

Wolverley School Meals

Today we see and hear so much on our TV's about children eating healthy nutritional food in our schools. TV chef, Jamie Oliver recently started a campaign calling for better meals to be served in schools throughout the country. I wonder what children today would say about the dinners served in Wolverley nearly 70 years ago. Could these children really have been the very first to eat school dinners in this country so many years ago?

On Saturday 2nd December 1939, the Kidderminster Shuttle reported;
“Kidderminster Rural District Council was informed at its meeting at Land Oak House, on Tuesday afternoon, that the system of communal feeding at Wolverley Elementary School had been responsible for less evacuees returning home from that parish than any other part of the rural district.

According to the Sanitary Inspector (Mr. R. S. Porter), the scheme was believed to be the first of its kind in the country, and certainly the first in Worcestershire.”

Mr Porter went on to reveal some interesting facts and figures to the member's of the council who were present at the meeting. A total of 254 evacuated children had arrived in the district since 2nd September 1939. Each one of them had been found adequate accommodation by local families. Originally 83 of them had gone to Wolverley, where 48 still remained. Meanwhile the neighbouring village of Cookley had originally received 47 evacuees; but only 15 of them remained now. The Chairman, Mr. Beeston, agreed with Mr Porter, the reason why so many children had stayed in Wolverley was because of the new system of communal feeding at lunchtime. They both felt that the school's Headmaster, Mr. S. L. Jarvis was largely responsible for the scheme and its current success.

Not only was Mr. Jarvis the headmaster at Wolverley School at that time; he was also the village's billeting officer. It's believed that the first group of evacuees that came to the village during those first few weeks of the Second World War were from the Uplands School in Smethwick. Arrangements were made for these children to continue their school work in the village's former school buildings, the Sebright Room. With very few facilities, mid day meals obviously became a major problem. By the 16th September a scheme to provide a mid day meal for the evacuees was being considered. On the 30th September, the Kidderminster Shuttle told its readers,
The communal mid-day meal at the Wolverley Sebright Elementary School is now working smoothly and giving satisfaction to all concerned.”

At the end of the mornings lessons the children from the Uplands School would walk the short distance to the Elementary School. There they would sit at the tables in the Domestic Centre especially arranged for them. They weren't the only ones to benefit from the meal as they were joined by many of the local children also. Miss M. Lyons, the domestic subjects teacher from Smethwick was in charge of the catering. Miss M. Kirkman, the domestic science mistress from Worcestershire County Education Department, also helped her for three days a week. Three local women who had volunteered helped them for those first few weeks. Miss Lyons also intended to get about ten of the older girls to help as soon as she could. She hoped they would take turns by helping to prepare vegetables, serve the meals and wash up afterwards. Many of the local householders and farmers were quick to support the scheme by providing locally grown fruit and vegetables for Miss Lyons to use.

Even in those days a small payment was required for each meal. The household where the evacuee was billeted was responsible for the payment. Its not clear if this money could be claimed back, this enabled the household's own children to have a school meal as well.

For just 1s – 6d (7 1/2p) a week, the children enjoyed the following menu;

- Monday; Brown stew, mashed potatoes, carrots and turnips.
Sweet; Stewed damson and custard.
- Tuesday; Hot pot, of carrots, turnips, onions, potatoes and meat (placed in
layers and stewed in the oven).
Sweet; Sultana pudding with fruit sauce.
- Wednesday; Fish cakes, mashed potatoes and parsley sauce.
Sweet; Rice pudding.
- Thursday; Baked rabbit, beans and potatoes.
Sweet; Steamed syrup pudding.
- Friday; Cottage pie and lentil soup.
Sweet; Semolina pudding.

A local newspaper asked one Wolverley lady for her views a few weeks later;
“The entire working and great success of the scheme is due to Mr. Jarvis and Mr. R. S. Porter, aided by the splendid co-operation of the Smethwick people. The children are happy and contented, clean and healthy, and judging by present appearances, would gladly remain at Wolverley for the duration of the war.”

Unlike the children of today, those who ate these meals had two choices, simply eat what was put in front of them or go hungry. For them there were no fast food shops such as burger bars and fish and chip shops just round the corner from the school gates. Did this simple but plain old-fashioned cooking do them any harm?

Mike Webster.