

Session Plan 9

Food and diet on the Home Front

This session explores how the First World War affected food supplies on the Home Front and the policies and practices introduced to tackle the problem.

The activities are designed to support the National Curriculums in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at Key Stage 2 and are suitable for pupils in Scotland following the broad general education phase of the Curriculum of Excellence. They are relevant for the KS2 'Local History Study' in England and Wales, 'The World Around Us' at KS2 in Northern Ireland, and support experiences and outcomes in Social Studies at Levels 2-4 in the broad general education of the Curriculum for Excellence.

The activities are also tailored for youth groups such as Young Archaeologists' Clubs, Scouts and Guides.

Session aims

- For your group to learn about the food people ate during the First World War
- For your group to consider how rationing affected diet on the Home Front
- For your group to learn how rationing was a key part of the war effort

Session outcomes

Your class or group will have learned why and how the diet of people living on the First World War Home Front was affected by the First World War. They will have explored some of the foods eaten during the war and will have been able to experiment with making and eating First World War recipes.

Resources required

The Win-the-War Cookery Book:

The full text of *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* can be downloaded as a PDF from the [Home Front Legacy project microsite on the YAC website](#). The booklet was published for the 'Food Economy Campaign' with the approval of the Ministry of Food in 1917. The booklet is now out of copyright and can be freely printed; the original file was



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kindly provided to the Home Front Legacy project by the State Library of Victoria in Australia.

Some of *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* recipes are reproduced on the worksheets (below).

Home Front Legacy – Rationing worksheet (below):

The worksheet can be used to identify which foods were rationed during the First World War.

Cooking facilities and equipment:

If you decide to create some of the recipes included in *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* with your pupils or group members, you will need to have access to safe and clean cooking facilities. Remember to:

- follow guidelines for safe handling of food;
- clearly label foods that contain allergens;
- and ensure that you risk assess your activity.

The [Food Standards Agency](#) provides advice and information about food hygiene and allergies.

Session plan

Time to talk... Begin your session with a discussion about what rationing is and why it was necessary during the First World War.

By 1917, the First World War was locked in a brutal and bloody stalemate on the Western Front throughout northern Europe. Both sides in the conflict were gaining little ground, and there was no end in sight to the fighting. The German High Command decided that they needed to try a different tactic.

Before the outbreak of the First World War, two-thirds of the food eaten in Britain was imported. This meant that the country was reliant on imported food to survive; the German army realised that if they could target Britain's supply of imported food, they could create a stranglehold and starve the British people into surrendering.



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In the words of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the Emperor of Germany, “We will starve the British people who have refused peace until they kneel and plead for it”. This new tactic meant that in February 1917, Germany began a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, attacking supply ships and merchant vessels coming across the Atlantic from North America. The German submarines, called U-boats, hit many merchant vessels. In 1917, 46,000 tons of meat destined for Britain never arrived because the ships carrying the food were sunk by U-boats. Similarly, 85,000 tons of sugar were lost to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean between February and June 1917 alone. Germany’s new tactic was working, and Britain had two options: to grow much more food or starve.

The British response was to dig up Britain! This significantly changed the landscape, and the term ‘the Home Front’ was used for the first time. Every available space was used to create allotments – the media described it as “allotment-itis”! More than 7,000,000 acres of land, including village greens, parks and railway embankments, were turned over to growing food, creating more than 1,500,000 new allotments. There was a new ‘army’ on the Home Front, the Women’s Land Army (WLA). By the end of 1917, more than 250,000 women were working on the land in Britain (alongside 84,000 wounded soldiers, 30,000 German Prisoners of War, and countless thousands of children). The women’s role was to produce food and manage farmland previously worked by men. Over 23,000 of these women were officially part of the Women’s Land Army.

Alongside the scheme to create more allotments and the Women’s Land Army, the government encouraged people to save food and reduce waste. They published *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* in 1917, which begins with an impassioned plea directed “To the women of Britain”:

The British fighting-line shifts and extends; and now you are in it. The struggle is not only on land and sea; it is in your larder, your kitchen, and your dining-room. Every meal you serve is now literally a battle. Every well-cooked meal that saves bread and wastes no food is a victory. Our soldiers are beating the Germans on land. Our sailors are beating the Germans on the sea. You can beat them in the larder and the kitchen. Victory in the food-fight will turn the scale. (Ministry of Food, London: 1917)



The biggest emphasis in *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* is on saving bread. In 1916, the wheat crop worldwide failed; coupled with the German's unrestricted submarine warfare targeting merchant shipping, this meant that wheat stocks were dangerously low. The book states, "Save bread, and win the War [...] Not a crumb should be wasted." (Ministry of Food, London: 1917, p2)

Even with the huge increase in food production on the Home Front and the campaign to reduce food waste, food was still scarce. In 1918, the government introduced rationing as a way of ensuring that everyone – rich and poor – received a fair share of the available food. People were given special ration cards that set out what a person's weekly entitlement was, and everyone had to register with a local butcher and grocer too. Sugar was the first food to be rationed (in January 1918), but by the end of April 1918, meat, butter, cheese and margarine were also added to the list.

After your class or group discussion about food and rationing during the First World War, challenge your pupils or group members to identify which foods were rationed using the worksheet (below).

Time to talk... what do your pupils or group members think about rationing? What foods would they find it hard to give up or reduce eating nowadays?

Foodie fun... using *The Win-the-War Cookery Book*, challenge your pupils or group members to work together in small groups to design the diet of a First World War family of a mother and three school-aged children for a week. They will need to plan breakfast, a midday meal, and an evening meal for seven days. Remember that they have limited quantities of some food types due to rationing and that they must restrict the amount of bread that is on their menu too.

How do your pupils' or group members' First World War menus compare with their own weekly diet? Which diet looks healthier? You could encourage your pupils or group members to use the [NHS Choices 'Eatwell Guide'](#) to compare the healthiness of their own diet and that of a First World War child on the Home Front. Are they surprised by the outcome?



Creative cooking... if you have the facilities available, you might like to challenge your pupils or group members to recreate some of the recipes. Why not put on a First World War feast for parents or friends to attend? Some of the recipes from *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* are reproduced on the worksheets (below).

Awesome allotment... a great practical project linked to food and rationing on the Home Front is to create your own class/group allotment. Can your pupils or group members research the types of vegetables that were grown on First World War allotments? If possible, it would be great to start your allotment project by turning over new ground – a bit like the millions of acres that were turned over to allotments and food production during the war. Your pupils or group should plan their planting and do the manual labour themselves (with supervision!). Monitoring and caring for the allotment can provide a rewarding long-term project, and you can encourage your pupils to keep records of plants' growth and development too. There is even scope to use the produce from the allotment in some of the recipes from *The Win-the-War Cookery Book*!

Final questions

At the end of this session, your pupils or group members should be able to answer the following questions: ***What did people eat in Britain during the First World War?*** ***How was diet affected by the war? What foods were rationed, and why, during the First World War?*** ***How was the landscape of the Home Front affected by food shortages during the First World War?*** ***How did food shortages affect the roles of women and children on the Home Front?***



Home Front Legacy – Rationing

In 1918, the government introduced rationing on the Home Front to try to make sure that everyone – rich and poor – had a fair share of the available food.

Everyone was given a special ration card, even King George V and Queen Mary! The ration card showed the amounts of certain foods that a person was allowed to buy each week.

Do you know which foods were rationed on the Home Front in the First World War?
Tick the foods in the box that you think were rationed.

Name: _____

Sugar

Potatoes

Eggs

Butter

Flour

Apples

Margarine

Meat

Fish

Jam

Onions

Milk



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Home Front Legacy – Recipes: Oatcake and Parkin

These recipes are taken from *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* (Ministry of Food, London: 1917)

Oatcake

Ingredients

One breakfast cupful of oatmeal
A little warm water
A pinch of salt

Method

Mix the oatmeal, warm water and salt together until a firm dough. Don't roll out but pat it with your hand into a thin, flat cake. Then sprinkle the top with oatmeal flour, and toast.

Parkin

Ingredients

Two breakfast cupfuls of coarse oatmeal
Six tablespoonfuls of butter or margarine
One teaspoonful of ground ginger
A saltspoonful of salt
Six tablespoonfuls of treacle
A little milk

Method

Mix all the dry ingredients together. Rub in the fat. Melt the treacle in a little hot milk and stir in. Work to a firm paste. Roll out and cut into biscuits. Bake in a slow oven.



Home Front Legacy – Recipes: Oatcake and Parkin

These recipes are taken from *The Win-the-War Cookery Book* (Ministry of Food, London: 1917)

Fruit cakes

Ingredients

One pound of dates
Half a pound of mixed nuts
Juice of two lemons
One tablespoonful of ground rice

Method

Stone and chop the dates. Put the nuts through the mincer. Mix nuts and fruit. Grate in the yellow rind of one lemon. Then add the juice of two lemons, and with a wooden spoon shape into a small roll. Finish the shaping with your hands, dipped in the ground rice. Put on a plate till the next morning, when it will be firm enough to cut in slices.

Rolled oats porridge

Ingredients

One breakfast cupful of rolled oats
Two breakfast cupfuls of boiling water
Pinch of salt

Method

When the water is boiling, put in the salt, then sprinkle in the oats, stirring well. Boil for about twenty minutes, adding more water if the porridge appears to be getting too thick.

Home Front Legacy – Recipes: Oatcake and Parkin

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Swede Soup

Ingredients

Two pounds of swedes
One carrot
Half an onion Seasoning to taste
One dessertspoonful of chopped onion Two tablespoonfuls of butter or margarine Three cloves

Method

Peel and cut up the swedes rather small; wash the carrot and cut into thin slices. Melt the fat in a large stewpan, and in it fry the chopped onion until soft, but not brown. Put in the swedes and carrot, stew in the fat for a minute or two, then pour in two pints of warm water. Add half a small onion, sliced thinly. Put in pepper and salt to taste; as swedes are sweet you can be generous with the pepper. Simmer for an hour and a half, then add three cloves. Pass the vegetables through a sieve and return the puree to the pan. Serve very hot. Cold cooked rice or lentils may be added to the soup.

Carrot mould

Ingredients

Two large carrots
One tablespoonful of butter or margarine One egg
Half a teaspoonful of chopped parsley
Seasoning to taste

Method

Boil the carrots and mash very thoroughly, add the fat, melted, the egg, well beaten, and the seasoning. Beat them all together very well, and put into a greased mould. Bake until hot right through, then turn out and sprinkle with the parsley.

Home Front Legacy – Recipes: Oatcake and Parkin

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Onion soup

Ingredients

One pound of onions
One and a half tablespoonfuls of maize, pea, barley, or oat flour
One and a half pints of vegetable stock
One tablespoonful of butter, dripping or margarine
Salt and pepper to taste

Method

Melt the fat in a large saucepan, and in it fry the onions, sliced thinly. Mix the salt and pepper with the flour, and work to a thin cream with a little stock. Put this into the rest of the stock, and put into the saucepan with the fried onion. Bring gradually to the boil, stirring to prevent lumps forming. This can be seasoned, if liked, with ketchup or any tasty sauce. Simmer steadily for at least half an hour.

Cheese charlotte

Ingredients

Half a pound of stale bread
One egg
One dessertspoonful of butter, dripping, or margarine
Four tablespoonfuls of grated cheese
Pepper and salt to taste

Method

Soak the bread in cold water for an hour or two, squeeze very dry, then mash with a fork to a smooth pulp. Mix the cheese into this, saving a little to sprinkle over the top. Add plenty of seasoning and the egg, slightly beaten. Grease a pie-dish with half the fat, put in the mixture, and press it firmly into the dish. Divide the remainder of the fat into tiny pieces, and place them round the edge of the dish. Put into a rather brisk oven, and bake until the charlotte is a nice golden-brown colour. Turn out to serve, sprinkling the rest of the grated cheese over as a garnish.

