

AS THIN AS BANBURY CHEESE

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In “The Merry Wives of Windsor” (1597),¹ Shakespeare has Bardolf address Slender as “You Banbury Cheese”. This is not just some local reference by a Warwickshire man: at the time, Banbury was nationally famous for its cheese. Indeed, it was better known for its Banbury Cheese than for its Banbury Cakes.

Banbury Cheese is variously described as having a keen, sharp savour,² and soft, rich³ and creamy.⁴ It was golden yellow in colour⁵ with an outer skin that needed to be pared off.⁶ In the sixteenth century at least, there were hard and soft versions. It was round, and only about one inch thick⁷ – hence the Shakespearean insult. Surprisingly, perhaps, given Banbury’s long association with the wool trade, it was made with cow’s milk, not sheep’s milk.⁸

The centre of Banbury’s cheese-making seems to have been the Northamptonshire hamlets, Grimsbury and Nethercote, although some cheese was made in the town and the Oxfordshire hamlets.⁹ The main cheese market was in the vicinity of the old High Cross,¹⁰ in the Market

¹ William Shakespeare. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act 1 Scene 1.

² Richard Jones, *The Good Huswifes Handmaid for the Kitchin* (1594).

³ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, published between 1724 and 1727.

⁴ Camden’s *Britannia* (1607).

⁵ As fn.2.

⁶ *Jack Drum’s Entertainment* (1601)

⁷ *Victoria County History A History of the County of Oxford: Vol 10: Banbury hundred* (1972) [VCH], ‘Origins and growth of the town’, pp. 18-28.

⁸ VCH. ‘Banbury: Economic history’, pp. 49-71.

⁹ VCH. As fn 7.

¹⁰ The Records of the Court of the Star Chamber 1604 [TNA St.Ch. 8/82/23]. A deposition by Matthew Knight, mercer, of Banbury, on behalf of the plaintiff in the case of George Blynco v. William Knight, John Gill, Richard Wheatley, Thomas Wheatley and Henry Shewell. See ‘Where was Banbury’s Cross?’, Paul Harvey, *Oxoniensia* 31 (1966); ‘Where was Banbury’s Cross?’, Paul Harvey, *C&CH* 3.10 (1967); ‘Trouble over Sheep Pans’, J.S.W. Gibson, *C&CH* 7.2 (1977), p.38.