

The Effects of Rationing on the Home Front 1914-1918



Poster from Imperial War Museum (www.iwm.org.uk) Ref: Art.IWM PST 6541

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Summary:

This case study examines the impact of rationing on the Home Front, with a specific focus on civilians living in the Bognor/ Chichester area, during the latter stages of World War One.

This will be explored through:

- the need for a system of rationing countrywide
- the impact of this voluntary scheme upon staple foods, shops and food production locally
- the outcomes following the national appointment of food controllers and the resulting changes upon local policy
- the introduction of compulsory rationing regarding food, lighting and heating and the overall consequences for civilians.

Introduction:

As volunteers at the Bognor Regis Museum we had access to copies of local newspapers relating to World War One. Whilst browsing these we became aware of the impact of the war as a whole and rationing in particular upon the Home Front. Although this was clearly a very difficult time for families and there was much suffering and anxiety, we also uncovered some amusing anecdotes relating to our study that we have included, where relevant, for your enjoyment.

We undertook this study for both the Great War Project and as a useful resource for the Museum in future years.

Background:

Bognor and Chichester are both situated on the western boundary of rural West Sussex.

In 1914, according to Ward Lock and Co's Illustrated Guide for the area, Bognor had a population of some 8,000 and was a popular watering place on the coast which had metamorphosed from a hamlet to a popular seaside resort due to Sir Richard Hotham's influence. It was known as a health resort due to its benign climate. Fishing was an important local industry that was to supplement the populations' diet throughout the First World War.

To any visitor it was a quiet, unpretentious, pretty Sussex town with an air of restfulness.

Chichester, meanwhile with its population of some 12,000 in 1914 was considered, according to Ward Lock, to be a clean, healthy and quiet cathedral city. The chief trade was in agricultural produce, livestock and timber, but wool-stapling, brewing and tanning were also important.

Introduction

It is widely known that rationing in Britain played a significant role during the Second World War, 1939-1945, but how many people are aware that it existed during the Great War, 1914-1918?

On the eve of War, two-thirds of this country's food came from overseas therefore any war at sea would have a crucial impact on the welfare of British citizens. It was during World War One that the submarine was deployed effectively for



Figure 1: The Food Queue 1918 by C R W Nevinson

the first time. The German navy had built up a strong fleet of U-boats and realised their best use was against merchant shipping rather than warships. This was warfare against the British civilians aimed at depriving them of food in the hope and expectation that the British government would capitulate.

In the spring and summer of 1917 this strategy of naval blockade was spectacularly successful for Germany. In all 46,000 tons of meat were lost at sea in 1917, so too were 85,000 tons of sugar. Parliament was stunned by the news that the country's food stocks could run out in a matter of

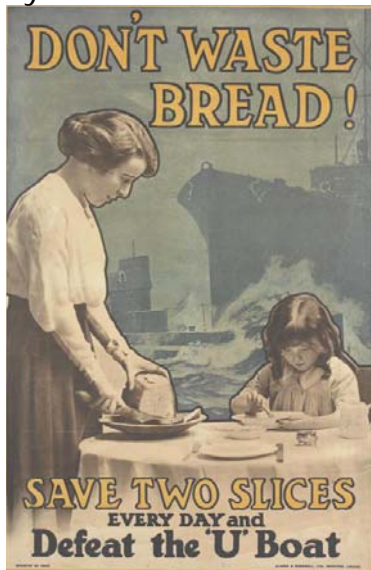


Figure 2: Poster encouraging households to support the war effort

weeks! A further 1,500 merchant ships were sunk with a loss of over 2.25 million tons of goods in the autumn of 1917; therefore urgent action was necessary to tackle this food crisis (Van Enden, 2003).

Britain recognised it needed to break the dominance of the U-boat to save the future of British food imports. Consequently during the early months of the war the price of food soared and panic buying ensued. The government quickly introduced fixed maximum prices for foods such as sugar, butter, margarine, cheese, bacon, tea and bread – all basic commodities.

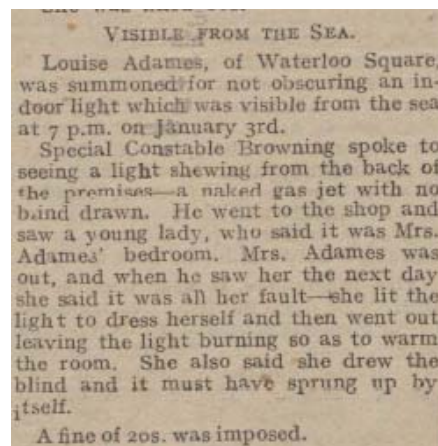
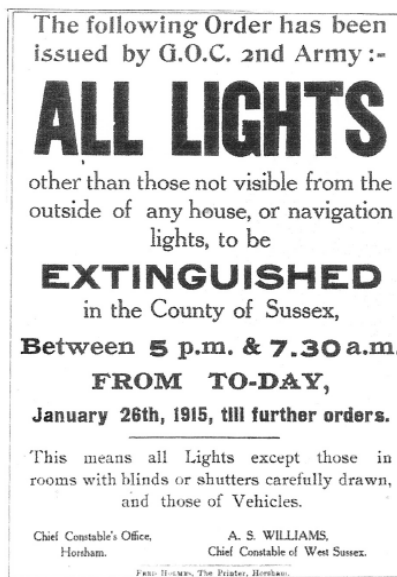
In the book 'Within Living Memory' by West Sussex Federation of Womens' Institutes, a member reminisces: 'In 1914 food was very short. There was no rationing at that time so we were very lucky if we got something to eat. Fuel was short too, so it meant we were often very cold. Influenza was rife'.

'I remember my Aunt and a friend being gone all day to Bognor trying to get some kind of food.'

As recorded by John Maclaren, student East London Polytechnic, in the Bognor Regis Observer 3 August 1989, 'In Chichester itself only one grocery shop managed to survive the whole week without being forced to close. There had been so much panic buying

of provisions that the Mayor appealed to the local people to stop hoarding foodstuffs.'

The nation found itself not only short of food but also with new regulations regarding fuel and lighting. New laws required everyone to put blinds up at their windows and keep them drawn at night. In Bognor, with its proximity to the sea, this had an immediate impact as many local residents found themselves at risk of incurring a fine of up to £100 or imprisonment for fear of attracting alien interest. An example of this appeared in the Bognor Regis Observer Centenary, Friday 5 May 1972, extracted from newspapers relating to the period covering 1912 to 1921. 'A waitress who flashed an electric torch from a seaside shelter on to passers-by at night was fined 30 shillings at Bognor for having an unextinguished private light in contravention of wartime orders.'



Bognor Observer Wednesday 23 January 1918

Poster – Fred Holmes, The Printer, Horsham

The price of coal also increased because of shortages and people became suspicious of their neighbours hoarding supplies of coal which inevitably led to unrest. To mitigate the acute fuel shortage newspapers were full of advice on fuel saving cookery and fuel substitutions. By October 1916 coal was in such short supply that it was rationed by the number of rooms a family had in its house!

The government introduced The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) on 8 August, 1914. It listed everything that people were **not allowed to do** in time of war. As the war progressed it was added to. In this first version amongst the many things it stated were that: -

- no one was allowed to light bonfires or fireworks
- no one was allowed to give bread to horses or chickens

The government could try any civilian breaking these laws.

Impact on poorer folk

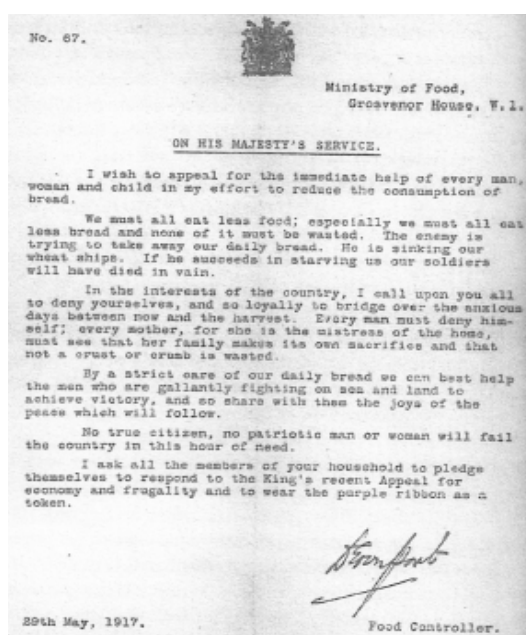
As may well be imagined the main victims of these shortages, especially of food, were the poorer members of society in both city and countryside. The main staple of their diet was bread and potatoes and at that time 80% of wheat used to make bread was imported. At least in more rural areas some food stuffs were freely available in the form of dandelion leaves, (used in sandwich making as a substitute for lettuce), berries and other fruits. Rabbits and birds became a crucial part of the country diet helping to keep poorest families alive. Coastal resorts were encouraged to increase the fish food supply. This later proved to have been very successful as there was an increase in the number of fish caught by fishermen. In Bognor they landed one and a half tons of fish over five months. In newspaper adverts people were encouraged to eat fish for breakfast instead of bacon!

As quoted from 'All Quiet on the Home Front' by Richard Van Emden and Steve Humphries: -'With butter in short supply margarine was substituted and *bread and scrape* was often all there was for breakfast and tea for millions of families.' (page 193)

Families had to adapt to prevent tragic loss of very young lives and so age old rural traditions of poaching, pilfering and collecting natural foods came to the fore. Some fruit and vegetables would be pilfered from farmers' fields often by children on their way home from school. Village policemen often turned a blind eye!

In urban areas, without the food from the countryside for free, the food shortages were even more evident. In some towns and cities there were random food riots where bread shops were the main target. Many of the restrictions imposed by DORA failed and so the government had to think again.

By December 1916 the outlook was so bleak a Food Controller, Lord Devonport, was appointed and a Ministry of Food established to promote economy and to maintain the food supply of the country. In February



1917 he introduced a voluntary rationing scheme in the hope that compulsory rationing would not be necessary. Through this scheme the general public were encouraged to reduce their consumption of staple foods and even to consider meatless days! Each person was asked to consume only 4lbs of bread, 2½lbs of meat and 12 ounces of sugar each week. By doing this it was hoped to conserve grain which was mostly imported and ensure fair shares of meat which was mostly produced at home. There was massive publicity through newspapers, billboard posters and in government propaganda to promote this scheme.

Figure 3: Letter from Ministry of Food

Letter from Lord Devonport imploring people to comply with voluntary rationing.

A later survey by the Ministry of Food to see how effective its food economy drive was found that 'In well-to-do Worthing, 92% of those surveyed were committed to voluntary food reduction.' However the new scheme was not received this well by everybody as the diet of the working class families was based on a high consumption of bread, a fact overlooked by Lord Devonport. As bread was still one of the cheapest and most filling foods their response was to eat more not less of it! Meat, being more expensive, was a luxury they couldn't afford. Even an appeal by the Royal Family to observe the restrictions concerning food failed.

New Regulations

By mid-1917, when the food shortage had become more serious, the country had a new food controller, Lord Rhondda. He replaced Lord Devonport who had proved to be an unconvincing food controller. The effect of this was immediate; rations grew stricter particularly with regard to less essential items.

For example: -

- the throwing of rice at weddings or feeding birds became a criminal offence
- the sale of luxury chocolates and sweets ceased
- the use of starch in laundering was limited
- horses, cows and even London pigeons were rationed. There was to be no corn for cobs, hunters, carriage horses and hacks
- the amount of bread or cake sold in tea shops was reduced to 2 ounces
- it became an offence to adopt and feed stray dogs
- bakers with only barley, rice, maize, beans, oatmeal and potato permitted were forbidden to bake anything but government regulation bread.

These new 'war loaves,' although more nutritious, tasted unpleasant and were **NOT** popular with customers! They changed from being pure white to a blackish shade with bits of potato in them! New machinery had to be installed to process the potatoes until slushy.

The advice to everyone was to 'eat slowly: you will eat less food' or 'keep warm: you will eat less food.' However no explanations were offered as to how you were to keep warm given fuel rationing and an insufficient fat diet.

In public houses the opening hours were cut, beer was watered down but the price of a pint rose from 3d to 4d and customers were not allowed to buy one another a round of drinks. This was reinforced by Lord Kitchener who wished to remove any temptations from the forces. Being drunk was seen as unpatriotic!

The effect of this could be seen locally at the Alexander Tavern, Bognor as mentioned in the Observer 1918.

'During the First World War beer could only be obtained two or three days a week. To make ends meet Mr Byerley would remain open selling tea and food when beer was out of supply'

Impact on Shops

Despite the well intentioned voluntary rationing scheme food supplies were increasingly unreliable. Many shops, particularly those in rural areas, ran out of basic items and this in turn led to queuing. It was indeed during 1917 that the queue became a national institution, a pattern that would be repeated in World War Two. People queued primarily for bread, potatoes or coal. This led to further unrest including food riots in some towns and cities and encouraged an increase in food hoarding. An outcome from this was that bread prices were subsidised from September 1917 onwards and potato prices from November.

On the home front, for those who lived through it, 1917 was remembered as the worst year of the whole war. The shortages of food and fuel were often magnified in the public mind by rumour and panic. In an edition of Punch at the time this matter was addressed more cheerfully with:-

O Matthew Arnold you were right:
 We need more sweetness and more light,
 For 'til we break the brutal foe,
 Our sugar's short, our lights are low.

Increase in food production at home

DORA (created 1914) empowered the government to take over land as it felt necessary. In 1917 it took over 2.5 million acres of land for farming to increase food productivity at home. This was to ensure that Britain would not be starved into surrender. 'Dig for Victory' was a familiar cry that galvanised people into action during World War Two. However, not everyone realises this principal, like rationing, had its origins in World War One. It attempted to boost home grown produce to combat the ever

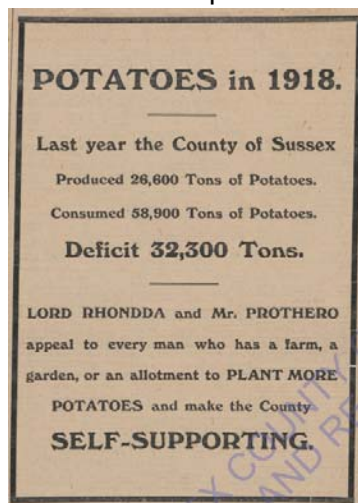


Figure 4: Poster promoting potato planting
 this with the inclusion of posters promoting potato planting. The allotment campaign proved to be a great success, again celebrated in the press.

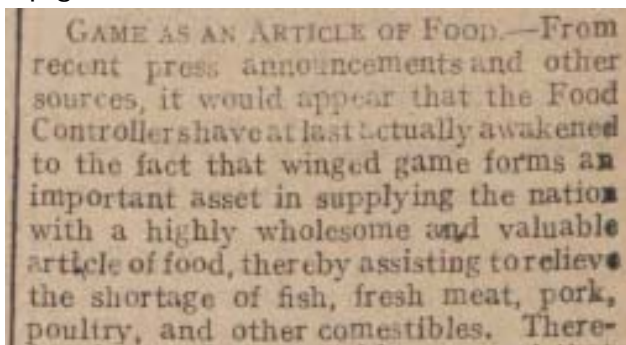
increasing shortages of imported food stuffs. The Board of Agriculture empowered local authorities to convert large areas of unoccupied land to allotments, often without the consent of the owners! In the Spring, common land, parks and playing fields were dug up and planted. People were encouraged to grow their own vegetables digging up their lawns and forgoing their flower beds. Local newspapers gave advice, as did government films, on how to grow the biggest and best potatoes. As a result the 1917 harvest was the best ever with a considerably increased output of both cereals and potatoes. The prices were halved and there was more food

for everyone. In the following year the Bognor Observer 3 April 1918 continued to emphasise

Tractors replaced horse power and prisoners of war, the Women's Land Army (newly formed in January 1917) and conscientious objectors provided the labour force, a strategy repeated in 1939-1945. Children were also encouraged to assist, as were 80,000 men of the Labour Corps, many of whom were injured or disabled soldiers precluding them from re-joining their units but not from working on the land.

Local newspapers also advertised instructive lectures on a variety of topics to encourage the community to think economically. These ranged from talks and classes on gardening – making the best use of your land; fuel saving cookery – using hay boxes; demonstrations of cheese making and bottling and canning of fruits and vegetables to cut back on waste. These could be accessed across the county. All places where cooking could be done in bulk could be supported in this way.

Bognor proved to be a 'shining light' in its provision of local piggeries. They were hailed as a great success. In the local press it was suggested that every town in the land should try the same experiment as Bognor for then the food supply of the country would be substantially increased. An appeal was made to Bognor's population to save all food scraps for the pigs.



In the Bognor Observer 10 April 1918 (see left) there was a report on the promotion of game as valuable substitute for other shortages. It was recognised that game should not be destroyed through its breeding season; it was preferable to destroy winged or four legged predators instead!

Figure 5: Article promoting value of game

There were even requests to save paper. One result of this was that from 1916 the Bognor Observer went through several changes in terms of size, number of pages and number of columns. At the Bognor Waste Paper Depot, where people were encouraged to send all the paper they could, they raised £678 which was sent to various war charities.

Rationing systems

Towards the end of 1917, Lord Rhondda initiated a national scheme of registration and rationing approved by the government; although some local committees had begun to develop their own rationing schemes earlier in the summer. The idea of food rationing was to guarantee supplies and **not** to reduce consumption.

In January 1918 sugar was rationed and by April, meat, butter, cheese and margarine had been added. Ration cards were issued to everyone including the King and Queen. Everyone had to register with a butcher for meat, a different retailer for bacon, a dairy for butter and margarine and a sugar retailer for sugar, often your general store where you could also purchase lard. Their allowance per week was: -

15oz (425g) of meat
5oz (142g) of bacon

4oz (113g) of butter or margarine
 1½oz (40g) of tea
 8oz (226g) of sugar

In the Bognor/Chichester districts some schools closed for a time so staff could assist with the issuing of food rationing cards. Later these were replaced by forgery-proof books printed using special inks, traceable by serial number, with coupons as in the Second World War. Those for adults were buff coloured and for children green. The books contained detachable coupons, yellow for sugar, blue for fats and red for meat and bacon. Spare coupons were included in case new items were rationed; jam was bought into the system in November, however new coupons were added at this point.

Rationing solved the problem of rising prices and food queues. Even more surprising, everyone became healthier! The poor got a share of better food than they could have afforded before, and the well-off ate less of the food that was bad for them! Queues and empty shops became a distant memory as



Figure 6: Examples of ration books

allocation of food was safe guarded and there was now no need to hoard. Punch magazine printed the cartoon below showing a queue of grumpy people having been shamed into returning their hoards to the food control depot.



Figure 7: Queue of patriotic disgorgers evading prosecution

The only queues now were temporary ones caused by shop keepers trying to master the novelty of ration cards or books! If you broke the rules you could end up in court. Examples of this were shop keepers selling food above shop prices and consumers hoarding or wasting food. The Bognor Observer 27 November 1918 reported a rationing

case at Chichester where Thomas Wood, a grocer and provision dealer, was summoned for supplying sugar, butter, margarine and lard to a non-registered customer between August 4th and August 11th and for not detaching coupons from ration books! In court he blamed his daughter and suffered a hefty fine.

National Kitchens came into being at this time, especially in poorer city areas, and although this was debated locally this idea was shelved. Instead recipes were included in weekly newspapers to encourage housewives to seek alternative foodstuffs where possible. The War Supplement suggested such tips as: -boiling hard green peas to a puree to be used to thicken soup and cooking tough old lettuces to imitate spinach!

Fuel Shortages

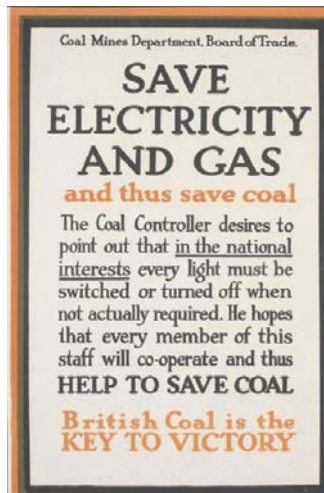


Figure 8: Save electricity and gas poster

1917 began as one of the coldest years on record and this caused further fuel shortages and the introduction of coal rationing. Residents had to register with a coal dealer who guaranteed them an allocation of coal. These shortages were felt more acutely by middle class families with more rooms to heat. In Bognor the coal controller decided a reserve stock of coal could be kept for emergency distribution to villages during the winter. This could be bought and stored by the village squire, vicar, doctor or any other responsible persons.

Another consequence was that local shops closed

early to save on heating and lighting, whilst people went to bed earlier for the same reason. It was quoted in the Bognor Observer 23 October 1918 that it was your 'patriotic duty to shop early and so save lighting!' In public houses the opening hours were further curtailed. These were additional restrictions imposed by DORA. Most opened only at lunchtime and some closed as early as 9pm. Staying open after 11pm was prohibited!

Bognor Council held its meetings earlier to save light in order to prove they practised what they preached. During the winter church services were to be held in the afternoon instead of the evening to save power. DORA also specified that no gas or electric current should be used on stage at theatres and places of entertainment between 10.30pm and 1.00pm the following day. Bognor Council agreed to this providing that essential cleaning could still take place.

The Bognor Observer tried to support the public by publishing a variety of helpful hints and ideas to combat the shortages entitled 'Notes on Saving'. These included practical topics such as: -how to save on: laundry bills, shopping, coal and gas, wear and tear of boots and shoes, in the kitchen, lighting bills, clothes, fares and also how men could save in the home and how to best use odds and ends.

Conclusion

In the War Supplement it was commented that 'it was nothing less than wonderful that after four years of war, and in the face of world shortages, our little island should still have enough food for its dense population in spite of all the submarine sinkings.'

Although to most of the population the rationing system appeared troublesome, it did have a bright side. It ensured regular and sufficient food supplies; it made it possible for the authorities to calculate precisely how to make the best of available stocks of food stuffs and how to share it fairly.

The malnutrition documented, regarding the poor, during the Edwardian era had all but disappeared and no one truly starved. Generally, living standards both in terms of poverty and health, improved the situation for

many of the nation's poorest citizens. Also through their war work, including working on the land, women gained a higher profile and rights in society than previously.

By the end of the war Britain had an extra three million acres of farming land thanks to DORA and a rationing system that had worked. This system continued until 1920. Meat came off ration first in December 1919, butter by May 1920 and sugar by the end of that year. People were soon able to go back to getting food from more distant sources. Restrictions on lighting, bonfires and fireworks were relaxed, although people were still encouraged to be thrifty on account of the continuing coal shortage. The Daily News 12 November 1918, which was circulated throughout our area, gave details of these suspensions.

No one could have foreseen that, within the next two decades, the nation would once again be facing a repeat of rationing and other restrictions in the advent of the Second World War!

Figure 1 <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-british-home-front-during-the-first-world-war> Art.IWM ART 840

Figure 2
<http://media.iwm.org.uk/iwm/mediaLib/156/media-156004/large.jpg?action=d&cat=p>
Art.IWM PST 13354

Figure 3 Book – All Quiet on the Home Front page 194

Figure 4 Bognor Observer 3rd April 1918

Figure 5 Bognor Observer 10th April 1918

Figure 6
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/vwMXqC78RA-W1vWYOwCFxw>

Figure 7
Punch Magazine; held at Worthing Reference Library

Figure 8
<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/31530>
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