

## Food Sense

### 125 years of food history at Guinness

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**Food security – one of the biggest challenges facing the world today – is not just a third world issue and nor is it confined to the past. 125 years ago, the cheap white loaf of bread symbolised Britain’s leading position in global free trade; but then, as now, the market did not always provide a guarantee against food insecurity for the poorest.**

Pages Walk, Bermondsey, 1890



Sir Edward Cecil Guinness, the first Earl of Iveagh, saw this for himself when he visited Victorian working class communities in the east-end of London, noting cramped living conditions and poor diets. He recognised that affordable rent would also enable his tenants to eat better. This attitude and Guinness’s early remedies – including a hostel for the homeless complete with dining room – were far-seeing. Today it is agreed that food security encompasses much more than simply the intake of enough calories and nutrients to sustain life.

According to the World Health Organisation food security is built on three pillars – the availability of food, access to it, and the use of it – and, as the rising number of food banks in the UK today testifies, food security matters as much in the developed as the developing world. That’s why Guinness is proud of its 125-year history in combating food poverty in England.

### **In and out of the kitchen**

In 1900 a resident in any one of the Guinness Trust’s London estates had access to hot and boiling water, a communal scullery and, by the 1920s, gas. Unremarkable enough by today’s standards, but a vast improvement on the standards of the time. Conditions at a Guinness estate were a world away from the squalid tenements many residents had come from, where several families shared one room, high rents meant that the gas meter was often fed before the children, and nutrient-deficiency diseases like scurvy and rickets were common.

For Guinness’s female tenants these simple amenities helped them to cook properly for their families. And as new estates were planned in the 1930s, they were improved further, redrafted on the instruction of the trustees to allow more kitchen and scullery space and room for modern range cookers. The Loughborough Park estate, which opened in Brixton in 1938, was purposely built close to the local market and shopping centre; kitchens had ample storage space; porters were on-hand to fix broken stoves; and fuel was bought in bulk and retailed to tenants at cost-price. In achieving food security, the little details went a long way indeed.

Stamford Hill, Hackney, 1950



Caple House, Kings Road, 2008



Superintendent's flat, Kings Road, 1948



Women and children at the beach, Newhaven, 1946



Newhaven at Christmas, 1948



Post-war improvements also aided resident's food security. Apartments in Guinness's Caple House block in Chelsea – constructed on the site of a bomb which killed 59 residents – came with state-of-the-art kitchen fittings and gas cookers. Not all of the estates qualified for post-war housing improvement grants, but by the 1960s and 70s, the improvement and modernisation of all the estates was well under way. The age of gadgetry and food processors had arrived, delivering better cooking facilities for tenants. This necessitated greater funds and, fittingly, dining now often provided the means, with money raised at charitable luncheons and dinners through the Guinness Trust's newly formed fundraising committee.

## Holiday time

These days, holidays grant many of us a release from the daily grind – and a chance to eat out instead of cooking. But until 1938, when the British government introduced the Holidays with Pay Act, most people had no paid holidays.

The new legislation meant that the majority of people living in Guinness housing estates were now entitled to a week's leave per year and so, Guinness opened a new holiday home in the port town of Newhaven, East Sussex to provide a break for 8,000 London residents. The holiday home came equipped with a dining hall, which seated over 100 people, and a kitchen where holidaymakers could lend a hand preparing meals.

But if the holiday home was there to provide an affordable and much-needed break for all the family, it was mum who was prioritised. With breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner provided in the dining hall and picnic lunches available on request, many mothers were finally able to put up their feet and enjoy the sunshine and sea breeze on the terrace instead of cooking in the kitchen. The trustees insisted that;

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*“one of the main considerations has been to ensure a scheme whereby the mother of the family may have a week's complete holiday from her daily household round.”*

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## Eating together

Studies have shown that eating together can enormously benefit physical and mental wellbeing. In other words, chatting, sharing and enjoying food collectively is good for you! Throughout its history, Guinness properties have been distinguished by their fusion of communal activities with food – a significant feature of life because in the earlier decades of the last century working class people seldom ate out.

Eating together was a typical experience for the early Guinness residents. From their late Victorian outset the majority of estates were equipped with a club room complete with dining table, chairs and kitchen facilities. While some of the earlier club rooms had fallen into disuse

Coronation tea party, Pages Walk, London, 1937



Victory Party, Lever Street, London, 1945



Dining room, John Street, West Ham, 1950s



by the 1930s, many were reopened after the Second World War and hosted lively social events offering a variety of entertainment from fancy dress to dancing: events which came with ample refreshments for children and adults. At children's parties on estates, children would be fed a meal on-site and given fruit and sweets to take away. For staff, too, the annual dinner with the company's trustees was an event to be looked forward to and savoured.

If you close your eyes and think of your favourite food, associated memories will soon follow. Indeed the faintest whiff of a certain food can bring back treasured memories and one former resident of the Loughborough Park estate in Brixton captures this when recalling Guinness's trips to the seaside for residents:

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*“Really good cheese sandwiches, apples and lemonade... the huge dining hall... dead on time, two hundred and fifty bowls of brown Windsor soup were served, each accompanied by a bread roll. The sound of two hundred and fifty spoons banging on bowls, together with the incessant chatter, was deafening.... I asked Dad if they had the custard delivered by tanker lorry, there was so much of it. He laughed until he had tears in his eyes.”*

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In the post-war period there was a resurgence in communal dining in Guinness properties triggered by the jubilant VE Day celebrations of 1945. Many residents and former residents have fond memories of the jelly and ice cream accompanying the coronation parties of 1953 when the end of food rationing was just around the corner.

Guinness was also ahead of its time in prioritising specialist care for the elderly. Recognising that one of the most distressing aspects of old age can be the inability to prepare one's own meals, special lunch clubs opened which were devoted to older residents, some of whom had lived in Guinness properties all their lives. In 1949 a residential club in Hampstead opened, aimed exclusively at providing food and fun for older residents and in 1954 'a hostel for older people no longer able to prepare their own meals' opened in West Ham.

In 1955, when the tenants' workshop at Guinness's oldest buildings in Walworth was converted into a social club, the oldest resident Rose Inman (aged 77) recalled being taken to lunch at the Crystal Palace with other residents by the first Earl of Iveagh two generations earlier. Eating together continued as an integral part of the Guinness's elderly provision, with a dedicated residential club opening in 1966, and the Lord Gage Centre in Newham, a space devoted to the elderly, which provided a hot midday meal and companionship and serving over 100 daily,



Lillian celebrates joining the Guinness 100 club



Loughborough Park allotments



Community garden, Cornwall



opening in 1984. Today the 'Guinness 100 Club' provides centenarian residents with £100 each so that they can throw a party to celebrate.

### Growing your own

During the First World War, fighting at sea seriously endangered food supplies. As food queues became a feature of everyday life, Guinness encouraged people to grow their own fruit and vegetables. Land was donated rent-free for allotment gardening, including the then-undeveloped Kennington Park Road site in south London on which 160 flats were built after the war.

In the Second World War, with shipped food supplies again disrupted, the trustees prioritised any spare land for allotments. With Britain reliant then (as now) on imported food, a big effort was made to put the 'Dig for Victory' motto into practice at home. At Loughborough Park, 120 plots sprung up on the former grass lawns between blocks, providing a ready source of food for residents. If residents could not cultivate an entire area themselves, Guinness paid local War Agricultural Committees for ploughing and labour to ensure all available land was used to grow food.

Allotments persisted as an invaluable food source for residents in the post-war period.

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*Guinness's annual report of 1948 recorded that allotments at Stamford Hill estate were 'well maintained', those at Loughborough Park had 'produced good results', and plots at Kennington Park Road were 'highly cultivated and produced very large crops for the area'.*

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Providing a little slice of the countryside in the city, allotments were lovingly maintained by residents and fertilised organically by horse manure. Many residents took great pride in growing vegetables and could enter a national allotment competition with prizes awarded by the Queen Mother.

That was if they could survive the childish imagination: one resident recalled playing cowboys and indians in the allotments as a boy and, excitement getting the better of him, 'beheading' two of his neighbour Dolly's prize cabbages. Today Guinness supports community gardens with funding – like the one set up by resident Tanya Dovey in Redruth, Cornwall – as well as improving green areas with the Pride in our Estates project.

### Food and social change

During the Second World War gender roles underwent a shift, with women carrying out jobs previously regarded as men's work in factories and farms. When the war ended, widespread social expectation held it that women should

Iveagh House, Brixton, 1954



Miss Gates receiving a food parcel, Lambeth, 1948



Vauxhall Walk, London, 1947



return to the kitchen, especially since Clement Attlee's post-war Labour government was busy building over a million homes with spacious kitchens.

The Guinness Trust, however, was aware of the tens of thousands of single working women who did not fit the stereotype. P.L. Leigh-Breese, General Secretary of the Trust, complained that such women's social and professional situation meant that they found themselves ineligible for council housing intended for families; they were "no one's darling". Shift work and limited incomes dictated that these working women often desired small, manageable apartments and a canteen where they could eat 'hot meals cheaply' if too tired or busy to prepare their own.

Work on 161 flats exclusively for 'Bachelor Girls' duly began in Lambeth in 1950. Offering an alternative to the kitchen, the complex featured a café lounge and cafeteria. The cafeteria may have been based upon the older model of wartime 'national restaurants' (municipal feeding centres which offered cheap and nutritious meals) but, by the standards of the time, Guinness's vision was forward-looking and unconventional.

An early pioneer of affordable housing, Guinness was again leading the way in new experiments in living, anticipating trends which became common in the 1970s when greater female employment ensured greater demand for convenience food and the electric fridge became a common sight in the kitchen. The Iveagh House kitchens were designed for working women who did not spend the majority of their time at home; these were smaller units comprising larder, sink, pull-out work table and small cooker. It would be over a decade until *Cooking in a Bedsitter*, the classic 1960s handbook of quick simple meals aimed at working single women, was published.

The very same social changes meant that older models of addressing food poverty were increasingly outdated and, by the 1980s individualism was overtaking paternalism. Food security today is more an issue of personal and social empowerment, sustainability and nutrition.

## Empowering people to tackle food poverty

Back in 1945 when bombed-out Guinness residents returned to their newly rebuilt Chelsea flats, the children of the estate enjoyed a tea party with the Mayor of Chelsea and a bag of sweets each courtesy of the Mayor of Melbourne, Australia. Children received similar treats at Guinness properties across the country with kids in Bermondsey receiving 30 kilos of sweets courtesy of the High Commissioner of South Africa. These days, though, the paternalistic days of notables feeding the 'deserving poor' sugar are long gone and charitable models have undergone considerable change. Guinness's focus is now on achieving sustainability and legacy in food security.





Foodbank collection for Trussell Trust



While Guinness remains committed to assisting its customers, it now helps to achieve sustainability in food security by working with people and organisations that have the same aims and objectives. This could be supporting local projects, such as food banks and community gardens; hosting community dinners in spaces like the Portsmouth Friendship Centre; or helping talented individuals obtain training and education in cookery, hygiene and nutrition through their Aspire Awards.

A notable recent example is 'Josie's Melting Pot', a community café run by a Gloucester resident who received advice and support from Guinness to help with her mission to bring together community members over Caribbean dishes like curried goat and rice.

The tenancy sustainment team helps people to make the most of their budgets and can arrange for external services to assist in the most serious cases.

With the emergence of food banks in Britain, Guinness's latest project goes beyond collecting and donating food. As well as dropping off 46 boxes of supplies to Trussell Trust food banks across England, the Food Sense campaign has seen staff adopt three food banks (in Oldham, Southwark and Havant), and fund a Trussell Trust cookery, nutrition and budget management course.

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*In celebration of Guinness's 125th anniversary, residents are throwing a number of anniversary parties; one of the Yorkshire sites even journeyed back in time to enjoy Victorian food served up by a Victorian chef and garnished with vintage local condiment, Henderson's relish!*

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While ways to solve food poverty and food insecurity in Britain may have changed, food security still remains a priority for Guinness. So for that reason, 125 years on, Guinness is still trying to make a meaningful difference.

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All imagery and sources from The Guinness Partnership archive, held at London Metropolitan Archives.

For more information

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