

THE WORKHOUSE COOKBOOK

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The 1835 Workhouse Dietary

In December 1835, the PLC published a set of six model 'dietaries' from which Boards of Guardians were required to select the one 'best adapted' for their particular union. The Commissioners' declared benchmark in formulating the workhouse diet was that on no account should it be 'superior or equal to the ordinary mode of subsistence of the labouring classes of the neighbourhood'. Although by 1842 this principle was no longer mentioned in the PLC's 'Workhouse Rules', it had already created a mindset in which the quantity and quality of the food provided for inmates was to be kept at a minimum.

The model dietaries were primarily constructed for able-bodied inmates and varied only a little in their range and amount of food they provided. The simplest diet was No. 3, which offered an unvarying menu of bread and gruel for breakfast, and bread and cheese for supper. Midday dinner was also bread and cheese five days a week (with extra soup on Thursdays), and meat and vegetables on the other two days. The remaining dietaries broadly differed by the inclusion of one or two other foods: for example, Dietary No. 1 added soup and broth, while No. 5 featured potatoes.

Men received, on average, around 25 per cent more food (by weight) than women. Children under nine were given a locally decided proportion of the adult amount, while the diets for the sick were left to the workhouse medical officer's discretion. The elderly usually had a ration of butter, sugar and tea although in some cases, this had to be traded for gruel.

The PLC's 1836 annual report contained a report by assistant Poor Law Commissioner Charles Mott which indicated the thinking behind the formulation of the new dietaries:

Uniformity of diet as to quality can hardly be attained, nor indeed is it absolutely necessary. Provincial habits are difficult to conquer. The labourers of Norfolk and Suffolk would hardly be prevailed upon to forego their dumplings, or the Cornish men their pies. In one of the seasons of scarcity in Ireland, when the potato crops had failed and great distress existed amongst the poor, the Marquess of Lansdowne sent over to his tenantry supplies of rice oatmeal and potatoes. When his Lordship next visited his estates in Ireland, he enquired if the supplies were timely and acceptable; his kindness was acknowledged with gratitude for the oatmeal and potatoes, but the rice was new to them; no one knew its use; consultations were held; it was condemned as being intended to cause sterility, and by common consent was thrown into the sea.

The uptake of the dietaries by unions in different parts of the country bore out this theory, with dietaries in Kent and Sussex mainly consisting of bread and cheese, while those adopted in the Northern counties were chiefly composed of potatoes and oatmeal porridge.

Mott calculated that the average weight of food provided to able-bodied inmates by the six standard dietaries was as follows:

Dietary	Ounces per day (grams per day)	Total ounces per week
1	19 (539)	122
2	25.5 (723)	178
3	24 (680)	168
4	26 (737)	182
5	20 (567)	140
6	23.5 (666)	164

Although Mott admitted that Dietary No. 1 was 'somewhat below the quantity used by labourers generally', he claimed that the overall average of 23oz daily or 161oz weekly was 'not only sufficient, but... exceeds the quantity consumed by agricultural labourers and mechanics, who support themselves by their own exertions.'

Mott also drew upon the estimates of daily food requirements calculated by Arctic explorer Sir Edmund Parry whose crew had dragged boats across polar ice. As a result of his deliberations, Mott concluded that 'a fair estimate of the proportions of food, requisite to support human life in a sound and healthy state' was as follows:

- 1st: For persons of moderate health or constitution, but using little exercise or exertion: Daily allowance of food, 12 to 18 ounces: In nutritive matter equal to an average daily of 10 ounces.
- 2nd: For persons of good health, accustomed to moderate labour, as sailors and soldiers, on ordinary peace duty, or agricultural labourers or mechanics at their usual work: Daily allowance of food, 18 to 24 ounces: In nutritive matter equal to an average daily of 10 ounces.
- 3rd: For persons subject to hard labour or other violent exertion, in good bodily health: 24 to 30 ounces of food: Equal to 22 ounces of nutritive matter.

Mott provided further examples of what he saw as the excessive generosity of some parish workhouses – what his colleague Sir Francis Head described as 'pot-bellied philanthropy'. Here is Mott's account of his visit to the parish workhouse at Farnham in Surrey:

On visiting the workhouse in company with the parish officers, I observed a quantity of trenchers, containing the dinner allowances, placed ready for the paupers on their return from work. I requested the governor of the workhouse to state the full quantity of food given daily to the paupers in Farnham workhouse; I doubted the correctness of it when produced, but the governor's representation being confirmed by the officers, that it was a fair average daily supply, I had the food placed in the scales in their presence; when it was found to weigh 66 ounces, equal to 51 ounces of nutritive matter; and the governor added that even with this allowance the paupers often grumbled because they had not enough.

The PLC's standard dietaries were not entirely rigid and unions could – subject to the Commissioners' approval – vary the content and the amount, both downwards as well as upwards. This could lead to large discrepancies in the food given to inmates at different workhouses.

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No. 1.—DIETARY for ABLE-BODIED MEN and WOMEN.

	BREAKFAST.		DINNER.				SUPPER.		
	Bread.	Gruel.	Cooked Meat.	Potatoes.	Soup.	Suet, or Rice Pudding.	Bread.	Cheese.	Broth.
	oz.	pints.	oz.	lbs.	pints.	oz.	oz.	oz.	pints.
Sunday . . Men .	6	1½	5	½	..	..	6	..	1½
Women	5	1½	5	½	..	..	5	..	1½
Monday . . Men .	6	1½	..	..	1½	..	6	2	—
Women	5	1½	..	..	1½	..	5	2	—
Tuesday . . Men .	6	1½	5	½	..	..	6	..	1½
Women	5	1½	5	½	..	..	5	..	1½
Wednesday . Men .	6	1½	..	..	1½	..	6	2	—
Women	5	1½	..	..	1½	..	5	2	—
Thursday . . Men .	6	1½	5	½	..	..	6	..	1½
Women	5	1½	5	½	..	..	5	..	1½
Friday . . Men .	6	1½	..	..	..	1½	6	2	—
Women	5	1½	..	..	..	1½	5	2	—
Saturday . . Men .	6	1½	..	..	1½	..	6	2	—
Women	5	1½	..	..	1½	..	5	2	—

Old people of sixty years of age and upwards may be allowed one ounce of tea, five ounces of butter, and seven ounces of sugar per week, in lieu of gruel for breakfast, if deemed expedient to make this change.

Children under nine years of age to be dieted at discretion; above nine, to be allowed the same quantities as women.

Sick to be dieted as directed by the medical officer.

The 'Model Diets' published by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1835.

	BREAKFAST.			DINNER.				SUPPER.		
	Bread.	Cheese.	Butter.	Meat Pudding, with Vegetables*.	Suet Pudding with Vegetables*.	Bread.	Cheese.	Bread.	Cheese.	Butter.
	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.
Sunday . . Men .	6	1	..	16	..	..	..	6	1	..
Women	5	..	½	10	..	..	..	5	..	½
Monday . . Men .	6	1	..	..	..	7	1	6	1	..
Women	5	..	½	..	..	7	1	5	..	½
Tuesday . . Men .	6	1	..	..	16	..	..	6	1	..
Women	5	..	½	..	10	..	..	5	..	½
Wednesday . Men .	6	1	..	..	..	7	1	6	1	..
Women	5	..	½	..	..	7	1	5	..	½
Thursday . . Men .	6	1	..	..	..	7	1	6	1	..
Women	5	..	½	..	..	7	1	5	..	½
Friday . . Men .	6	1	..	..	16	..	..	6	1	..
Women	5	..	½	..	10	..	..	5	..	½
Saturday . . Men .	6	1	..	..	..	7	1	6	1	..
Women	5	..	½	..	..	7	1	5	..	½

Old people, being all sixty years of age and upwards: the weekly addition of one ounce of tea, and milk or sugar; also an additional meat pudding dinner on Thursday in each week, in lieu of bread and cheese, to those for whose age and infirmities it may be deemed requisite.

Children under nine years of age: bread and milk for their breakfast and supper, or gruel when milk cannot be obtained; also such proportions of the dinner diet as may be requisite for their respective ages.

Sick: whatever is ordered for them by the medical officer.

* The vegetables are extra, and not included in the weight specified.

	BREAKFAST.		DINNER.					SUPPER.	
	Bread.	Gruel.	Cooked Meat.	Potatoes or other Vegetables.	Soup.	Bread.	Cheese.	Bread.	Cheese.
	oz.	pints.	oz.	lb.	pints.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.
Sunday . . Men .	8	1½	..	..	..	7	2	6	1½
Women	6	1½	..	..	..	6	1½	5	1½
Monday . . Men .	8	1½	..	..	..	7	2	6	1½
Women	6	1½	..	..	..	6	1½	5	1½
Tuesday . . Men .	8	1½	8	¾	..	..	..	6	1½
Women	6	1½	6	¾	..	..	..	5	1½
Wednesday . Men .	8	1½	..	..	..	7	2	6	1½
Women	6	1½	..	..	..	6	1½	5	1½
Thursday . . Men .	8	1½	..	..	1½	6	..	6	1½
Women	6	1½	..	..	1½	5	..	5	1½
Friday . . . Men .	8	1½	..	..	..	7	2	6	1½
Women	6	1½	..	..	..	6	1½	5	1½
Saturday . . Men .	8	1½	Bacon. 5	¾	..	..	..	6	1½
Women	6	1½	4	¾	..	..	..	5	1½

Old people, of sixty years of age and upwards, may be allowed one ounce of tea, five ounces of butter, and seven ounces of sugar per week, in lieu of gruel for breakfast, if deemed expedient to make this change.

Children under nine years of age, to be dieted at discretion; above nine, to be allowed the same quantities as women.

Sick to be dieted as directed by the medical officer.

No. 3 dietary.

	BREAKFAST.		DINNER.					SUPPER.	
	Bread.	Gruel.	Pickled Pork, or Bacon, with Vegetables.	Soup.	Bread.	Meat Pudding, with Vegetables.	Rice or Suet Pudding with Vegetables.	Bread.	Cheese.
	oz.	pints.	oz.	pints.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.
Sunday . . Men .	8	1½	..	2	6	..	..	6	2
Women	6	1½	..	1½	5	..	..	5	1½
Monday . . Men .	8	1½	..	..	..	..	12	6	2
Women	6	1½	..	..	..	..	10	5	1½
Tuesday . . Men .	8	1½	..	2	6	..	..	6	2
Women	6	1½	..	1½	5	..	..	5	1½
Wednesday . Men .	8	1½	6	..	..	..	..	6	2
Women	6	1½	5	..	..	..	..	5	1½
Thursday . . Men .	8	1½	..	..	..	..	12	6	2
Women	6	1½	..	..	..	..	10	5	1½
Friday . . . Men .	8	1½	..	2	6	..	..	6	2
Women	6	1½	..	1½	5	..	..	5	1½
Saturday . . Men .	8	1½	..	..	..	12	..	6	2
Women	6	1½	..	..	..	10	..	5	1½

The vegetables are not included in the weight specified, which is for the meat when cooked.

If it be thought desirable, half an ounce of butter may be given to the women in lieu of cheese, for supper.

Old people of sixty years of age and upwards may be allowed one ounce of tea, five ounces of butter, and seven ounces of sugar per week, in lieu of gruel for breakfast, if deemed expedient to make this change.

Children under nine years of age to be dieted at discretion; above nine, to be allowed the same quantities as women.

Sick to be dieted as directed by the medical officer.

No. 4 dietary.

	BREAK-FAST.			DINNER.					SUPPER.		
	Bread.	Gruel or Porridge	Cooked Meat.	Vegetables.	Soup.	Boiled Rice or Suet Pudding	Bread.	Cheese.	Bread.	Potatoes.	Cheese.
	oz.	pints.	oz.	lb.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	lb.	oz.
Sunday . Men .	7	1½	5	•	•	•	•	•	7	•	1½
Women	6	1½	5	•	•	•	•	•	6	•	1½
Monday . Men .	7	1½	•	•	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•
Women	6	1½	•	•	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•
Tuesday . Men .	7	1½	•	•	•	14	•	•	7	•	1½
Women	6	1½	•	•	•	12	•	•	6	•	1½
Wednesday Men .	7	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Women	6	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Thursday . Men .	7	1½	5	•	•	•	•	•	7	•	1½
Women	6	1½	5	•	•	•	•	•	6	•	1½
Friday . Men .	7	1½	•	•	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•
Women	6	1½	•	•	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•
Saturday . Men .	7	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Women	6	1½	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Old people, of sixty years of age and upwards, may be allowed one ounce of tea, five ounces of butter, and seven ounces of sugar per week, in lieu of gruel for breakfast, if deemed expedient to make this change.

Children under nine years of age, to be dieted at discretion; above nine, to be allowed the same quantities as women.

Sick to be dieted as directed by the medical officer.

No. 5 dietary.

No. 6.—DIETARY for ABLE-BODIED PAUPERS.

	BREAKFAST.			DINNER.					SUPPER.				
	Bread.	Cheese.	Butter.	Boiled Meat.	Potatoes.	Yeast Dumplings.	Suet Pudding	Bread.	Cheese.	Bread.	Cheese.	Butter.	Broth.
	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	pints.
Sunday . Men .	6	1	•	•	•	•	16	•	•	6	1	•	•
Women	5	•	•	•	•	•	12	•	•	5	•	•	•
Monday . Men .	6	1	•	•	•	•	•	6	1	6	1	•	•
Women	5	•	•	•	•	•	•	6	•	5	•	•	•
Tuesday . Men .	6	1	•	4	12	5½	•	•	•	6	•	•	1
Women	5	•	•	4	12	5½	•	•	•	5	•	•	1
Wednesday Men .	6	1	•	•	•	•	•	6	1	6	1	•	•
Women	5	•	•	•	•	•	•	6	1	5	•	•	•
Thursday . Men .	6	1	•	4	12	5½	•	•	•	6	•	•	1
Women	5	•	•	4	12	5½	•	•	•	5	•	•	1
Friday . Men .	6	1	•	•	•	11	•	•	•	6	1	•	•
Women	5	•	•	•	•	11	•	•	•	5	•	•	•
Saturday . Men .	6	1	•	•	•	•	•	6	1	6	1	•	•
Women	5	•	•	•	•	•	•	6	1	5	•	•	•

Old people, being all sixty years of age and upwards; the weekly addition of one ounce of tea, and milk or sugar to those for whose age and infirmities it may be deemed requisite.

Children under nine years of age; bread and milk for their breakfast and supper, or gruel when milk cannot be obtained; also such proportions of the dinner diet as may be requisite for their respective ages.

Sick, whatever is ordered for them by the medical officer.

No. 6 dietary.



What dinner actually looked like for adult male inmates receiving the PLC's No. 3 dietary: 7oz of bread (around a quarter of a modern 800gm loaf) and 2oz of cheese.

Towards the end of 1836, a dietary for the Cirencester Union was approved by the PLC for introduction on 26 December. It included a daily breakfast of 7oz of bread (6oz for women) and a pint of gruel; for supper there was the same bread ration with 1oz of cheese; on one day a week, dinner comprised 2 pints of soup (without vegetables), while on other days 1lb of potatoes was served. The only variation was the addition of 5oz of bacon to the Sunday dinner. The total weekly food ration provided to male able-bodied inmates at Cirencester was therefore 105oz of solid food and 9 pints of liquid food without vegetables added. An outcry ensued when it was subsequently discovered that inmates of the City of London Union workhouse were given 163oz of solid food and 26 pints of liquid with vegetables.

NUTRITIONAL VALUE OF THE 1835 DIETS

The science of nutrition barely existed in the 1830s -- it was not until 1838 that the term 'protein' was introduced by Dutch physician Gerrit Mulder to describe a common building block of animal substances. Diets at this date were almost wholly judged in terms of the weight of the food they provided. However, a modern analysis of an average of the six 1835 diets allows us to assess the PLC's claims for the adequacy of their dietaries. The table below shows the breakdown of the 1835 able-bodied men's dietary, together with the corresponding 1991 UK daily recommended Dietary Reference Values (DRVs) for males aged nineteen to fifty-nine years.³¹

	Carbohydrate (gm)	Fat (gm)	Protein (gm)	Energy (kcal)
1835 male able-bodied dietary	317	46	67	1900
1991 DRV males aged nineteen to fifty-nine	345	99	55.5	2550

The table shows that with regard to carbohydrate and fat, the diet fell short of modern daily intake recommendations. Although the protein level was more than adequate, there was an overall deficit in energy intake of around 25 per cent.

Overall, the 1835 dietaries were very low in fat. Small amounts were provided in the occasional meat meal, suet pudding, or cheese and milk. However, workhouse milk was often watered down. Cheese was often made from skimmed milk and of variable quality. Aged and infirm paupers received a little extra fat in the form of butter, but again that could be bulked out with water.

The general lack of fruit and vegetables in all the 1835 diets also indicates a deficiency in minerals and vitamins in the diet.

WHAT DID THE FOOD TASTE LIKE?

Regardless of the quantity and nutritional quality of workhouse food, those who consumed it had a rather more important question in mind: what did it taste like?

In the 1830s, Harold Price was a resident of both the old Warminster parish workhouse and its successor the new Warminster Union workhouse. In the latter establishment, one piece of bacon served to the inmates was so tough as to be inedible and was kicked around their exercise yard like a dirty tennis ball. In September 1837, the male inmates of the workhouse refused to attend chapel as a protest against the food they were receiving.

Another view on the matter was expressed by seventy-year-old Charles Shaw in his book *When I was a Child*, published in 1903. In 1842, at the age of ten, Shaw and his family had been forced into the Wolstanton and Burslem Union workhouse at Chell in Staffordshire. On the subject of gruel, or 'skilly' as it was colloquially known, Shaw wrote:

I had heard of workhouse skilly but had never before seen it. I had had poor food before this, but never any so offensively poor as this. By what rare culinary-making nausea and bottomless fatuousness it could be made so sickening I never could make out. Simple meal and water, however small the amount of meal, honestly boiled, would be palatable. But this decoction of meal and water and mustiness and fustiness was most revolting to any healthy taste. It might have been boiled in old clothes, which had been worn upon sweating bodies for three-score years and ten. That workhouse skilly was the vilest compound I ever tasted, unutterably insipid, and it might never have been made in a country where either sugar or salt was known.

Will Crooks, a workhouse inmate during his childhood, later rose to become chairman of the Poplar Board of Guardians. In 1906, he recounted his first visit as a guardian to the Poplar workhouse:

One day I went into the dining-room and found women sitting on the long forms, some sullen, some crying. In front of each was a basin of what was alleged to be broth... The staple diet when I joined the Board was skilly. I have seen the old people, when this stuff was put before them, picking

out black specks from the oatmeal. These were caused by rats, which had the undisturbed run of the oatmeal bin. No attempt was made to cleanse the oatmeal before it was prepared for the old people.³²

A former workhouse inmate, identified only by his initials W.H.R., later recounted his experiences of the food served to children in the 1860s at the Greenwich workhouse:

If I remember rightly, nearly all our meat dinners consisted of salt beef. It was very salty, there was no water, and the wash-house was generally locked, except when we were washing. How I have suffered with thirst. Not one drop of water to be got, except during washing time.³³

It was not only the inmates who criticised the food. A local surgeon visiting the kitchens of the Sheffield Union workhouse in 1896 was bold enough to sample the day's menu:

I was invited to taste the dinner of the day, which happened to be soup. I was rash enough to take a breakfast cupful, with a piece of their excellent bread, and I paid the penalty of a severe attack of indigestion. A professional cook and five bakers are employed here, and have half-a-dozen inmates to assist them. Black beetles, as at Ecclesall, are a great nuisance, and occasionally get into the food, but vigorous steps are being taken to decimate them.

Even those responsible for the dietary could occasionally criticise the food. In December 1880, the subject of the workhouse porridge was discussed at a meeting of the Camberwell Board of Guardians. One member thought it would make a 'very good paste', while another professed that he would be ashamed to give it to one of his servants. The Board eventually agreed that serving a half pint of milk with the porridge would be sufficient to improve its palatability.

Following his election to the Poplar Board of Guardians in 1893, George Lansbury inspected conditions at the union's workhouse:

On this occasion the food was served up with pieces of black stuff floating around. On examination, we discovered it to be rat and mice manure. I called for the chief officer, who immediately argued against me, saying the porridge was good and wholesome. "Very good, madam," said I, taking up a basinful and a spoon, "here you are, eat one mouthful and I will acknowledge that I am wrong." "Oh dear, no," said the fine lady, "the food is not for me, and is good and wholesome enough for those who want it." I stamped and shouted around till both doctor and master arrived, both of whom pleaded it was all a mistake, and promptly served cocoa and bread and margarine.³⁴

The quality of workhouse food was not universally condemned however. In 1841, a report of a visit to the Windsor Union workhouse published in the *Penny Magazine* noted:

The inmates have recently dined. We taste the food which has constituted their meal; and we acknowledge that the suet pudding, the bread, and the cheese are, in quality, equal to what may be found in the larders of the wealthiest.