

RATIONS

A VERY PECULIAR HISTORY

ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE

Your Ration Book



Issued to safeguard your food supply

HOLDER'S NAME AND REGISTERED ADDRESS

COMPARE WITH YOUR IDENTITY
CARD AND REPORT ANY
DIFFERENCE TO YOUR FOOD
OFFICE

DO NOT ALTER

Surname _____

Other Names _____

Address _____

NAT.
REG.
NO.

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Date of Issue - 7 JUL 1941

Serial Number of Book

If found, please return to

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CITY OF WESTMINSTER.

FOOD OFFICE.

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The government introduced rationing at the beginning of 1940 in order to make things as fair as possible. Without it, rich people could have bought as much as they liked, and that would have left very little for everyone else.

There were, as we shall see, crafty ways of getting round the regulations, but by and large everyone suffered together.

And if they complained, there was a common, exasperated response: 'Don't you know there's a war on?'

Those queues

It's often said that the British habit of patiently and politely standing in line was learnt in wartime.

What's certainly true (it comes up in so many memoirs) is that people would often join a queue without any idea of what they might find at the end of it. Mothers would thrust money into their children's hands with strict instructions to bring home whatever they could afford.

Doing it by the book

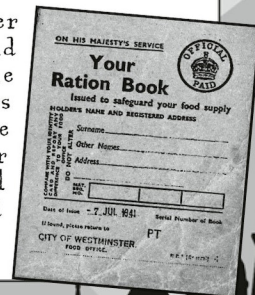
Everyone had a ration book during the war – beige for adults, blue for school children and pink for babies and toddlers. You had to register with a local grocer and a local butcher, and they were the only shops from which you could buy rationed food.

The coupons in the book weren't a substitute for money. They simply allowed you to buy your fair share – assuming that you could afford it in the first place.

The amount everyone was allowed depended on how scarce or plentiful it was at the time, which meant that the quota might vary from one month to the next.

Meat was rationed by cost rather than weight, so that you could choose between a small cut of something expensive or a joint of something cheap.

A points system covered other items, such as canned food and clothing. Everyone had the same number of points, and (as with meat) you could splurge them on something special or eke them out to buy several smaller things – if you could find them!



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And if they didn't need it? That wasn't a problem, because they could promptly sell it to someone who did – probably at a small profit.

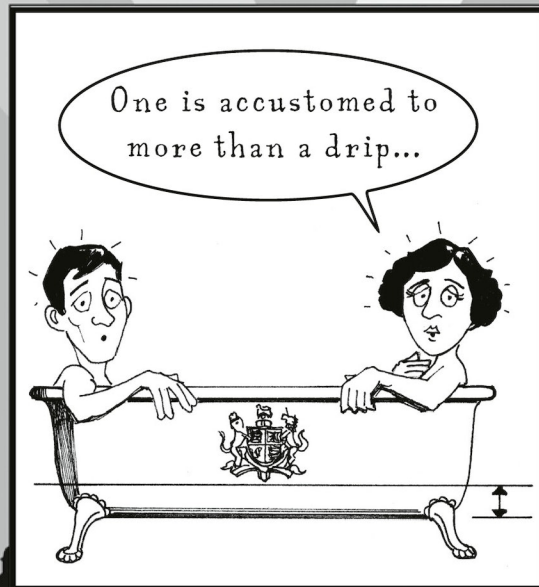
A sense of humour helped people get by. Before the war there was a popular comic song called 'Yes, we have no bananas', and during the war shopkeepers would display the title in their windows, as bananas were a great rarity for years.

One shop, still operating despite a gaping hole in the wall after a bombing raid, sported a tongue-in-cheek notice which read 'Open for business'.

A royal dribble

King George VI and Queen Elizabeth set the nation a good example by living frugally at Buckingham Palace when they could have left London and lived safely on one of their country estates.

They even had a 5 inch (12.7 cm) line painted near the bottom of their bath to show how much water they should use.



Five inches of water could go a surprisingly long way.

No, there wasn't a shortage of water, but the government had suggested that 5 inches of water was how much a whole family should use in a week – between them! – in order to save the electricity used to heat it.

We don't know whether the king and queen followed this advice and shared their puddle, but when America's First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, visited the palace in the autumn of 1941 (shortly before the United States entered the war) she was shocked by the spartan conditions in which they were living.

The bath water was shallow, there was no heating and she found only one electric bulb in each room.

Yes, there was indeed a war on – but how bad things become so very desperate?

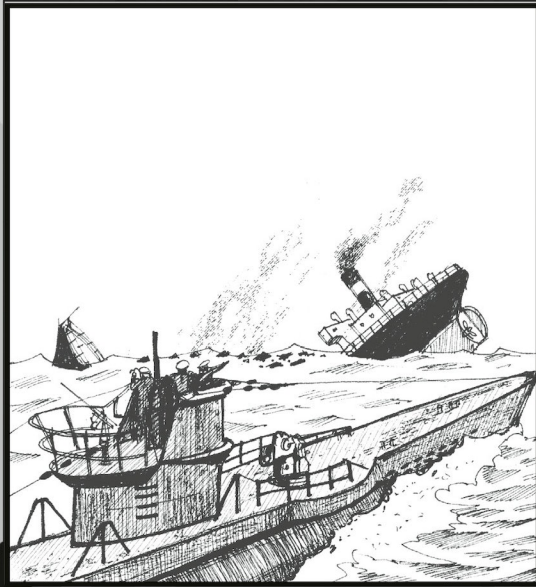


WHY WE RAN SHORT



All countries import goods they can't make or grow themselves, but at the time war broke out Britain relied on other countries to a worrying degree. More than 50 million tons of food were being shipped in every year – and that amounted to a staggering 60 per cent of everything we ate.

Being an island meant that we couldn't easily be overrun by an invading army as so many European countries were from 1939 onwards, but it also left us dangerously isolated unless we could control the seas around us.



Those waters were now patrolled by fast German E-boats carrying guns and torpedoes, while beneath the waves enemy U-boat submarines hunted our merchant vessels in deadly 'wolf packs' which would come to the surface at night to fire their torpedoes.

Many British cargo boats were needed to transport troops and to carry munitions and other material vital to the war effort. Others did continue to bring food to our shores, but in the early months of the war they were being destroyed at a frightening rate.

During the so-called Battle of the Atlantic, ships bringing food, fuel, equipment and raw materials from North America were being lost at the rate of sixty a month: the final toll was all of 2,500.

Some 30,000 Allied seamen perished while taking part in this epic struggle which was crucial to Britain's very survival.

No wonder Winston Churchill later wrote that 'the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril'.

Germany's U-boats were responsible for many sunken trade ships.