

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

RATIONING

Remembering rationing in Wittering

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A CHILD'S VIEW OF WARTIME RATIONING

Soon after war was declared in September, 1939, it was announced that Food Rationing would come into force and everyone was issued with a Ration Book. Identity Cards were issued also. I remember an official came from the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries to our home and took down the names of each member of our family and then made out the cards and Ration Books.

Each family had to register the books with a grocer and butcher from whom they would purchase their food, and so the housewife did not only have to worry how she would afford to buy provisions for her family – she would also have to work out if she had enough coupons in her Ration Books to cover the needs of her family! All food, except fish, vegetables and bread were rationed. We were quite a large family, with four children and three adults; luckily our mother was a good cook and manager.

My youngest sister was born only a few days after war was declared. All children under the age of five years were issued with a book with a green cover, which entitled them to concentrated orange juice and cod liver oil. These would provide extra vitamins. There were also the occasional oranges from the greengrocers, for as war progressed exotic fruit and vegetables had to be brought from overseas by merchant ships, and those carrying supplies were a target for German U-boats and their torpedoes. Many ships were sunk and thousands of seamen lost their lives.

At first, rationing was not too bad, as most households had store cupboards and I suppose during 1939 with rumours of war, people may have stockpiled tinned foods, etc.

Before the war, my mother had been careful not to allow many sweets, but with rationing and a fear of losing our allowance, we were spending all our sweet coupons. And so a bad habit started!

Most families supplemented their food rations by keeping rabbits and using them for meat; this resembled chicken when roasted or made into a tasty stew with vegetables and dumplings. People also kept chickens to supply them with fresh eggs and some even kept a pig and fed it on scraps to fatten it up. A butcher then slaughtered it and prepared the meat, since by law he could keep half to supply his registered customers and the owner kept the other half for his family and friends. Large vegetable patches were dug and planted with some householders even digging up their lawns and tennis courts. My father fed all seven people living in our house in this way.

The children were expected to help. They were sent out in the fields to pick the green leaves of dandelions and hogweed for the rabbits to eat, as well as gathering hay and straw for their bedding. We spent many happy hours rambling the hedgerows and byways of rural Wittering, picking blackberries, crab apples, mushrooms and watercress from the rife, learning more of our countryside as we went. I can also remember gleaning in the fields after the harvest, picking up ears of wheat left behind by the binder. This was used as chicken feed for our neighbours' few birds and in exchange they would give us an egg or two.

Living near the Harbour, once the first dangers of war had passed we could go onto the mud at West Wittering to search for cockles and winkles, which Mother would cook. We would then enjoy them for tea, with bread and a scrape of precious butter!

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