



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

Do you remember Potato Pete and Doctor Carrot? Can you remember the family listening to Lord Woolton on the wireless? If all this is nonsense to you, then you were born after the Second World War.

Most of us are aware of pivotal, history-changing events of the war and the heroism of many. We've probably heard the reminiscences of older relatives about their experiences in the armed services, but the heroism of the Home Front, particularly 'the kitchen front' is less well aired.

Towards the end of the First World War, many British people suffered near starvation and the lesson of the vulnerability of those living on these islands was well-learned. In the hiatus between the Munich crisis and the declaration of war in 1939 nutritionists, home economists and the Ministry of Food, set about designing a diet which would be feasible and which would keep the population healthy.

Looked at today, the adult rations appear unbelievably small. Some items like milk, cheese and eggs did vary a little in quantity, according to the seasons but, basically, 4oz bacon or ham, meat to the value of 1s.2d, 2oz each of butter and cheese, 4oz of margarine and cooking fat, 3 pints of milk and some dried milk, 1 shell egg and some dried egg, 2oz tea, 8oz sugar, were the rations for a week. 12oz of sweets every four weeks and 1lb of preserves every two months were also allowed. In addition there was a small allowance of 'points' which could be used to buy a variety of things like dried fruit, cans of meat or fish, as well as pulses.

As the Ministry of Food wrote in its leaflets, 'Your rations and allowances are the foundation of your fighting diet'. The Ministry stressed the need for fruit and vegetables and unrefined whole-grain foods to, 'add bulk and build up satisfying meals'. The population was bombarded with leaflets - hence, 'Potato Pete' and 'Doctor Carrot' - and there were radio talks, demonstrations and classes all over the country to help the population make the most and best of what was available.

There were other, un-rationed foods around and searching for them taught the British the art of the orderly queue. The word would go round that the butcher had offal or might even have sausages - both off-ration - the man in the market had some pots of honey, there was fish in today, and later in the war, whale meat appeared.

In Steeple Aston, as in many rural communities, many people kept a pig, and they and their neighbours used any vegetable waste as pig-swill. The pig was registered and had a ration of 'pig-nuts'. But when the killing time came along, only half the pig stayed with the owner and the other half went to the Ministry. Many more families kept chickens and they in turn, were registered for a corn ration. There is still a corn ration list extant in the village.

A large part of people's gardens were turned over to vegetable growing and allotments were well-used. If the man of the house was away from the village or in the Forces, the women and older children worked the land. Salting beans, pickling, preserving eggs in isinglass, clamping root crops, hunting the fields and hedgerows for berries, nuts, mushrooms and kindling - the jobs were endless. But with the exchange of produce between neighbours, the families were cared for.

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It was in these war years that school dinners were introduced and in addition, each child received a third of a pint of milk at playtime. Expectant mothers, babies and toddlers had cod-liver oil and concentrated orange juice and there was special dried milk, where needed, for babies and invalids.

Factories, in which many Steeple Aston people worked, set up canteens for their employees. There were some restaurants open which were not subject to rationing, but they were restricted to providing a five-shilling maximum, three course meal - £5 in today's money. Even more interesting was that the Ministry of Food opened what Winston Churchill called 'British Restaurants'. These were non-profit making enterprises, run by local communities, to make sure that no-one starved. A meal here cost up to ninepence - one pound in today's money - and could not consist of more than one serving of meat, game, fish or egg per person. There were no British Restaurants in the villages, but there was one near The Plain in Oxford, which was still serving starving students in the 1950's!

It is ironic that, today, we worry about obesity and other diet-related ills. We need encouragement to cut down the intake of first class protein and processed foods and to take five servings of fruit and vegetables a day. Yet it is those children, brought up by 'heroic' adults during the Second World War, who have the best teeth and general health of any generation since the start of the Industrial Revolution.

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