



CHAPTER NINE - FOOD

Many of the dishes our parents knew would just beat many of the young housewives of to-day, both to make and prepare, and others would be afraid of germs and poisoning if they should see them in their various states and stages. You often hear the older generation speak of the good wholesome food on which they were reared and they usually finish when on this subject with the remark, "You just don't know what you are eating to-day." I have said it myself, and sometimes thought it when looking in shop windows, but be that as it may, when you see the difference in the build of the old generation and the new, there undoubtedly is the answer, for the youngsters generally are a race of giants.

Let us take a look first at the shops, past and present and see some of the great changes that have taken place there.

The butcher, no matter how small his business had his own slaughter house, bought his own animals from various sources, sometimes from the market, sometimes from a farm direct and no one troubled such what the conditions were. The humane killer was unknown and so the actual slaughtering was done with a knife or poleaxe. Then came the cutting up process, which in country shops was usually started by hanging the carcass in the front door frame of the shop and carving right down through it.

As it was so completely a local affair, the offal was all disposed of locally and many families enjoyed the home made brawn, liver, trotters, ox tails and many other pieces which now find their way to the big pie and soup manufacturing firms, to say nothing of the sausages which really had got meat in them. The most noticeable difference is the demand for a much smaller joint, no doubt brought about largely by the rationing during two wars, and so farmer and butcher have had to produce a different type of animal to meet the modern trend of "not too much fat, please".

In the far off days before the first war, many workers were not paid until three or four o'clock on Saturdays, and shopping had to be done after this time. All shops kept open until at least nine o'clock with the butcher and fishmonger if possible until they had sold out for they had no refrigerator in which to keep their goods, and numbers of the poorer people would hang about outside the shop to see how much the prices would drop.

Many people kept a pig or two in their back gardens and there was no such thing as a registered slaughter house, and so anyone could kill a pig when he liked and either eat it all, or sell some to his friends and neighbours. Often when this happened and the butcher didn't happen to hear about it beforehand, he would buy his usual number of animals for the week and then find that several of his customers did not want their usual joint and he would be left with it on his hands.

My grandfather usually had one killed early in the season and it was quite an event to be prepared for, and a lot of hard work after the killing.

Poor piggy had to go without food for twenty four hours before meeting his doom, after which he was cleared and hung up on three poles tied into a tripod in the back yard over night to be cut up next day.

The four joints which received most attention were the hams and hands. These with the streaky were placed in two earthenware pans, and my job in coming in from school for a fortnight was rubbing in the salt, and I had to make sure that I went over every piece. At the end of the time the streaky was used as pickled pork, the hams and hands were sent away to be smoked for bacon. On their return my grandmother would stitch them up in flannel wrappers to be hung from the scullery ceiling, and then as it was wanted a piece would be cut off and the wrapper sewn up again.

What with the bacon hanging from the ceiling and the three pickle crocks under the table you were always sure of a meal.

These pickle crocks were quite large earthenware pans, holding about four or five gallons each. One would be being filled up with whatever was in season such as small onions, the tender pieces of cabbage stalk, cauliflower, runner beans and cucumber, the next one, being full was tied down to pickle, while the third one was being used from. These were real mixed pickles.

I have just mentioned the fishmonger. At this time there was no fish shop in the village, but a fairly regular supply of some kinds such as kippers, red herrings, bloaters and dried haddock were brought

around the street by an old man with a horse and van. Sometimes he would also have shrimps and winkles and he generally cleared his stock on Saturday night at a reduced price outside the Royal Oak.

This old hawker was known as Jocko, and he would have all sorts of odd things in the van mixed up with the fish. One regular box contained pins, needles, cottons, mending wool, boot laces and collar studs, while under the seat was a large sack of dog biscuits, finishing up his load with nuts, oranges, bananas or whatever happened to be in season and as he went along so he would cry his wares, "Pins, buttons and collar studs, oranges, apples, fish alive-o". Everybody would hear Jocko, and he fulfilled a very useful service.

At this period there were three other regular street vendors from the neighbouring towns who came round at set seasons. One was the muffin man who carried his wares on a large tray on his head, and as he walked along, so he would ring a hand bell. He never called at doors, but just kept walking and people who wanted his goods had to listen for his bell, and then run out and catch him, taking a plate or something to put them in for he had no bags or paper to wrap them in, and his charge, six for threepence or thirteen for sixpence.

The other two were women, both of whom used babies' old push chairs to carry their baskets. One sold bananas when they were to be had, and she was commonly known as the banana woman. The other lady trader was called Peppermint Polly for she sold peppermint essence which she made herself and sold mostly to regular customers, who used it chiefly for drinking purposes, hot in winter and cold in summer. In fact it was a forerunner of the now common cordial. In her basket she had a very mixed array of bottles, for each client had to give her an empty one of some kind ready for the next round, and she would wrap each one in a cloth to stop them from clinking together as she pushed them over the rough roads.

At the turn of the century there were still some housewives who used the old brick ovens to make the weekly batch of bread, cakes and pies. These ovens were built, mostly, at least two bricks thick all round to hold the heat, which was made by filling them with wood and setting it alight actually in the oven and then closing it with a massive iron plate. While this was burning the food to be baked was prepared.

When the fire had burned out and all was ready, the ashes were raked out and a damp cloth on a pole was quickly rubbed round inside to pick up the dust, and to put the food in a peel was used. This was like a flat long handled shovel and as soon as possible the iron plate was put back and the whole thing left until it was cool, by which time usually it was cooked to perfection.

Gradually this way of baking disappeared as competition grew between rival commercial bakers, mostly small family concerns, and

clothing, to a very large extent these trades have parted company, and most grocers have added fresh fruit and greengrocery to their business, and because most people have more money to do with they find that this makes life much easier than working for it in gardens and allotments as our forefathers did.

Refrigeration has made a tremendous difference with food of all kinds. Most grocers have a deep freeze cabinet in which a very wide assortment of goods is kept, a great many in small portions for those living alone, and all quite easily prepared for the table so that the one time familiar cry about all the trouble of getting a meal for one, no longer exists.

While on the subject of freezing, how the popularity of the ice cream has altered in the past fifty years, from a rare luxury, nearly always associated with Italian vendors, to real big business, both in shops and in the street by motor vans with their musical chimes to let you know of their presence in the vicinity, and wherever there is a gathering of people you are sure to find ice cream on sale in some form or other.

There is one thing missing in our village at the moment, which when taking the country as a whole, is regarded by foreign visitors as a national food, and that is a supply of fish and chips. Many have tried to establish themselves as purveyors of this tasty product, some in shops and others with mobile fish vans, but somehow or other none has been able to carry on for very long.

Food and drink seem to go together, and so let us give a little thought to drink. I have no doubt, if figures could be found, that the demand for the cup of tea has gone up by leaps and bounds. Apart from the cups that we have at meal times, there are the many odd ones taken in between and the thermos flask has completely changed the way in which it is used for work and picnics. In days gone by it was a common thing to see a workman with his enamelled billy-can with its cup lid or a bottle which contained cold tea with plenty of sugar and no milk. In many households, in hot weather this drink was made in a large jug for anyone to help themselves, in much the same way as cordials are used to-day, and if you have not tried it you would probably be surprised at the flavour of this fine thirst quencher on a hot day.

Coffee and cocoa still have their place in pleasing the palate and quite a number of homes still have their jugs of lemonade, made with real lemons, and perhaps a little pearl barley.

The art of making home made wines is still carried on by many people and in some quarters keen competition goes on to see who can make the most potent of these usually very tasty luxuries, using all sorts of fruit, vegetables, flowers and even bramble tips to make them with. When drinking them it is almost fatal to mix

them, for if they are kept for any length of time they become most intoxicating.

What of the drinks sold on licensed premises? There have been two great changes in these, one, the number that are now sold in bottles and cans, whereas in the past, even wines and spirits were supplied in casks, and racked off on the premises. The other great change is the price, most of which goes in taxation. Just you fancy! In pre 1914 days a bottle of whisky for three and sixpence, or a pint of mild ale for twopence. This may be one way of looking at things, but I believe that the rate of drunkenness has fallen comparably with the rise in prices.