

Some Funny Things

Boy, Tyneside

We never starved, but we ate some funny things. Best was American dried egg. You poured a thin trickle into the frying pan, then as it cooked it blew up like a balloon, till it was two inches thick, like a big yellow hump-backed whale.

And we had whale meat, that tasted strongly of fish, unless you soaked it for twenty-four hours in vinegar, after which it tasted of vinegar. But there was so much of it – great big steaks as big as your plate – that we didn't care what it tasted like.

Sausage meat was pale pink – I don't think it had any meat in it at all. Late in the war, my mother got a pound of 'butcher's sausage' – the sausage the butcher made for his own family. It seemed indecent, cos lumps of real meat kept dropping out of it – it nearly made us sick.

I lived a lot on chip butties – but you had to eat them quick, before the chips turned dark blue.

The government posters made us all hate the 'Black Market' – though no one ever knew what a 'Black Marketeer' looked like. But all through the war, things kept 'appearing' in our house.

One Christmas, a whole unopened box of Mars bars. Another time, a seven-pound tin of butter, which for some reason we kept in the bath.

I enjoyed carving great caves out of it.

When I asked Dad where these things came from, he'd say 'bought it off a feller at work' or 'off the ships', so matter of factly that it never occurred to me till after the war that my father must have 'received goods knowing them to have been stolen' – from the Black Market.

Luckily, we had a neighbour on the trawlers. My parents looked after his wife while he was at sea, especially when she was pregnant, so we were never short of fish.

And we had a large greenhouse – immediately after every raid my father would go and check how many panes the Germans had blown out – by the end of the war, it wasn't so much a glasshouse as a cardboard-house, but all through we had so many tomatoes, we sold them to other people.

My mother spent our week's holiday in Cumberland collecting eggs from all the surrounding farms, a dozen at a time.

At first she was treated with great suspicion, as a Ministry of Ag. and Fish snooper, but by the end of the war, she'd come home with twelve dozen in a carrier bag.

My friend Ally Johnson dropped his mother's carrier, also containing twelve dozen eggs, in Newcastle Haymarket Bus Station, right under the nose of a policeman. He said the yellow egg yolk just spread and spread, all over the road; the Johnsons took to their heels.

In 1939, I was a thin child; by 1941, I was an enormous fat elephant.

I think my mother saw fattening us up as a patriotic duty.

Our dog got very fat as well.

Our neighbour in the trawlers used to see it as a good-luck mascot – when he went on a trip, he used to always come and stroke our dog first.

When he came back safe, he would give our dog a whole pound block of Cadbury's chocolate. The dog used to bring it home in its mouth, with half the wrapping chewed off; my mother would immediately requisition it. The number of times we handed round tooth-marked chocolate at Christmas.....

My mother seemed to have no appetite in the war. She'd sit my father and I down to something tasty, then announce 'I'm not really hungry. I'll have my share later. I think I'll just have a little bit of bread and butter...'