

CANTERBURY ROLL
WORKING PAPERS

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Daines, Another Role for the Canterbury Roll?

Book of Keruyng (1413) refers to tablecloths consisting of three long, overlapping strips.⁸

These cloths tended to be plain, however, as they were often covered by other napery during

the 14th century. (The 14th century is a period of time in the history of the world, which is characterized by the rise of the

occasion, as well as the menu.”¹¹ Edward IV’s Black Book of 1478 confirms this with a description of the “Offyce of Ewary and Napry,” a servant whose duty it was: “to serue the kynges persone [...] with clene basons and moste pure waters, asseyde as oftin as his moste royall person shal be seruyd.”¹²

A surnape for royalty would be made of linen,¹³ and, from the descriptions given of its use, measure longer than the banquet table. Henry VII’s articles for the regulation of his household (1494) set out in detail how the servants should conduct themselves while the King washed his hands.¹⁴ The sewer (a high ranking household officer) and a gentleman usher brought the surnape and an equally long linen damask “towel” from a nearby table, carefully layered and folded together in a concertina. The usher also carried a rod, which he used to draw the folded cloths along the length of the table from right to left, remembering to reverence to the King whenever he passed in front of him. The sewer and the usher stretched the cloths taut between them, then the usher would “make an estate” by pulling the surnape and towel into a loose pleat on both sides of the King’s place setting, ensuring that the rest of the cloth



remained smooth. Once the King had washed and dried his hands on the towel, the usher inserted his rod back into the end of the double cloths, drawing them towards the centre of the table while the sewer did the same at the other end, then returned the cloths to the ewery table.

The savenap was also intended to protect the undercloth, but from food and wine stains during courses.¹⁵ The online *Dictionary of the Scots Language* documents a wide variety of spellings during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries;¹⁶ all are derived from *sauver* (French for “to save”) + “nap”. Its purpose and position on the table indicates that this particular piece of napery would require the most laundering, regardless of the type of material used, or how much care the diners took. The Canterbury Roll, on the other hand, is made of sheep’s-hide parchment that remains extremely oily to the touch. If Henry VI or Edward IV did use the Roll as decoration during a banquet, wiping the surface clean afterwards might not have been an issue.

Banquet scenes often appear in illuminations in medieval texts. No narrow, decorative centrepieces appear in these, although there are plenty of examples of savenaps, often depicted as smooth, plain, and white beneath the dishes, with the hanging undercloth (if shown) painted as a separate patterned cloth, or hanging in pleats or folds if plain. See, for example, a scene of the Last Supper (bas-de-page) in the fourteenth-century “Taymouth

¹⁵ Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England*, 192.

¹⁶ “Savenap n.” *Dictionary of the Scots Language*. 2004. Scottish Language Dictionaries Ltd. Dictionaries of the Scots Language, <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/savenap>.



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