Meat is a curious thing... In Uganda, plantain that would feed a family for four days exchanges for one 'scrawny' chicken with less than a twentieth of the nutritional value (Bennet 1954: 32). The Sharanahua of Peru see hunting for meat as men’s primary occupation yet even the most active hunt for only a few hours on less than half the available days (Siskind 1973: 93). At Toraja funeral ceremonies in Indonesia exchange and division of meat makes important statements about status and themes of honour (Wellenkamp 1984). And we are told that the war-time German government’s wish to supply its forces with ‘excessive’ standards of protein intake may have led necessarily to:

a distortion of agriculture towards animal production and hence to a lower total food production and the country’s inability to withstand the Allied blockade. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, the philosophy of the minimal diet appealed more and food supplies were preserved by a switch towards cereal production.

(Rivers 1981: 20)

Whether or not Germany’s military potency was indeed reduced, it is notable that its leaders apparently elected to supply their population with ample meat (or ‘protein’) at all cost. America, meanwhile, rationed meat for its civilians, although ‘richly fatted beef was force-fed into every putative American warrior’ (Baker 1973: 43). Around the world, meat plays a singular part in people’s affairs, not least through a common association with strength and aggression.

Chagnon begins his description of the diet of the Yanomamo –
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the 'Fierce People' – of Amazonia by noting that ‘The jungle provides numerous varieties of food, both animal and vegetable. The most commonly taken includes several species of monkeys, two varieties of wild “turkey”, two species of wild pig...’ He then reveals that ‘Game animals are not abundant, and an area is rapidly hunted out’ (Chagnon 1977: 29, 33). In fact the Yanomamo spend almost as much time hunting as gardening although cultivated foods provide 85 per cent or more of their diet. Is it not rather odd that the Yanomamo allocate so much time to obtaining meat, and that Chagnon should devote the bulk of his attention to a food that constitutes less than 15 per cent of his subjects’ diet?

In similar vein a modern textbook description of nutritional theory is headed by the ‘proteins we need’ which firstly ‘come mainly from meat, fish, cheese, milk and eggs’ (Matthews and Wells 1982: 1), having opened with a historical review which begins: ‘In ancient times man was... continually on the move, living in tribes, getting his food by fishing or hunting for wild animals and foraging for edible plants and fruits and berries’ (1982: 1). The mention of ‘man’s’ obtaining animal foods before (woman’s?) foraging activity – although the latter may well have provided the bulk of the diet as in most modern subsistence societies – is significant for the very orthodoxy of its priorities. Nutrition in ‘under-privileged countries’ is discussed as a final chapter which blames ignorance and ‘taboos’ for preventing the ‘best use’ from being made of available food – especially for pregnant women who are said to ‘have the highest protein requirements of the community and need all the animal protein foods to meet their increased needs’ (1982: 232). The book advocates ‘better education’ by western agencies, with no recognition that our own exalted valuation of ‘protein’ might in fact induce deprivation in ‘The hungry nations’ since cash crops for the rich tastes of the affluent repeatedly rob traditional communities of their fertile land and labour (George 1984).

The primacy of animal protein has been an established tenet of nutritional wisdom for many years amongst ‘experts’ as well as amongst much of the public. In one recent study of food distribution within British families, when asked what the family needs to eat properly:

FOOD = MEAT

meat was mentioned by the women more frequently than any other food. In fact, only five women [out of 200] thought meat was not an important item of the family diet. Meat, or fish as its substitute, was usually viewed as an essential ingredient of the main meal of the day and a proper meal was most commonly defined as meat and two veg... men’s preference for meat ensured its regular consumption in most families, and when inflation or lowered income had an impact on family eating it was the reduction in the quantity and quality of meat which was most frequently reported and most regretted.

(Kerr and Charles 1986: 140)

Time and again, in different contexts, cultures, social groups, and periods of history, meat is supreme. Within most nations today, the higher the income bracket, the greater the proportion of animal products in the diet. In one study of over 50 countries, higher-income groups consistently derived far more of their fats, proteins and calories from animal sources than did lower-income groups (Perisse et al. 1969). As Julia Twigg notes:

Meat is the most highly prized of food. It is the centre around which a meal is arranged. It stands in a sense for the very idea of food itself... our meat and drink. At the top of the hierarchy, then, we find meat, and in particular red meat, for the status and meaning of meat is quintessentially found in red meat. Lower in status are the ‘bloodless’ meats – chicken and fish – and below these are the animal products – eggs and cheese. These are sufficiently high in the hierarchy to support a meal’s being formed around them, though they are confined to the low status events – the omelette and cheese flan of light lunch or supper. Below these we have the vegetables, regarded in the dominant scheme as insufficient for the formation of a meal, and merely ancillary.

(Twigg 1983: 21–22)

Meat is so significant that, all over the world, people describe a ‘meat-hunger’ that is unlike ordinary hunger. Among the Canela of Amazonia, for example, ii mo plan means ‘I am hungry’, whilst iiyate translates as ‘I am hungry for meat’ (Gross 1975: 532). Marvin Harris (1986: 31) correspondingly asserts that humans are
genetically programmed to prefer animal foods. But it is the fact that Harris argues this case with conviction that is significant, since science does not otherwise support his view. 'Instinct' is more likely to be a useful **topic** than a useful **tool** for analysis. Both biological and anthropological evidence suggest that 'humans are food generalists ... As a direct consequence of this, the recognition of foods cannot be pre-specified genetically' (Rozin 1976: 286). A food habit is rather 'a feature of society and is integrated into a structure of social values that may have nothing to do with the principles of nutrition' (Le Gros Clark 1968: 69).

Like Harris, however, many of us believe in some biological 'instinct' — including this habitually meat-eating woman who, in an interview with me, described missing it whilst living amongst vegetarians:

'Well, on a subliminal level, I think, you just have this notion that it's going to be more filling; it's going to be nicer; you're going to have a better feeling of ... you're not going to want, sort of, six cream cakes after it. There's really no doubt about it, that while we were eating vegetarian food we were always hungry. I mean, we always were ... The fact was, that without some meat at all — I mean even if it was once every other day ... even if it was a glimmer of meat — that without any meat at any time we always had a slight hunger.'

This sort of 'meat hunger' is widely expressed in a variety of ways. Meat is, to many, almost synonymous with 'real' food. To the habitual meat eater, such as a male marketing executive being proposed a vegetarian alternative by his wife, it can be difficult to imagine its absence: only meat has the right substance; only meat is proper food: 'No, I mean you can't sort of chew that. What do you chew on? What do you eat?'

Not only preferred food, meat is regularly synonymous with food — like bread, which enjoys a similar, though humbler, symbolic role in British tradition. The !Kung of the Kalahari, for example, describe gathered provisions as 'things comparable to nothing' while meat provided by men is called 'food' (Lee 1972; Shostak 1983). To be deprived of meat can indeed be equated with starvation. A middle-aged meat-eating British woman, for example, when asked how she might feel had she to kill animals for their meat herself, responds: 'I don't think I could. I think I'd probably starve.'
meat component of the meal may be. Likewise, when dinner commences the brussels sprouts are unlikely to receive first comment:

'A lot of the things I enjoyed had nothing to do with meat. So I suddenly realised that, you know, most people always make this big thing about a meal, that it's the meat that's always most praised when someone cooks a meal and that's the important bit. And I enjoyed the other bits so much.'

The primacy of meat surely also underpins a seemingly insignificant, but slightly perplexing, minor personal routine:

'I know it doesn't make much sense but I always have to put the meat on the plate first before the vegetables. I really don't know why. It just seems right that way - meat first, vegetables next. I keep wondering why it is I do it but... it just wouldn't be right otherwise.'

The arrival of a 'roast' at table can be a scene of considerable ceremony. It is the one occasion in the traditional British household where the male head of household may be expected to help serve, as he may have supervised its purchase. The meat's arrival is properly greeted by conspicuous inhalations and references to its aroma, and the first mouthful should be followed by appropriate remarks on its flavour and tenderness. But whilst a roast of meat is still the epitome of the proper meal, it is the idea of any meat, the feeling of meat, the spirit of meat, that is essential:

'I do have meat with most meals I suppose. We might just have an omelette now and again, but usually there's at least a bit of meat there, like in a spaghetti bolognese or something. I mean, even if there's lots of vegetables and things there, it wouldn't taste the same without that bit of mince.'

The range of soya-based meat-analogues and other substitutes available today testifies to the centrality of the concept of meat, not to its dispensability. Many people wishing to avoid meat feel that the gap left in their habitual food system needs to be filled with a direct equivalent which mimics the form or the nutritional content of meat itself. At the launch of Quorn, a new 'high protein, fibrous substance brewed entirely from a microscopic

plant', Saffron Davies asks:

who will buy it? Vegetarians are an obvious target if they want to eat 'meat' that is not meat. It can be made to look more or less like herbivorous flesh, it chews like meat and it has a similar texture.

(Davies 1988: 34)

But it seems likely that even if a perfect substitute for meat were developed, indistinguishable in any respect from the real thing, many meat eaters would be reluctant to swap. There is just something important about its having come from an animal. As the technical director of a company producing soya protein remarks, explaining the fact that more of his product is fed to pets than to humans, 'You do not have to educate dogs, except by giving them the stuff' (Clayton 1978: 6). Unfortunately, however, few meat substitutes are entirely satisfactory. With Tivall, for example, a recent soya-based contender in the field:

making the bean palatable has been a major problem. Technology has made it possible to isolate the protein in the bean for use as Textured Vegetable Protein (TVP) or to mix with cereals in meat substitutes. But TVP is like trying to digest a minced trampoline, and all of the meat substitutes made in the United Kingdom have tasted so dire to me that I would prefer to go hungry. These products, trying to ape the British sausage, add too much cereal with its carbohydrate content while allowing a pronounced aftertaste to linger on the palate like a fermenting sock.

(Spencer 1988: 23)

Even when the form of meat is entirely foregone, a substitute, such as cheese or eggs, is almost always of animal origin - possibly due to lingering belief in the need for large amounts of protein in a healthy diet. Meat and animal products are pre-eminent in our food system and, even allowing for the fact that the majority of ethnographies are written by western anthropologists with western interests, it is clear that this is also true of the food systems of many other cultures.

But meat is not only the most privileged nourishment; it is also the most feared and abhorred. The likeliest potential foods to nauseate us today are those recognisably animal - the gristle, the blood vessels, the organs, the eyes - unlike vegetable foods whose
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identity we rarely dread. Around the world, meat is by far the most common focus for food avoidance, taboos, and special regulation (Simoons 1967). Hindus, for example, revere cows and would not contemplate their consumption, whilst Jews and Moslems abhor pork as unclean. And in western society too, feelings of disgust about foods almost always relate to meat or other animal products (Angyal 1941). In Macbeth, for example, almost every component of the infamous witches' brew is of animal origin (IV. i):

FIRST WITCH

Round about the cauldron go;
In the poisoned entrails throw:
Toad that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one.
Sweltered venom, sleeping got,
Boil thou first i' the charmèd pot.

ALL

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

SECOND WITCH

Fillet of a fenny snake
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and howlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble.

ALL

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

THIRD WITCH

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,
Witch's mummy, maw and gulf
Of the ravined salt sea shark,
Root of hemlock dug in the dark,
A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEAT EATING

The advent of hunting – variously estimated at between two and four million years ago – marks the emergence of humanity, and prehistoric life revolved around securing meat . . . or so it is said. Jane Renfrew, for example, writes that ‘The first men appear to have arrived in Britain sometime before 300,000 years ago. These men were hunters’ (Renfrew 1985a: 6). This canon will be shown in Chapter 5 to be based largely on modern supposition. Indeed Renfrew tacitly admits that the common icon of early humankind’s carnivorous is substantially conjectural: ‘From the camp sites so far excavated, there has been little evidence for the plant food part of their diet, but on analogy with modern hunting communities up to 80 per cent of their diet may have consisted of vegetable sources’ (1985a: 6).

Archaeological excavations do suggest that people have eaten some meat for as long as they have inhabited the British Isles – rings of mutton-bones found around fire-pits belonging to the Celtic Belgae tribe, for example, imply members throwing gnawed bones over their shoulders (Pullar 1970: 45) – but such evidence cannot accurately indicate how much meat was eaten, nor how regularly it was consumed. The archaeology of early Christian Ireland suggests that livestock husbandry was primarily based upon dairy farming rather than meat production (McCormick 1987) which is consistent with some evidence from later periods. But little is well established historically before about the time of the Norman invasion, and what information exists relates mainly to ruling élites. Surveying eating habits in Roman times, for example, Renfrew writes that:

Perhaps the best introduction to Roman cooking is to look at the description of some of the most elaborate banquets recorded – bearing in mind that they are exceptions rather than the rule, they give one a vivid insight into the extravagant aspirations and achievements of the Roman cooks.

(Renfrew 1985b: 11)

She catalogues dormice seasoned with poppy seeds and honey; ‘eggs’ made from spiced garden warblers in pastry; beef kidneys and testicles; the uterus of a sow; chickens; hare; wild boar containing live thrushes; pigs, slaughtered on the spot, stuffed with black pudding and sausages – and all at a single meal! This indeed tells us much about the excesses of a ruling class but little about how most people actually subsisted. After another dozen similar pages Renfrew reveals that ‘the Romans were enthusiastic about vegetables’ and provides an inventory of their delights in a paragraph of seven lines (1985b: 23) highlighting both the paucity of reliable data on the normal diet of pre-modern times and the bias of most modern writers towards the colourful lives of a minority.

From what evidence exists it can be gleaned that until as recently as the last few centuries animal products were for most people probably less pre-eminent than they are today. The Reverend Oswald Cockayne’s studies of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (1864), for example, clearly show animal dishes to have been just one part of the cook’s repertoire; goose-giblets, pigs-trotters, and pigeon in a piquant sauce were lauded, but equally were peas with honey, and nettles cooked in water. Philippa Pullar, in her history of English food, holds that when much is made of the ‘poverty’ of diet in the period the fact that cattle were not then reared primarily for meat is not usually taken sufficiently into account. Oxen, she says, ‘were draught animals, cows were for milk; sheep were for wool and dairy produce. The diet was largely one of dairy produce, legumes, cereals, game, fish, wild fowl and young animals’ – though Pullar herself nonetheless illustrates this passage solely with meat dishes: ‘Meat broths and stews containing pot-herbs were concocted in giant cauldrons; meat was also fried, steamed or roasted and brought to the table on long spits’ (1970: 74).

Meat’s proscription during Christian periods of fasting such as
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Lent suggests that it was then already a prestige food. Until the eighth or ninth centuries this could mean as many as fifty or sixty successive days without meat and rules of abstinence could embrace half of all days in the year. Throughout the Middle Ages the greatest differences in eating patterns were not so much between geographical areas as between the mass of the population and a numerically small but outstandingly wealthy élite whose diet was marked by conspicuous consumption in terms of quality, quantity, and variety (Pullar 1970: 75; Kiszbañ 1986: 3–4). As Norbert Elias notes of the period:

The relation to meat-eating moves in the medieval world between the following poles. On the one hand, in the secular upper class the consumption of meat is extraordinarily high, compared to the standard of our own times. A tendency prevails to devour quantities of meat that to us seem fantastic. On the other hand, in the monasteries an ascetic abstinence from all meat-eating largely prevails, an abstention resulting from self-denial, not from shortage, and often accompanied by a radical depreciation or restriction of eating. From these circles come expressions of strong aversion to the ‘gluttony’ among the upper-class laity. The meat consumption of the lowest class, the peasants, is also frequently extremely limited – not from a spiritual need, a voluntary renunciation with regard to God and the next world, but from shortage. Cattle are expensive and therefore destined, for a long period, essentially for the rulers’ tables.

(Elias 1989: 118)

It is the habits of the élite which are better documented and which tend therefore to characterise the period. Thus when we hear that medieval Europeans were exceptionally carnivorous compared to the vegetable-eating peoples of the East (Braudel 1974: 248–9) the comparison is with the wealthy and powerful. Of them the popular image is at least partly true with occasional lavish and ostentatious feasting. Otherwise meat was in generally short supply, except immediately after the Black Death when a smaller population had more and better land and stock to share.

The late Middle Ages saw a further stimulus to meat consumption with increasing use of draught horses gradually releasing oxen for human food (Thirsk 1978). By the eighteenth century England had more domestic beasts per acre and per person than any country in Europe except the Netherlands (O’Brien 1977: 169) and a longstanding reputation for meat consumption. A foreign visitor to England in the 1790s reported (presumably referring to the upper classes):

I have always heard that they [the English] were great flesh-eaters, and I found it true. I have known people in England that never eat any bread, and universally they eat very little. They nibble a few crumbs, while they chew meat by whole mouthfuls.

(quoted in Stead 1985: 20)

Another cause of increasing meat consumption in the eighteenth century was a series of agricultural innovations. New animal feeding practices and the enclosure of land removed the need for the slaughter of animals for salting prior to the onset of winter. Meanwhile, the import of new breeds from Holland markedly raised productivity. For many people meat from farm animals began to replace game meat for the first time, particularly as hunting laws became more restrictive for non-landowners. High meat consumption became general amongst more than just a powerful minority. ‘Butchers meat was cheap’ although ‘if one compares the prices with wages it may be seen that working men could not afford to eat well’ (Stead 1985: 23).

Technical innovations facilitated the increase in average meat consumption which is evident from the eighteenth century onwards. (All such figures must be treated with some caution since regular collection of agricultural statistics began in Ireland only in 1847 and in Great Britain in 1867 and UK meat output was not officially measured until 1907 (Perren 1978: 2).) But, as we shall see, it is important also to note that society’s perception of – and thus relationship with – the world that it inhabited was undergoing substantial modification during this period. Rapidly changing scientific orthodoxy and expanding industrial potency were combining to alter the very way in which people viewed their surroundings as, to an unprecedented extent, people came to extol the virtues of environmental conquest. In the words of Eszter Kiszbañ, this period of history:

embraces the emergence of modern natural sciences, technical innovations, industrialisation, urbanisation. Though
they appeared at different periods in different places, they nevertheless provide the characteristic features...

It is no accident that in parallel with these great economic and social changes there was a continuous increase in meat consumption.

(Kisbán 1986: 8)

After a period of decline in the ‘hungry forties’, British meat consumption increased steadily from the mid-nineteenth century. By 1881 more money was spent on meat than on bread (Burnett 1966: 13, 129).

Reay Tannahill sees rising consumption as partly supply-driven since the latter decades of the nineteenth century, ‘the heyday of imperialism, were years of land-grabbing and utilization on a majestic scale’ (Tannahill 1988: 816). Perren suggests a general rise in real incomes, a liberalisation in tariff policy encouraging imports, and advances in transportation and refrigeration technology to have been complementary factors encouraging the market for meat (1978: 216). For example, when the ss Strathleven brought the first really successful cargo from Melbourne to London in 1880, penny ha’penny frozen beef and mutton now fetched fivepence ha’penny at Smithfield (Burnett 1966: 101).

The benefits of the industrial revolution were, however, unevenly spread. The diet of the numerically large working class in the early nineteenth century was as bad as ever it had been and most labourers rarely saw fresh meat at all. A morsel of bacon was luxury, and a farmer might compel his workers to take diseased and unsaleable meat in lieu of wages (Burnett 1966: 14–50, 120). According to Edward Smith’s 1863 inquiry into the food of the poor, whilst labourers’ diet was barely adequate their family was often malnourished, most food going to the breadwinner (E. Smith 1863). The affluent, by contrast, consumed meat aplenty. The Family Oracle of Health, published in 1824, declares: ‘It is a bad dinner when there are not at least five varieties – a substantial dish of fish, one of meat, one of game, one of poultry, and above all, a ragout with truffles’ (Burnett 1966: 58). Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, the fashionable meal began to become lighter and more varied:

the excessive meat-eating of earlier generations was gradually being replaced by dishes of a more vegetarian nature, partly, at least, as a result of the new knowledge of nutrition.
which emphasised the dietary importance of fresh fruit and vegetables. London had at least two vegetarian restaurants at the turn of the century, and it is noticeable that the later editions of standard cookery books devoted increasing space to the preparation and service of vegetable dishes.

(Burnett 1966: 180)

Prior to the Second World War, average per capita consumption had levelled out but both quantity and quality of meat purchases still differed markedly between social groups (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Weekly consumption of meat by social class in 1937

![Graph showing weekly consumption of meat by social class in 1937]

Source: Burnett 1966: 254

Meat supplies reached their lowest level not during the war but whilst rationing continued afterwards, particularly in 1948, 1949 and 1951 (Frank 1987) and demand rose sharply with de-rationing. This rise levelled out again in about 1958 and continued only slowly until 1971. From 1972–1976 consumption began to decline, although it recovered between 1976 and 1979 largely due to EEC policies aimed at reducing the beef ‘mountain’. Since then, however, the slow decline has continued (Frank 1987).

UK agriculture remains a major industry, contributing around 2 per cent of the national Gross Domestic Product, of which the meat sector accounts for about 40 per cent and dairying another 30 per cent. It employs about 3 per cent of the workforce, the livelihoods of about 400,000 people being dependent on livestock farming. Nonetheless, the UK lies at the bottom of the European meat consumption league at about 150lb/person/year whilst France, for example, consumes over 220lb/person/year (Sloyan 1985: 3–4). British meat consumption currently demands the annual slaughter of 450 million chickens, 25 million turkeys, 14

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million sheep, 13 million pigs, eight million ducks, three million rabbits, and one million quail . . . not to mention quite a few cows. This totals more than two million tonnes of red meat and almost one million tonnes of poultry (Jackman 1989b: 50)

In the two decades, 1966–1986, overall purchases of meat and meat products in Britain fell only marginally, from 37.99 oz/person/week to 37.07 oz/p/w, but within that market occurred significant sub-trends. Beef and veal consumption fell from 8.13 oz/p/w to 6.58 oz/p/w, mostly in the 1980s, and mutton and lamb fell from 6.28 oz/p/w to 3.01 oz/p/w. Pork consumption rose from 2.76 oz/p/w to 3.64 oz/p/w, matched by a fall in uncooked bacon and ham eating from 5.30 oz/p/w to 3.68 oz/p/w. The major rises in consumption were for poultry and cooked chicken, from 4.06 oz/p/w to 7.30 oz/p/w, and for ‘other meat products’, from 2.78 oz/p/w to 5.67 oz/p/w (Central Statistical Office 1990).

Figure 3 Indices of meat consumption in the home, 1961–1988

![Graph showing indices of meat consumption in the home, 1961–1988]

Source: Social Trends 1990: 16

In particular 1980 to 1985 saw beef and veal consumption in the home fall by 20 per cent, mutton and lamb by 27 per cent, and pork by 17 per cent. These falls were balanced by a rise, beginning in the 1960s, in meat eaten away from home, especially in fast food establishments (Sloyan 1985: 4). A significant shift has occurred in meat retailing patterns: between 1979 and 1989 independent butchers’ share of the market for meat fell from
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56 per cent to 39 per cent while that sold in supermarkets rose from 20 per cent to 38 per cent (Butcher & Processor 1989a: 5).

Meanwhile, demand has risen for meat perceived as healthier, such as lower fat products and more white meats, as well as for free-range and organic meat which now constitutes a small, specialised market. About six times as much poultry was eaten in 1984 as in 1954, and in July 1989 the British Chicken Information Service announced that ‘Chicken is now Britain’s most popular meat – beating beef into second place for the first time’ (Frank 1987; Meat Trades Journal 1989a: 15).

Regional variations in meat preferences also exist. In the period 1975-1980, for example, Scots consumed about 40 per cent more beef and veal, and 65 per cent more fresh fish, than the British national average, whilst inhabitants of Greater London ate around 43 per cent more mutton and lamb, 28 per cent more pork, 32 per cent more poultry, and 56 per cent more processed fish products (MAFF 1982).

Numbers of vegetarians have also been rising. Although vegetarianism did exist in medieval times and even in the classical world, not to mention in India and many other cultures, in its modern incarnation (characterised by a system of associated ideas to do with health, animal welfare, spirituality, and other social and environmental concerns) the phenomenon began to emerge slowly from the late eighteenth century onwards. It grew steadily in the nineteenth century, notably marked by the founding of the Vegetarian Society in 1847, and has continued at varying rates ever since (Twigg 1983: 20).

In Britain during the Second World War 120,000 applicants for food rationing cards registered as vegetarians – about 0.25 per cent of the population – and most were middle aged and elderly (Erhard 1973: 5). In the mid-1980s around two per cent of the adult population did not eat any meat at all, with a further 2 per cent avoiding red meat (Harrington 1985: 5; Realeat Survey 1986). At time of writing in 1990 this had risen to 3.7 per cent vegetarian and 6.3 per cent avoiding red meat – totalling 10 per cent of the population (5.6 million people). The numbers of vegetarians has risen by 76 per cent since 1984, whilst the number avoiding red meat has more than trebled in that period.

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Figure 4 Non-meat eaters. Make-up and change 1984–1990

Source: Realeat Surveys 1984–1990

Meat avoidance is more common among women than men – particularly amongst the young. On the most recent evidence 22.4 per cent of 16–24-year-olds and 12.8 per cent of all women eat meat rarely or not at all, compared with 9.1 per cent of young men and 7.1 per cent of all men. Half of all British women claim to be ‘eating less meat’. Geographical variations also exist with over 44 per cent of Scots in 1988 claiming to be reducing their meat intake as against 21.5 per cent in Wales and 35.3 per cent in London. In 1990, however, the increase in vegetarianism was greatest in the south of England, where 37 per cent more people were abstaining than in 1988 whereas vegetarianism had apparently decreased by 12 per cent in Scotland. Meat abstention is also more likely to be found amongst the more affluent. Of members of the AB socio-economic groups 4.5 per cent and of C1s 5.5 per cent eat no meat at all, compared with 2.5 per cent of C2s, and 2.9 per cent of DE group members (Realeat Surveys 1988, 1990). This points to one of the most significant aspects of the rapid recent growth in numbers of people avoiding meat: namely that – perhaps for the first time in history – meat avoidance today is often a matter of choice rather than of necessity and is most prevalent among better off and better informed members of the population.