A Little Chopped Parsley!

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THREE MEALS a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, multiplied by the number of inmates in prisons, borstals and detention centres works out at approximately thirty million meals a year, and may perhaps give some idea of the magnitude of the task allotted to those concerned with the feeding of the inmates. It may come as a surprise to know that we provide and cook in a year some 670 tons of fish, 1,000 tons of meat, 5,000 tons of potatoes, 5,000 tons of bread (mostly home-baked), 1,000 tons of cabbage and tons and tons of oatmeal, cheese, pulses and home-made jam, and perhaps most surprising of all we use 7,500 gallons of vinegar. The quantities quoted are not intended to interest the commercial caterer, whose motive is that of profit, but such huge quantities of food are sure to leave an impression on the layman whose only connection with food in any quantity is the capacity of his individual stomach.

There are times when instances suggest that all may not be well with inmate feeding, but how many people in free life have any idea of what is the standard of meals, or if there is anything really to complain about? Those familiar with inside conditions know there is not. Do people in free life, who read or hear of these incidents and perhaps criticisms, think in terms of smoked salmon and peche melba and consider that inmates should receive such dishes? Or do they think in terms of bread and water, and believe that bread and water is all that they should receive? Should prison food be as good as or better than the working man's domestic fare or should it be on a par with a five-star hotel?

Let us admit that before the war the food provided for inmates must have been on the verge of being punitive. Breakfasts never varied, and merely consisted of bread, margarine, porridge and tea year in year out. The dinner meal was of the most simple kind consisting of sixteen different meat and vegetable combinations and served with monotonous repetition each cycle of twenty-eight days. Treacle pudding as a sweet course was the only sweet served, and this never more than three times in the twenty-eight days. The supper meal, served at about 4.30 p.m., never varied and consisted of bread, margarine, cocoa and cheese, and that was the last food or drink served until breakfast the following morning. Every

item of food served in those days had, by law, to conform to specified weights and measures, and the method of distribution was the most primitive and very much in keeping with the silence, no smoking and rigid discipline of those days. The dinner meals were served in a two-part cylindrical aluminium tin. The upper part fitted into the lower. The lower would contain the main part of one of the statutory meals, say, Irish stew, and the top tin would contain steamed unpeeled potatoes, the combined weight of both would be twenty-three ounces. In the larger prisons, it was necessary to commence weighing and portioning the food into the tins at 8 a.m. to be ready by serving time at 12 noon. They were then packed into wooden trays which held about twenty tins and both trays and tins were stored in primitive steam-heated hot closets until serving time. At noon dozens of inmates would be escorted by officers to the kitchen to collect the counted dinners, so many to each wing, according to the number of inmates. It usually took five people to serve one tray — two inmates to carry the tray, one officer to unlock the cell door, one officer to hand the tin of food to the occupier of the cell and another officer to lock the cell door. Once the food was in and the door locked, if he wished to complain about it or to question the weight, he had to do so at once and to leave it untouched until it was weighed in his presence. If his complaint referred to the quality of the food, it was examined by the medical officer as soon as possible. It can be imagined, therefore, that as the meal had to be uneaten in order to complain about it, complaints were not numerous.

With the outbreak of war and introduction of national rationing, it was necessary to break away from the rigid set dietaries, but nevertheless the meals followed the same pattern until rationing ended. There was little alternative. The knowledge of the cook was limited, as indeed was the cooking equipment.

The year 1948 brought a few changes in the dietary scales and gave some latitude to the cook, and as a first step a sweet pudding was introduced with the dinner meal. However, because the dinner tin in which the food was served had only two compartments, there was, of course, nothing to serve the pudding in, and there was no alternative but to give each individual his portion of pudding in his bare hand! At this time a new method of distribution came about. Instead of officers serving food at cell doors, serving points were introduced at strategic positions in the hall or wings, and inmates were given their individual tins of food to carry to their cells. It was a common sight to see a man eating his portion of pudding on the way to the cells, and many of them had consumed it before they got there. There was only one plate in each cell, and if the main course was tipped from the tin on to the plate, the pudding (if not already consumed on the way) had

to be placed on the cell table until the main course had been eaten. Some inmates would save the pudding to eat later in the day. At a little later date, some addition to the bread at supper time was provided — this took the form of cheese or meat savoury or jam, or perhaps a bun or sweet cake of some description, and this innovation caused some consternation to many of those whose duty it was to serve these extra items.

Tea now replaced the cocoa for the supper meal, and the cocoa was served, as it is today, later in the evening. Our cook officers were beginning to acquire a completely different outlook on inmate feeding, but their endeavours were somewhat baulked by the limitations imposed by the cylindrical tins and the lack of kitchen equipment and machinery. Gradually, as time went on and as funds permitted, modern kitchen equipment was made available. Refrigerators, slicing machines, vegetable preparation machines, automatic bread slicers, general purpose mixing machines and power operated dough mixers all found their way into the kitchen. Fresh fish was introduced on the scale of rations; this created the necessity for the provision of fish fryers.

Then came a remarkable change. The cylindrical tins were replaced by a four-compartment plastic tray which enabled the cook officer to provide a greater variety of meals from the authorised rations. These trays created quite a sensation and placed a completely new look on inmate feeding. The midday meal now comprised three courses — soup, main dish with vegetables and a sweet pudding. A freshly baked bread roll was now introduced to be served with this meal, and the entire meal was served cafeteria fashion at strategic serving points. No longer was it necessary for an inmate to accept what was given to him with no opportunity to refuse food not to his liking or palate, and if he had a grievance about his food, the matter could be attended to at once. The plastic trays have now been replaced by stainless steel trays with soup bowls.

Attention was then turned to breakfast. Hitherto, for perhaps one hundred years, porridge and bread was the only item allowed for breakfast, but now a second course to the porridge was made possible. Sausage or bacon, or marmalade, or some made-up dish is now generally served at breakfast time. Further improvements to the supper meal were also made and today's supper meal might be fried fish and chips or cheese and salad, or a made-up dish of some kind. The salad consists of shredded cabbage and other root vegetables from the authorised ration, together with (occasionally) fresh tomatoes. Attention was next turned to the bread ration which inmates received in definite weight quantities whether they wanted it or not and this, unfortunately, at times led to excessive waste. Today bread is almost unrationed and, apart from the roll with dinner, is sliced by automatic machine, and inmates in many establishments are allowed to help themselves to what they want. Those who need

it take plenty, and those whose need is not so great take less. In other words, inmates take what they require, and as a result there is very little waste. The ration to the institution as a whole is not exceeded, and in many instances it is below the authorised scale.

Dining in association came into being and has been extended to the limits which space will allow. Inmates can talk freely and discuss topics of interest with their table companions. The tables are furnished with condiment sets and in some instances flowers are arranged and add to the decor of the surroundings, giving an appearance of interest and pride shown in the dining arrangements.

The diets had never in the history of prisons contained any fresh fruits, but this was altered and Governors are authorised to spend fourpence per head per week on fresh fruit. Inmates enjoy the occasional orange or banana or apples, and the tomatoes provided under the allowance add attractiveness to salads and various cooked dishes.

Hospital diets, as with ordinary diets, were limited in variety. There is no hospital diet as such today. Sick inmates receive the normal meals issued to the prison as a whole, plus whatever additions or special items the Medical Officer recommends, and much thought, care and attention goes into the preparation of invalid foods.

Packed lunches for outside workers have also received attention, and a cash allowance is authorised to provide items of food which are suitable for sandwich fillings. A far better packed meal than hitherto is now possible.

To indicate the advances made to improve inmate dietaries, a comparison of meals served in 1939 and 1959 is given below:

1939			1959	
Breakfast: (without any variation)	Tea	1 pint	Breakfast:	Tea
	Porridge	½ pint		Porridge
	Bread	6 oz.		Bacon, fried bread
	Margarine	½ oz.		Bread
				Margarine
Dinner: (one of the 16 varieties)	Haricot mutton	25 oz.	Dinner:	Vegetable soup
	Bread	2 oz.		Meat pie
				Cabbage, Roast potatoes
				Fruit pudding and custard
				Bread roll
Supper: (without any variation)	Bread	8 oz.	Supper:	Tea, Bread
	Margarine	½ oz.		Margarine
	Cocoa	1 pint		Fried fish and chips
	Cheese	1 oz.	Evening:	Cocoa and Savoury filled roll

To give an indication of what can be produced from the present-day rations, the following meal, which was not a special occasion, is known to have been actually served for supper in a prison:

Hors d'œuvre
Grilled mutton chop,
green peas and chips
Apple pie and custard
Bread and tea

Inmates' rations are centrally controlled and every item of food is on a strict ration basis. These, and the varying scales for the different categories of inmates, are carefully compiled having regard to the climate, age and labour factors to ensure adequate nutrition. It is common knowledge that practically every inmate adds to his body weight whilst in custody.

Officers in charge of kitchens with a flair for this type of work are trained in our own cookery school. The cook officer is taught to plan the menu and convert the rations into a variety of meals at his discretion, and it is necessary for him to be ever conscious of the importance of good food attractively served and to recognise that good food is the basis of good health. In no walk of life outside the prison are the efforts of a cook more criticised. He has to satisfy the inmates all of the time and he is well supervised. The Governor, Medical Officer, Steward, Visiting Officers, Visiting Magistrates and Committees are all interested in the food, and the cook has to satisfy them all. Nowhere else can it be said that food is so important as it is to a prisoner.

It must be remembered that the majority of our prisons are among the oldest of public buildings and the problem of introducing up-to-date methods to provide proper and adequate catering facilities is very real. We try to meet ever increasing demands consequent upon the rising population and to improve our standards. The cooks possess a good knowledge of their job and apply it with enthusiasm and above all display a spirit of service to a public which is not always appreciative.

The question posed is, is there anything wrong with prison food? Is it desirable that the diets should contain elegant gastronomical fare, or should it be as it is, well-balanced, well-cooked, plain, wholesome and served in as attactive a manner as facilities will allow? (It is surprising what a little chopped parsley can do to enhance the appearance of food.) The answer must be "no" to the gastronomic fare. There have been so many improvements in prison food in recent years. Indeed, it has been written that one of the most outstanding improvements in prisons in recent years is the food, and inmates really have not much to complain about.