

Wartime Food at Chailey

Looking back to my war years at Chailey Heritage, now known as the Chailey Heritage Foundation, it seems that Chailey had a thing with children who wouldn't eat their food. I had the experience of having to remain in the dining hall at St Georges until I finished eating my pudding. On this occasion it happened to be sago, the most revolting looking comestible ever put in front of a child on a plate. As I recollect it was twice the size of frogspawn, but with a similar consistency, and it would wobble and quiver each time I approached it with my spoon. I'm sure it was sentient.

Of course, my experience occurred in wartime Britain, with food rationing in place and the Merchant Navy risking their lives bringing in food while avoiding German submarines to get it here. I can quite understand not wanting to waste food and the need for discipline but, as a stropky child, I couldn't understand that and, even if I had, I would still have spooned it into my pocket for later disposal down the dykes. (Toilets for the uninitiated.) Release from my misery of staring at a plate of sago that stared back at me, came after an hour or so when a voice from above shouted my name. I looked up, it wasn't God, it was in fact Mr White, the house master, looking down at me from the balcony. It was obvious that he saw what I was doing but, taking pity on a wretched child searching desperately for a way out, he gestured me to go. I made it to the dykes in record time where I gingerly removed the loaded hanky from my pocket from where I had hastily squelched it just a few minutes previously, and watched anxiously as its slimy contents slithered its way to the S-bend with the first flush of the chain.



Mr White (left) at his wedding to Matron. Best man on the right.

Also, at that time someone had invented something called Margarine which came to replace Butter. It had a slight acidic whiff about it, as though it had been drained from a car battery, and tasted of sour milk, of course it had to be mustard yellow, and everybody hated it. Today it is called Spreadable Butter. It looks like butter and tastes like butter, which is a great improvement on drained car oil.



The Dining Hall St Georges

Then again, as a wartime child, I had never seen or tasted an orange or a banana. In fact I can't recall ever hearing the word banana mentioned until one particular day. An announcement was made from the platform during meal time that we would be having a Banana for pudding. A buzz of excitement went round the dining hall from 150 disabled kids who didn't know what a banana was. We didn't have to wait long, the plates came out of the kitchen on trolleys and were passed along the row of tables, and there on the plate was a desiccated banana. Well, desiccated or dehydrated, I'm not sure which, but whichever it was it had been reconstituted. It had been peeled and, as it lay on the plate it looked like a strip of black rubber. It had lost its banana shape, so that it was now square and straight, and glistened from where it had gone through some culinary process. The miracle was, as I recognised some years later having eaten my first real banana, it actually tasted like a banana.

Something too had happened to eggs. I don't know if the hens had been shocked by the Blitz raining down from German bombers, but eggs now looked like pancakes. Yep, they were flat and, if you put one side by side with a real pancake, it would have been difficult to tell the difference. Eggs had been dehydrated and turned into powdered eggs. They too needed to be reconstituted as we do with packets of mash potato from Tesco, yet again the funny thing was they tasted like real eggs.

It is difficult to recall those days without thinking how modern-day society would cope without having everything on instant demand. Even sweets, clothes, toys, everything, was on ration. Ration books were issued filled with coupons enough for a month's supplies. Coupons would be given up for a couple of ounces of sweets to last a month. My grandmother would send my ration of sweets and her own, each month, in a Shredded Wheat box. I would receive the parcel and be allowed to open it, but the sweets would be taken away to be shared out amongst the school with everyone else's. That way children who didn't get parcels would have a share of the sweets.



Looking back at those war years as a disabled ten-year-old, I now realise how my life had been shaped not just by my disability but also by the circumstances and conditions by which I was surrounded. Food rationing was a necessity created by the conflict of war, but it was the small things, when repeated at the same time every day for the endurance of my ten years, that created a void in my existence when eventually it was time for me leave Chailey. No longer was I required to line up in my house group on the playground, to march in silence to take my regular place at the table in the dining hall and, once there, to say grace before the commencement of the meal. There were many daily rituals that needed to be performed for the smooth running of things at St Georges, and it was this environment that fashioned my personality over time. I needed to make big adjustments to my perspective of what I called civilian life. Eating a meal at the table with my grandmother was an entirely different experience from sharing a disciplined approach with 150 other disabled children.

Getting away from Chailey, I can also remember the introduction of another dislike of mine which was the evil smell of a dead fish, namely that of yellow smoked haddock, quite vividly. Although I don't think it was at Chailey. I think that would have been a luxury item in wartime. So possibly it was when I moved from living at my grandmother's, after leaving St Georges, to moving in with my new stepmother, after my dad's second marriage. I can remember the smell when I sat facing the shape of a yellow haddock with a large lump of melting butter sliding slowly down its fishy shape. It carried the smell of next door's tomcat. But one didn't question the culinary delectables of a brand-new stepmother. So I ate it, while stifling my natural desire to gag on every mouthful. I have never eaten haddock since, not even with a soft poached egg perched on top.

It's funny how all these Chailey memories rise to the surface seventy years later. But, on the whole, I didn't dislike Chailey's war time food. The brown bread was a bit on the rough side, roughage being the operative word, but I liked it for breakfast with lashings of beef dripping, especially with a hint of gravy forming a jelly-like residue to the dripping, sprinkled with salt. I loved it. Generally speaking, today's food is much more processed than I can remember it being during my childhood. Back then it appeared to be more substantial and wholesome. The bread we eat today is so much lighter and less filling, although there is a greater variety and so much more choice. There was no sliced bread in my young days, it was all loaf bread delivered to the house by the local baker. The breadboard and breadknife took centre place at the tea table, and two or three slices of bread and jam was a substantial meal. It was not uncommon either to have bread and beef dripping for breakfast. It's only with hindsight and my knowledge of the war years that I can now really appreciate the everyday challenge faced by the staff at the Heritage in caring for 150 disabled children and express my gratitude to all the names that flood into my mind from those tumultuous days.



Jack Top Right