

The Black Market

The U-boat menace in the Atlantic caused a shortage of food on the home front, as at the beginning of the war Britain imported nearly three quarters of its foodstuffs. To help the efficient distribution of reduced food supplies rationing was introduced at the end of 1939, and a concerted effort was made by the Government to boost food production at home, either on farms or through the 'Dig For Victory' campaign. All food supplies and production came under central control, typified by the issue of ration books allowing individuals to only buy certain amounts of foodstuffs limited by cost or coupons. It was a system of managing food supplies which generally worked very well, illustrated by the general health of the population during the war, and indeed rationing under state control was to persist for some varieties of foodstuffs until 1954, eight years after the end of the Second World War.

Yet despite a large number of Ministry of Food inspectors employed around the country to ensure the system was adhered to, there were many instances of goods, not just food, which were traded outside the system. This trading became known as the Black Market, practised by a wide variety of individuals, many of whom were normally law abiding, certainly not hardened criminals. This was despite the harsh penalties that could be imposed for black marketeering, notably up to a £500 fine or a two year prison sentence, and the paying of an additional fine equivalent to three times the value of the goods they had been witnessed trading illegally.

There were people who made a living of trading in black market goods; they became known as SPIVs, a term which some believed came from VIPs spelt backwards. Some thought the term came from the horse racing world. Yet in reality these 'professionals' made up a very small percentage of the black market. Hence some farmers could increase their income by selling their produce not to the state but to individuals, who were prepared to pay a higher price. Much of this black market trade occurred in the form of barter or exchange of goods. Doing it this way was considered a less extreme way of breaking the law.

A local pig keeper in Lowestoft in February 1944 under the terms of his licence sold half of his slaughtered pig to his local butcher and kept the other half for himself. Three days later a Deputy Meat Agent from the

Ministry of Food accused the pig keeper of selling the rest of his pig, as only a leg of the carcass could be observed. At the local magistrates' court the case was thrown out for lack of evidence, but the pig keeper was prosecuted for illegally giving the pork away. The comments of the presiding magistrate ensured that the case reached the national press and indeed the Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who prompted by the magistrate's comments on Gestapo tactics being used to visit the pig keeper at home, sent a memo to Lord Woolton the Minister for Food complaining of 'pettifoggery, tyrannical tactics' and arguing that a person licensed to kill a pig should be able to share it with friends and family. The law was subsequently relaxed in this sphere.

Why did such a large number of apparently law-abiding citizens trade or barter goods and food on the black market? Certainly many goods were in short supply, some were on occasion virtually unobtainable, notably silk stockings, but food supplies were sufficient to feed the population even if their supply was uneven in some areas.

The morality of the black market has been studied by numerous scholars trying to rationalise and answer this question. Put simply in times of war normal levels of moral behaviour do get distorted. On the Home Front the deprivations of war did cause people to 'bend the rules', spurred on by a combination of motives of which greed might only have been one. The 'war spirit' did encourage some to buy on the black market for the benefit of friends and family. Outside the main towns, where supplies of food were often less regulated, many people were involved in the bartering of goods including locally grown food or locally reared livestock. It might be therefore argued that the effectiveness of the rationing system was reinforced by an also thriving black market, which did not necessarily take away large amounts of goods from the 'system' but merely supplemented it, especially in the rural areas, with food.