Rationing and digging for victory

During the Second World War, serious food shortages led the British Government to establish a strict program of rationing. The threat of enemy forces meant that the seas around the British Isles were dangerous and, as a result, imported food was highly restricted. In addition, manpower and production at home were diverted into the war effort.

The government therefore implemented a rationing system, ensuring that key goods were shared out equally. Every adult in the country was issued with a ration book. Rationed ingredients included fresh meat, cheese, sugar, butter, jam and tea - even sweets and chocolate. Queues outside grocers and butchers were common - a British housewife might wait hours outside her local grocer just to get a small bag of onions. Ingenious recipes suggested ways to imitate unavailable foods - flour, water and vinegar were mixed together to make mayonnaise for instance. It was not uncommon for people to eat powdered egg or tinned meat - even on occasion horseflesh and whalemeat.

Healthy eating

Amazingly, however, the war years were a period of greatly improved nutrition for most people. Indeed, many were healthier than they had ever been before. During the First World War, the government had been shocked to find that 40% of 2.5 million men tested were unfit for military service - mainly due to malnourishment. This led the government to invest time and money into dietary research and, over time, public awareness of nutrition-related issues has spread. The outbreak of WWII sparked similar concerns, and the Ministry of Food was established to deal with the problem.

Government measures

The ministry set up a wide range of schemes. These included giving free milk to school children; establishing public canteens, restaurants and school kitchens to ensure most people ate at least one healthy meal a day; administering advice about healthy and affordable eating and spreading information and advice about growing your own vegetables. Slogans like 'Dig for Victory' and 'Make Do and Mend' appeared on posters all over the country, and became watch words of the nation’s war effort.