



CHILTERN
OPEN AIR
MUSEUM

*Where buildings come
alive through history*

1940s Washday



Location:

- Amersham Prefab.

Practical Notes:

- The 1940s Washday is an outdoor activity. It is important that your group dresses warmly and appropriately.
- The 1940s Washday involves the use of soap and cold water; if this might pose a difficulty for any member of your group (for example individuals with severe eczema) we can provide non-powdered vinyl gloves.
- Please note that if the weather is inclement then the Rag Rug Making activity will be organised.
- There are photo opportunities throughout these activities.

Purpose and content of the activity session:

- During this session the children will be able to compare washday in the late Victorian times to the present day, with particular reference to the 1940s Prefab at the Museum.
- The Museum teacher will demonstrate how clothes were sorted, wetted, soaped, washed, rinsed, mangled and then dolly pegged up onto the clothesline.
- The Museum teacher will also explain the social importance of washday in the past.
- The children will then take turns washing cloths and using the mangle.
- Understand and use the vocabulary associated with washday.

The explanation will vary in emphasis having regard to the age, ability and current or recent schoolwork (e.g. Houses and homes or Materials) or interest if known beforehand.

Access Statement:

Thame Vicarage Room: Fully Accessible to all users.

1940s Washday:

- This activity provides a hands-on experience for all children and can be adapted to all needs.
- The mangle, which is used during the activity, must only be used under the instruction of the Museum teacher. This is especially important when the group contains children with emotional/behavioural problems or autism.

Washday – Historical Background

The traditional day for the washing to be done was a Monday. Very few wives then went out to work, and to wash on a Sunday and hang it on the line was thought rather disgraceful.

Stored under the draining board in the kitchen of Amersham Prefab is an electric copper (wash boiler) which was used to boil the dirt and stains from tea-towels, work clothes and, in particular, terry towelling nappies (there were no disposable nappies at that time). This copper was filled through a piece of hose attached to one of the taps above the sink and it was then emptied via the tap at the base.

When the copper was being used the kitchen filled with clouds of steam and it was a messy business to transfer the clothes from it to the sink.

In the sink the clothes would be washed and rinsed, using the washboard with its corrugated surface where the dirt was rubbed and scrubbed away. Once the clothes were rinsed they were put through the mangle to remove excess water.

Next the clothes would be taken outside and hung on the clothesline to dry using dolly pegs. However, if it rained, the clothes might have taken several days to dry, especially as there are no radiators to give artificial heat.



Ladies were very proud of hanging out a spotless wash and they would be judged on this by their neighbours as to whether they were a good or bad housewife. For a family of four or five, it would take at least a whole day to wash, rinse, starch, peg out and fold away the clothes ready for ironing.

Soap powders were available, but all soap and soap powders were rationed so that economy had to be practised by all the family. Scraps of hand soap

were placed in jars with hot water and the resulting 'jelly' would have been used in the washtub for clothes. There are examples of some of the different powders and starch available in the late 1940s next to the kitchen sink in Amersham Prefab.



A collection of different soap powders and starch.

Housewives in the 1940s might have had a weekly routine such as:

Monday: Washday

Tuesday: Ironing

Wednesday: Baking

Thursday: Market Day

Friday: General housework

Saturday: General housework

Sunday: Day of Rest

Rationing – Historical Background

Food Rationing

Before the war Britain, as an island, imported 55 million tonnes of goods, broken down as follows:

- 50% of its meat
- 70% of its cheese and sugar
- nearly 80% of fruits
- about 90% of cereals and fats

Britain was in no position to be able to feed its population in the event of war without first making provision. To this end a “Food Defence Plans Department” was created by the British government in 1936 and in 1940 John Boyd Orr (Rowett Institute in Aberdeen) warned the government that, *“the health line of the Home Front may become as important as the Maginot Line.”*

By this time however the government had understood that adequate nutrition for its people was part of the war effort, as it would lead to an energetic workforce in the factories, homes and services. Through advertisements from the Ministry of Food the British public learnt that eating wisely was part of defeating Hitler.

The government also realised that the majority of factories in Britain would be concentrating on the war effort and so food and other household items would be in short supply. So, in early 1940, rationing of some items began, ensuring that what *was* available was distributed fairly and no one went without *anything* completely. The country was split into nine areas and shopkeepers could obtain supplies only from their local area, a modern analogy would be that only people in Slough would be able to obtain Mars Bars.

All families were issued with ration books, which contained coupons for different foods. Each family had to register with a shop and the shopkeeper was then issued with enough food for the people on his list alone.

Food was rationed in the following order:

From January 1940

Sugar

Butter

Ham

Bacon



From March 1940

Meat

From July 1940

Tea

And the list of rationed food was later to include

Preserves (jam, margarine, syrups and treacle)

Sweets

Cooking fats

Eggs (1 egg per person, weekly).

Other food was on a 'points system' and each person was allocated a certain number of points each week, to spend as they wished or on whatever was available, these were usually tinned foods.

Beer and cigarettes were never rationed in order to keep the public morale high.



The weekly allowance per person could and did vary throughout the year due to shortages. However, the average adults weekly allowance during 1943 was 3 pints of milk, 3 1/4lb - 1lb meat, 1 egg or 1 packet of dried eggs every 2 months, 3-4 oz cheese, 4 oz bacon and ham, 2 oz tea, 8 oz sugar, 2 oz butter, 2 oz cooking fat plus 16 points a month for other rationed foods (usually tinned) subject to availability.

To ensure that as many eggs as possible were eaten but did not 'go off'; the government introduced dried eggs (a tin of which can be seen in the display in Amersham Prefab). One tablespoon of dried egg mixed with two tablespoons of water equalled one egg and the Ministry of Food stated that these were, *"pure fresh eggs with no additions, and nothing but the moisture taken away."*

Choice and variety of the available foodstuffs decreased noticeably during the war, for example before the war there were 350 varieties of biscuits; these were reduced to 20.

Even cat and dog food was rationed. You could feed a small amount of a person's own meat ration to them but if you gave them too much fresh meat you might have been prosecuted. Some recipe books even included meals for them.

Under the leadership of Lord Woolton, the Ministry of Food led a campaign of information for the benefit of the people, including 'Food Facts' in newspapers and magazines with weekly advice columns for the cook. Soup advertisements also stated, *"Rations go twice as far this way ... Start with platefuls of piping hot, thick, appetizing soup, and plenty of bread. It's filling and satisfying and you can make do with smaller servings of the rationed foods..."*

Information leaflets were issued, particularly with ideas for recipes using the new dried eggs and milk and on how to make the most of the foods that were available still.

Whilst shopping, women had to be aware of 'bomb-damaged' goods, for example addled eggs or glass shards in the packaging. As food packaging became sparse, shoppers had to remember to take their own paper with them and as bottles were in short supply there was a government campaign to encourage people to return all bottles to be re-used, and housewives collected and saved their paper bags.

Lord Woolton also introduced free school meals for children from poorer families and free cod liver oil and orange juice for the under two's. Expectant mothers received more milk and egg rations each week than other adults.

The government's food control was able to give society a good mixed diet, which benefited their health, and after two years of rationing the British public were slimmer, livelier and healthier than they had ever been. It also resulted in a lower child mortality rate, a significant decrease in TB cases and decreased levels of tooth decay. Children were taller and sturdier, and fewer mothers had died in childbirth, all this whilst there were fewer doctors and nurses available on the Home Front.

Because of rationing no-one starved and although it resulted in plain and boring food throughout the period, it effectively helped to win the war. A Ministry of Food advertisement boasted:

'Because of the pail, the scraps were saved,

Because of the scraps, the pigs were saved,

Because of the pigs, the rations were saved,

Because of the rations, the ships were saved,

Because of the ships, the island was saved,

Because of the island, the Empire was saved,

And all because of the housewife's pail'

Other forms of Rationing

On 1st June 1941, every individual was allocated 66 clothing coupons for the year (equal to one complete outfit per year) and in 1942 the government, to limit the amount of materials used in making clothes, introduced a 'utility' scheme.

The list below shows the number of coupons needed to buy certain garments:

Woman's nightdress = 6 coupons.

Mans overcoat = 16 coupons

Dress = 11 coupons

Underpants = 4 coupons

Handkerchief = ½ coupon

Pyjamas = 8 coupons.

With these clothing restrictions, women were encouraged to repair old family clothes or 'recycle' old clothing by, for example, unravelling the wool of old or outgrown jumpers and knitting it into something else.

Campaigns like 'Make Do and Mend' did much to bolster inventiveness, often sparking off ideas of how to create new clothing using old materials. It wasn't unheard of for unwanted curtains to be made into skirts or dresses, or for women to draw lines down the backs of their legs to give the impression that they were wearing stockings with seams!

Furniture and other household items

Furniture was available only on coupons because of the rationing of materials, and 'utility' furniture was designed to use as little wood and other raw materials as possible. It was made available, however, to newly weds and civilians who had lost everything as a direct result of air raid bombings.

Materials used in the production of plates, saucepans and umbrellas were also tightly controlled – as an example, cups were often white with no handles.

Petrol rationing

The average working man couldn't afford a car but shortages of petrol meant fewer vehicles on the road and a greater reliability on public transport, which in itself was also restricted.

Farmers had special allowances for their tractors to help with the harvest, which was vital for food production.

Cosmetics rationing

Soap was in short supply and consequently rationed. Make up was difficult to find and therefore presents from friends abroad were very much appreciated.

Rationing of food and other items continued for 14 years (1939 until 1953), with strict control of items even after the war had ended.