

# War Time Rationing.

Food rationing was introduced in January 1940. Everybody was issued with a ration book. This contained coupons that had to be handed in to the shops every time rationed food was bought. As well as the basic ration everybody had 16 coupons each month that they could spend on what they wished. This ensured that everyone was able to buy and eat the basic food necessary to keep healthy. Bacon, butter and sugar were among the first things to be rationed. Some foods such as potatoes, fruit and fish were not rationed. People were able to buy these things, provided they could afford them and there were supplies in the shops.

## Wartime Rationing

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The system of rationing and controls was started early enough in the Second World War to prevent the breakdown of supplies to the shops which caused so much hardship in the First World War.

Rationing was introduced in stages, and the first day that the housewife had to take her ration books to the shops was on **8th January 1940**, and so it began..

**8th January 1940: Bacon or Ham** 4 oz per week; sugar 12 oz per week (later reduced to 8 oz); **butter** 4 oz per week.

**Later in 1940: Meat rationing:** 11d worth of meat for children under 6 yrs old; 1s 10d worth of meat for children aged 6 and over, and for adults; the adult ration was later reduced to 1s 1d. (Offal was excluded, but sometimes included in the ration).

**July 1940: Tea:** 2 oz per week, (increased in Dec 1944 for the over 70s to 3 oz per week); **cooking fat:** 2 oz per week; **margarine:** 4 oz per week; butter ration reduced to 2 oz per week.

**March 1941: Preserves:** 1 lb every 2 months.

**May 1941: Cheese:** 2 oz per week, sometimes 4 oz, and more for manual workers; **sugar:** extra granted for jam making.

**November 1941: Milk:** 2-2½ pints per week; **biscuits:** 350 varieties reduced to just 20 varieties.

**December 1941: Dried household milk:** 1 tin per month per family; Children under 2 yrs: National Dried Milk available.

**December 1941: Eggs:** 1 per week (sometimes 1 per two weeks) plus 1 packet dried egg per month (equivalent to 12 eggs); More for children under 5 and expectant mothers.

**Points system started:** 16 points per month, covering tinned goods, cereals, rice, biscuits, etc.

Large queues formed outside any **fishmongers** shop that had anything to sell. All sorts of unknown fish were offered for sale, including great slabs of whale meat. No amount of Food Ministry encouragement could persuade the public to accept this meat-fish. Offal was sometimes available in the butcher's shop, such things as 'pigs fry', trotters, brawns, sweetbreads, ox cheek or tripe, in addition to the more usual liver and hearts. Sausages could sometimes be found; they contained a high percentage of bread, plus mysterious bits of animal unacceptable to the public as offal. A standing war-time joke was, 'do, you eat sausages with mustard or marmalade?'

The **greengrocer** also had his shortages. Potatoes were always available, as were carrots (supposed to give night vision). Onions became very scarce; they were used to add flavour to some of the less interesting main meals. Bananas and lemons were seldom seen by the majority of shoppers for the duration. The holder of a green ration book (expectant mums) or a child under 16, could, in theory, get oranges, but they were very scarce. Probably the fresh egg shortage caused one of the greatest difficulties, alleviated to some extent when American Dried Egg became available.

Households could surrender their egg ration to become **domestic poultry keepers**. In exchange for the egg coupons, they received a ration of balancer meal, which was mixed with boiled up scraps, potato peelings, etc. This was a real gamble as the amateur poultry keepers could buy poor stock, and sometimes day old chicks turned out to be all cock birds! If the egg production didn't come up to expectation, the adult birds became a

roast meal, which would have been the culinary highlight for many a day. Rabbits, which before the war were regarded as poor man's meat, now became a highly prized luxury.

Sometimes friends and neighbours got together to form **pig clubs**. The club members had to organise the collection of household waste and scraps, vegetable peelings, etc. This had to be boiled for two hours. Barley meal was then mixed with it and fed to the pigs night and morning. The pigs were supposed to be killed before they weighed more than 100lbs, but it was tempting to try and get away with a few extra pounds.

With the start of the points rationing scheme in December 1941, the housewife had some choice of how and where she shopped. This was good for her morale as it gave her the feeling that she had some control over the wellbeing of her family. She could spend the family points on necessities or blow the lot on something for a special occasion, maybe a wedding or Christmas. It is doubtful if the adult ration would have been sufficient for many workers without the supplement of works' canteens or the British Restaurants, where a good meal could be obtained for less than 1/-. For those not catered for in this way, extra rations were available for heavy manual workers.

With the start of sweet rationing (Personal points), children could give much thought to the selection of their month's ration. Many children found that their parents had suddenly taken a dislike to sweets.

**July 1942: Sweet rationing** (Personal points): 8 ozs per month, sometimes increased to 12 ozs. for short periods. Slam Bars, Eskimo Block made of "Chocolate" much sought after but now vanished.

Weddings and funerals:

Extra food rations allowed for weddings or funerals. Maximum 40 guests or mourners. Typical allowance: ¼ oz butter, 1/8 oz sugar per guest. 1 pint milk (5 points) per 20 guests

Soap rationing:

February 1942: Soap rationing: 3 ozs i.e. small tablet or ½ bath tablet per month. Extra for those with dirty jobs, and also for babies. Ration could be taken in larger amount in hard soap, or No. 2 Soap powder. Shaving soap never rationed.

The soap ration was never generous, one could just about keep clean on the ration, but it didn't leave much to do the household washing. As shaving soap was never rationed it was pressed into service as a toilet soap, but this in turn became almost unobtainable. Another item in short supply was the toilet roll, and one had to be prepared to carry one's own supply. It was reported that a toilet roll was the booby prize at a whist drive, it would have been very acceptable as a first prize.

Clothes rationing:

Clothes rationing posed more problems for all the family, the measures introduced included, men's jackets to be single-breasted with no more than three pockets, no

buttons on the cuffs, no turn-ups on the trousers, 19" leg, and no elastic waist band. Black-out material was soon covering almost as many women as windows, skirts decorated with coloured tape, black-out slacks with a curtain net blouse. Unrationed cheese-cloth and butter muslin made underwear, furnishing fabrics made dresses.

Whit Sunday 1941: Clothes Rationing: First year issue 66 coupons, 26 of them in the form of unused margarine coupons in ration book; Second issue, 60 coupons to last 15 months; 1945 issue was 41 coupons for 12 months. Clothes rationing ended in 1949.

Coupon value for men's clothes:

Jacket or blazer: 13 coupons; Trousers or shirt: 8 coupons; Shoes: 9 coupons; Overcoat or raincoat: 16 coupons; Underpants: 4 coupons; Two handkerchiefs: 1 coupons.

Coupon value for women's clothes:

Top coat or raincoat: 14 coupons; Vest or pair pants: 3 coupons; Nightdress: 6 coupons; Slacks: 8 coupons; Shoes: 7 coupons; Dress: 11 coupons; Stockings: 2 coupons; Pyjamas: 8 coupons; Skirt: 7 coupons.

Some working clothes had to come from basic ration:

E.g. Nurses uniform: 10 coupons per year.

Policewomen's stockings: 6 coupons per year.

Service blankets made dressing gowns and overcoats. Hats were almost unobtainable and head scarves became acceptable everywhere.

A surprising number of brides still managed to get married in white, friends and relations giving a few coupons, but a two-piece had to be the wedding dress of many.

The newly-weds (or bombed out) also faced enormous difficulties in setting up home. In addition to the housing shortage, the furniture allocation was very tightly controlled.

Furniture:

In 1942 docket values were issued for Utility Furniture. Newly-weds or people bombed out received 60 units plus 15 units for each child or expected child. This was reduced in 1944 to 36 units.

Some examples of furniture docket values:

Table: 6 units; Chair: 1 unit; Sideboard: 8 units; Wardrobe: 12 units; Double bed: 5 units; Single bed: 3 units; Fireside chair: 5 units; Dressing table 8 units; Bookcase: 3 units.

Linen:

Priority docket values were available for bed linen and household linen. Family and friends again came to the rescue with pieces not available on the furniture ration, for the docket values didn't allow for any purchase not vitally necessary. The bride about to set up home also found the prospect of obtaining equipment appalling, the kitchen being the most difficult, china and cutlery being almost unobtainable. Her store cupboard had to

be built up from nothing. Lucky was the girl whose wedding presents included a washing-up bowl, perhaps containing a quarter of tea, two cups and saucers and some old cutlery.

#### Clocks:

Clocks, even alarms, were classed as luxury items, so the newlyweds had to rely on the family again for some kind of time piece. To try to overcome the shortage an alarm clock in a black fibre case was put on the market in 1944. Known as the Waralarm, it was available on permits issued by employers or trade union branches to those who needed to get up between midnight and five a.m. (later extended to six a.m.).

#### Cigarettes:

A queue made up mostly of men was almost certainly for cigarettes, they were always in short supply. Brands appeared that were unheard of before the war and did not survive the peace. Most wartime smokers will remember being told by the shop-keeper "Sorry, Sir, only Walters".

#### Petrol rationing:

The final rationed item was petrol. After March 1942 there was no petrol for private motoring. Coupons were issued for business use only if no other means of transport was available. The punishment was heavy for anyone caught driving without being on the petrol-allocated route.

1940 Petrol Rationing: Basic Ration of 'Pool' petrol (No brand names in war-time):

7 Horsepower 4 gallons per month

8 Horsepower: 5 gallons per month

10 Horsepower: 6 gallons per month.

Higher horsepower: Enough petrol for 100-200 miles per month

Supplementary coupons were available for priority users.

1942: Basic ration ceased in March

1945: Basic ration restored in June.

1950: Rationing abolished.

#### Making items go further:

Some background details about coping with rationing: Most women had private wrinkles to make food go further.

- Begging for cheese rind from the grocer to use for flavouring.
- Mixing cornflour with dried egg.
- Melting the butter and spreading with a brush.
- Putting a saccharine tablet in the teapot instead of in the cup.
- Taking the cream off the top of the milk to make a small amount of butter. Blending that with margarine to deceive almost everyone.

#### Bread and cakes:

Bread, known as the National loaf, was made from grey wholemeal flour. It was never really popular, but not rationed.

It was illegal to make or sell an iced cake. Wedding cakes were often a sponge cake covered with a cardboard 'iced' wedding cake, borrowed from a baker, which had to be returned after the wedding photos had been taken. In the excitement of the moment, some couples pretended to cut the cake too realistically, with serious effect on the 'cake!'

Some American imports:

Points values were adjusted to suit availability of stocks. If the Ministry of Food had a build-up of one item, shop shelves could be cleared by lowering the points value of that item. Large tins of American sausage meat took 16 points. It could make several main meals. Two more American imports were Spam and Mor. These could be fried, eaten in sandwiches, or as a filling in a pie.

Milk rationing:

Milk rationing (Controlled Distribution) was augmented by tins of dried Household Milk, this was barely drinkable on its own, not much better in tea or coffee, but was alright for cooking. Children under two were entitled to National Dried Milk, a full cream product which was much nearer the real thing.

Other snippets:

School dinners provided the main meal of the day for almost two million children. All works over a certain size had to provide a canteen.

Most goods were sold unwrapped, the shopper had to provide his own wrapping, usually newspaper.

Average basic pay for a man in 1943 was £3 18s 6d, but for a highly skilled man working long hours it could be £15 0s 0d.

Purchase Tax was introduced in the summer of 1940. Income Tax was increased to 10/- in the pound from April 1941.

What did food cost?

What did the basic rations cost?

8 ozs sugar: 3d

2 ozs tea: 6d

4 ozs butter: 5d

4 ozs bacon: 5d

3 ozs cheese: 3d

1 lb preserves: 1/-

4 ozs margarine: 1½d

2 ozs lard: 1½d

Meat ration: 1s 10d (this would buy a small breast of lamb or two chops)

Did anything good come from rationing and shortages?

There was a community spirit abroad in the land in which help was freely given to anyone in real need. Most people developed a sardonic sense of humour, mostly at the expense of Government Ministers, or Ministries. The queueing habit was born which, fortunately, is still with us. (Witness the scramble for public transport on the continent.)

Official advice leaflets:

Many leaflets and booklets were issued during the war.

The HHA Archive holds two typical examples (kindly sent by Ron Rowland, 2023):

- ["How to keep well in Wartime", published 1943, and](#)
- ["Pocket "First Aid" Ready Reference, published April 1940.](#)

See also:

- [Second World War](#)
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