

From 'Field to Fork' in World War II

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Nick: Hi, my name's Nick Suffolk, and I'm delighted to present this special HistBites episode for Winchester Heritage Open Days. In this episode, I'm going to explore food in World War II. Why we had rationing, how rationing worked, how we grew more food and made food go further and even try some recipes from the period.

I work for Hampshire Cultural Trust at Milestones Museum, so later we'll visit one of our World War II displays and meet Jo Burgess-England, one of our costumed interpreters who will chat to us about the way people got extra meat during the war, and hopefully make some food for me to try. We'll also catch up with Jeremy Bracknell from the Winchester New Allotment Holders Society to find out how much has changed since the Dig for Victory campaign.

Let's start by looking at why we needed rationing. In the 1930s, 75% of Britain's food was imported by ship. This reliance on imported food made us vulnerable. After war was declared, the Germans set up a U boat blockade, threatening ships bringing food to Britain. Ships were also needed for war materials, troop movement and the import of weapons. These combined factors put our food industry under huge pressure. During World War I, pressures on food had mounted, but there had been no rationing. This meant supplies were short and prices were high. Many poorer people did not get enough to eat and suffered from malnutrition and disease. The government wanted to avoid this happening again, but was still initially reluctant to impose rationing, believing that it would affect morale. However, preparations were put in place as war approached.

In September 1939 National Registration Day saw every household in the country register everyone living there. They were all issued with national identity cards and ration books. The rationing system worked by registering with a particular shop for a particular type of goods. This allowed the ministry of food to ensure that each shop was able to order sufficient supplies for all those registered with it. You still had to pay for your rationed food, but you needed the coupon to be allowed to buy it, and the price was pegged to a nationally agreed rate to prevent high prices.

What was rationed changed through the war and depended on who you were. Children and pregnant mothers had extra rations of milk, workers doing heavy work received extra rations as well. What ships were able to reach Britain carrying food were tasked to bring in more dried and condensed milk, more fatty fish and pulses, but less fresh fruit as its poor shelf-life made it a wasteful use of shipping space. The exception to this was oranges, which were imported for vitamin C.

Let's go to Milestones and meet up with Jo, who's going to help me try some wartime rationing recipes. Jo, I think you're going to talk to us a little bit about some of the things people would do with their rations?

Jo: Yeah. Well, you haven't got much rations, especially sugar and sweet things and jam, especially, jam on bread was really popular. And so, a child will come home from school, providing they hadn't been evacuated, and they'd be so hungry as all children are when they come home, so you'd want to give them something a little sweet, you haven't got any jam, so you are going to make them a sandwich. And the first thing you're going to use is potato, mashed potato.

Nick: Mashed potato sandwich?

Jo: Mashed potato. It's not actually a mashed potato sandwhi-, well it is really but to your mashed potato, you would add some cocoa powder.

Nick: You've got that there. Yep. Okay. Can see that going in.

Jo: Now, if you can imagine potatoes and cocoa together, as they always should be. Give that a good stir in and you stir it all the way through, you don't want it to look marbled.

Nick: Okay. Yeah, I can see. It's kind of, it's kind of getting there. It's a little, it looks a bit like one of those Easter eggs at the moment you get. Its half white chocolate and half actual chocolate.

Jo: Yeah, you mix that all in. Now, that's not going to be quite sweet enough for a child I should imagine. So what you do then is you put in a teaspoon, only a tiny amount because you don't want to use up all your sugar ration. You haven't got a lot and you don't want to waste it.

Nick: That's really a tiny bit of sugar going in there. Is that alright?

Jo: Yeah, mixing it in, tiny amount because you want to make it slightly sweet, but you don't want to make it so sweet that you are wasting all of your ration on one person. And then what you can also do is put in something like vanilla essence or other kinds of essences. Again, I don't have any of these and they would have been slightly difficult to get during the war, so basically, you use what you've got and then put this between a couple of pieces of bread and Hey Presto, a sweet, potato chocolate sandwich.

Nick: That is amazing. You've kind of basically made a wartime Nutella, haven't you? I guess, other chocolate spreads are available. But yeah, perhaps, perhaps without nuts. All right. Well, I'll try a little bit of this on my piece of bread here. Spread it out a little bit. There we are.

Mmmm.

Well, I have to say it's quite potatoey still, but yeah, you can taste a little bit of the sweetness in there and a little bit of the chocolate, whether you'd be very happy if you were a modern kid and came home from school and your Mum put that in your sandwich, I'm not sure, but during the war I expect anything was good.

Thank you very much Jo.

Jo: Their idea of a treat was a carrot, so. ..

Nick: That's got to be better, better than that than I think. Yeah. Thanks. Thanks Jo, that's amazing.

So, the nation had re-prioritized its food imports and rationed what we had. The next problem was to increase national food production on our farms. In the 1930s farms were relatively unmechanised and required a lot of labour. This was increasingly difficult, as more men were called up or volunteered. Certain agricultural jobs were protected occupations and were not subject to call up. However, many were not and lots of young men felt it was their duty to volunteer. The shortage of labour was handled by reviving a World War I organisation, the Women's Land Army.

Re-formed in 1939, initially the Women's Land Army recruited by volunteers going to a local headquarters for an interview and a medical test. But in 1941, the National Service Act allowed the conscription of women into the armed forces or vital war work, like the Land Army. Single women were recruited between the ages of 20 and 30, but this was later expanded to 19 to 43. By 1943, 80,000 women worked in the Land Army. They ploughed, harvested, reclaimed land and killed rats. For some, it was a liberating experience, but for others it could be a hard and lonely existence in isolated communities. Hours were long, with land girls working a 48 to 50 hour a week for just 28 shillings, minus 14 shillings for board and lodging. Land girls were finally given a week's holiday in 1943.

In why we needed to ration. We've seen a little bit about how rationing worked and the kind of recipes that people could make with rations. And we've learned about how we tried to increase our food production. It wasn't just farmers and agriculture that were producing food that everyone relied on. The Dig for Victory campaign made it everyone's responsibility.

In 1939, the government launched the Dig for Victory campaign with leaflets and short films in cinemas encouraging people to grow their own fruit and vegetables. Any available space was used from gardens to playing fields and parks, from wasteland around factories to the edge of airfields. The

chance for people to help the war effort and their own families by growing food was massively popular. C H Middleton's BBC gardening programme, *In Your Garden*, gave people topical advice on growing food in their gardens and plots. By 1940 3.5 million listeners were tuning in to his weekly show and by 1942, over 70% of Britain listened. Growing vegetables made a significant contribution to people's rations. By the end of the war there were 1.4 million allotments producing 1.3 million tons of food.

Let's catch up with Jeremy Bracknell to find out how today's allotments compare with the Dig for Victory plots in the past.

I'm here at Edington Road allotment with Jeremy Bracknell. Hello, Jeremy.

Jeremy: Hello.

Nick: I'm hoping that you can tell us a little bit about your work on the allotment. How long approximately do you spend at the allotment, a week?

Jeremy: It's a very variable answer. So, in the middle of the winter, very little indeed. In the early spring you could spend every hour God gives down here planting, growing, weeding, planting out. Then in the middle of the summer, it dies down and basically you come down to pick. If the weather is kind, you don't need to come down to water. If the weather is unkind, you do. So, it's something like five hours a week, of that order, I would think. But it has peaks and troughs. Yeah.

Nick: So, it's seasonal. And how much land do you get in an allotment here?

Jeremy: A classic allotment is 10 rods¹, and 10 rods was assessed as being the amount of land that a family of four could grow their own vegetables on. Why that was worked out, I don't know. It's in rods because historically it always has been, as in rods, poles and perches. And you could, with careful management and the right storage facilities, be close to self-sufficient in vegetables, close to. So in my plot, I've got a four plot system, four bed system. One is potatoes. One is brassicas. One is legumes and beans and one, onions and leeks and everything else and courgettes and so on.

I grow enough potatoes a quarter of the plot to keep a family of two now in potatoes till January, February, that sort of thing. But I mainly grow them because you can't buy freshly dug new potatoes, you can't buy freshly picked peas. You can't buy runner beans almost, you know, certainly not like we grow here. You can't buy in the pod broad beans, etc, etc. So, you're doing it for the sheer joy of produce which is lovely.

Nick: Now the process of growing them is part of the pleasure I presume.

Jeremy: Yes.

Nick: And, and also the harvest and the freshness of the produce.

Jeremy: Yes.

Nick: About how much do you think of your yearly amount of vegetables that you eat, do you grow yourself? Do you still shop for vegetables?

Jeremy: Yeah, so we're currently buying leeks, but that will stop in about a couple of weeks. We aren't buying any other vegetables at the moment. Though, sporadically it, hey, it would be nice to have a cauliflower. Yeah, my cauliflowers aren't ready, so you buy a cauliflower.

Nick: Yeah. Yeah. So, it's, but it's very much supplementing your core vegetables rather than your vegetables supplementing your shop.

Jeremy: Yeah. In the middle of winter, I'll have kale, cabbages. In the spring I'll have purple sprouting sroccoli. spring cabbages, if the slugs haven't eaten them all. You can, you can go pretty well, but yeah, so I didn't mention spinach chard. That's almost all year round.

¹ A 10 rod allotment is about 250 square meters or about the size of a doubles tennis court.

Nick: Obviously during the war, vegetables grown on allotments and Dig for Victory patches were hugely important to the families that were growing them, they supplemented their rations, they allowed them to get food that they couldn't normally have got. But it's quite seasonal as you've said earlier. I know an important part of looking after the food that they got from it was preserving it, bottling it, canning it, drying it. I'm guessing if you are preserving anything you're using quite different methods today.

Jeremy: Yes and no. So, potatoes are stored in sacks. I happen to have access to a cellar, if you like, it's an underground storage system, which is what they would have done during the war. You stored potatoes in a potato clamp, you stored carrots in sand, and you can still do that. I personally like preserving things. So, I make green tomato chutney. I make Piccalilli. I do put things in bottles and don't freeze much. So mainly because the point is freshness, seasonality, and I suppose a bit using as few resources as you can.

Nick: Do you know anything about the history of this allotment? Was this allotment going during the years of the war?

Jeremy: I believe so. Yes. There are a number of allotment sites in Winchester, there were more during the war, there were a lot of allotments. So, Stanmore had allotment sites then, now they've, quite a lot of them have been built on, but any patch you could get hold of, almost, became an allotment or growing for vegetables, a bit like guerrilla gardening.

So, this site and Park Road are statutory allotment sites, which means that the local authority who owned the land have a legal obligation to provide another equivalent site, if they decide they want this one back. So, we lease it from the Council.

Nick: Is there a waiting list for the allotment at the moment?

Jeremy: There is a waiting list, yes. That again fluctuates a bit, but since I've been associated with it, in the last 15 years, there has been a waiting list. People want allotments. There's a reasonably high turnover. I say some people think it will be put the seeds in the ground and come back six months later, eat the produce, but it ain't like that. Sometimes of course, they move. Their circumstances change. The traditional, probably middle-aged, probably male, allotment holder is in a minority now. You have a range of the population as you would expect, that slice right through.

Nick: I'm wondering if this is a change or something that's a little bit different for allotments, allotment victory, kind of patcher milestones. We've got a vegetable bed, but we've also got chickens and, in the compound, next to the allotment, we've got a pig because meat and eggs are obviously, a very important part of people's nutrition during the war as well. Is that something that continues on allotments today? Do people keep chickens or...?

Jeremy: It does. Yes. Not very many, but yes it does. There are chickens on some of the allotment sites. I don't know of anybody who's had a pig because I think the regulations around that are now quite complex. I do know that somebody did keep a horse, well a pony. So, chickens, yes. Rabbits, yes. Bees, yes. Pigs, not that I'm aware of, no, but yes why not?

Nick: But you do? There's nothing in the allotment rules?

Jeremy: There is nothing in our rules that says, no, you can't keep a pig. You mustn't of course, annoy the neighbours. So, it has to be within those constraints.

Nick: So, Jeremy here is a ministry leaflet from World War II, as part of the Dig for Victory campaign, laying out a little bit of what you might grow and how you might grow it. Do you think a lot has changed?

Jeremy: No. It's remarkably similar to what we could do now and do do now. So, all the crops on here, familiar to broad beans, peas, onions, potatoes, runner beans, spinach, parsnips, brussels sprouts, kale, sprouting broccoli are all things that you could see turning your head around and looking around here now and there you are, tomatoes, those tomatoes over there, leeks aren't mentioned on here, but

leeks over there come under the onions. So yes, all the same. Yes, and it even gets into rotation, crop rotation. So that's, that's a decent, simple, sensible guide.

Nick: So, we've heard from Jeremy that not perhaps as much as you might think would change has changed in the allotments of today. They're still important for the same reasons. But we did mention in that interview pig clubs and animals for food as well. So let's go back to Milestones and meet up with Jo again. And she has got some information for us about pig clubs and how they helped people's rations go further.

I'm in Milestones museum now, and I'm in the 1940s section of the building. And in front of me, I can see our new Field to Fork World War II display. I can see our Dig for Victory patch with lots of vegetables in it. And I can see our house off to the side, but there's also something new. I'm here with Jo and hopefully we're going to talk about what we can see. So, Jo, who's this fellow, I can see just the left of the allotment? What's Wallace?

Jo: Wallace is a pig.

Nick: Ah, yes, that's right. There were pig clubs during World War II, weren't there? Ways of increasing the meat that you could get for your family. Can you tell us a bit about it?

Jo: Well, actually it wasn't a new thing because there were pig clubs in World War I. So, it's something that was being continued and some of the pig clubs actually carried on and were still going by World War II.

Originally the Small Pig Keepers Council was set up to encourage people to keep pigs in places where they wouldn't normally keep them. So, for example, on allotments and in gardens. Pig clubs were really popular in town areas as well because people could have concrete floors, the pigs didn't need grass to walk on. So they could be at the back of things like ARP stations. They'd have Pig clubs all over the place. They particularly liked the idea of getting the people on the railways to start taking, start being pig clubs as well, because, you know.

Nick: Railway sidings and stuff? Yeah.

Jo: Yeah. Places where they could keep the pigs. The Small Pigs Council was actually set up in '39 - towards the end of '39.

Nick: So what was the role of the Small Pig Council in all of this?

Jo: They basically were overseeing the setting up of the pig clubs and also giving all the information. So people who wanted to set them up, they didn't know very much, the council would give them advice. They would also do things like insurance, so that if your pig was killed, say in a bomb raid, then you would get some money back for that pig.

Nick: Excellent. Yeah, that makes sense. I think you'd definitely want insurance 'cause you; you've invested a lot in it haven't you?

Jo: Yeah, you have. But I was told a story about a family who actually were members of a pig club. They were members with some other people in the street and they had set up their Anderson shelter so that the pig was in the Anderson shelter. And if there was a raid, that's where the pig went and then both families went into the other Anderson shelter.

Nick: Excellent. That is a very protected pig. I can see where their priorities were.

Jo: As I said, they were trying to encourage people to keep more pigs. So, the pig keepers, they actually got to keep the whole pig. Which most people, when they talk about the people who had pigs in 1942, they had to start giving half of the pig away. In fact, they didn't give it away, they sold it. So, half of their pig was bought by the Ministry of Food. And it went into the food rations at that point. But before then so in '39, '40, '41 during all that period, they could keep their own pigs, or they could sell them on.

Nick: So, yeah, it sounds like half your pig was meat and half your pig was cash. I wonder if they had arguments over who got what part of the pig and how much cash you got from it?

Jo: Yeah, apparently there were some arguments because with the pig clubs, some people did more than others. Some people put in more, they put in time, they cleaned them out, they looked after them, they fed them. Whereas somebody just put their garden waste into feed them, things like that. So, there were arguments about who deserved more. And usually, the people that put in the least were the ones that wanted the most.

Nick: That's always the way.

Jo: It is. They'd have to have them for two months for fattening, the clubs would have to have them for at least two months to fatten up their pigs. And they were allowed to slaughter providing it was done by licensed slaughterer and they could kill up to either one pig every three months or two pigs every six months. And they could keep all of that or sell it, but they had to have a license to sell it on. Which brought around the problem of actually storing the pig meat. So, people had to then find ways of preserving pig meat. There are various ways to do it smoking it is one way to do it, salting it is another, cooking it and putting it in sealed jars is another way of doing it. They used to cover it with fat to actually seal the jars to stop the air from ...

Nick: Potted pork, isn't it?

Jo: Yes

Nick: Typically, who would set up these pig clubs? Is it people who live together on a street, neighbours? Is it a family? Is it a workplace? Who did it?

Jo: All of those, all of the above. Basically, if there was space and land where they could keep pigs people could get together, they would have to buy the pig. They would also have to obviously buy some food for the pig. They would actually get that through the Small Pig Keepers Council. But anybody could set up a pig club. You had to have more than five people for it to be a pig club. Other than that, then it would just be independent pig keepers. Cause you could have an individual pig keeper as well, and they could go through the Small Pig Keepers.

When they first started out, there were some worries about hygiene and sickness and several Councils refused to let people set up pig clubs on their land. So, like if it was a council house, they couldn't actually set it up on their land because they said it was detrimental to health. And they were complaining because the government was sort of saying, no, we need to set these things up. But the local councils were going well, if it was detrimental to health before, why is it not now?

Nick: That's true. Different priorities.

Jo: Yeah. So, the priorities changed. When they brought in the rationing, when the food, half of it had to go to the government, the Ministry of Food, what they actually also did, they put on other restrictions for the people that were growing the pigs, literally growing because that's what they were doing, really.

Nick: Yeah.

Jo: Basically, one member of the pig club would have to give up their bacon ration for the year, which is a lot.

Nick: Wow, so they couldn't buy any?

Jo: No, they couldn't buy any bacon. They would have that taken off their ration book so they wouldn't be able to get it. But as compensation, that meant that they were eligible for being able to buy the pig feed.

Nick: Right.

Jo: So pigs were mostly fed, this was what the big thing that really made the importance was that the pig was actually the most efficient way of turning waste into wholesome food is what the government were saying. And basically, the waste was kitchen waste, but it was things like - so you couldn't put meat and things like that into it that wasn't allowed. But things like fruit and vegetables any parts that you'd cut off and bread, bread also went in too, that was okay. And also, if you had an allotment or

you had a garden, so all the waste from the garden could go into it and then it would be cooked up with the meal to make a substantial meal for the animals. I mean, sometimes they'd just eat the raw vegetables as well. There was however, an outbreak of foot and mouth. And that was, went back to the pig swill that had been made by somebody that hadn't done it correctly.

Nick: Right.

Jo: And because of that, they then made it, you had to go and get your pig swill from a licensed pig swill maker.

Nick: That makes sense. Who knew there were such things?

Jo: Yes, exactly. I should imagine probably the people who lived near where the pig swill was being made by families were a lot happier because apparently it was awful. The smell was really bad. And so, people were quite relieved that they didn't have to do it anymore. But what they would then do is that they would also gather food from around. So even if you weren't a member of the pig club, you were encouraged to put your food scraps out into special bins that the council would put out because that would help feed pigs that were actually on farms and things like that. So it was all about using up everything in order to feed the pigs in order for them to grow in order for them to be slaughtered in order to start carry on. So, it was like a big circle, and it worked quite well. And apparently there are still some pig clubs going, although yeah, although they're sort of governed by the Small Pig Keepers Council, because that has gone.

Nick: Yeah.

Jo: And that was just there for World War II, but there are actually some small groups still, obviously they don't have to give up half of their pig for the ration. But you know, it's still something that people do.

Nick: So I hope you've enjoyed our whistle-stop tour through food in the Second World War. We've seen why there were food shortages and what the government did about it through rationing. We've seen how we handled the labour shortage on the land with the Women's Land Army, and how people came together to grow their own food through allotments, Dig for Victory patches and pig clubs.

We've seen that communities coming together to grow their own food and solve their own food problems can be as important today as they ever were. That's all from me, but to find out more about other Winchester Heritage Open Day events, this September, check out the festival website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org.

Thank you, and goodbye.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.