

Home on the Range

One by-product of lockdown has been the opportunity for many households to take more time preparing food, just as our parents and grandparents once did. Today, as well as takeaways and ready meals, there are many semi-prepared ingredients available to speed up home cooking while the significance of different seasons is being lost by the reliance on imported products.

Another feature of modern times is the wealth of mechanical aids, mainly dependent on electric power, which past generations, especially in rural areas, could not enjoy. No wonder being a housewife was a full time job, while 'big houses' needed to employ staff, amongst whom the cook was a very important member.

To them, one of the most useful inventions of the Victorian era was the Kitchen Range, which could be considered the ancestor of the later Aga. It was but one of the many cast iron products of that time, which could vary in size to fit either 'big house' or humble cottage.

The core of this 'machine' was a confined coal fire with front grill, which could also heat ovens on one or both sides, as well as hot plates on top. In this way food could be baked, boiled or grilled, while consuming fuel in an efficient way. It was ideal for slow cooking, such as maintaining a stock pot, or keeping a tea kettle on stand-by. The room was also warmed, so that an off-duty cook could also enjoy sitting by it in a comfortable chair. At the same time, 'morning sticks' could be drying in the oven, ready for relighting next day.

Bit by bit, such 'apparatus' have been replaced by gas and electric cookers, modern fireplaces or log burners and, of course, they have become very rare. Do any still survive in the parish?

Another Victorian development was the publication of cookery books, which still give us some insight into what would have been prepared in such kitchens. Perhaps the most famous of these was written by Mrs Isabella Beeton, who gathered together many of the recipes to fill her 'Book of Household Management' first published in 1859-61. Her husband was actually also her publisher. The book also contained advice on general management of a large household, including the duties of different servants. There was also advice on health matters and it was sad that she herself suffered infections during childbirth and died in 1867. The book, however, continued to be published in many more editions during the following decades, hence the lasting fame.

One local housewife who certainly would have been familiar with Mrs Beeton's ideas was Blanche Lewis, of Milnsbridge, wife of Ernest and mother of Dorothy, whom we have recently discussed. Her 1866 edition survives, although the Milnsbridge kitchen and range have long gone.

Originally Blanche Rosier, she had first come to Bicton with her sister to work for Rev'd Edwards at the vicarage, having been obliged to seek domestic work after death of father, a teacher. The girls did not stay long here, however, as the 1901 census recorded them working for Arthur Maw at Alderley Edge, Blanche being the cook.

Arthur and his wife had recently retired here allowing the next generation to take over the family home and tile manufacturing in the Ironbridge Gorge. Sadly his wife died in 1900 and so Arthur later decided to move again, this time to Kingsland in Shrewsbury, taking Blanche with him. This was certainly conveniently closer to Ernest Lewis of Old School House, who had kept in touch since first meeting her at the vicarage. They married in 1907.

With this background and a copy of Mrs Beeton's 1866 edition she had a reputation for being both a 'lady' and an excellent cook.

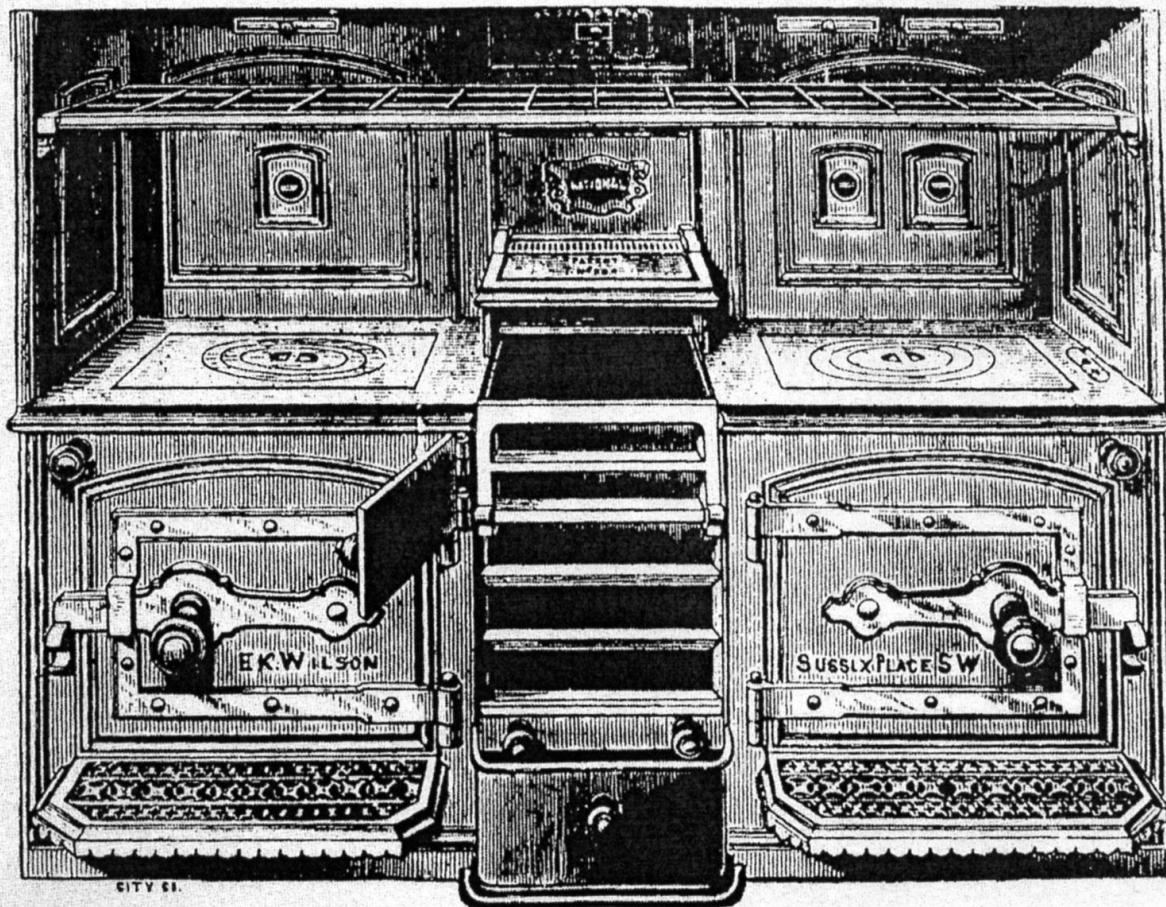
Many of Mrs Beeton's recipes could still be followed today, but some are dependent on cuts of meat which are no longer available. Flesh from awkward shapes like head and feet are now mechanically removed by food processors and turned into pies, burgers and pet food, so that brains, pigs' trotters and even whole heads do not appear in the modern supermarket. We may nevertheless be eating some in a processed form without realising it.

Also in a world of large families and armies of domestic staff, Mrs Beeton had to cater for more mouths than in the modern household, which would be wise to reduce the amounts listed by her. She also calculated the time taken and the cost per person. This is a useful exercise which you can also try at home.

The example reproduced here illustrates these points.

THE NATIONAL KENSINGTON KITCHENER.

E. K. WILSON, 13, 38, & 47, Sussex Place, S.W.



COLLARED CALF'S HEAD.

862. INGREDIENTS.—A calf's head, 4 tablespoonfuls of minced parsley, 4 blades of pounded mace, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoonful of grated nutmeg, white pepper to taste, a few thick slices of ham, the yolks of 6 eggs boiled hard.

Mode.—Scald the head for a few minutes; take it out of the water, and with a blunt knife scrape off all the hair. Clean it nicely, divide the head and remove the brains. Boil it tender enough to take out the bones, which will be in about 2 hours. When the head is boned, flatten it on the table, sprinkle over it a thick layer of parsley, then a layer of ham, and then the yolks of the eggs cut into thin rings and put a seasoning of pounded mace, nutmeg, and white pepper between each layer; roll the head up in a cloth, and tie it up as tightly as possible. Boil it for 4 hours, and when it is taken out of the pot, place a heavy weight on the top, the same as for other collars. Let it remain till cold; then remove the cloth and binding, and it will be ready to serve.

Time.—Altogether 6 hours. *Average cost*, 5s. to 7s. each.

Seasonable from March to October.