

20th Century Sparks!

World War Two

Rationing

The introduction of rationing during World War Two brought about some surprising views in retrospect. Rations were a great equaliser, as it ensured that the rich ate less and the poor ate more. Although people went hungry, historians now believe the lack of certain foods, and the constraints of 'making good', went some way to improving the diet of most people during the time.

On this page, you can explore local memories of rationing during World War Two.



Bread Queue Outside Cowley's, c. 1946
Brighton and Hove in Pictures

Rationing was brought in by the government so that both rich and poor would receive a fair share of scarce food. A flourishing 'Black Market' made big profits for some and enabled people with money to add to their rations. Rationing and shortages meant that providing food for the family became even more of a struggle for the poor, but they were now joined in this struggle by the more affluent; queuing and making the ration last the week was a great leveller.

A ration was devised with extra food for priority groups such as young children, expectant mothers and workers in heavy industry.

Michael Corum in [Brighton behind the Front](#)

Food shortages worsened and more things came under rationing. You now needed coupons or points to acquire bread and potatoes. This is where the allotment holders were better off. 'Dig for Victory' the posters said. Most of us dug for victory in our own back gardens.

Kathleen Wilson - [International Service](#)

We had a number of bombs dropped in Rottingdean. One very large one fell near the windmill. No one could eat their vegetables on the nearby allotments, because they were all covered in some kind of white substance.

Margaret Ward - [One camp chair in the living room](#)

Then sweets and chocolate fell to rationing and everyone was allowed 4 ozs. a week, or if you wanted, the coupons could be saved up so that it was possible to buy the whole month's supply in one go. That way you could buy a box of chocolates. This was a great blow if you were a sweet-toothed person like myself.

Kathleen Wilson - [International Service](#)



World War Two

Rationing - continued

Rationing of sweets concerned me, but not of soap, nor of prunes, nor was I miffed by austerity clothing, which meant, for instance, a limit to the number of pockets in a suit (said by a government minister later to have had a bad affect upon men's morale) and women having a choice of only six designs of knickers (women's morale was said by the same minister to be high).

John Knight - A Ha'p'orth of Sweets

The rations for one person, as I lived on my own, were very small. One finger of cheese for a week, and my meat ration was only enough to cover two days so I used to give it to my landlady for the Saturday and Sunday dinner. I think the rest of the week I must have lived on marmite and toast, and perhaps sausages. The offal wasn't on coupon, but anyone working in an office all day, as I did, never got any because it sold out during the week to the housewives with families, who were able to get it because they weren't working. By Saturday there would be nothing, I was permanently hungry.

Georgiana Lally in Brighton behind the Front

Clothing coupons were handled differently; if I remember correctly, we were allowed twenty of these a year. That was not so many when you come to think about it because I believe a man's suit or lady's costume took twenty coupons in one go to buy. So if you did that, it meant you passed a whole year unable to buy any more garments. It was a matter of make do and mend. Blankets did not fall under this restriction, neither did curtain material. I once bought an ex-military blanket, dyed it and made up a coat, and for the lining I used a curtain. From the outside it looked very presentable and I wore it for several years.

Kathleen Wilson - International Service

Clothing coupons were issued and much bartering went on, enabling people to get a pair of shoes, etc. Clothes were very basic: no extra buttons or trimming allowed. Furniture, known as 'utility', was the same. We lived from day to day and people were very kind and caring.

Marjorie Batchelor - A Life Behind Bars

Along with rationing of soap came the direction not to use more than five inches of water in the bath and it has been recorded by a visitor to Buckingham Palace that the Queen's bath had a line painted on it to ensure no over-filling by her maid. Following on food rationing came an order tying the customer to one shop, so a grocer who before had been all smiles and politeness was given captive customers and could become, in the words of my father who helped with the week's shopping, a "little tin god".

John Knight - A Ha'p'orth of Sweets



World War Two

Rationing - continued

The second war was very different from the first. The first was just cruel and wicked - far worse than the second. It was static warfare. The men were in the trenches without coming out, There wasn't one man who could say he was fit coming back from the first war. They were suffering from shell shock. They were suffering from gas. They were suffering from trench feet. They were suffering from every damn thing that was possible. They were absolute wrecks.

But in the second war, through it being mobile and properly organised, they came back fitter than they were when they went. They came back with bouncing health. They had food, whereas they had no food in the first war. We were starved then. In 1917 all I had for Christmas dinner was a piece of corned beef, and I was jolly lucky to get it, because they had been sinking our ships wholesale. We were starving, and we were very near to giving up. We had to queue for everything. I queued three hours to get two pounds of potatoes or a pound of sugar or a little bit of marge. The rationing that was started in the last war gave everyone a share, it was a marvellous thing.

John Langley - Always a Layman

Do you know, I think we were better off, I think today we eat far too much. My daughter and I used to share a boiled egg. One day it was my turn to have the top, the next day it was her turn. We seemed to cope all right... We seemed to get by, you know. I mean there was always bread and scrape, and a bit of jam or a bit of marmalade, but we never seemed to go particularly hungry, it's surprising how we coped.

Phyllis Turner in Brighton behind the Front

Nutritionists have suggested that the British enjoyed a healthier diet during the war than before it; those who had eaten too much were forced to consume less, while the undernourished improved their diet. Britain never suffered the inequalities of diet and malnutrition experienced in most of wartime Europe.

Michael Corum in Brighton behind the Front