



Meriden's First World War Centenary Commemoration 2014-2018

Country Recipes

One problem about creating the menus of yesteryear is that we may dislike it or/and the dieticians warn us it is unhealthy. In the countryside of 1914, it was designed to satisfy men and women involved in physical hard work on farms. There would be less chance to be overweight because they were using up all their calories.

Food available in the post World War Two era had not changed greatly as a result of rationing that ended in 1954. I still have my mother's last buff-coloured ration book issued in Coleshill showing her name, medical number and Meriden address. She must have put it on one side as a memento. Children's ration books were a different colour but mine is missing.

Rationing in World War One began in January 1918 and was less restrictive. Black market was rife in both wars. Mrs Milburn's Diary (she lived in a house still standing in Station Rd, Balsall Common) has details of black market transactions from the grocery stores now 'Michael's' on the corner of Meeting House Lane. Distribution in this way was similar in both wars and depended on your income and knowledge of local, illegal purveyors. It would be inappropriate for me to name anyone! The expensive black market eggs I mentioned bought by my grandfather in 1918 were probably from farms on Corley Moor where he collected rents.

Stinging Nettle and other pops:

Lant's pop was made locally in Birmingham, Coventry and when I was a child in Coleshill. Lants, once a local family, lived in Allesley and Berkswell. The owner of the Coleshill factory whom we knew when I was young lived in Hampton- in- Arden. I do not think he was a descendant.



You might wish to reduce the amount made of this by using less water or for ginger beer. Dandelion and burdock was made from the Middle Ages onwards but most of today's is an artificial product. In the past it comprised dandelion flowers and burdock root but was not made for health reasons since the 1960s. You can buy a similar bottled drink locally though it is expensive and not dangerous.

Stinging Nettle Pop ingredients: 225g sugar (8ozs); leaves from 15 stingers; 1 tbls cream of tartar; 2.8 litres of chlorine free water (5 pints); 10g (¼oz) of yeast; juice of a lemon.

Method:

Wear gardening gloves to cut the nettle stems near to the ground. Put them in a large saucepan of boiling water for 1 minute so they lose their sting.

Put all the water in the saucepan; bring to boil; add nettle leaves, cream of tartar and sugar. Put a lid on it and remove from the heat. Leave to cool then add yeast. Keep in a warm spot until it ceases to bubble vigorously, (about 2 days). Strain into a large container through a material like an old shirt. Stir in lemon juice. Put into clean, stoppered bottles. It will last for a few days. Nettles were considered good for purifying the blood each Spring.

Ginger Beer is made in a similar manner. You need to get what is known as a 'ginger beer plant'. That is not a plant but a mixture of special yeast and bacterium originally discovered in Victorian days. It is advertised on the net but I do not know which to recommend. The proportions are slightly different with about 2litres of water, 250 g sugar, a lemon and some real peeled ginger.

Barley Water: 2 tbsp. pearl barley, 1 pt. of cold water, rind of a lemon,
Boil pearl barley in water in a saucepan and throw first water away. Bring to boil a second time, until it looks milky. Peel the lemon rind and add. Strain and sweeten to taste.
I also have recipes for lemonade or orangeade.

Dinners

Poor Man's Goose: 1 lb. pig's fry**, 1kg (2 ½ lb) potatoes, a large onion, pepper and salt to taste, small amount of finely chopped sage leaves, water.

** pig's fry = pig's offal like liver, heart, kidneys, sweetbreads. This was not on ration during or after Second World War and as we in the country killed our own pigs, this type of dish was a regular favourite.

Boil onion and mix with chopped sage leaves. Cut up the meats and fry to seal them. Cut the potatoes into scallops. Layer them alternately with the meats and onion + sage mixture in a large casserole dish. Top with last of the potato and season. Cover with lid. Heat oven to 110C/225F/Gas mark ¼ and cook for 2 ½ hours. It feeds 6.

Bubble and squeak: For this dish you need cold boiled beef, chopped potatoes and left over cabbage. Seasoning: pepper and salt. Fry vegetables in butter. Fry slices of cold meat. Layer alternately the meat and vegetables to heat through.

Tea, picnics

In the 1830s, Meriden's Dr Kittermaster sketched his family enjoying picnics and a barbeques. The meat was being cooked at the barbeque on a long skewer over an open fire.

Sandwiches with popular fillings: These were mainly for better off people.

Salmon with cucumber, mayonnaise and butter: Flake the fish, add mayonnaise or tartar sauce and sliced cucumber. Alternatives to cucumber were lettuce, cresses, tomato.

Adelaide sandwiches: Spread bread with mild curry butter, use alternative layers of thinly sliced chicken and ham. Cut into triangles with crusts removed. Garnish with water cress or parsley.

Sardine and tomato: Skin and bone the fish. Sieve tomato and eggs. Spread bread with butter and layer the ingredients. Add a taste of squeezed lemon juice, pepper or vinegar



The very poor could not afford much meat:

560ml oatmeal; 1.1 litres of water, salt and butter if available. Put the oatmeal in a saucepan and add water little by little stir briskly to avoid burning. Simmer for 15 minutes stirring all the while. Add salt and butter.

Vegetable stew: 900gr of meat; 115grms carrots; 225gr turnips; any available greens; 900grms of potatoes; 2-3 onions; 680grms oatmeal; 9 litres of water, pepper and salt to taste.

Cut your meat very small and simmer in the water for 3 hours. Add sliced carrots, thinly diced turnip, sliced greens and onions, sliced potatoes. Add to the meat. Thicken with the oatmeal and cook slowly till the vegetables are cooked through. Season to taste. It can be served throughout the day and is quite balanced nutritionally. Our Workhouse records show we had the 1845 Potato Blight in Warwickshire as in Ireland. The Guardians of the workhouse sought out alternatives for the inmates.

A complete weekly menu existed for the workhouse inmates. The Guardians chose which one of about 7 they wished to implement. I have a copy in my notes of Meriden's menus from The National Archives at Kew. It was monotonous but healthier than in a very poor cottage. Special attention was paid to the elderly over 70 and the children under 10. Tenders for food were put out in the newspapers. Suppliers applied for trade. Most of the meat was suitable for stewing and the milk was usually skimmed not for health reasons; it was cheaper. One Coventry grocer Abraham Cave moved into the village when he won the contract in 1845 and opened up the present Bull's Head.

Doreen Agutter March 2014 (more recipes are available)