

How did it all begin?

In 1982 a newly opened health club attracted a number of men who decided to improve and maintain their fitness now that they were entering their 30's. Not being dedicated athletes they also enjoyed a pint or two. After late Saturday afternoon workouts and following a relaxing sauna, new friendships were formed and half a dozen or so of the members would retire to the picturesque Bridge Inn.

One of the regular attendees would bring himself a pork pie provided by his wife. The rest of the group would look on with envy, whilst eating crisps and nuts. The man in question was never fazed by this attention, but after a few weeks of torture another member of the group offered to bring pies from a particular butcher whom he felt made excellent pies. The landlord was consulted and he kindly agreed the members to eat brought in food as the pub didn't serve food on Saturdays.

For many months everyone present enjoyed a delicious fresh pork pie until the pie fetcher announced that his errand of mercy must cease due to child care arrangements. He suggested that the duty of pie fetcher should be shared by all. Everyone agreed, and so the Pie Club was about to begin.

It didn't start in a competitive manner, but inevitably each week's offering was compared with previous weeks. To remind members to buy the pies when it was their turn, a small wooden box, that had once been filled with tea was passed to the person who was due to provide the pies the following Saturday.

To add to the fun, marks began to be awarded, and for a while the results were recorded on the box itself. When we ran out of space, a book was used instead, and this gave more space in which to record comments and marks.

The protocol of the meetings evolved over time. The meeting starts when everyone has their beer. News items of the week are discussed; this can be any topical issue and ranges from very local to international matters. After often heated arguments, with many different points of view put forward, between one and three items of news are selected and written up under the heading "Events of the Week". This is followed by "Sporting Events of the Week", again

encompassing local, national and international events.

The serious business then begins:-

The pies are eaten in relative quiet. Comments that may influence others in the subsequent marking are frowned upon, but this isn't a game of poker and many an expression may give away private thoughts. A more obvious clue as to how things are going is the condiments box, which contains a wide range of sauces, pickles and mustards. If no one reaches for any of them, the pie must be at least quite good.

The amount of sauce used and the type, also gives a good indication of how the tasting is going. HP sauce is a regular favourite to help provide a little more taste, but should members reach for a Chinese Oyster sauce, Soya sauce or Worcester sauce, things are not looking good, and should anyone reach for Tabasco Chilli sauce then the pie is likely to be considered a disaster.

Once the pies have been eaten, the members write down their mark on a card, without conferring. The person sitting to the left of the pie fetcher for the day begins. He explains what he thinks of the pie in often graphic and amusing detail, and ends by turning over his marking card. Each person then talks, and then the fetcher has his say last. Interruptions to each member's address are not allowed, nor is leaving the table.

Of course the fetcher is usually a little biased in his marking and he is allowed some latitude which has become known as 'fetcher's privilege'. However, the fetcher must be careful not to abuse this and award more than 2 marks above the average. Should he do so, he is denounced loudly as being a bad sportsman and worse.

The scribe diligently takes notes in the minute book, and records the marks of each member. An average of the marks is then calculated. The fetcher is then asked where the pies came from, and this is recorded along with the price. A new source of pies merits a gold star against the name of the fetcher for the day. The names of the members are inscribed on the box and this ensures that pies are fetched in rotation.

Each Christmas the president of the club awards prizes, for example, Pie Fetcher of the Year (the member with the highest average of marks over the year), The Farthest Fetch, Most Expensive Pie, Cheapest Pie, Highest Attendance over the Year, and finally The Wooden Spoon Award for the lowest average marks over the year. This particular wooden spoon is actually 3 feet long and more of a shovel than a spoon.

The Pie Club also holds an annual contest for butchers and bakers from all over the country in March. This competition now attracts over 50 entrants, and after several competitions the standard of pies produced has definitely improved. It is fair to say that the pies that make it into the top ten are excellent. All proceeds from this event go to a named charity