

# **Better Fed: The Impact of the State Directed Food Production and Rationing System in Britain during the Second World War.**

John Martin

Metamorphic in an economic and social sense, the Second World War is arguably of greater significance in transforming British food production consumption patterns of the population than in any previous period even including the Agricultural Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Faced with the threat of a European war, and coupled with the possibility of a siege economy, the need for a state directed food production seemed self evident and even more overwhelming than in the first world war.

Within the space of a mere five years, British agriculture had experienced a structural transformation of unprecedented proportions both in the level and composition of agricultural production. According to official indices, domestic agricultural production measured in monetary terms more than doubled, while its calorific value increased by over 180 per cent. The state directed wartime ploughing campaign ensured that pastoral farming, the traditional mainstay of British farming, was replaced by the production of tillage crops such as wheat and potatoes, the area of which nearly doubled. Such changes necessitated a major rationalisation of the livestock sector. With the exception of milk production, which was prioritised, sheep numbers declined by nearly 30 per cent, while pig and poultry production contracted by 55 and 60 per cent respectively.

Rather surprisingly the historiography of the precise nature of the state's relationship with the farming community and the impact of the wartime rationing system have been neglected. This is manifested not by the absence of a strong conventional wisdom, but by the existence of a prevailing orthodoxy, the foundations of which are less substantial than might appear at first sight. The need for such a radical and unprecedented transformation has been hailed as an unqualified success ensuring that the British population was actually better fed.