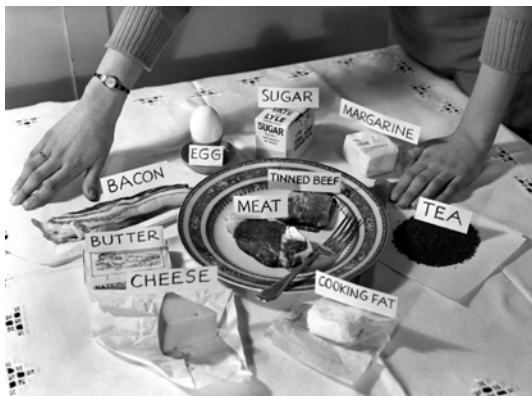


The War on Cheese by Simon Wilson

In the 1930s, the biggest threat to British cheese was not the Nazis, the rise of Communism or the IRA bombing campaign, but the newly created Milk Marketing Board (MMB).

Farming struggled between the wars and the government, when it finally recognised the problem, and started to worry about food security in the looming war, began to organise the agricultural economy, first with the Wheat Act of 1932, and then with the establishment of various marketing boards in 1933. The remit of the MMB was to form a more financially secure basis for milk production and the destruction of the farmhouse cheese sector was merely an unintended consequence. To be fair, the farmers helped in the destruction, as farmers often do when the government offers them money. Basically, the MMB offered a secure market for milk, which tempted farmers to sell it rather than turn it into cheese. Even if they wanted to continue, the MMB controlled the supply of milk, and the wholesale price of cheese.

There was no room for farmhouse cheesemakers in this brave new world, and the last farmhouse maker of Stilton cheese closed in 1935, leaving production in the hands of the big dairies, where it remains to this day. The way forward was seen as efficiency, economy and industrialisation, with factories producing a limited range standard products with limited choice. This was already well advanced by the start of the war.



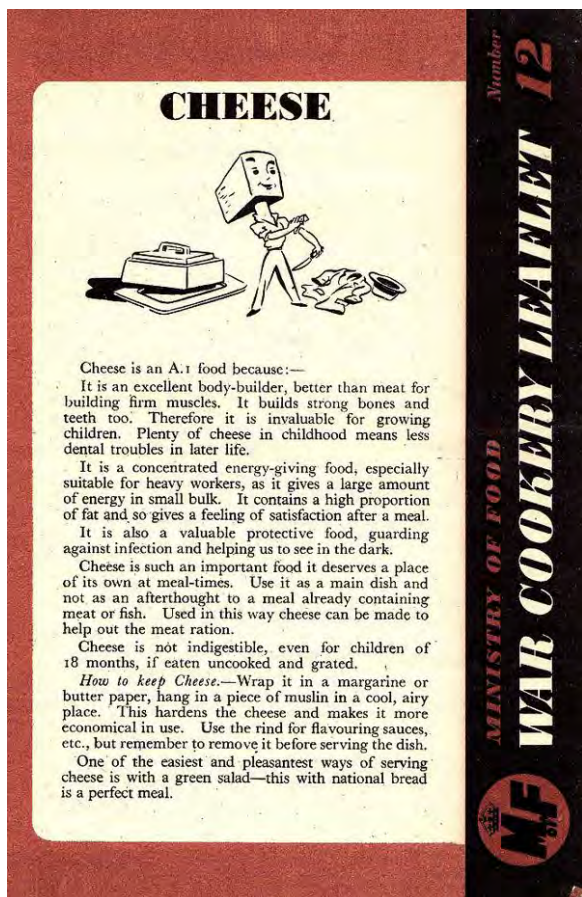
By 1941, with wartime pressures on shipping and supplies, the pre-war vision had become real. Cheese is an important foodstuff, and even more in wartime as it is nutritious, easy to transport and keeps well. With limited resources, it made sense for manufacturing to be streamlined and consumer choice to be limited. Cheddar was selected as the national cheese and a standard recipe chosen. Milk supplies to makers of other cheeses were restricted or stopped, with only Cheddar and a limited amount of Cheshire being

produced in significant quantities as the war progressed.

Cheddar was a good choice from the government's point of view, being simple to produce with few faults. It stored well, cut well and could be used after minimal ageing, or left longer if needed. Other popular cheeses such as Lancashire, Wensleydale, Derby, Stilton, Leicester and Double Gloucester declined to the point of almost becoming extinct. The move to "Government Cheddar" (also known as "National Cheddar") was gradual, starting in 1941 as milk supplies were diverted and dairies ordered to stop production as production was switched to large industrial operations. In 1942, 126 dairies were closed, and 52 more were ordered to close in 1943. This situation persisted until the end of rationing.



Originally the preferred cheeses were Wensleydale, Cheddar, Dunlop, Leicester and Cheshire. Dunlop is a cheese from Ayrshire and was popular in Scotland, though it seems to have declined to almost



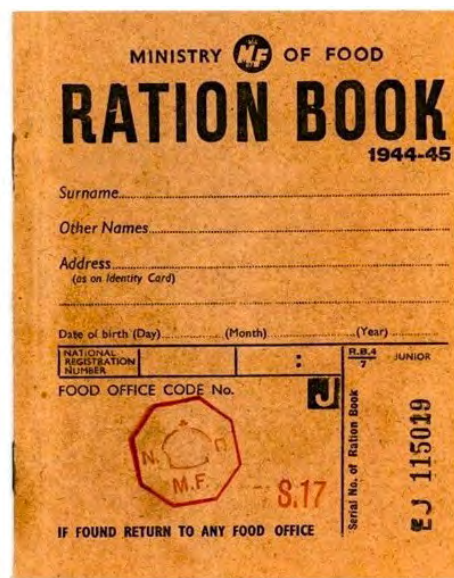
nothing by 1940. Wensleydale, was on the ration book, but declined to just 9 producers in 1945 (from 176 in 1939). This seems to have been the general picture with all cheese except for Cheddar and Cheshire. Even the regional cheeses that survived were made to different recipes (particularly regarding moisture content) to ensure good storage characteristics.

In 1938 Britain produced only 23% of its requirements for cheese, a familiar picture with many foodstuffs. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA all produced cheap Cheddar and many European countries supplied our market with premium cheese brands. In 1940, these European cheeses became unavailable We imported 70% of our food in 1939, needing 20 million tons of shipping a year. Of our cheese, 77% was imported, half of that coming from New Zealand.

Cheese rationing began on May 5 1941 with one ounce per week but grocers complained that cutting such a small amount was wasteful, so it was

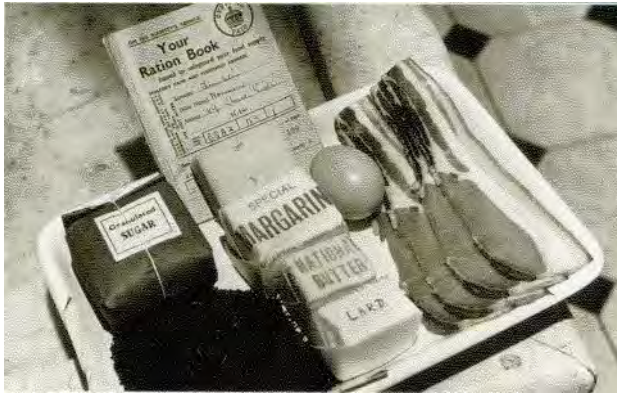
raised to two ounces from June. They could supply up to four weeks' ration at a time, but they couldn't force people to take more than a week's supply. Vegetarians and certain classes of key workers who did not have access to canteens had an 8-ounce ration. Pubs were prohibited from serving cheese. Cheese rationing was eventually ended in 1954, having been reduced to 1 ounce in 1952.

Cheese was widely publicised in propaganda films and information. The film *Choose Cheese* (1940) made a number of claims, stating that cheese makes children grow bigger and stronger, protects against infections, and even improves vision in the dark. It is a good source of calcium and protein, but some of the claims seem a bit far-fetched. Research on free school milk showed increases in size and health, and the same was claimed for cheese. But seeing better at night? It also showed cyclists stopping at a pub for bread and cheese which, ironically, would be banned the next year, and claimed that 5 ounces of cheese was as nutritious as 10 ounces of meat.



Suggested recipes were not inspiring, particularly if you only had 2 ounces of cheese to use each week. Recipes ranged from grilled cheese to cauliflower cheese (a "meal in itself" according to the film), and included cheesy potatoes, Kensington Rarebit (cheese on boiled potatoes, with onions or cabbage if

available) and Potato Rarebit, the latter being mashed potato and cheese grilled on toast. There was even a cheese-based kedgeree recipe with rice and tomatoes.



The war nearly wiped out the traditional farmhouse cheese maker. In 1945 fewer than 100 independent manufacturers still existed. There had been over 3,500 before the Great War, and 1,600 survived into the 1930s. There were a number of complaints over the years following the war, as people were tired of Cheddar and wanted Lancashire, Wensleydale and Stilton. None of them were available in quantity, as the cheesemakers were often kept

short of milk by the MMB, who wanted it for their Cheddar.

After rationing, people wanted cheap food and plenty of it. A few were concerned with variety, quality or flavour, but most just wanted quantity and a cheap price. Supermarkets began to appear. Cheese produced in vacuum packed blocks suited the industrial farming and retailing style.

The description “farmhouse cheese” was not available to artisan cheese makers, because it was reserved for the use of the MMB on their factory-made cheese. It was not until the 1980s that local farmhouse cheeses started to hold their own, and finally came back into full scale production with the end of the MMB in the 90s.