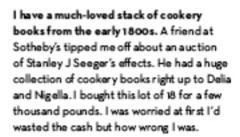




WILLIAM SITWELL

The food writer, editor and greatnephew of Edith Sitwell on the cookery books that inspire him



Reading them shows that nothing in the food world has really changed. Just as now, every book claims to be the one that works. A manual from 1817 called The Cook's Oracle by Dr William Kitchiner says that all cookery books published until his would help a cook 'no more than reading Robinson Crusoe would enable a sailor to steer safely from England to India.'

The old books contain some unusual recipes – turtle neck soup isn't something you often see on a menu these days – as well as more commonplace dishes. Cassell's Dictionary of Cookery bangs on about using up your leftovers, while a book by Friedrich Accum contains endless essays about frying.

I keep the books in my study on a shelf that I made. They sit next to a copy of Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management that I found in the home of a dead relative. I didn't know her but the executors of her estate invited me to her home to see if I wanted anything. There, in her old sticky kitchen, was Mrs Beeton. I had to have it.

A house is not a home until it has books in it. We have a library where I keep the 130-odd volumes by my grandfather, Sir Sacheverell Sitwell, and my great-aunt Edith's poetry books, which I hauled out of the family attic. Putting my book next to theirs gave me great pleasure, although I still have a way to go to match their output!

The library is painted our own shade of red. My friend Jasper Gall oway runs the paint company Konig Colours and created a dark red for me which you can now buy. It's called 'Sitwell Red'.

There is a secret door into my study.

It leads out of the library. When we first moved in I went to a local bookshop and bought 250 or so old tomes, took the dust jackets off and stuck them on to the door to make a kind of trampe l'oeil.

I tend to give a home to pieces rather than buy things. That said, I do have a lovely Victorian estate desk I found at Holloway's auctioneers in Banbury. I sit at it while I flick through my books to get inspiration.

The paperback edition of William Sitwell's A History of Food in 100 Recipes will be published on 12th March

