

20th Century Sparks!

School

School dinners

Schools were given permission to offer cheap nutritional meals in 1906. This was part of the government's drive to raise the standard of public health. Other measures, such as school nurses and free milk were also introduced to improve the health of children.

However, by 1939 some children were still going hungry or returning home at lunchtime, as not all local authorities were able to offer a meal.

On this page and on [Ha'penny milk and canteens](#), you can explore memories of the provision of school meals before 1948 in the local area of Brighton and Hove.

For further information on some key developments in education visit the [Timeline for Schools](#).

No school dinners

I started school at Pelham Street School when I was five years old. There were no school dinners in those days; every child had to go home at dinner time. School hours were from nine until twelve o'clock then from two o'clock until four o'clock for infants and juniors and four-thirty for seniors.

L. Scarborough - [Backyard Brighton](#)

Usually the children were sent home in the dinner hour and the school gates were often locked between 12 o'clock and 2pm. My sisters had to carry their lunch to school, and then at dinnertime walk to a relative's house in Crescent Road, who allowed them to eat in her kitchen.

Ruby Dunn - [Mouslecoomb Days](#)

... But in cold weather we took cocoa in a medicine bottle, which we stood in front of the fire until playtime. There was no central heating, just a coal fire, so those who got in first stood a better chance of a warm drink. Those who sat in the front of the classroom were warmer than those at the back by the windows.

Marjory Batchelor - [A Life Behind Bars](#)



Children having a picnic
George Ruff



School

School dinners - continued

.... There was the time when Mum and Dad were at work and we came out from school at dinner break. My brother Charlie and sister Ivy were playing in the street and sent me to get the dinner from the Salvation Army, which was, and still is in Conway Street nearby. It was a good soup at a penny a jug. Of course, you took your own jug!

I got home safely with it and as they were still playing I thought I should keep it warm, so I put it on the gas ring. The trouble came when Charlie and Ivy took it off. You see, it was a china jug and the bottom fell off, so it was no dinner for us that day.

Ernie Mason - A Working Man

The school was a short distance from the Soup Kitchen, and the majority of us used to walk there daily in a long crocodile, for our dinner. Ugh! I shudder even today when I remember the dinners. It would be the same day after day - stew, swimming in fat and potatoes - you were lucky if you managed to find a bit of grisly meat lurking midst the slush.

Occasionally we would get mince, but again it was sloppy and slimy and supplemented by potatoes. As it is against Jewish law to have milk after meat, thankfully we never got milk puddings. Instead we were served with stodgy suet puddings; jam, syrup or spotted dick, all of which I ate with relish, as I'd always had a sweet tooth, and these filled me up after being unable to eat the first course.

Leila Abrahams - We're not all Rothchilds



School

Ha'penny milk and canteens

Ha'penny milk

One day at school we were told that we were going to have milk at lunch. It came in one-third pint bottles, with a cardboard top and a straw. We had to pay half pence a day for it; the poor and fatherless children got theirs free. I got mine free as I was the only child in the class whose father had been killed in the war.

L. Scarborough - Backyard Brighton

Canteens

The main course meals were served from a hotplate, at which we all had to queue. At lunch times, for example, we would line up to collect our food. Once the main course was over the queue would form again to collect the sweet of the day, taking with you the dirty main course plate.

Things really livened up then. If for some reason you had not eaten any part of the main course you were not asked why, nor could you scrape it off the plate into a waste bin. What would happen is your sweet would be tipped on top of whatever you had left.

So if you left cabbage - and how many kids liked that? - you would have, say, rice pudding poured over the top of it, and made to eat it, or six of the best. Of course, unless you were stupid, there was no way that you would take your main course plate back with anything on it. If you didn't like cabbage then stick it in your trouser pocket and throw it away when it was playtime, the same with any other food, like swede, that you may not have liked. There were quite a few boys in that school that had the continuous smell of cabbage on them!

Ron Piper - Take Him Away

Free school meals

We had a free dinner given to us two or three times a week at school, and I can still see to this day little oval white things floating in the gravy which I thought were maggots, but were in fact little bits of the butter beans in the stew.

Bert Healey - Hard Times and Easy Terms

When I went to Grammar school, we were so poor that I was given free uniform, books and dinners. I still squirm when I remember how I was shown up by a teacher who made me come out to collect my free dinner tickets.

Leila Abrahams - We're not all Rothchilds