'FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD!'
from No.13

I don't know where the food came from. Most of the vegetables must have come from the School's own farm, under the bridge and on the other side of the railway tracks. Potatoes, cabbage, and rhubarb, (which seemed to be in an abundance) lettuce and radishes. In the kitchen store-rooms there were catering-sized tins of beans and marmalade, so I suppose there were charitable donations from various food suppliers. Each morning a milk float from Assoc.Dairies (now ASDA) supplied the bottled milk. No doubt the food was all of excellent quality but between its arrival at the kitchen and its serving at the table, something dreadful must have been happening, because the cooked end-product was generally vile and often inedible. The kitchen cooking staff were female and I'm sure one was called 'Maggy' Newlands. One of her helpers was “Witchy-Woo”. She was a small, old and wizened female version of Arthur Askey, complete with the National Health circular glasses. She had stray hair that emanated from various parts of her face, and strands of which regularly appeared in the food. Some of the girls assisted in the kitchens, and could be seen operating the steaming, iron monster dish-washing machine, that resembled something from the imagination of Heath Robinson. It hissed like a steam locomotive, belched out great farts of steam, and clanked as if it were digesting steel nuts and bolts. The boys' dining room had a flat, plaster ceiling, and brick walls which were painted with a ghastly two-tone of gloss green and cream. There was a large framed painting on one wall of a seascape. Grace And I think a famous mural entitled the “Green Woman”. At one end was a raised paltform for the Masters' table (it was only ever used by the Masters for the mid-day meal – they had more sense to attend for Breakfast and were long since gone by the evening meal), and at the other end, an arched doorway (used for the Slices stampede). At the centre was a cleared space with, on one side, the hotplates and the door through the corridor to the kitchens. On the wall opposite was the bank of table lockers and the high windows that looked out over the girls' netball courts. (Sometimes in the winter the hotplates were off and the plates were frozen and I recall in the summer salads being served on plates that were so hot they blistered your fingers). There were fourteen dining tables, with seats either side for the boys and a seat at either end for the prefect and assistant table prefect. The three meal times were among the rare occasions when talk between the boys was unrestrained and so the cacophany was almost unbearable. It was interrupted only by the regular bellows for “Booze!” Booze came in large tin jugs; at breakfast it was cocoa, at lunch time it was water, and at dinner time it was tea. Nobody asked for the jug to be passed, it was just shouted for and the jug would be shoved and sent sailing down the table to the caller. The cocoa in the morning was foul, and came with a thick, elaphantine skin on its surface. It was rarely drunk. I remember the Great Cocoa Strike of 1960 when consumption was forbidden by general agreement and the cans sent back to the kitchens untouched. Nothing was done to improve the drink and the strike petered out after ten days. The tea wasn't much better.

Every picture tells a story and when you look at the school photos taken over the years, you would be hard pressed to find any evidence of obesity, and it wasn't just due to the absence of the fast or junk food available these days - the boys were always hungry.

Apart from the cocoa, breakfast on one day was a rash of bacon – streaky bacon, undercooked if you were unlucky, overcooked if you were lucky. The trouble was that when it was crispy, it sometimes disintegrated when you stabbed at it with your bent fork, and the
splinters flew away, never to be regained. Another morning it was “scrambled egg”. This was a very pale yellow gruel with susiciuous lumps lurking in its midst. You couldn't scoop it up with a fork but had to resort to a spoon. I suspect it was a powdered egg product, perhaps left over from the war.

Each table was given a plate of sliced bread and a block of margarine, about eight ounces. The prefects took most of the bread and a large chunk of the margarine, the rest of the marge' was sliced into slithers for the boys. As you often ended up with no bread, the margarine was surplus to requirements. The trick was to put the lump of margarine onto the end of the handle of your fork. Then, with all your might, you thumped your fist down onto the pronged end. This had the effect of catapulting the lump of marge' upwards, where it would splatter onto the ceiling. There it stayed until it gradually dissolved into the plaster, leaving a greasy smear. The whole dining room ceiling was mottled with greasy smears.

In order to supplement their meagre diet, the boys would sometimes use some of their pitifully small pocket money to buy 'spreads' from the village. (My pocket money was usually £1 for a term, sometimes topped up with ten shillings at half term). The boys would return from the village with Marmite, Peanut butter, and HP or ketchup sauces to make the food more palatable. In Hatch End, one well-meaning old lady observed the boys buying foodstuffs, and wrote a letter to the Headmaster (H.F. Dyer) complaining that it was apparent that we weren't being fed well enough. The response from HFD was not to reassure the lady, but one of his typical knee-jerk reactions – he banned any future purchases of food from the village! The boys resorted to smuggling and the ban lapsed into disuse.

Fish cakes were a favourite. You got one fish cake and a squirt of tomato ketchup. I remember one of those times when the plates from the hotplate were unbearably hot. Most of the boys used the folds of their jacket as gloves to hold the plates. Not so No.1. He had the fishcake on his plate and fled back to his table while the plate burnt into the flesh of his hands. He took the final turn to his table at such speed that the fish cake flew off his plate and by the time No.1 had dropped the empty plate onto the table-top and turned to retrieve his fishcake from the floor, it had gone, scooped up and eaten by some lucky boy, and mourned by No.1 ever since.

Another popular dish was “Elephant Spew”. This was scooped out of big tin baking trays. It was mashed potato that was then baked and given a covering of some sort of cheese and tomato concoction. It came out of the baking dish at over 1000º degrees centigrade, it resembled, and was as hot as, the molten lava from a volcano and only bearable to the roof of your mouth after ten minutes of furious blowing.

“Bursar's Earwax” was a pudding of kinds. It too came out of a baking tray, it was chocolate brown in colour, but quite crispy. I think it contained raisins or currants in a toad-in-the-hole sort of goo and was cut and served in squares.

The midday meal on Sunday after church was always a big disappointment. It should have been a highlight of the week but by the time Maggy Newlands and Witchy Woo had wrought their magical skills on the meat and veg, it was reduced to another culinary disaster. I think it was intended to be roast, sliced beef with mash and cabbage and gravy. As always the mash was lumpy, and I mean lumps that had to be chewed. The gravy was hot and topped off with globules of fat. The beef was thin and stringy. Sometimes the stringy bits would get caught between your teeth and the rest of the meal was given over to trying to untie and untangle the offending gristle. Many years later, in the Middle East, I saw a goat that had been rummaging in the waste bins. It had eaten a Lipton's tea bag and was walking down the dusty road with the string and the label from the tea bag, hanging tangled from a tooth. It bought back memories. The saving grace was the pudding – open jam tart with
custard. It didn't matter that the custard was as lumpy as the mashed potato – the tart was cut and served into squares, a thin layer of hard pastry spread with a thick layer of red jam. Please let there be seconds!

Friday was, of course, fish day. But oh!, what awful sea did these sad fish ever swim in? No crispy golden batter here, no flakey tender white fish within. We were presented with a soggy, dull quilt, which leaked oil when you pierced it with your fork. The fish hidden inside was full of bones the size of toothpicks. The skin of the fish on the underside was black and torn. It was accompanied by the inevitable lumpy mashed potato and a dollop of mushy peas, which was more mush than peas. All washed down with a cup of cold water ...

The subject of fish draws me inevitably to the subject of chips, and so to the Great Chip Riot. But firstly I must remind you of the anarchic “seconds” procedure that was in place at the time. Once all the boys had all been served, there were sometimes left-overs available as “seconds” from the main course or the pudding course. Priority for seconds went to the table prefects in order of seniority (the whole school ethos was entrenched in 'seniority'). The prefects themselves never had to make the unseemly rush to the hotplate for seconds, that duty was assigned to the poor junior who sat at his right hand. The boy's task was to make sure he returned with extra helpings for the prefect or risk a beating. If there were still seconds available after this, then each table were given the go-ahead to scramble for more, again in order of seniority, so the boys at junior tables had no chance! Of course some of the dishes were so foul that there were always unwanted seconds available and the more popular dishes rarely lasted to 'seconds'. Chips were served just three times a year (once a term). This auspicious ocassion was either on the last day of term, or the last Friday of term with fish, I think the latter was the case. Anyway, on this memorable day someone must have cocked-up in the kitchen, because there was a whole heap of chips left over. The prefects had all had their seconds of chips and still there was a heap of chips left over. So the duty prefect approached the senior table and was about to raise his hand to set the boys off their marks, but by now “chip fever” had taken hold and all the boys at all the tables were straining at the bit, their empty plates, knives and forks clutched in their hands. (Knives and forks always seemed to be in short supply so you let your cutlery out of your hands at your peril). The prefect gave the fateful hand signal and instead of just eight boys speeding to the hotplate, every boy from every table joined the stampede. The prefects serving the chips retreated in the face of this savage onslaught and a great fight ensued. I swear to this day that I saw the boy next to me drop his plate and fall back from the melee, vainly trying to remove a fork that had been squarely implanted between his shoulder blades! Oh happy days!

The most popular dish was Wednesday lunch-time. Cow Pie. Need I say more. Cow Pie came out of the same baking dishes as everything else. It was minced beef sandwiched between pastry and sliced into squares. It was served with cabbage and gravy. No matter what the dish, the prefects serving at the hotplate always had to be mean to make sure that everyone got a helping. But also to make sure that there was always plenty left over for them to load onto their own plates. This was never more so than with Cow Pie! I have seen prefects trying to return to their tables with plates of Cow Pie and gravy so brimming over that they have had to creep with breath held all the skill of Blondin crossing the Niagara Fall on a tightrope!

Sunday night's meal was not served out from the hotplates, instead it was already laid out on the tables. Plates, invariably red hot, bearing a “salad” arrangement. A leaf of lettuce, a lump of cheese, a stick of celery and half a dozen radishes. Radishes! What are radishes for? No-one ever knew what to do with them, certainly I never saw anyone attempt to eat one. On
this particular evening, as the meal was drawing to its close, somebody threw a radish at the back of the head of an unsuspecting victim on the next table. The victim retaliated and hurled a radish back in the general direction of the nearby table. The innocent third party responded with an accurate strike on a fourth boy. And then there was a spontaneous and unscripted escalation of hostilities and within seconds hundreds of radishes were being pelted across the dining room. I don't remember which Master was on duty that night, but I do remember seeing him in the centre of the dining room, bent double, his jacket pulled up around his head to protect himself, caught in a deadly cross-fire of radishes. It only ceased when all the ammunition was lost or damaged on the dining room floor. There were no reports of any serious injuries.

Porridge from hell was served every morning, except Sunday (when the staff must have been given a day off from adulterating the food) because on Sunday morning we got cereal in the morning, roast meat at lunch (surely cooked the day before) and salad at night. There was Spam Fritter, Corned Beef, Scotch Eggs, Boiled Eggs served sitting in a pool of drool, but I can't recall apples, oranges or bananas. On “Open” days we got a cup of orange juice and a chocolate cup cake each – was that for us or just to impress the visitors? One night we climbed out of the dormitory window, shinned down the drainpipe and got into the kitchens through an open window. In one of the unlocked store rooms we found a load of Swiss Rolls (*We never, ever, got Swiss Rolls*), We did that night!