Durham Miners Food and Cooking

by Susan Weightman

In my previous project the general role of the miners' wife in providing meals was laid out. The pattern emerged – long slow cooking on open fires and early stoves allowing hard-pressed wives and mothers to accomplish washing, ironing, cleaning and all the other necessary tasks. These were all labour intensive, physically demanding and much more time consuming than they are today.

During the first half of 19th century as new mines were sunk dwellings were erected quickly to house incoming miners and often provided with just one level. In such communities communal ovens were built often one per row of colliery houses. These seem to have been used and looked after ‘democratically’ by the miner’s wives who stoked them up and cleaned them out I turn. The size of these ovens was sufficient to hold 6 or 8 loaves at a time – 3 or 4 on the top shelf and the same on the bottom, usually these loaves would be switched bottom to top and top to bottom to complete baking.

The remainder of all their cooking would be done over to open fires ‘at home’. Pans, cauldrons and kettles would simmer and boil and when a griddle was put in place, scones of several varieties baked.

From the 1850’s ovens were built into colliery houses and the communal ovens began to disappear.

It is often generally assumed that all mining families scraped by eking out minimal meals and living poor lives. However this was often actually not the case. Mackenzie
writing in 1825 singles out colliers as being “fond of good living, having pies and puddings made with the best of beef and mutton, dumplings, potatoes baked in the oven with a joint of beef. Singing hinnies were their great favourite.”

Nearly 20 years later The Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children in the Mines records that miners eat meat in some quantity. Some of them have “fresh meat thrice and day and not a few of them twice”. It also said they ate plenty of bacon and cheese. A witness stated, “Their larders abound in potatoes, bacon, fresh meat, sugar, tea and coffee”. It also added “at first Mr Wood knew them to eat rye bread, now they will eat only wheat bread.

It is interesting to see the miners’ fortnightly food budget of this time.

A hard life needed good substantial food. It must be remembered that often-entire families were employed at the pit so a wife/mother could have husband/sons working different shifts coming home at different times hungry, dirty and tired.

Suet puddings and savoury and sweet were a staple in all homes. Meat puddings, leek puddings, bacon puddings and gravy made substantial savoury meals. Apples, rhubarb, currants, lemon, jam, syrup or honey, and soft fruit such as gooseberries, bilberries, and blackberries were all used to make a sweet suet pudding.

Bread – all homemade in the 19th century and early 20th century and potatoes were great staples. Stottie cakes and teacakes provided a variation on the loaf although still a yeast based dough.

Broth – particularly Sheep’s Head in the early years was often a meal in itself, lots of barley ensuring it became really tick as it simmered far long periods on the fire.
Traditional Sunday dinners have long been meat, potatoes, turnips (Swede), cabbage and Yorkshire pudding. Leaving the remainder of the cold meat to be used in the Monday Washing Day dinner for Panaclity.

Many miners were self sufficient to a great extent. The miners’ cottages at Beamish show the long gardens typical of many colliery houses. They had a comprehensive vegetable patch ‘growing a wide range of vegetable – peas, beans, cabbage, leeks, cauliflowers, onions, carrots, turnips, parsnips, potatoes as well as some salad items such lettuce and radishes. Some had fruits too – rhubarb, gooseberry and black and red currants bushes etc. Some miners kept chickens providing eggs daily, also rabbits which were a popular source of meat as well as a pig or two. A pig provided a huge selection of meat – sausage, black pudding and brawn were the partial by-product. Some of the meat was cured for pork, some for bacon. A side of bacon or ham often hung up in a miner’s kitchen. The children used the pig’s bladder as a football ensuring no part was wasted. Many miners in the Bishop Auckland area kept goats as well. They are good foragers so cheap to keep and their milk was used in tea in place of cows.

For those mining villages particularly in the east of the county in the early years, fish was another addition to the diet. In June and July herrings were particularly cheap and girls or more often the men with flat-carts drawn by ponies would travel the area selling them to housewives at their doors. They were several methods of serving them too like other staples – specifically in oatmeal; soured or salted in a cask or coop. As with other foodstuffs the variety of fish available and affordable increased over the years.
As the communities grew a variety of travelling vendors began taking their wares to the housewife. She was always at home and keen for a bargain. Alex Johnston mentioned several such characters in his reminiscences. Shops increased in number to keep pace with the increasing populations as pits grew and needed more men. Murton illustrated this.

Several of the original home delivery firms expanded too including Ringtons who blended and packaged tea and coffee and by the late 1900’s was supplying its goods in locally produced decorative and commemorated items as well as conventional packaging. Whether miners generally drank tea or a coffee appears to be a very personal or specifically local tradition. Some contemporary accounts say miners always drank tea, others disagree and whether both. Others again say strong ground coffee was the drink of the morning. Mr George Bell of Bishop Auckland a retired miner born in 1884 and quoted in Life and Tradition in Northumberland and Durham said his father always had coffee. The beans were ground in a hand grinder by the children before each meal he remembered.

Once ‘home bakers’ had access to their own individual ovens they began to use and develop new recipes. Pastry became an alternative to the suet crust giving savoury pies, fruit pies, sly cake and the like. Cakes were made to add to the previously “griddled” scones such as the famous singinghinney.

Miners’ wives made jams in season too boil from fruit grown in the garden or allotments such as gooseberries, rhubarb, black and red currants and also wild growing such as blackberries and bilberries. Jam was a great mainstay with bread and could be used with puddings and cakes too – jam roly poly (suet or sponge) and
jam tarts also in the core of blackcurrant jam was a great traditional cold remedy taken as a hot drink on winter evenings.

A variety of other wild growing plants were used in cooking too – particularly nettles and herbs such as parsley, mint and sage. Mushrooms were also gathered from the fields in season. This latter fact is one which should be emphasized – fresh food – particularly vegetables and fruit could only be eaten within season. (This is a hard concept to grasp from today’s modern perspective!) Methods of preserving – jamming, pickling and salting etc were used to maintain supplies for use through the winter. Many men working in the mines had left farming and agriculture but their year still followed the same natural pattern. They were dependent on nature. Alongside this and many cases intrinsically involved with it, were seasoned traditional festivals and religion and festivals and occasions. A lot of these had evolved special foods and delicacies unique to the celebration. Many of these are mentioned in songs and recollections of the era. Sadly many of these have died out but several are still recognised today.

Improved communication meant better roads and railways and so the growing variety of foods became more readily available in local communities.

Fotnightly budget for a miner

(food items only)

£ s d

MUTTON 14lbs at 7½d a lb 8 9
FLOUR 5 stone at 2/8 a stone 13 4

MASLIN* 3 stone at 2/6 a stone 7 6

BACON 14lbs at 8d a lb 9 4

POTATOES ½boll at 4/6 a boll 2 3

OATMEAL 6

BUTTER 2lbs at 1/3 2 6

MILK 3d a day 3 6

COFFEE 1¼lbs at 2/4 a lb 3 0

TEA ¼lb at 6/- a lb 1 6

SUGAR 3lbs at 8d a lb 2 0

PEPPER, SALT, MUSTARD 6

Circa 1842 and first report of the commissioners on the employment of children in the mines.

Taken from Northumbrian Fare by Margaret Slack
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