

Women and Rationing in the Second World War

The announcement on the home service by Neville Chamberlin at 11.15 am on Sunday 3rd September 1939 that Britain was at war, was to make women reassess many things, including how to feed and clothe their families, how they would manage if fuel for heating and cooking at home was in short supply and how life would be without as many men around, on both a financial and practical basis.

Some women remembered the food shortages in the Great War and wondered if anything would change this time. Many thought about the fact the Government on 29th September that year had asked each household to fill in the 1939 register. This was used for the issue of registration cards which needed to be produced when using ration books, which were issued to everyone in January 1940.

At this time in the UK, it was the woman who was considered in charge of the household budget she would register for her rations with local shopkeepers who would then be allowed to bring in the amount of food stuff to cover their orders. Each person had a weekly ration and there would be queues to collect foodstuffs, just in case there was nothing left if you were late when the delivery to the shop was made and quantities were not enough. Friendships were made as you would meet the same people at a registered shop and for some, it became part of a small women's support group, swapping good news and bad. Communal kitchens were also set up to save fuel used in cooking; one woman may be cooking various neighbours' food at the same time as hers and every space in the oven was to be used. It was a good idea to be friendly to the shopkeeper, in the hope that he added an extra item, possibly not rationed such as fish, horsemeat, fruit and vegetables but still in short supply, to your family's weekly shop. Tinned goods, such as dried fruit, cereals and biscuits were rationed using a points system and this changed depending on availability and demand. Pregnant women and children had extra allowances of milk and eggs to make sure they remained healthy. They also were given vitamins.

Food hoarding was not encouraged and many remembered how in the Great War some of the wealthier classes had been driven round as many shops as

possible to gather stocks of food. This time the Government was determined this would not happen, hence the early introduction of ration books for all classes. On the 1st January 1941 an article in the *Birmingham Post* stated the following

“Food Hoarding Unprofitable Housewives with stock of emergency rations, or who continue to maintain store cupboards at the pre-war level, will not be proceeded against for food hoarding, but recently Lord Woolton caused some unquiet by threatening stern measures against people who buy large quantities of tinned and bottled foodstuffs in expectation of a coming shortage. One of his New Year resolutions is to wage a relentless crusade against those who, with ,well-filled purses, from shop to shop in search of non-perishable articles of food. From experience - mined in the last war, Food Ministry officials are confident they will be able to enforce the law with such effect that food hoarding will be an expensive hobby. all who selfishly seek to advantage themselves at the expense of the community generally there will be short shrift.”

The government made sure the following article (here from the *Western Press*) was in most papers only months later on Friday July 4th 1941

“Hoarding Shock To many thousands of people throughout the country the Glasgow case in which a fine £50 has been imposed on man who hoarded rationed and unrationed food far in excess of immediate requirements has come as a shock. There was a time when people were pressed to lay in stocks of tinned stuffs. Are those who have conserved those stocks to be punished? This prosecution calls attention to the fact that food hoards are liable to confiscation, and according to the Ministry no one should buy or keep more than one weeks supply of food. Concessions are made only in cases where it is difficult or impossible to shop as often as once a week Shopkeepers are forbidden to sell food when they have reason to believe that the purchaser has more than a week’s supply in reserve. Those who are in possession of pre-war stocks given this instruction; or at any late advice by the Ministry of Food. They should not make new purchases until their old stocks are exhausted Sugar is exempt under the hoarding order so that people who wish to save their sugar or making jam may do so.”

The Government ran many campaigns to yet again encourage families to “Grow your own” and “Dig for Victory”, many ladies turning gardens into vegetable

patches or applying to local public parks who turned land into allotments so they could provide extra food for their families. A poster from the Imperial War Museum from 1942 stated, 'Grow your own food Supply your own cookhouse'. Previously, gardening had returned after the end of the Great War to be considered a job men should do but women proved they could manage to grow produce, look after children and hold down a job, often one that had previously again been thought of as a job for men. This was unheard of in an era where respectable married women were to give up their jobs and remain in the home to look after the family and spinsters often stayed at home to look after parents. Many of the older women who had enjoyed a taste of both employment freedom and the fact that certain traditional roles could be done by either sex in the Great War years, were keen to either regain this, or encourage the next generation of girls to do so. Foraging for food such as fruit or mushrooms or growing your own potatoes and vegetables was part of this movement towards equality, it was not just men who were the providers.

The campaign of Grow your Own was encouraged by not only Government but organisations such as the Women's Institute, who would have many meetings about how to grow food items and then how to preserve them, so they would not go off when all the produce arrived at the same time of year. Women became expert at storing apples in boxes between paper, or in hay depending on what was available and how to check them regularly for signs of rot, people preserved foods in many ways and jam, piccalillis pickled veg and chutneys were produced in quantity and put down for winter when produce was not as plentiful. People ate more vegetables and people had less sugar meaning the nation became healthier.

Women cooked in a different way, meat was not rationed at first and then was rationed by price not quantity therefore people started using cheaper and often tastier cuts of meat. Offal, which was cheaper and plentiful, was very popular.

Foods were often rationed by quantity and this brought up inconsistencies according to HANSARD HC Deb 30 September 1941 vol 374 cc475-6W

"Mr Groves asked the parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Food whether he is aware of the inconvenience caused to retail shopkeepers in as much as there are 52 categories of sardines on the market, that at a recent prosecution at Southend for exceeding the maximum, a representative of the food control committee was handed 12 tins and had to measure the separately by a paper chart; and whether he can introduce some scheme of co-ordination whereby these mistakes can be

avoided? The reply from Major Lloyd George the operations of the Sardines (Maximum Prices) Order may have caused some inconvenience owing to the difficulty in identifying the large variety of containers in use, but it was clearly necessary for the Order to be comprehensive in this respect. The chart to which my hon. Friend refers was prepared as a means of identification and it is understood to have proved quite satisfactory for this purpose. Future importations of canned sardines will be restricted to 5 sizes and the price Order simplified as soon as stocks already in the country disposed of."

How your rations stretched largely depended on where you lived and what women had access too. Women in rural communities often had more land available to grow things, or the opportunity to find free food, such as mushrooms, a good meat substitute and could maybe keep chickens, to provide eggs. In the town although people did keep animals it was not as common. However sometimes living in distant places had its own problems HANSARD states HC Deb 30 September 1941 vol 374 cc473-5W

"Major Thornton-Kemsley asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Food whether he will waive the restriction against householders purchasing more than one weeks supply of rationed foodstuffs in the case of lonely glens to which merchants pay only occasional visits and whose inhabitants have to walk long distances for their weekly supplies when roads are blocked by snow?"

Major Lloyd George replied The rationing regulations provide that rations of butter and margarine, cooking fats, bacon and sugar may be purchased for the current week and a week in arrears. Tea rations may be bought for the current week and either for a week in arrears or a week in advance. The whole ration of cheese for a four weeks period may be bought."

People in the countryside often supplemented their diets with rabbit, pheasant or pigeon, which if caught by a friendly neighbour and swapped for jam cost nothing. They also made wine and beer from fruits such as elderberries, nettles and raspberries and at the right time of year could pick nuts.

Women became excellent at bartering to increase their food supplies; people would do jobs for payment in vegetables or an egg. If anyone had a surplus of a vegetable or fruits, they were happy to share with neighbours knowing that one day they would be in receipt of another person's food glut. Community spirit thrived and women banded together, sometimes combining rations to make a special cake for an event such as wedding. Women also became creative, many

a person had a wedding cake where several layers were made of cardboard and only the smallest layer was real cake to make the rations stretch further.

To make your clothing coupons go further Women followed the “Make do and Mend” principle, making clothes from any materials they could acquire whether it be parachute silk (I never asked my Grandmother how she got it but used parachutes were sometimes put on sale) for nighties and underwear, tablecloths became dresses and when one child wore or grew out of an item of clothing, it could be patched up and passed on to someone else. The WRVS set up clothing exchanges so women could take outgrown children’s clothes and hopefully swap for something that would fit them. Women would stain their legs with tea or gravy browning and draw a line down the back of their legs to imitate stockings. A Limitations of Supply Order meant that makeup was not available. Mascara was sometimes replaced by boot polish, beetroot juice was used to darken lips. The troops had some anti sunburn lipstick produced for them in 1943 and these were in great demand. Flowers soaked in water for a while could make something that could be used instead of rouge. Some of course turned to “Spivs”, who managed to get most things on the black market, with stockings being a popular item if you had the money to pay for them. When the American G.I.s arrived, they brought with them silk stockings and nylons.

Utility clothing was introduced and also there were a large amount of women now in uniform, who needed less leisure time clothing, thus saving some ration coupons. Utility clothing was limited to a choice of just a few styles including just 6 shapes of underwear. Clothes styles became simpler to use less material, no turn ups on trousers or extra frills on a blouse, no more than three buttons on a woman’s suit and also clothes became very drab mainly grey.

Women could not easily get metal hairpins, shampoos and perms, so hair became longer and styles involving rolling hair and hairnets, or hand crocheted or knitted snoods became very popular, as did the wearing of a turban.

The Government encouraged people to watch public information films made by the ministry of food cinema going was a chance for people to go out and have fun and so they would get to watch one of these films before the main film of the night. The Imperial War Museum has some in their Archive film collection and more than 200 flash films were shown in cinemas between March 1942 and November 1946. These would encourage people to eat cheese not meat and

suggest that cauliflower was a healthy meal in itself and did not need meat with it.

In many places, such as factories, hospitals as well as in the forces there would be a workplace restaurant, which meant you could have a good healthy meal without using your rations. Private restaurants had not been closed down and did not need you to use your ration card but many people could not afford them. In 1942 the government set rules meaning that no more than three courses could be served, there were restrictions on the amount of meat and fish served and the cost of meals was capped at five shillings. To enable everyone to visit a restaurant, The British Restaurants were set up by local authorities across the country although they provided good filling food people who remembered them thought the food was very bland.

Women coped very well managing to help themselves and their families keep to as normal a life as they could under the circumstances of war.