

Sex and the trenches

The testimonies of brothel-visiting Tommies offer a poignant insight into how soldiers reacted when stalked by death. Clare Makepeace explains

"Keep constantly on your guard against any excesses. In this new experience you may find temptations both in wine and women. You must entirely resist both."

These were the words sent by Lord Kitchener, Britain's Secretary of State for War, to each fighting man in the British Expeditionary Force before they disembarked for the trenches in France during the First World War. But Kitchener's warning received short shrift from some of his men. Among them was Private Richards, who declared that Kitchener's edict "may as well have not been issued for all the notice we took".

One of the temptations that Kitchener had in mind was the legalised brothel, or *maison tolérée*. British soldiers were free to visit these establishments in France for most of the war and one report recorded that 171,000 men

attended brothels in just a single street over the course of a year.

Revealing details

Only a few soldiers wrote about their sexual experiences, but their observations, some of which are now held at the Imperial War Museum in London, provide us with a more complete picture of the Tommy's life. They also add poignancy as to how men reacted when faced with the slaughter of trench warfare.

After arriving in France, Richards visited a brothel, or a 'red lamp', as they were also known, abstained on this occasion and found his own "respectable bit of goods" in another village. A few days later, he returned. "This time there were "300 men in a queue, all waiting their turns to go in the Red Lamp, the majority being mere lads". In 24 hours, these 'lads'

had little what they called chemises then. And they were sitting about on the troops' knees in all sorts of places... The idea was that if you fancied any girl, you bought her a drink and then took her upstairs." These were places where, according to Lieutenant Wheatley, men who "might well be dead within a week" could have "a little fun". Lieutenant Butlin found Rouen had been "ruinous" to both his purse and morals, but "from what I heard out here I decided quickly that life must be enjoyed to the full".

Threat of infection

Many had never before experienced sex. Captain Graves observed how "they stood a good chance of being killed within a few weeks... They did not want to die virgins." With so many Tommies frequenting red lamps, it's perhaps hardly surprising that venereal disease was rife among the British army, resulting in 150,000 admissions to hospital in France during the war.

Only in November 1918 were bottles of potassium permanganate lotion and tubes of calomel cream given to soldiers stationed overseas to use for self-disinfection. Before then, they had to trust the measures employed at the brothel, including the "old lady cock examiner", as Private Roworth described her, who checked

each man. The army also advised men to attend their unit's disinfecting stations after brothel visits.

Some soldiers had little interest in such precautions. They frequented brothels because they wanted to catch syphilis or gonorrhoea – and, in doing so, secure a more permanent removal from the conflict. At this time, VD was still heavily stigmatised,

"They stood a good chance of being killed within a few weeks... They did not want to die virgins"

and the available treatments for syphilis were dangerous and only partially effective. But they did entail about one month's stay in hospital – a worthwhile trade-off for some, if it enabled them to escape the carnage of the front line.

Having regular sex in brothels was believed, by others, to be imperative for their health. As Lieutenant Dixon wrote: "We were not monks, but fighting soldiers certainly with an abundance of physical energy... and if bought love is no substitute for the real thing, it at any rate seemed better than nothing." This belief was so widespread that a member of parliament impressed on the officers "that continence is neither impossible nor harmful".

This thinking led to the perverse idea that it was more acceptable for married men, rather than single men, to visit prostitutes. Lance Corporal Chaney, while he surveyed a queue of soldiers outside one red lamp, was told these places "were not for young lads like me, but for married men who were missing their wives". Private Clare also remembered a chaplain who excused unfaithfulness to

spouses under the present circumstances, but advised the men to only use licensed brothels, otherwise they might contract disease.

When the war ended, men declared their readiness to return to their marital beds. For Dixon "the business was compartmentalised". His "sweet-heart in Blighty" did not belong to the "topsy-turvy world of the battle-fronts, where values were totally different". The red lamps that had "amused and disgusted" Private Holt as he was redeployed across France "faded away completely when [he] left the towns".

Whether this really was the end of their indulgences, we do not know, since their descriptions stop with the armistice. As the combination of officially accessible brothels, an all-male environment and the conditions of battle faded, so too does this rare glimpse into men's commercial sexual indulgence. ■

Clare Makepeace is currently studying for a PhD on the lives of British prisoners of war during the Second World War



DID CONKERS HELP WIN THE FIRST WORLD WAR?

Saul David explains how Britain's schoolchildren were enlisted into the war effort – via the humble horse chestnut, the staple of the playground game of conkers

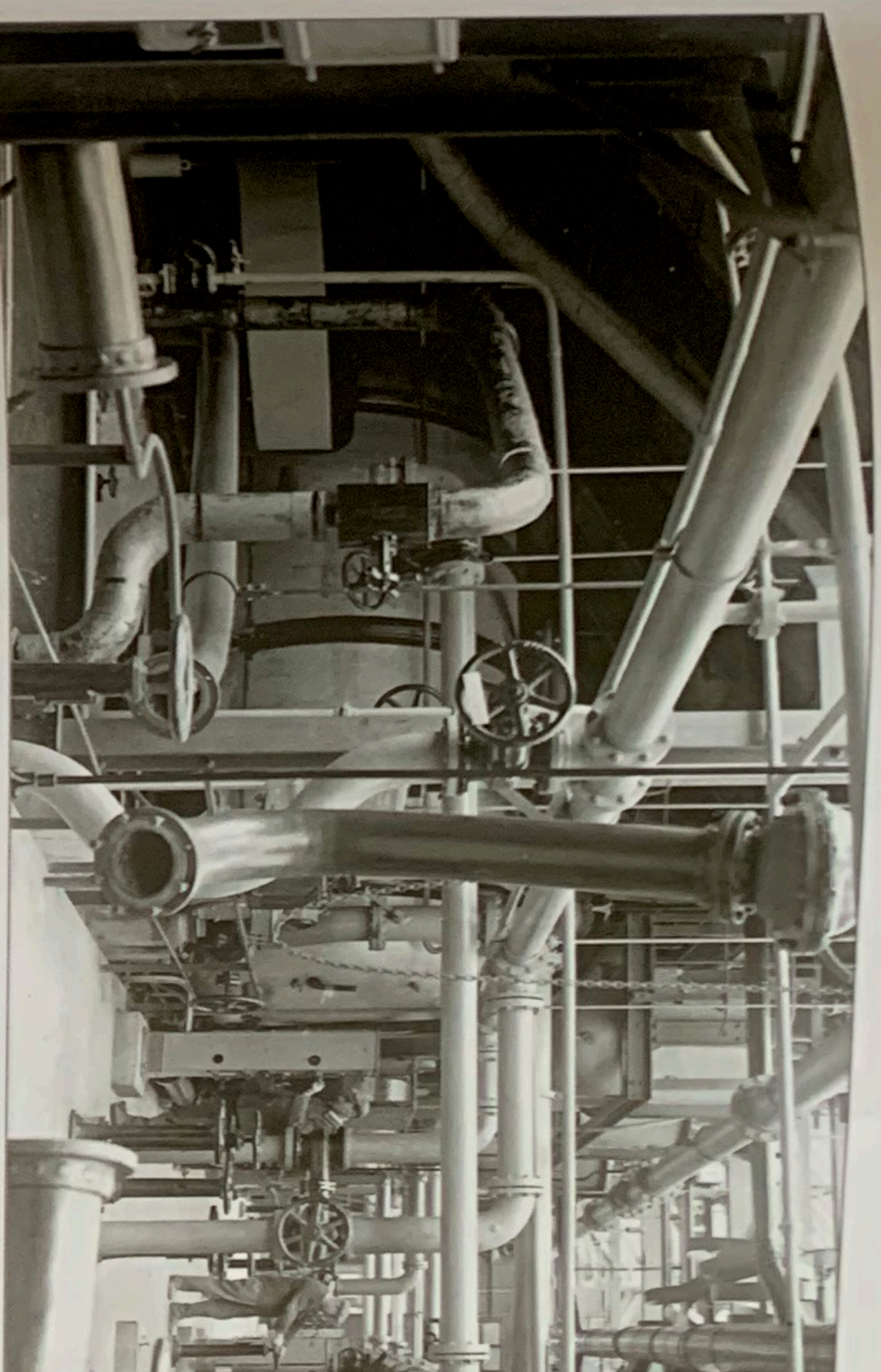


▲ Boys playing conkers in 1919. Horse chestnuts played an unlikely role in the war effort just a few years earlier
▶ Chaim Weizmann, the chemist who came up with the idea of harvesting conkers for highly prized acetone

In the autumn of 1917, a notice appeared on the walls of classrooms and scout huts across Britain: “Groups of scholars and boy scouts are being organised to collect conkers... This collection is invaluable war work and is very urgent. Please encourage it.”

It was never explained to the children exactly how conkers – otherwise known as horse chestnuts, the essential tool of the popular playground game – could help the war effort. Nor did they care. They were more interested in the War Office’s bounty of 7s 6d (37.5p) for every hundredweight they handed in. For weeks they scoured woods and lanes for the shiny brown objects they usually destroyed in the game. The children’s efforts were so successful that there simply weren’t enough trains to transport them. Piles were seen rotting at railway stations. But a total of 3,000 tonnes of conkers did reach their destination – the Synthetic Products Company at King’s Lynn – where they were used to make acetone, a vital component of the smokeless propellant for shells and bullets known as cordite.

Cordite had been used by the British military since 1889, when it first replaced black gunpowder. It consisted chiefly of the highly-explosives nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose (gun-cotton), with acetone playing the key role of solvent in the manufacturing process. Prior to the First World War, the acetone used in British munitions was made almost entirely from the dry distillation (pyrolysis) of wood. As it required almost a hundred tonnes of birch, beech or maple



▲ The cordite factory in Dorset, where the Admiralty converted grain to acetone

to produce a tonne of acetone, the great timber-growing countries were the biggest producers of this vital commodity, with Britain forced to import the vast majority of its acetone from the United States.

An attempt to produce its own acetone was made in 1913 when a modern factory was built in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire. But by the outbreak of war in 1914, the stocks for military use totalled just 3,200 tonnes and it was soon obvious that an alternative domestic supply would be needed. This became even more pressing during the spring of 1915 when an acute shortage of shells – the so-called ‘shell crisis’ – reduced some British guns to firing just four times a day.

Alternative methods

The British government created a dedicated Ministry of Munitions, run by the future Prime Minister David Lloyd George. One of Lloyd George’s first initiatives was to ask the brilliant chemist Chaim Weizmann of Manchester University if there was an alternative way of making acetone in large quantities.

There was. Developing the work of Louis Pasteur and others, Weizmann had perfected an anaerobic fermentation process that used a highly vigorous bacterium known as *Clostridium acetobutylicum* (also known as the Weizmann organism) to produce large quantities of acetone from a variety of starchy foodstuffs such as grain, maize and rice. He at once agreed to place his process at the disposal of the government. In May 1915, after Weizmann had demonstrated to the Admiralty that he could convert 100 tonnes of grain to

12 tonnes of acetone, the government commandeered brewing and distillery equipment, and built dedicated factories to utilise the new process in Dorset and Norfolk. Together they produced more than 90,000 gallons of acetone a year, enough to feed the war’s seemingly insatiable demand for cordite. (The

There weren’t enough trains to transport all the conkers the children gathered

British army and Royal Navy, alone, fired 248 million shells from 1914 to 1918.)

But by 1917, as grain and potatoes were needed to feed the British population, and German U-boat activity in the Atlantic was threatening to cut off the import of maize from the United States, Weizmann was tasked to find another supply of starch for his process that would not interfere with the already limited food supplies. He began experimenting with conkers, aware that they grew in abundance across the country, and found that the yield of acetone was sufficiently high to begin production. This, in turn, prompted the nationwide appeal for schoolchildren to collect the conkers and hand them in.

The government was determined not to reveal the real reason for the great chestnut hunt of 1917 in case the blockaded Germans copied their methods. The only official statement was printed in *The Times* on 26 July 1917. It read: “Chestnut seeds, not the green husks, are required by the Government for the Ministry of Munitions. The nuts



▲ A female munitions worker straightens out strings of cordite ready for packing

will replace cereals which have been necessary for the production of an article of great importance in the prosecution of the War.”

When questions were asked in the House of Commons, the veiled response was that the conkers were needed for “certain purposes”. So suspicious did some members of the public become that they accused the government of using voluntary labour for private profit.

The actual production of acetone from conkers was, despite Weizmann’s assurances, never that successful. Teething problems meant the manufacturing process did not begin in the Norfolk factory until April 1918, and it was soon discovered that horse chestnuts did not provide the yields the government had hoped for. Production ended after just three months.

So did conkers really help to win the war? They played their part, certainly, even if their role was more walk-on than centre stage. The real star of the show was Chaim Weizmann, whose brilliant solution to the acetone shortage – using a variety of natural products from maize to conkers – helped to solve the shell crisis and get Britain’s guns firing again. ■

Saul David has presented numerous history programmes on the BBC network

BBC



Tommyes tuck into rations from a field kitchen in the Ancre area of France, during the Battle of the Somme, 1916



GRUB UP! BRITISH ARMY FOOD ON THE WESTERN FRONT

An army can't march on an empty stomach – but rations were far from haute cuisine. **Rachel Duffett** describes a diet based on rock-hard biscuits and bully beef

Private S T Eachus, a signaller with the Royal Engineers, kept a detailed diary of his wartime service in France and proved to be a stern critic of much he witnessed – from the strategy at the First Battle of the Somme to the excesses of army discipline. Yet he was at his angriest on 16 August 1916 when describing deficiencies in the food rations given to the troops: "Have heard a good deal about German atrocities, but certainly in some respect the British are quite as bad and cruel, for weeks together we have not had a second vegetable, often none at all."

Eachus wasn't joking. He had given up his liberty – and potentially his life – for his country and, at the very least, expected to be fed properly. His was a view widely shared by the rank-and-file soldiers of the war, whose letters, diaries and memoirs are replete with references to, and criticisms of, army food.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the men's stories run counter to the official statistics and histories, which confidently proclaim the success of military feeding. On paper, the ration set for front-line rank-and-file soldiers does indeed appear generous at just over 4,000 calories per day, little different from today.

As the war continued, reductions were made, mainly in the training and reserve camps, so preserving the best diet for those on active service. The daily scales for each soldier were highly detailed, from the key items of meat and bread (around a pound of each) through the three ounces of jam and two of cheese, to the half-ounce of salt and one thirty-sixth of pepper.

Field kitchens

Good cooks were able to convert the rations into tasty meals for the men. Private Sid Liddell wrote that the cooks were "really splendid. Besides the usual stews, roasts, plum duff, etc, we have had stewed rabbit & pork, stewed mixed fruits & custard, rice pudding & fruit."

However, not all were as conscientious or able, despite the army training 92,627 new cooks during the conflict. Lance Corporal Walter Holyfield expressed a widely held view when he wrote to his mother that "our cooks are manuals; they'll turn a lump of the finest steak into a rough chip of mahogany in no time".

Formal complaints about the cooks were unwise. Someone at Private A E Perriman's camp complained to the regiment ▷

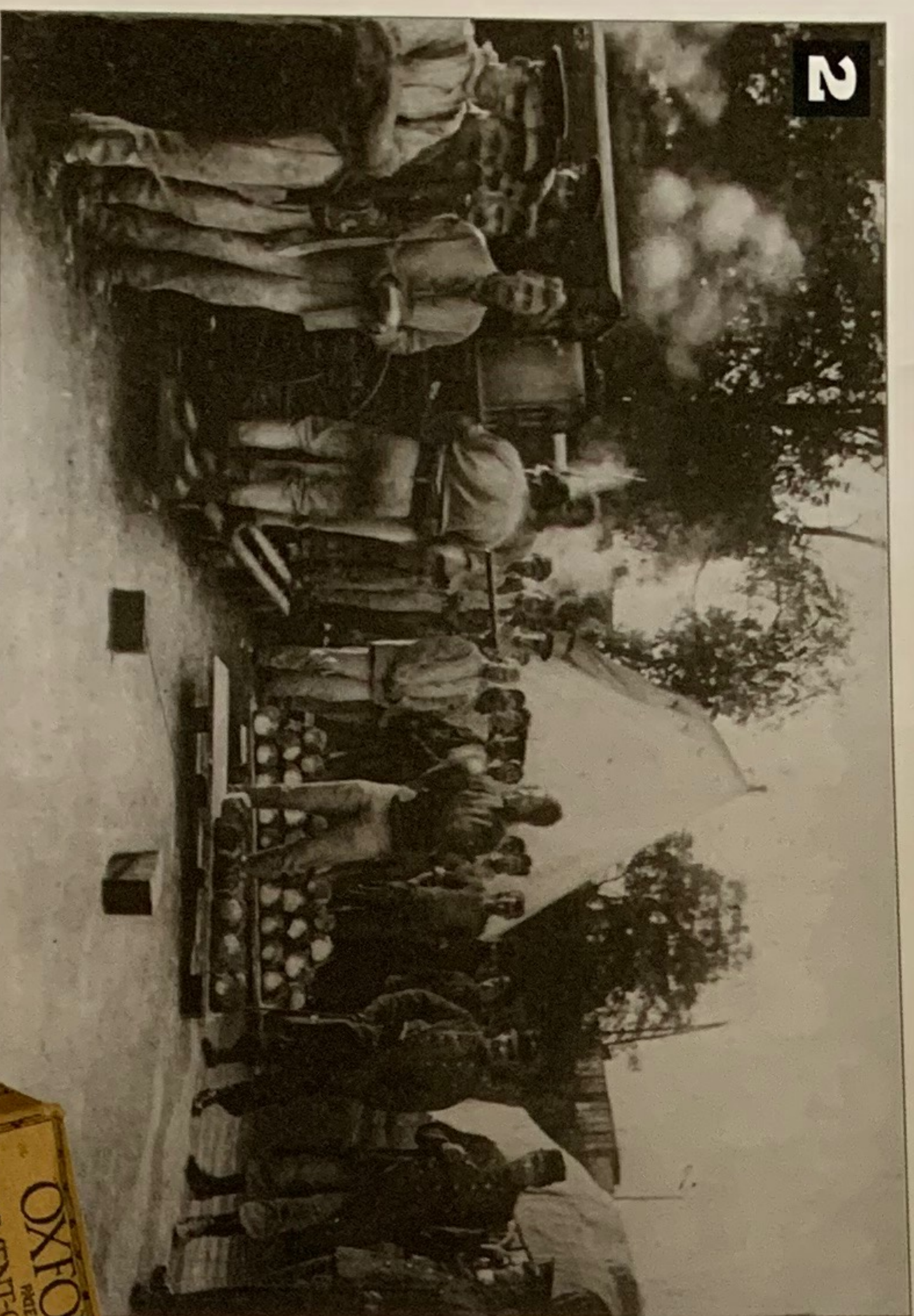




1 sergeant major that the tea was disgusting with “grease from the previous meal floating on top”. The sergeant bellowed “there’s nothing wrong with that”, proceeding to stir the offending beverage with his fingers.

The soldiers’ appetites would have been better satisfied if the specified rations had been delivered in full. Supply in war is fraught with difficulty and at times, such as during the chaotic retreat from Mons in 1914, provisioning broke down completely. Sergeant T H Culhoun recorded that, on 5 September 1914, he had not eaten for 36 hours. A week later, he complained that he’d only received half a tin of meat and two hardtack biscuits over a similar period.

The static nature of the Western Front generally facilitated the delivery of food to the men through a complex system of trains, motor vehicles, horse-drawn limbers and handcarts. Base Supply Depots (BSDs) were established on the French coast to store the quantities of food required to feed the huge numbers of soldiers. By March 1918, the ration strength had reached 1,828,098. One hangar at Le Havre held 80,000 tonnes in a building more than half a mile long and over 600 feet wide. Bakeries were established near the BSDs – at Boulogne, 15,875,667 pounds of bread were issued in one month alone.



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1. Soldiers with their Christmas dinners. The British Army tried to make the day festive
2. A French postcard showing a British travelling bakery in 1914
3. Orderlies prepare sandwiches for the wounded at the battle of Arras, April 1917
4. A range of the long-life food sent to the British troops on the front line



Space in the supply lines was always at a premium, so compact, calorifically dense food with a long shelf-life suited the army best. Tinned bully beef was easier to store, transport and serve than fresh or frozen meat, while hardtack biscuit was preferable to bread.

Alternative uses

Feeding men in distant and often dangerous front lines was difficult and the High Command regarded bully and biscuit as a useful solution to the problem – perhaps because they rarely ate it at HQ. The men in the trenches were less keen. The rock-like biscuit meant that even men with good teeth found it a challenge. For the many men with bad teeth – a consequence of the poor pre-war diet and lack of dentistry – it could verge on the torturous. It was a standing joke that biscuit made better kindling than eating; occasionally they were used as a canvas by the more artistic or a mount for cigarette cards, pleasing decorations for the dug-out. Ingenuity made the biscuit edible and ‘pozy’, where it was ground up and boiled with a tin of milk and some jam, was popular.

Cooking in the

trenches was permitted, but depended upon proximity to the enemy. Private W A Quinton recalled heating pierced tins of meat and vegetables on an open fire. “Usually it tasted badly of smoke,” he wrote, “but it was appetising enough to a hungry stomach.”

Cookhouses were established in forward positions, as the army knew how important hot food was to the men’s morale. Where kitchens were forced to remain distant, pan-packs were developed so that ration parties could carry stew to the front on their backs. Travelling kitchens were also used.

Captain Sidney Rogerson thought the stew he tasted in his capacity were pretty good “even if, as sometimes happened, a kipper or two had found their way among the meat, vegetables and biscuits...”

The soldiers were often less tolerant of eclectic mixtures. Private Eric Hiscock recalled a pal moaning “the f***ing stuff’s mule, and I don’t care who hears me”. In fact, mule or horse meat did unofficially find its way into the ration, as many units ate the animal casualties of shelling rather than waste the meat.

The official army recipe books aimed to give the cooks clear direction on the best food for the men in their care. The 1915 *Manual Of Military Cooking And Dietary Mobilization* contains a complete 100-day menu schedule. However, the need to ensure that the cookhouses made the most economical use of ingredients – and following the menu plan meant that the leftovers from one day could be included in the next day’s dishes.

A subsequent booklet entitled *Cooking In The Field* contained a number of new recipes. Of course, ‘new’ was not strictly accurate: the ingredients must have induced a sense of déjà vu. Bully beef was the chief constituent, whether in ‘bread soup’ (bully with bread and stock) or ‘potted meat’ (minced bully with pepper). Even the optimistically named ‘Fish Paste’ was four tins of sardines mixed with eight tins of bully beef.

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Although it was rare for the supply chain to break down completely, failure to provide the variety promised in the published ration scales was commonplace.

Contemporary nutritional science emphasised the importance of calories and lacked a full understanding of the role of vitamins and minerals. Consequently, the military believed that the sacrifice of a varied diet to the expedient but monotonous bully and biscuit was unproblematic.

Of course, whatever efforts the army expended in its provisioning, it was always unlikely that it would satisfy the men. The soldiers’ accounts show us what psychologists are well aware of: that eating is about much more than mere calories. Food’s physiological role is inextricably linked with its complex social and emotional associations. The anger that men directed towards army food, like that of Private Eachus quoted at the start, had broader origins than the mess hall menu.

In common with many of his peers, Eachus’s dissatisfaction with his rations said more about his resentment at fighting a war that terrified him, far away from the comforts of home, than it did a shortage of vegetables. ■

CHRISTMAS PARCELS

The little extras that provided welcome seasonal cheer...

Christmas dinner was an occasion when the disappointments of military rations were forgotten. In addition to official supplies, officers were expected to enhance the meal from their own resources. Private W M Floyd’s diary records a “spanking Xmas” in great detail, from the turkey, sprouts and potatoes, to the dates, nuts and muscatels.

Many organisations sent gifts to the troops, but not all were gratefully received. Private A P Burke wrote home complaining about one from The Manchester Guardian, which contained “only a few biscuits”.

Parcels from home, always a great source of support to the men, flooded across the channel at this time of year – over 50,000 a day in the period before Christmas 1917. Sadly, families to men no longer there send parcels to men no longer there to receive them. Pragmatism prevailed and they were usually consumed by the survivors, confident that it was what both senders and casualties would have desired.

On occasion, the contents could be overwhelming, as when Private P H Jones and his pals found an unclaimed box and “unpacked a magnificent plum cake, with a little note ‘To dear Reggie with best wishes for a Happy Christmas and a safe return home, from Mother’... not one of us would touch the parcel after that.”

► Christmas mail arrives in the trenches, 1916



Rachel Duffett is the author of *The Stomach For Fighting: Food And The Soldiers Of The Great War* (Manchester University Press, 2012)