Those coastal folk really knew their sanfer

PETER TRUDGILL

email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

COASTAL FOOD: Samphire picking in Blakeney circa 1900.

My maternal grandparents came from north Norfolk, so our family knew all about coastal foods like samphire.

We knew it was pronounced "sanfer" – not "sam-fire", as less fortunate people call it; and we knew you served it with malt vinegar and white pepper, not melted butter like posh people.

But we didn't know the word came from French "Saint Pierre", which is short for "herbe de St Pierre", 'Saint Peter's herb' – Peter was the patron saint of fishermen.

My paternal grandparents were city people, and they knew about different foods.

One of these was what people elsewhere call "brawn" or "pork cheese" – my American wife calls it "head cheese", a literal translation of German "Kopfkäse".

We got it from the butcher's. It consisted of bits of meat from the head and other parts of a pig, in aspic, with onion, pepper and other spices. We'd eat it cold with vinegar and mustard.

But my Norwich grandparents had a special, very ancient word for it. I don't really know how to spell it. Norfolk has a special vowel which dialect speakers use in words like "church" and "first".

Sidney Grapes couldn't decide how to write it – in The Boy John Letters he spells "church" both "chuch" and "chatch", even though it doesn't rhyme with "much" or "match" – it's somewhere in between.

My grandparents' word had this vowel, so I'll write it "swad", even though it doesn't rhyme with "bad" (or "bud").

"Swad" isn't in any normal dictionaries, but I did find it in the English Dialect Dictionary, spelt "sward". The EDD shows the word all over the North and Midlands of England.

The Norfolk variant is cited as "swerd, swad, schwad", meaning 'the hard, outer rind of bacon'.

But there are two subsidiary meanings for Norfolk, from Sydney Cozens-Hardy's 1893 book "Broad Norfolk": 'a Norfolk dish composed of the rind of pork, seasoned, rolled up tight, boiled and eaten in slices' and 'a kind of brawn, pork-cheese'.

Norfolk people have had this word for fifteen-hundred years – it's from Anglo-Saxon "sweard", 'bacon rind'. And it obviously goes back to the days when our Germanic ancestors were still living on the continent – the German word is "Schwarte", and in Dutch it's "zwoerd".

In the West Frisian language of northern Holland, the language which is most closely related to English, the word is "swaard". Which, come to think of it, sounds pretty much like "swad".

■ Richard Watts' column will appear tomorrow.