Before war broke out Britain imported around 55 million tons of products from other parts of the world like America, Africa, Europe and the Far East. Food like bananas, sugar, tea, rice, and oil as well as materials like rubber, wood and oil for petrol all came by boat from overseas. Not surprisingly one of Hitler’s main objectives was to stop all sea-borne trade and so literally starve Britain into surrender. Using battleships and U-boats the Nazis succeeded in sinking over 2,500 merchant ships.

The British government foresaw the danger and from early in the war rationing was introduced whereby people were limited in the amount and variety of food they could buy.
Ration books were being printed before the war: Buff (a pale brown) for adults; blue for children aged 3-16 and green for infants under 3.

This is the ration book of Ernest B. Basden who lived at Farnham Royal. The names and address of the shops where he could get his rations are written at the front. The Co-op was one of the few stores resembling a modern day supermarket and Slough was a big enough place to have one. (D113/81)

This photograph shows Welch’s Butchers shop in Whielden Street, Amersham (phAmersham25)
At first householders had to register with particular shops and buy their food only from those. Supermarkets were virtually unknown at this time and people used individual shops: butchers, bakers, grocers etc. Shopkeepers were supposed to be supplied with enough food to sell to the people registered with them. Prices were fixed to prevent some shops charging more than others and to keep prices from soaring because of shortages.

Newspapers were used to tell people about rationing. This advert, taken from the Bucks Herald 12 January 1940, appeared in all local and national newspapers. Some more are shown on the following pages.
The Basel Diet
In the summer of 1940 a committee of nutritional experts worked out a daily basic diet sufficient to keep the average adult Briton healthy through the war:

- 12oz (350g) bread
- 1lb (454g) potatoes
- 2oz (50g) oatmeal
- 1oz (25g) fat
- 6oz (150g) vegetables
- 6/10ths of 1 pint of milk
- Small amounts of cheese, pulses, meat, fish, sugar, eggs and dried fruit.

Fortunately, Winston Churchill and the Ministry of Food realised the diet was unappealing and therefore unworkable and the ration book approach was used.

Rationing was introduced in stages during the course of the war. It started in January 1940 when fixed amounts of bacon, ham, sugar and butter were allowed per person per week. Meat followed in March 1940 and tea, margarine and cheese in July. The amounts allowed were changed from time to time and allowances were made for pregnant women and small children.

By 1942 when rationing was at its height a week’s ration for an adult looked like this:

- Bacon and ham: 4oz (100g)
- Meat: To the value of 1s.2d (6p today). (perhaps a pork chop and four sausages) Sausages were not rationed but difficult to get; offal (liver, kidneys, tripe) was not originally rationed but sometimes formed part of the meat ration.
- Cheese: 2oz (50g) sometimes it went up to 4oz (100g) and even up to 8oz (225g).
- Margarine: 4oz (100g)
- Butter: 2oz (50g)
- Milk: 3 pints (1800ml) occasionally dropping to 2 pints (1200ml). Household milk (skimmed or dried) was available: 1 packet per four weeks.
- Sugar: 8oz (225g).
- Jam: 1lb (450g) every two months.
- Tea: 2oz (50g). (half a packet or the equivalent of 15 tea bags)
- Eggs: 1 fresh egg a week if available but often only one every two weeks. Dried eggs 1 packet every four weeks.
- Sweets: 12oz (350g) every four weeks
How rationing affected children
Imported fruit all but disappeared from the shops, so while apples and pears could be bought, bananas and oranges were absent until long after the war had ended. Sweets and chocolate were limited to 2oz per person per week from July 1942. Kind mothers made toffee using black treacle or a sort of peppermint lump using peppermint juice available from the chemist. Sugar rationing meant much fewer sweet things and children were encouraged to eat carrots as snacks. Nicknamed “Dr. Carrot”, carrot recipes abounded, including a homemade drink called Carrolade made from carrot and swede juice strained through a muslin sieve. Biscuits were also rationed and even bread, although not rationed until the end of the war, was made so as to use as much of the husk as possible. The “National Loaf” was a solid wholemeal bread; white bread became virtually unobtainable. However, from December 1941 schoolchildren received 1/3 of a pint of milk a day and cheap nutritious school meals were made more widely available: mainly potatoes, dumplings and vegetables.

Children at Queen’s Park school, Aylesbury setting up a shop, 1949
(phAylesbury2019)

Points System
In December 1941 the points system was introduced. 16 points per month were allowed to each shopper. Specified foods, particularly canned and dried foods, were also given a certain number of points and the shopper could use their points to buy different things each month or even save their points from one month to the next. These points were included in the back of the ration book.

This is an advert placed in the newspaper to explain about points rationing.
(D113/63)
Other rationing
It wasn’t just food that was rationed: petrol, clothes, even soap and washing powder. Some things never rationed were extremely hard to get hold of – string, pencils and paper for example.

Rationing continued for several years even after the war had ended. One person could end up with a whole collection of ration books! Here are food, clothing and fuel ration books belonging to Ernest Basden who lived in Farnham Royal. (D113/81)

Christmas Advert from the Bucks Advertiser and Aylesbury News, 1941, giving coupon as well as monetary value.

Tips on economical living were not confined to food, as this Brylcreem advert shows. (D113/63)
Dig for Victory

This was a slogan adopted by the government from the outbreak of war. The whole population was encouraged to transform their gardens into fruit and vegetable growing allotments to counteract the food shortage. Even parks, golf clubs and tennis courts were dug up and planted. In the country farmers ploughed up grass fields and drained boggy land to grow more food crops. Even songs were written to encourage people to grow their own food:

*Dig! Dig! Dig! And your muscles will grow big*
  *Keep on pushing the spade*
  *Don’t mind the worms*
  *Just ignore their squirms*
  *And when your back aches laugh with glee*
  *And keep on diggin’*
  *Till we give our foes a Wiggin’*
  *Dig! Dig! Dig! to Victory*

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Front cover from a Dig for Victory leaflet. (D113/22)

Advert from Local Newspaper