

TfL Corporate Archives Research Guides: World War II 75th Anniversary Edition

Feeding the Workforce during WWII

What does it take to feed a workforce during a war? Using original material from the Corporate Archives collections, we shed some light on how the London Passenger Transport Board did it...



Wartime Farm Products, JR Eyerman, June 1942. Courtesy of the LIFE Photographic Collection.

Under the strenuous conditions of war, the canteen service became vital. By 1939, the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) had built up a well organised system of canteens for staff at depots, garages, works, and at places where meal reliefs were taken on the road.



With the outbreak of war special emergency arrangements as well as a great expansion of the canteen facilities became necessary.

Emergency field kitchens were constructed at all canteens, in case of gas and water supply issues. 70 blast proof equipped shelters enabled a refreshment service to be maintained during the air raids. The number of canteens was

Article on farming practices at Brockley Hill Vegetable Farm, which supplied London Transport's Canteens, June 1941. Archive ref num: LT000030/078

increased from 113 to 150, employing 1,930 staff.

To supply the increased number of canteens, farms were established at Brockley Hill, Little Bushy, and Staines.

By 1943, 130 acres of farmland (spread over 5 farms) was supplying over four fifths of all the food required by the canteens. To cater for the canteens, 12,000lb of vegetables were needed for harvest each week.

YOUR MEALS IN 1943

' Bless Thy good creatures to our use . . '
—from a 17th Century meal-time grace still current.

UP to three years ago a harvest home within London Transport could have been but the dream of a nostalgic countryman here in exile. But the necessities of war mothered a farm, or rather four farms, 130 acres in extent, and now these grow four-fifths, or more, of all the vegetables served in our 137 canteens. It was the third season, that of 1942, and the best ; and to celebrate the in-gathering of the crops the workers, led by the farms manager, Mr. W. E. Gurden, had a festive dinner together for the first time.

A representative company gathered under a genial chairman, Mr. H. J. Green. He was supported by Mr. J. H. Condy and Mr. C. E. Dunton and, as guests, by Mr. G. H. Brooks and by colleagues of the catering and audit departments.

Three of the farm staff present were women trained for other pursuits : Miss Muriel Harris, poster artist, Miss Phyllis Hutton, an Oxford Street chiropodist, and Miss Joan Kellock, a clerk. They are no fine-weather farmers : and they do all jobs, from spreading manure to cutting cabbages.

Even the men (many of them) have forsaken transport for the older industry. There is a tram ganger, big-shouldered Jim Gordon, who is 65 but lifts a 1-cwt. sack easily : they say he used to perform strongman weight-lifting on the stage. Charlie Passey, one-time platelayer injured in London Transport service, used to keep our gardens gay and now plants and picks our greengrocery ' with the best.'

No harvest songs, no ' John Barleycorn,' enlivened the dinner, but there was good fellowship, and thanksgiving too, to preserve harvest home traditions. The chairman toasted the Farms and Mr. Gurden replied ; ' The Farmers ' was given by Mr. Dunton, who started, and still administers, the venture, and Mr. T. W. Montgomery in reply thanked the chairman and Mr.

Dunton for their hospitality ; Mr. Dunton called upon Mr. Passey to propose ' The Ladies ' and Miss Harris responded for them ; Mr. Condy proposed ' The Guests,' and their spokesman, Mr. Brooks, praised the quality of the farm produce and mentioned that Lord Ashfield derived much pleasure from his visits to the estates.

New Way of Planting

All of you who eat in the canteens will endorse that praise. We owe an abundance of fresh supplies to the farms. They yielded 400 tons of potatoes last season ; nearly 9,000 lb. of tomatoes grew to perfection on what, until 1939, was our nursery for the shrubs and flowers of our lawns and embankments ; at the height of the season the output of cabbages was 1,500 bags (30 lb. each) a week.

On farms in the Elstree district big-scale planting of spring cabbage was never done until London Transport began to plant for victory : the plant would not have a chance in the cold and wet of an ordinary winter (1941-42 was worse than ordinary).

Yet our crop was excellent. Why? We used a new method of planting. Every plant was given deeper root-hold and kept high and dry. It was done by ridging, a practice introduced by Mr. Gurden.

If war founded the farms, the blitz gave them buildings : stables and store sheds were built, and roadways laid, with the salvage of wrecked premises nearer town. This was poetic justice, because here and there the land dips sharply into enemy-bomb craters.

Plans for 1943? Still more greenstuff. The canteens want 12,000 lb. a week, because it will be fresh—it will have been cut a few hours before boiling. Besides, the crop is always a perfect one : it's the cabbages of small shut-in gardens that attract the caterpillars—our land is high and open, the clean wind sweeps it.

No wonder, with such a record of success, our farms look forward to better crops still, in 1943 !

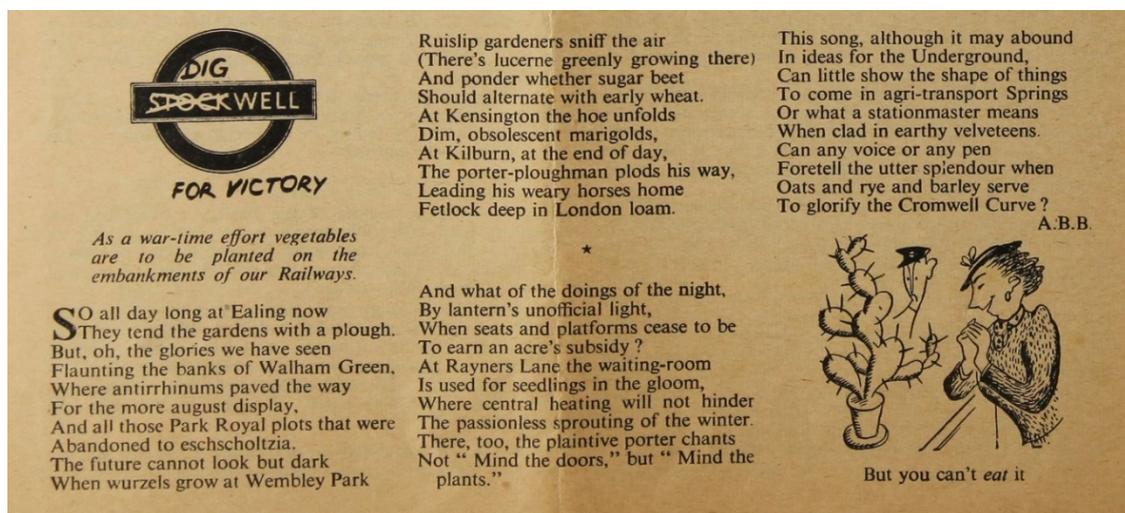
By the end of the war, over 100,000 meals were being served daily in the canteens, using 5 cows, 30 sheep, 4,000 dried eggs, 100 sacks of potatoes,

130 sacks of cabbages, 30 sacks of flour, 1,200 loaves, 1,600 gallons of milk, 105,000 cups of tea, and 63,000 cakes!

LPTB helped with the 'Dig for Victory' campaign

It turned over free land including railway embankments, for agricultural purposes. 850 staff were allocated individual allotments for a nominal fee.

This poem describes an "agri-transport" vision to grow plants along the rail network, so that it's "not 'Mind the doors' but 'Mind the plants.'"



DIG
STOCKWELL
FOR VICTORY

As a war-time effort vegetables are to be planted on the embankments of our Railways.

SO all day long at Ealing now
They tend the gardens with a plough.
But, oh, the glories we have seen
Flaunting the banks of Walham Green.
Where antirrhinums paved the way
For the more august display,
And all those Park Royal plots that were
Abandoned to eschsoltzia.
The future cannot look but dark
When wurzels grow at Wembley Park

Ruislip gardeners sniff the air
(There's lucerne greenly growing there)
And ponder whether sugar beet
Should alternate with early wheat.
At Kensington the hoe unfolds
Dim, obsolescent marigolds,
At Kilburn, at the end of day,
The porter-ploughman plods his way,
Leading his weary horses home
Fetlock deep in London loam.

This song, although it may abound
In ideas for the Underground,
Can little show the shape of things
To come in agri-transport Springs
Or what a stationmaster means
When clad in earthy velveteens.
Can any voice or any pen
Foretell the utter splendour when
Oats and rye and barley serve
To glorify the Cromwell Curve?
A.B.B.

And what of the doings of the night,
By lantern's unofficial light,
When seats and platforms cease to be
To earn an acre's subsidy?
At Rayners Lane the waiting-room
Is used for seedlings in the gloom,
Where central heating will not hinder
The passionless sprouting of the winter.
There, too, the plaintive porter chants
Not "Mind the doors," but "Mind the plants."

But you can't eat it

*Poem printed in the staff magazine, December 1939. Archive ref num:
LT000030/078*

What Are These New Plots?

A Grow-More-Food battalion, employees of London Transport, has attacked the railway embankments and empty sites owned by the Board. A paragraph in *Pennyfare* preceded the advance. Weapons of peace, if not ploughshares, are being used. With spade and fork 850 men who drive trains, or pens, or who punch tickets, or nails, are occupying 24 acres of the land available, apart from the station shrubberies and flower beds. The High Command, otherwise the Estate Office, is letting each man clear a plot half as big as a tennis court, and charging a nominal sum for the privilege. Quickly the gardening battalion entrenched, High Command first pegging out with 3,000 stakes, and now that digging has begun the fruits of victory are awaited in 850 kitchens, more even than that, sometime in 1940. Meanwhile 1,000 old campaigners crouched over 30 acres are wishing their new chums luck.

B. RUSSELL SPROUT.

Dispatch on vegetable gardens from B. Russell Sprout, December 1939. Archive ref num: LT000030/078

This story has been compiled using information in records at the Transport for London Corporate Archives. The Corporate Archives seeks to preserve and make accessible records, not to interpret them. A wider range of material is available for physical consultation.

This story has been enhanced using some material from the LIFE Photo Collection. All enquiries regarding this material should be made directly to that institution.

Email: CorporateArchives@tfl.gov.uk