

## Interview with Paul Couchman Transcript Season 4, Bonus Episode 2

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. In today's bonus episode, I talk to Paul Couchman, the Regency Cook, about his work, the Regency townhouse he volunteers at, and the surprising lockdown success of its housekeeper, Mrs. Finnegan.

**GL:** Thank you for joining me Paul! I hope Brighton is sunnier than Newcastle, because it's chucking it down here!

**PC:** I'm in my back bedroom at the moment, and the sky is grey outside, so it looks like it's about to rain!

**GL:** Oh no! You've got it as well. I've cursed you now, so I'm sorry about that!

**PC:** I'm really happy to be here, with my cup of coffee next to me, in my room, talking to you about food and history.

**GL:** well, they're two of my favourite things. I've set up a desk in our spare room and the dog is here, but you won't see her because she likes to sleep. And she's already in the huff this morning because we made her go out and she doesn't like getting wet! She's not speaking to me, so we definitely won't be disturbed by her!

So, we'll crack on, because we've got some good questions this morning. First of all, could you tell the listeners a little bit about what it is you do, please, and your interest in history, because you do some pretty good stuff.

**PC:** [The Regency Townhouse](#) is a project based in a very beautiful, old historic house which is on the seafront in Hove, and the whole house is being restored. At the same time, there are lots of people researching its history. My role in all of this is that I run the social media, and I make sure that people know about the townhouse and what we do.

I'm also running my own food and history business, and I educate people about food and history. I'm very lucky to do all of this, usually, in a very beautiful 1830s kitchen, in the basement of the building and which I helped to restore.

**GL:** I know that you do cooking in the kitchen. Were there any challenges with restoring it and is authenticity a key part? Did you have to think about particular types of ovens and equipment? Was that something you had to think about as part of the restoration process?

**PC:** When the room was restored, there was no real thought about it as a working kitchen; that all came later. What we did in the restoration was put the building back

together again, using traditional techniques. For example, all of the carpentry was put back into place using those techniques.

We've used old Crown glass into the windows – for those who don't know, it's that lovely, rippled glass you get in old buildings - and when the light shines through it casts shadows on the floor. The plaster on the wall had come off, so we replaced it with lime plaster, which is an old method which allows the building to breathe; especially important in basements.

We've got a lovely, restored kitchen which we now use to cook in. We use very modern equipment, because what we're concerned about is that people are able to eat the stuff we make! We have to follow health and safety guidelines.

**GL:** You're not like the reenactors, the authies, who go round in bare feet and don't use modern things?

**PC:** We're a hybrid of the two, because we're working in the old kitchen but using slightly modern techniques to enable us to do it. But most important to me, especially when you're cooking historically, is that you're bringing life back to a space, and doing things in it that would have happened there.

You've got the smells and the textures, and the activities you're doing are the same ones they would have done in that space. I think it's a way of bringing history back to life.

**GL:** I think it's a great thing that you do, and hopefully one day I'll be able to come down and see the kitchen in person. I know you've been doing a lot of tours. I also know you've been working on the restoration of the townhouse for a long time, and I think I know some of the answers to this question, but what has been the biggest challenge for the project, and the biggest success?

**PC:** The continuing challenge, and I think everyone who has encounters with a heritage project will know, is money. It's impossible, and so we have to do everything we can to earn money to do what we do in terms of restoration.

For years we might stop because we've got no money whatsoever, and then suddenly we get a bit of funding and another room magically appears. The reason we can do all that is because I do the dining event called "Dine Like a Servant." We cook for people; they eat with us and pay for the privilege. That gets over that challenge, and the cooking helps the restoration.

Personally, my biggest success was when I actually brought the dining room back to life. I used the kitchen to cook the types of food that would have been cooked there (in the Regency period) and then it got taken to the dining room.

We had a group of people around the table, some dressed in Regency costume, and they ate the food. Imagine it! You've time-travelled back to the 1830s and people are

sitting in the candlelight, enjoying the food that the people of the house would have eaten at the time too. We brought history back to life with the food.

**GL:** How does it work for people if they want to come and cook? Do you do it in pairs and is there a restriction on numbers? Do they bring their ingredients or does the cost of the session include you supplying those for them?

**PC:** I usually separate the two things out. We have dining events, where people just come to dine, and then I have a cookery course where people come to cook, and as a small group we eat in the kitchen together.

We had one lady who came all the way from America – she came early for the event, and instead of sitting at the table she spent the evening with us, working in the kitchen. And she paid for it! She loved it, and said it was better than sitting at the table. I still keep in touch with her now.

**GL:** It would be nice if she could come back one day, when the Americans are allowed out – if they ever are! Fingers crossed! We talk a lot about cooking, and this isn't a question I planned to ask you, but it's an obvious one.

I follow you on Twitter, and you share a lot of recipes. What is your favourite recipe, or is there one that you would always go to that's an easy one to cook that is evocative of the time period? Some of the recipes you share look amazing; some of them look fairly revolting! I would eat most things, so I think I would try any of them once.

**PC:** Obviously, that changes all the time, and it's hard for me to pick just one. I'm going to go really seasonally now, as we're recording this in September. I'm going to go for pumpkin pie. You might think that it's quite modern, but it isn't.

The recipe I'm going for is one by Amelia Simmons, who wrote a cookbook back in the 1780s. I've made the pie, and it's delicious. I've cooked it for a lot of people. If the world was different and we didn't have Covid, I'd be down there in the kitchen making this now, so it's a recipe that's quite dear to me, and it's delicious. Do you like pumpkin pie? Not everyone does.

**GL:** I don't often have it. I only have it at Hallowe'en, because despite the fact that I'm 37 my father still carves me a pumpkin every year, and then my mother always commandeers the leftover pumpkin. I quite like it.

I suppose what surprises me about the fact that it's an old recipe is because I don't think of pumpkin as something we had in Britain. When I was a kid, our Hallowe'en lanterns were always swede, so I imagine that pumpkin is something that's recently arrived on these shores. But obviously, that can't be the case.

**PC:** This one is an American recipe, but I do have recipes from the 1680s where they used pumpkin as well, in Britain. We were using it, but we just stopped for some

reason. They were around, and then they disappeared. Things go in and out of fashion, don't they?

**GL:** Yeah. I hadn't really realised that, but it makes sense. We have plenty of other sorts of squashes, gourds and so on, so there's no reason not to have had pumpkin. I could just eat a pumpkin pie now with a cup of tea! That would be lovely!

My next question is quite an interesting one. I've already said I follow the Regency Townhouse on Twitter, but during lockdown I've also been following the housekeeper, who is feisty and opinionated, and she looks like she's been going through the master's drinks cabinet! I'm not sure if that's right, but Mrs. Finnegan has been holding down the fort over the last few months. Can you tell me a bit more about her, please?

**PC:** Mrs. Finnegan, I should say at this point, is fictional! She doesn't really exist. She's the creation of two of us, and I do the social media side. I also collaborate with Bridget Whelan, who's a writer, and she writes the blog post that goes out every week.

Mrs. Finnegan is a bit of an agony aunt and answers readers' questions, in an 1830s style. They're usually servants' dilemmas. She also says what's going on in her life, so since March onwards she's been alone in the townhouse.

The family have left, and like a lot of people she's alone in a house and doesn't know what to do. Some of the tweets, as you've said, she cleans things in the wine cellar and breaks bottles by accident – the butler left the key.

She also tries on her mistress's dresses and tests out the bed and things like that. We find that she offers people some consolation, because she's going through this intense loneliness and she talks about it. But she's also funny, and there's humour in it too.

**GL:** I'm not sure if I've actually subscribed to the blog, because I keep reading it on Twitter and then looking for the link. But I read all of her problem pages and her advice.

She reminds me a bit of Mrs. Mills who used to do the column in the Sunday Times (I don't know if she still does). That kind of, not very sympathetic to people but still giving her opinion, which is nice.

**PC:** It's a good way of using fiction and humour to get people interested in history. She's funny, but what she's doing more importantly, because the townhouse is shut and nothing is happening inside the building, to keep it in mind is quite tricky.

That's kind of the reason why I invented her, because every time people think about Mrs. Finnegan, they'll think about the townhouse, so our project will carry on living even though we're empty and shut down.

People will still remember us, so hopefully when we open again, they'll think, 'Oh, that lovely townhouse that's kept us amused through lockdown.' That's the reason for it, anyway, and we love doing it, because it's a way for the two of us to work together remotely.

I haven't seen Bridget in person since March, but we correspond all the time because of the Mrs. Finnegan character. It's a lovely project to be involved with remotely. And she's helped ME through lockdown; in that period in March when I felt terrible, I could always retreat into Mrs. Finnegan! A few minutes to escape everything.

**GL:** I would think that she will help people remember the townhouse, because she talks a lot, doesn't she, about going out into the park, the neighbours in the townhouses around.

The way I always imagine it is like that scene in Mary Poppins, or in Oliver Twist – the London style which I imagine is the same in Brighton and Hove – the square with the townhouses round it. If that's not true, don't tell me!

**PC:** The only difference is that the London ones don't tend to have the big bits of grass in the middle, which we do. The houses are quite far apart from each other. Close together on the terraces, but it's actually quite a long way to get from one side of the square to the other! It's very beautiful, which you'll see when you visit.

**GL:** So Mrs. Finnegan has taken on a life of her own, and that must have been a nice surprise and a positive by-product of the lockdown. When I'm on Twitter, I see a lot of people engage with her and she's got a lot of followers, so that must be nice to see.

Something you've created has grown legs (she's a woman, she would have legs!) people have taken her to heart and it might be a bit unexpected but exactly what they needed. She's relatable and stuck like the rest of us.

**PC:** She gets more emails than I do at the moment! It's incredible! And she's not even real!

**GL:** What?! No, she must be real!

**PC:** I know! It's a bit like Father Christmas. When we open again, I can't wait for the curator to open the door and people to say, 'Now, where's this Mrs. Finnegan?'

**GL:** You'll have to give Mrs. Finnegan her own room, like the butler's pantry.

**PC:** She's got her own room at the front of the house.

**GL:** Oh, fantastic!

**PC:** But you're right, we're going to have to put things in there that are identified with her, so people can say, 'Oh, she's just left!'

**GL:** 'You've just missed her! What a shame!' I really enjoy that, and I really like what you've done. She's certainly struck a chord with people, which is good. My standard question, and this is one that's fairly obvious, but if you could spend a day in history, when would it be, and which person from history would you like to meet?

**PC:** I've thought about this, and it might sound a bit odd, but I actually want to go back to the townhouse's kitchen. I want to go back to the 1830s and walk through the basement door.

I want to hear the voices of the servants as they move down the corridor, and then when I push the kitchen door open, I want to work with them, making food, tasting things and helping out.

Then we'll go upstairs and put all the food on the table, and I want to open every cupboard door, and write down everything I see. Then I want to come back to 2020 and I want to recreate the kitchen exactly as I've seen it, and I want to invite a group of people to eat the same meal that I helped to make.

**GL:** At that point in time, would a chef or a cook have been male? When you watch things like *Downton Abbey*, even though it's a lot more recent, or another historical fiction drama, the person in charge of the kitchen tends to be a woman. Would there have been any men doing the cooking?

**PC:** The thing is, men are expensive! That's the thing; because of the disparity in wages, unless you're rich and could afford one, you'd want a male cook. What was funny was that sometimes they didn't do much and were there mostly to advertise the fact that the family had a male chef, and he then let other people do the work.

He would wander around looking fantastic. There are examples of chefs who were like that, and I don't know if it's like that now, but the women did all the work. Maybe in a house like the Townhouse they would have hired a chef in for a special occasion. Then they could say to the people round the table, 'This food as been created by a French chef.'

But yes, most of the cooks were women, and most of the cookery writers were as well. I don't know if you've gone into this at all, but between 1700 and 1800 there were about 300 cookery books published. That's quite a lot for that period. Most of those were written for women, by women. Those are the books that I delve into, and it was very female-dominated, in a good way.

**GL:** Those books – were they aimed at housewives rather than a cook in a townhouse? Would it be aimed at housewives having to cook food for their own families?

**PC:** Maybe not housewives cooking for themselves, but they would be instructing the servants to cook for them. But you're right. From 1747 you get Hannah Glass coming along, and she's very popular because she appeals to these new types of people on how to cook dinners.

As people get richer, they want to make better food, so the people lower down the scale need books, and she fills that gap. She was incredibly popular. Of course, you get Eliza Acton coming after her, another very popular cook, and of course, Mrs. Beeton. Who doesn't know Mrs. Beeton? Three very strong, successful women cookery writers.

**GL:** I think if I started, I'd just use hours of my day! I've got my grandma's recipe books, which were actually her mother's, so I've got 'Everything Within', which was an early 20<sup>th</sup> century, how to do everything. And even that, which is not even 100 years old, the differences in the styles and ingredients is really interesting.

One of the things I've been doing a lot in France is exploring the local history there, and there's a lot of medieval stuff, but there aren't a lot of cookery books from the time.

I think there are only one or two obvious ones, so that would be a bit of a side project – to delve into the medieval cookery stuff and see what we could find. That would be quite interesting. But if I had all of them, I'd probably spend all of my time in the kitchen and probably never get anything done.

**PC:** There's a woman called Barbara Wheaton, who's written an incredible book on French cookery; you'll really like that. The good thing about her is that she's actually quite funny. There are lots of really funny stories in it and I loved it. It's really worth getting your hands on, because it goes right through – it rushes through the whole period – beginning, medieval up to about 1800s.

**GL:** I'm going straight to Amazon! Other book sellers are available, I should add! I don't think I've got any other questions for you. Could you share for us please how people can find out more about the townhouse, your cooking and of course the fabulous Mrs. Finnegan. That would be great, and I'll add them to the shownotes for everybody.

**PC:** Sure. My website is my name, so it's very easy: [paulcouchman.co.uk](http://paulcouchman.co.uk). I tweet under [@TheRegencyCook](https://twitter.com/TheRegencyCook) and I've got an Instagram under the same name: [@thereregencycook](https://www.instagram.com/theregencycook).

Mrs. Finnegan is [@MrsFinnegan](https://twitter.com/MrsFinnegan). If you Google her, you have to ignore the Irish-American one! We come up quite high under there. Or find her at Bridget Whelan's [website](http://www.bridgetwhelan.com).

And the Regency Townhouse is really easy to find on Google and so on. On Twitter it's [@rth\\_brighton](https://twitter.com/rth_brighton), on Instagram [@theregencytownhouse](https://www.instagram.com/theregencytownhouse).

**GL:** Brilliant. Thank you so much for your time today, and hopefully, probably next year, I'll be able to come down to Brighton and eat like a servant, which would be fantastic.

**PC:** Thank you.