

Watercress Beds Website

Food and cooking

Teacher's Background

When our houses were new, in the 1890s, most cooking was done on a range that used coal as a fuel – gas cookers began to become available and affordable over the next ten years. There were no refrigerators and, in most local houses, water was heated in a back boiler behind the range. Bigger kitchens would contain a larder in which to store food – this was a large cupboard, sometimes big enough to walk into, set in the coolest part of the kitchen. A kitchen in a smaller house would feature only a meat safe – a wooden cupboard with a ventilated panel let into the door. A large majority of local households featured a stay-at-home wife and mother. Looking after a family and a house was considered to be a full-time job at this time. And certainly all household tasks were much harder and more time-consuming than they are today.

Most cooking was done from scratch. And with no refrigerators, either in houses or in shops, food shopping had to be done every day or two – more often in summer. The milkman would call three times a day, so that there would be fresh milk for each meal. And in hot weather, it was not safe to keep meat or fish for more than a few hours.

Tinned food such as peas, pineapple, peaches and corned beef was available. Baked beans in tomato sauce had yet to make an appearance, but margarine was in the shops – this was the hard variety.

Victorian Walthamstow could offer much take-away and street food. Queen's Road featured a fried fish shop, and there were several others in the High Street. Fish and chip and pie and mash shops were very common. And in the market there were stalls offering baked potatoes, roast chestnuts, coffee and sarsaparilla. Sarsaparilla was a soft drink, the late Victorian equivalent of coca-cola, and highly popular.



Food a hundred years ago was much more seasonal than it is now. With no air freighting and no deep freezing, no power on earth could provide even the well-off Londoner with young peas or strawberries in December. At some times of year, even fresh eggs were scarce and expensive. Food was imported from all over the British Empire, and from elsewhere, but only by ship. This meant that there was a delay of several weeks before a consignment would arrive from, for example, India or New Zealand. So tea was available, but kiwi fruit was not.

In Walthamstow as elsewhere, people from many parts of the world made their homes. And for many of them, work was in some way food related. For example, there were several bakers of German origin working in the area. And there was at least one High Street fish and chip shop run by an Italian (the fried fish and chip habit was introduced into the British Isles by Italian cooks in the 1860s. But this was before the days of mass international tourism. Few local people went further than the south or east coast of England for their holidays, and so there was not the impetus to provide exotic recipes to remind returned holiday makers of their travels.



By the last years of the nineteenth century, Walthamstow had become a densely populated but less affluent area. Few local households would include more than one servant, and those that were employed, were expected to do many household tasks besides cooking. In most cases, the house wife would do the shopping and cooking, and few had the time, the knowledge or the money do undertake anything other than very plain cooking.

Cooked breakfasts were popular but too time consuming and expensive for many people. Tea, bread and margarine was more likely. Coffee was available, but expensive and complicated to prepare. Instant coffee was not yet known. Cocoa, however, was very popular with people of all ages.

Lunch would be eaten out by working people. Commuters, especially the less well paid, might take a packed meal of sandwiches or a pie. There were no canned drinks as yet – some people took tea or cocoa in a stone bottle. For those who could afford it, there were plenty of eating houses offering a quick meal to office workers. Mass catering, in the form of the Lyons Corner House, appeared for the first time in 1909. These were the days before school lunches – most children were expected to go home at midday to eat. For those from the poorest homes, there was a soup kitchen at the Chequers pub in the High Street. Children needing free bread and soup had to obtain a “chit” from the headteacher.

For most adults, dinner was the main meal of the day. Working days were long, and commuters might not get home until 8 or even 9 in the evening – in time to eat and then go to bed so as to be up at 5.30 in the morning to catch the cheapest workmen’s train the next day. Stews, pies, made dishes such as shepherd’s, cottage and fish pies, dishes made with batter, such as toad in the hole, savoury suet puddings and, most popular of all, roast or boiled joints of meat were often served. Pasta, burgers and pizza were unknown in our area, and rice was mostly of the short grain, pudding variety. Desserts included fruit pies, sponge and suet puddings as well as milk puddings such as rice, semolina and sago.

Lot of people made their own sweets and cakes at home. Arthur Spencer (see the Spencers’ page on the website for more about him) remembered being sent out to the corner shop on a Sunday with a bowl for treacle so that his mother could make treacle toffee to add to the family’s lunches during the week. If she had extra money to spare, she would make a second batch of toffee including condensed milk. Chocolate bars were available but expensive, and usually only appeared at Christmas, Easter and for special treats.

Shopping was very different a hundred years ago. There were no supermarkets, and many different specialist shops for various kinds of food. In Queen’s Road there were at least two butchers, a wet fish shop, a baker, several grocers, a green grocer, three dairies and several sweet shops as well as an off licence and a number of pubs.. Most shops would deliver – the order had to be delivered by a letter (there were several posts a day) or a verbal message. For everyday needs, there was no necessity to go further afield, and many people did not.

There were no plastic carrier bags – everyone took their own bag or basket for purchases. And many kinds of food were delivered to the shop in large sacks, weighed out exactly and then either packed in paper bags (sugar was sold in this way) or put into the customer’s own container (items such as milk and treacle were sold like this).

Money

Money was much more complicated a hundred years ago. There were pounds (£), shillings (s) and pence (d).

There were twelve pennies in a shilling, and twenty shillings in a pound.

There were extra complications, too – the half crown was worth two shillings and sixpence, and a guinea was £1 1s.

Some food prices of around 1910 (these are local prices in Walthamstow from Arthur Spencer's memoir)

Milk 1 ½ d a pint

Bread, large loaf 2d

Mutton sausages 4d a pound

A small haddock 1/2d

A large smoked haddock 2d

Mutton sausages 4d per pound

Tomatoes in season 2d a pound

Apples about 1 ½ d a pound depending on the variety

Bargain price on a Saturday night for a large joint of beef 1s 6d (only available from about 10pm on the market - taking your chance there would be some left)

Sugar 1 ½ d a pound

Potatoes 4lb for 1d

Large bag of slightly stale cake - 6d (from 10pm at the market on a Saturday night)

Children's activities.

Activity One

You are going to do the shopping and cooking for your family. You need to plan dinner for four people, and want to make toad in the hole with cabbage and then apple sponge. The ingredients for these are

1 lb sausages

1/2 pt milk

3 eggs

6 oz flour

Cooking oil

1 cabbage

For the apple sponge

1lb apples

4 oz butter

2 eggs

4oz flour

4 oz sugar

First, list all the different ingredients you will need. What kind of shops will you need to visit? Can you buy everything in Queen's Road?

How much will your shopping basket cost?

Activity Two

It's 1910. You are ten years old, and you have a part time job helping a milk man who delivers milk, cream and butter to houses in the Queen's Road area.

You have to be ready to start work at 5.30am, winter and summer, whatever the weather. The milk cart is pulled by a horse. The milk man expects you to be there in time to help load up the milk cart. There are both big churns, for the customers who prefer to have their own jugs filled with milk, and crates of the more modern - and expensive - ready filled bottles. Milk costs 2d for a pint.

When you and the milkman are on the round, it's your job to go and knock on the doors of the houses where the customer provides a jug, bring the jug to be filled and then carry it carefully back. Or at other houses, you carry the full bottles to the door and collect the empty ones left out in return.

There is a dairy in Hoe Street with a milk dispensing machine. You put your jug underneath the tap, put a penny in the slot and get a pint of milk in return. But the shop is open until 10 at night and opens again at 7 in the morning. There's a lot a competition among Walthamstow dairies, so you have to be certain to keep your customers happy, otherwise they could well decide to leave. One dairy employs milk ladies delivering milk from a hand cart - the owner says customers prefer buying from them.

When the round is over, you have to get home in time to get into school uniform ready for the start of the school day. You sometimes get very tired, and are frightened of falling asleep in class and getting into trouble.

Write a diary entry about a morning in February 1910. There is snow on the ground and the horse is slipping about all over the place on the frozen road. Using your imagination, tell the story of the milk round. Do you manage to deliver all the milk? What happens to you, the milkman and the horse on the way? Do you get to school on time? And do you stay awake in class?