works, out-of-works, miners, officials, factory workers, shopkeepers, shop assistants, school-teachers, labourers, printers, a postmaster, and various other ranks of life, and we experience happy days" (Hopkin, Friday 29, 1933).

Rambling in the 1930s was called a "craze" (Hoggart 1957 [1992, 254]), and a marker of the new craze was the use of the relatively new word 'hiking,' indicative of the newness of the activity, (although the term had been used in the 1880s and was used widespread in American English). The term became 'quite voguish.' J.B. Priestly wrote in 1934 about "that push towards the open which we have now decided to call 'hiking'" (1984, 359)). The amount of newspaper column space devoted to rambling reflected the popularity of this 'new craze.' The *Daily Mail* had a regular column called "Hints for Hikers," The *Manchester Guardian* featured many articles on ramblers including what to eat on walks, and local newspapers had regular weekly columns by their local rambling club (Taylor 1997). The rise in the popularity of rambling was also reflected in the multiplication of rambling clubs at the local and national level. Glenfield Rambling Club, in Kilmarnock Scotland, for example, was one of many clubs that regularly had rambles of 80 people and sometimes 300 on special occasions (Taylor, 231?). Beginning in the 1920s, individual clubs were increasingly federated into larger organizations, culminating in the 1935 national body of the Ramblers' Association with more than 300 affiliated rambling clubs (Taylor: 251?).

### *Tea and Tearooms*

The huge influx of hikers and motorized day trippers into the countryside in the 1930s gave rise to a growth in tearooms which were often improvised in farmhouses and private homes, often displaying the sign "Tea and Hot Water Provided." "Tea" refers both to the meal—sandwiches and cakes—and also the drink. Ramblers could have a

complete tea or a drink of tea with their own food. They could also bring their own tea leaves in a thermos to be filled with hot water. “Tea and Hot Water Provided” was so prevalent a concept that it figures in popular literature of the time. There is a reference to a “Tea and Hot Water Provided” sign in Arnold Bennett’s 1912 story “Under the Clock” in *The Matador of the Five Towns: And Other Stories*. The Five Towns refers to the towns that comprise Stoke-on-Trent, that made pottery, also called the Potteries, and which sit to the southwest of the Peak District.

Sneyd lies but a few miles from the immense seat of pottery manufacture, it is not as the Five Towns are. It is not feverish, grimy, rude, strenuous, Bacchic, and wicked. It is a model village, presided over by the Countess of Chell. The people of the Five Towns go there on Thursday afternoons (eightpence, third class return), as if they were going to Paradise. Thus, indeed, it was that William Henry had met Annie, daughter of a house over whose door were writ the inviting words, “Tea and Hot Water Provided” (Bennett 1912:144).

This description captures what ramblers were escaping from—the feverish, grimy town—and the paradise in the Peak District they hoped to find on their hikes.

So tearooms fed not only appetites. Food is more than just a matter of production and consumption. Mintz (1986) argues that food allows people to express “who and what they are, to themselves and to others” (13). Fischler (1988) suggests that the varying ways in which a human group eats signals “its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently” (275). Our food choices, therefore, represent an identification with a particular social group or class, a national, ethnic, regional or local entity, or with a gender or generation, etc. In the tearooms, the ramblers found a site for the creating, confirming, and changing social relations, identities, and behaviors. For Hopkin, the party of ramblers stopping at a tearoom represented the apotheosis of sociability, what we will later define as conviviality, commensality, and hospitality, prized symbols of an imagined rural British life, a “merrie England” in contrast to the dour life of industrial cities. Hopkin breaks into verse, as he very often did in his columns, to praise the virtues of tea.

Let others sing in praise of beer  
Of porter, stout, or sherry  
Whisky, Moselle, or potent wines  
That make sad men feel merry:  
We ramblers sound the dulcimer,  
The sackbut, shawm, and psalt'ry  
In praise of tea, the drink that makes  
All other drinks seem paltry.  
(Hopkin, July 27, 1934)

Day-hiking during this time mainly occurred on Sundays and on national holidays. Hopkin’s hikes usually had set routines

of meeting at around 10 am on a Sunday or holiday, taking lunch in a pub and tea in the afternoon. Tea was more often provided in farmhouses and cottages rather than in established tearooms. Because of the size of the rambling groups—often between 15–25, and the improvisational nature of the tearoom, often arrangements had to be made in advance. And on the day of the ramble, a couple of hikers went ahead to warn the host (usually female) of the imminent arrival of the main party and the need to start boiling water.

Sometimes, there was no forward planning and ramblers had to ask if a host would take them in on the spot. On one occasion, Hopkin describes arriving in a village and sending out one of his party to enquire about tea. “Once more we clicked for a most agreeable hostess and were soon our thirst assuaging and stopping hunger’s raging” (Hopkin, Aug 4, 1933). On another occasion, finding tea is even more serendipitous: “We wandered around Ruddington looking for somewhere to get tea but found no place whatever. We were just about to commence a few choice maledictions when a boy came up and said that his mother would make tea for us. [...] So we had a comfortable tea in a comfortable room and afterwards left for Nottingham and home” (Hopkin, Oct 13, 1933).

Rambling parties might take over several rooms and some might sit outside. Ramblers could have a complete tea or tea with their own food. Hopkin notes that at Wisk Hill Farm “you can either have a very nice tea at reasonable cost, or tea with your own eatables, and that makes a nice restful break” (Hopkin, Aug 26, 1933). It was also common practice in pubs that ramblers could eat their own food with a pint of beer. In this way, ramblers became a not insubstantial driver of local rural economies.

The presence of ramblers in such numbers requiring tea was a relatively new occurrence in these Peak District villages. Jack Jordan, recalling the first ramble of the newly formed Sheffield Clarion Ramblers in 1900, writes: “We reached the Snake Inn early and they got a shock when we asked for tea for —such a number in those far-off days was unheard off. In 1900 there were not only no cars, no buses, no coach-parties—there were no ramblers” (Ward, 2002, 14). Hopkin, remembering a similar earlier hike, writes: “My first visit to Kinder Scout was in the days before the Dore and Chinley railway was laid, and when Castleton was a romantic and little-known village of mystery, and not the rowdy place it now sometimes is” (Hopkin, Dec 8, 1933). Castleton and the nearby villages of Hope and Hayfield have become popular trailheads for ramblers to this day.

Conviviality, Commensality, and Hospitality  
Let’s now examine Hopkin’s descriptions of his weekly rambles from three perspectives: conviviality, commensality, and hospitality, and consider how these concepts are interconnected in the descriptions of the ramblers’ food consumption. As we shall see, conviviality serves as an umbrella term which includes the more specific notion of commensality as one form of conviviality. Hospitality in

our examination of the tearoom, can be understood as one material element of the notion of commensality.

### *Conviviality*

In English, the common definition of conviviality is to describe people or occasions which are friendly, lively, and enjoyable, but the word has taken on more particular sociological meanings. In French, starting with Brillat-Savarin *convivialité* describes the coming together of different people over a good long meal filled with engaging conversations: eating good food together “is one of the principal links of society; it extends gradually that spirit of conviviality which unites...different classes...and softens the angles of conventional inequality” 1825 (1926, 115). In Spanish *convivencia*, commonly used to mean “living in the company of others” has been used more specifically to describe the period of Islamic rule (711–1492) in which it has been claimed Muslims, Christians, and Jews co-existed in relative peace.

Building on these more specific meanings of conviviality, Illich describes conviviality as a choice of spending leisure time with others and especially spending it with others in the environment of the countryside. Conviviality is essentially a creative interaction built upon conversation and play. “I choose the term ‘conviviality’ to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment” (1973, 11). More recently, in European societies that have experienced large scale immigration conviviality has come to mean the idea of living together with difference and used as a tool of analysis of everyday interdependencies of people living in diverse communities in mainly urban settings (Hemer 2020).

We have taken Illich’s definition of conviviality as more in keeping with the ethos of Hopkin’s times than more modern definitions. Conviviality—the interaction of hikers with the environment and each other—was at the heart of Hopkin’s philosophy of rambling. As he said, “We do not collect miles, nor do we boast about the distances travelled, for our object is a quest of health, pleasure and companionship, and from the questing comes a great deal of happiness” (Hopkin, Aug 4, 1933). Being together, rambling in nature, and sharing that physical experience is clearly a major promoter of conviviality but as Hopkin points out, just as important is the escape from nature, especially an escape from the rain, into the civility of a cozy room with tea. These contrasts of nature and shelter are tropes which underline the importance of conviviality: “We ate, drank, and watched it rain ...we also hugged the fire, read good books, and were vastly contented. Then the rain once more ceased and we sallied forth...” (Hopkin, Oct 14, 1932). In another column, Hopkin again contrasts the civility of the inside and the inclemency of the outside: “When we reached Holly Tree Farm we found a good fire and the table laid... Inside was so pleasant that we quite forgot the outside and were surprised to find it raining smartly when we resumed

our travels” (Hopkin, Jan 6, 1933). On another occasion, Hopkin writes: “At the farm we found the table laid and a jolly fire to welcome us. What with the coziness and a very interesting conversation we stayed longer than is our want” (Hopkin, Mar 10, 1933). The ramblers and their hosts played dominoes and ring games, had sing-songs, and often had musical entertainments on the piano and on the trombone. Many of the towns in the Peak District had brass bands and hosts often brought out their instruments to entertain guests.

### *Commensality*

Closely related to the notion of conviviality is the notion of commensality. Commensality—the act of eating together—is derived from the root word *mensa*, the Latin for “table” which suggests a sharing of the table, or derived from the root *mensalis*, the Latin for what is on the table, and so the eating of food together. And in some languages, *mensa* is used to refer to a cafeteria or refectory, especially in an educational institution. Commensality, as it is understood in anthropology, is minimally defined as eating and drinking together, which may or may not include the sharing of food and the sharing of a table and may occur in either informal or formal settings as a daily or special event (Kerner *et al.* 2015, 1). Commensality has been variously described as a site for socialization, civilization, democratization, solidarity, cultural identification, social demarcation and hierarchical distinction (Jonsson *et al.* 2021). Hopkin’s descriptions of ramblers having tea together often illustrate these various facets of commensality. These occasions are special commensal events amongst people who do not daily eat together; there may be 15 or more ramblers eating together; sometimes they ate outside without a table; and food was often shared together. The ramblers represented a range of social classes and groups, and this widening of the social circle of diners may have had effects of integration and social bonding through the contentment of the meal, and at the same time, reinforced the group’s identity as ramblers as opposed to motorists and other participants in outdoor activities.

Miss Smedley had a cheerful fire and presently brought out bacon in a lordly dish [...] And also eggs—on the same dish. We ate, drank, and watched it rain [...] and were vastly contented. Then the rain once more ceased and we sallied forth [...] (Hopkin, Friday 14 October 1932)

Hopkin delights in describing the material aspects of commensality: the cheerful fires and the mouthwatering quality of the dishes, and especially localness, and authenticity of the food that the ramblers were offered.

About five, we sat down to a really Epicurean feast of almost endless variety [...] Listen to this ye stay-at-homes—bread (brown and white) homemade, butter home-made, pastry and cakes home-made, trifle with lots of real cream produced on the premises and lots

of other things. Does not that make your mouths water? Indeed, it was a sumptuous and merry meal (Hopkin, Friday 23 June 1933).

Here, Hopkin uses the quality and sumptuousness of the meal to exhort the “stay at homes” to get off their couches and enjoy a ramble, an activity rewarded with authentic and delicious fare. The farmhouse and the village in which these meals took place also represented for most of these ramblers a link to their ancestors who would have lived in these villages and sat down together for these meals before the industrial revolution drew them into the new manufacturing towns like Manchester and where the routines of factory production detached them from the imagined commensal pleasures of their rural past.

### *Hospitality*

Finally, the notion of hospitality is an important aspect of both conviviality and commensality. One fundamental and historical meaning of hospitality is the belief that strangers should be assisted and protected while traveling: being welcomed, and made comfortable, and treated well in individual homes. An early institutionalization of hospitality was monasteries, later followed by inns, offering rudimentary shelter for sleep, some food, and accommodations for pack animals, and by the 19th century the full commercialization of hospitality in the form of hotels. Heal describes five consistent underlying principles that have governed English hospitality: (i) host/guest relationships are ‘natural,’ (ii) a guest can bring honor and status to the host, (iii) hospitality is ‘noble,’ (iv) altruism is an established and expected part of English social life, and (v) hospitality and the social relationships it creates are just as important as those relationships created in a commercial transaction (1990, 22). Selwyn describes the kind of social relationships hospitality can engender: “Hospitality converts: strangers into familiars, enemies into friends, friends into better friends, outsiders into insiders, non kin into kin” (2000,19).

Throughout his columns, Hopkin prizes the experience of hospitality. The key concepts and words for Hopkin that typify hospitality are the welcoming signs such as a “cozy” fire and an already laid table; a “spread” symbolizing generosity, “being made comfortable” symbolizing appreciation and honor; and, of course, the starring role of the “host/hostess.”

At the Old Barleymow, we sat down to a jolly tea.  
At some inns, it is too much trouble to bother with tea, but the ladies at the ancient hostelry, the Barleymow, spare no pains to make us comfortable” (Hopkin, Oct 21, 1932).

When his conception of hospitality is not reciprocated, Hopkin is quick to call out the establishment: “They charged us a tanner [sixpence] each for tea and hot water. Memo, to avoid that spot in future” (Hopkin, Aug 12, 1932).

Hospitality is often equated with the notion of “spread.” “When we arrived at Holly Tree Farm what a spread was there my countrymen!” (Hopkin, Nov 3, 1933). And praise for the hostess is usually included in Hopkin’s descriptions of teas.

At the Malt Shovel itself we found a table laid in the stone-flagged yard, and everything just ready. It was a happy meal, and its crowning pleasure was the presence and courteous attention of our hostess. No rambling club in the country has such pleasant feeding places as ours (Hopkin, July 27, 1934).

And again, these notions of hospitality connected Hopkin and his rambler companions to an imagined rural past life and run through is descriptions of a thatched cottage with the sign: “Tea and Hot Water Provided” and tiny rooms “low and strongly rafted” with a cozy fire. In the village of Baslow, one of Hopkin’s ramblers’ regular stops, the tearoom was a thatched cottage, which had been in the same family since 1600. The tearoom and the importance of hospitality suggests a nostalgia for a lost rural past through historical connections.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined Hopkin’s descriptions of communal ramblers’ meals and what they represent to the ramblers from the perspective of conviviality, commensality, and hospitality. Conviviality serves as a larger term which includes the more specific notion of commensality as one form of conviviality: the companionship of the trail is intensified by the companionship of the table and the sharing of food, conversation, and play. Hospitality has been understood as one material element of the notion of commensality: a connection to the historic relationship of host and guest, and the requirements to provide travelers with welcoming comforts, abundant and wholesome of food and drink, and shelter from inclement weather.

It is clear from Hopkin’s columns that the tea experience was central to the ramble. While the ramblers may have set off in “quest of health, pleasure, and companionship,” Hopkin’s columns show that the degree of that health, pleasure, and companionship rested heavily on the farmhouse “spread” and how that hospitality fed both the hikers’ conviviality and commensality. For Hopkin, the tearoom hospitality spoke to traditional values of the English countryside, with the city dwellers being welcomed back as it were to an idealized rural past. The sharing of the hostess’s food and drink—this commensality—helped bring the ramblers together as a group, in spite of differing social backgrounds and occupations. Receiving hospitality, sharing a meal, being together experiencing nature created and nurtured the social bonding of ‘free men on Sunday,’ a sociality that seemed unobtainable during the working week in the dour life of industrial cities.

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