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Tommies, Food, and Drink: A Microhistory, 1914–18

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This article uses a diary kept by a First World War soldier, Vince Schürhoff, to explore the British Army's food culture. It examines his journey through seven food contexts, the evolution of his cooking and consumption, and interaction with French food culture. This microhistory of everyday life demonstrates the centrality of food in the men's lives both emotionally and socially as well as physiologically. Additionally, it provides valuable insights into the relationships that formed around eating between the soldiers themselves and also with civilian providers. His rich account confirms the role of food as a key factor in the men's expression of the sometimes-shocking differences between military and civilian worlds.

KEYWORDS British Army, First World War, food, drink, Western Front, everyday life

In mid-July 1917 Corporal Vince Schürhoff reflected upon the etiquette of food consumption he had just encountered amongst the soldiers of a British headquarters behind the lines:

The mealtime politeness is almost painful, 'After you with the butter, please' or 'Please help yourself first' — like a bally girls' school, very different to our 'Chuck the posy over' or 'Hurry up with the bread' or 'Are you going to keep me waiting all night for the butter?' etc. Still, it's good to be amongst more refined men again.

Although Vince came from the same social class as these 'draughtsmen, surveyors, chemists, [and] engineers', he had spent much of the previous 18 months in the trenches with less refined men (Beach, 2015: 191). Therefore, the mockery contained within the diary entry is tempered by a consciousness of his now-roughened

table manners. This snippet is indicative of Vince's value as a contemporaneous observer of the British Army's food culture on the Western Front (Duffett, 2012: 4–11). Although Vince was an unusual soldier, this is to the advantage of the historian. A middle-class ranker with both French and German language skills, he undertook variegated military tasks in many different contexts. Those circumstances allowed him to transcend a number of military and cultural boundaries. But perhaps more importantly Vince took the time to record the nuances he encountered. His testimony is, therefore, worthy of close inspection by historians interested in the British Army's eating and drinking habits. To this end, this article has been posited as a microhistory. It seeks to conduct an 'intensive historical investigation' of one aspect of a small community's lived experience, in this case through the testimony of one member. The analysis thereby supplements the 'everyday life' focus of the published version of Vince's diaries (Gregory, 1999: 110–10, Magnússon & Szijártó, 2013: 4–5, Simon, 2015: 237–38). Furthermore, it provides additional nuance to our understanding of an important component of the British Army's sustainment of its soldiers' morale. As studies of the French, German, Russian, and Italian armies have shown, food was an important factor, especially when soldiers perceived it to be of limited quantity, low quality, or poor in comparison to that consumed by their officers (Wildman, 1987: 226–29; Smith, 1994: 226, 229; Ulrich & Ziemann, 2010: 113–17; Wilcox, 2016, 104–10).

Vince's war had begun fairly conventionally. The son of a naturalized German businessman and a British mother, he had grown up in Birmingham's middle-class suburbs. During the surge of patriotic recruitment in 1914, he joined a newly raised local infantry battalion. This unit deployed to France in November 1915 and Vince remained with them for another seven months. At that point his German language skills prompted a transfer to intelligence work and, through to the Armistice, he was employed mostly in listening to German telephone communications and interrogating prisoners (Beach, 2015: 1–3, 9–23, 79–100; Beach & Bruce, 2020). Although this intelligence work tied him to the Arras-Amiens area, his duties allowed considerable freedom of movement within their environs. This contrasted with the more itinerant and socially constrained world of the infantry.

Vince kept a diary throughout his military service in France. The entries record many mundane details and, in so doing, Vince offers an excellent window into the daily life of the British 'Tommy'. However, the published version of the diary did not unpack fully the food dimension. Therefore, this article will subject his rich and varied testimony to proper analysis. Although some contemporaneously recorded testimonies are available to food historians examining the British Army in the First World War, they are uncommon and usually rather laconic. Memory sources are available, but can be problematic because negative recollections of army food may simply be a proxy for deeper feelings of discontent towards military service (Duffett, 2012: 11–17, 180). The longevity of Vince's record is also significant, with the consistent detail across the four years of war providing a rare opportunity to assess changes in his food environment over time.

The article explores three aspects of Vince's experiences. First, it unpacks the food contexts that were delineated by moments of transition when he encountered a new type of food environment. Second, Vince's food preparation processes and consumption activities will be subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Although the diary does not chronicle every mealtime, the volume of food and drink mentions are such that data can be aggregated, and dietary patterns discerned. Similarly, he provides sufficient additional commentary on cooking and meals to test previous interpretations of the British Army's food culture. Especially important within this section is the question of personal agency. For Vince and his comrades there were significant changes over time in their food preparation practices. The third section examines Vince's interaction with French food culture. His language skills gave him access to a wider variety of outlets than the average Tommy and his testimony challenges us to re-think conventional delineations of consumption within the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) rear areas.

I. Context

Before examining his experiences thematically, it is helpful to set out the chronological development of Vince's wartime food experiences. Seven key moments of transition can be identified. Six were caused by a straightforward shift in his physical surroundings, but one related to a subtle shift in his military status. The first came when Vince reported for duty in October 1914 and spent the next 13 months training in England. Like many other middle-class men (Duffett, 2012: 85–89), his first day in the army provided a significant moment of dislocation with regard to food culture:

It is said a sudden shock numbs the reason. I think that it what happened to me. Certainly, to one straight from home the meal was a most nauseating mess [...] After half-an-hour's waiting, I reached the cooks. A fork was dug into a slice of meat and a greasy thumb and forefinger pushed the slice of meat off the fork onto the plate. I was told to move on and found myself confronted by another cook who quite unconcernedly scooped a couple of potatoes out of a pot with his dirty hands and dropped them on my plate. Quite suddenly my appetite had vanished. (Beach, 2015: 24)

It was not just the poor hygiene that jarred with Vince's middle-class sensibilities, but the communal eating environment that compounded his discomfort:

The crush reminded me of handing round tea cups and saucers at our tennis club and I could not help smiling at the contrast. There everything refined and clean, here boards on trestles, pieces of bread on the table, forms and floor. Fat, grease and gristle lying about everywhere and I thought of the clean tablecloth at home, the flower vases filled with fresh flowers and the whole feeling of happiness that reigned at our meal times. (Beach, 2015: 25)

In Vince's case the personal discontinuity with civilian life was certainly stark, but as a patriotic volunteer he submitted stoically to this aspect of military socialization, 'arguing to myself that one could not expect but the roughest fare with so many together' (Shirley 1; Duffett, 2012: 69). But the food 'did not improve' and Vince noted on one occasion 'the meat was extra tough and as a remedy to our complaint, we were simply given ten extra minutes in which to chew the meat'. Vince retained a photograph (Figure 1) of his battalion's first dining hall showing over 100 men sitting closely together at the end of a meal in early 1915. The 'leftovers' on the right of the picture indicate an adequate volume of food and Vince's written account also tells us that over-crowding was alleviated by the staggering of mealtimes between companies.

A second, less shocking transition occurred in April 1915 when the battalion began a summer under canvas. Initially they were close to the spa town of Malvern which allowed them to easily augment their army rations, with Vince noting that they often went to the Café Royal for tea. Later they were moved to the Yorkshire Dales where a more remote setting and a greater concentration of troops limited their off-duty eating options. However, Vince and his comrades were able to spend evenings consuming homemade bread, jam, buns, and cakes in the home of a local woman (Beach, 2015: 37). Within their tented camps the consumption of food was decentralized, with 'each tent provid[ing] an orderly [...] to fetch rations' (Shirley 1). In good weather meals would be eaten in the open air, but when it rained the men had to shelter within the cramped confines of their tents, where:



FIGURE 1 Dining Hall of 3rd Birmingham City Battalion, early 1915. Vince is in the middle, sitting in front of the standing soldier.

Plate[s] would slip from beneath the meat or the meat from off the plate and go skidding across the muddy boards. The mud would be scraped off with a knife and the meat returned to the plate [...] At first this and similar incidents disgusted us, but soon we grew used to them.

As this quote suggests, hygiene was not of a high standard. Vince recounted how plates and utensils would be cleaned, even between courses, with towels, bits of paper, or sandy soil. But the atmosphere was different to the mess-hall, with the meals:

Conducted in a very free and easy style, each man pleasing himself as regards both accommodation and dress. Anything from the bare ground to a mattress served as a table, meals were taken in and outside the tent and as a rule with tunic off and shirt sleeves rolled up. (Beach, 2015: 32)

The third transition came in November 1915 with deployment to France. His battalion was moved to the Somme region where they were normally billeted mainly within out-buildings in villages. As Table 1 shows, food featured very prominently in Vince's diary during the first weeks of 'active service' (Beach, 2015: 44–50; Shirley 2). It is also noticeable that food mentions decline after 1916, suggesting that he became acculturated to military eating and its idiosyncrasies proved less worthy of comment.

Perhaps the most important transition came on 16 December 1915 when the battalion went to the frontline trenches. Although food was not mentioned in Vince's

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF DAYS PER MONTH FOOD IS MENTIONED.

	1915	1916	1917	1918
January		8	2	–
February		8	–	5
March		11	8	6
April		6	3	2
May		5	4	3
June		6	3	6
July		10	6	4
August		8	3	1
September		3	4	6
October		13	5	5
November	–	6	4	–
December	13	5	–	
Total		89	42	38
Average		7	4	4

account of their traumatic first tour of duty, it was more significant during the second stint which fell over the Christmas period (Beach, 2015: 50–54). Vince stressed the awfulness of his Christmas Eve experience. That day, physically exhausted by the muddy conditions and possibly suffering from hypothermia, he staggered barefoot into a dug-out where his comrades ‘stuffed [him] up with bread and jam, cakes, [and] sardines’. Christmas Day was more benign. Having ‘procured a brazier [...] coke and charcoal [...] they] had a cheerful fire and with some of Mother’s tea tablets, bread, butter, jam and cheese [...] had a good feed’.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF DAYS PER MONTH FOOD IS MENTIONED.

	1915	1916	1917	1918
January		8	2	–
February		8	–	5
March		11	8	6
April		6	3	2
May		5	4	3
June		6	3	6
July		10	6	4
August		8	3	1
September		3	4	6
October		13	5	5
November	–	6	4	–
December	13	5	–	
Total		89	42	38
Average		7	4	4

In February 1916 Vince experienced a pleasant transition with a brief visit to Amiens, where he and his comrades enjoyed ‘coffee and cakes in a very nice café’ (Beach, 2015: 63). Over the next three years, access to large towns would become an important feature in Vince’s consumption of food and drink. In later diary entries, when contrasting them with the trenches, he explicitly referred to French urban areas as constituting ‘civilization’ (Beach, 2015: 192, 224, 277, 293). Vince’s sixth food transition was also a positive one but it did not stem primarily from a geographical shift. In June 1916 Vince transferred to intelligence duties. Although the physical environment was similar to that which he had experienced in the infantry, his military status had changed, and this opened up new food and drink possibilities, especially with regard to alcohol. He was now part of a small team of specialists whose place of duty was at the rear of the trench system, and they were able to spend many evenings in *estaminets* just behind the lines. This unusual freedom of movement when ‘in the line’ also allowed them to visit welfare huts run by British religious organizations and to patronize French shops and cafés. The final transition occurred at the end of July 1916. After six

weeks in the listening station, Vince was rotated out to a semi-permanent camp (Beach, 2015: 110). Like those he had experienced in Britain, it consisted of tents and huts. These camps constituted a half-way point between the trenches and ‘civilization’. Although Vince was officially ‘at rest’ between tours in the trenches, he worked to support his comrades still in the line. This usually required vehicular transport which thus enabled freedom of movement to visit French towns and villages. When off-duty Vince could proceed on foot and, by hitching lifts on wagons or lorries, might travel some distance in search of entertainment, food, and drink.

The diary provides some nuanced insights into Vince’s acquisition of army rations and also the means to cook them in the trenches. During his time in the infantry, the battalion provided Vince with cooked meals when in the line. He noted his own heating of drinks at night, but was otherwise reliant upon food being brought forward from the rear (Beach, 2015: 59). Vince recorded his own subsequent involvement in a two-hour round trip:

The tea is carried in dixies, with wooden handles balanced on one’s shoulders but the front man usually gets tea down his back, legs and puttees and the rear man down his legs on to his boots, thus both arrive fairly wet through. This is caused by the tea slopping from under the cover or lid which very rarely fits properly. (Beach, 2015: 69)

After transferring to intelligence work, Vince continued to rely upon what might be termed ‘the system’ for his meals. His small team was supplied with unprepared food which was then cooked by the infantry in their vicinity. But the frequent rotation of battalions often disrupted the arrangement, and the process of fetching their meals from the cookhouse was also an unwelcome chore (Beach, 2015: 102–04, 110, 112, 115; Shirley 4). In October, after a series of mishaps, Vince and his comrades took matters into their own hands. They ‘tried their hands at cooking’ on a stove acquired at least six weeks earlier and ‘the result was quite a success’ (Beach, 2015: 122–23; Shirley 4). This was a pivotal moment. With winter looming, they had taken control of their meals and this approach became the norm during their subsequent trench rotations.

Their decision was strongly influenced by the fact that their subterranean listening stations would remain in the same place for lengthy periods. Whenever they did relocate, acquiring a new means of cooking was always a priority. In January 1917 his team took a stove from a ‘ruined house’, as well as using ‘scrounged crockery’ which they stored in a salvaged cupboard (Beach, 2015: 142–43; Shirley 5). The advantage of a wood-fired kitchen stove was that it could be used in a cellar or dug-out if a chimney could be improvised. Although there was always the risk in daylight of the smoke giving away their location, the key advantage was that cooking below ground avoided the dangers of shellfire (Beach, 2015: 147, 154; Shirley 5). Oil stoves were also used by Vince and his comrades, but the fuel supply was unreliable and they were inefficient, sometimes taking several hours

to boil water (Beach, 2015: 200, 211; Shirley 5). Another option for quick hot drinks was to privately purchase a small camping stove. Vince had used one while in the infantry and in November his team clubbed together to buy another (Beach, 2015: 129; Shirley 4). But an absence of later mentions suggests that when the personnel were reshuffled at the end of the year, someone else retained this Primus cooker. When the group moved to a deep dug-out in the autumn of 1917 Vince thought its stove was ‘unreliable’, so cooking was done above ground:

We’ve fixed up quite a jolly kitchen upstairs at the dugout entrance. The brazier stands on two old petrol tins which let a good draught through. The sides have been banked up with sandbags and corrugated iron sheets, with shelves etc. for cooking utensils.

Their conscious preference for a low-tech solution using foraged wood is illustrated by their use of the stove’s paraffin supply to get the fire going in wet weather. Although riskier, by this point Vince and his comrades were veterans with a good ‘weather eye’ for enemy bombardments and could, therefore, manage the risks of open-air cooking (Beach, 2015: 94, 208–11; Shirley 5).

Getting uncooked rations to the listening stations was a perennial challenge. The first hurdle was ensuring they were included in the local distribution arrangements. That said, in early 1917 they were able to ‘play’ the system and received double rations by requesting supplies from two different headquarters. In a similar vein, Vince noted how he ‘saw the [infantry] Sergeant-Major about our rations [and] got extra tea and sugar and pork and beans, after putting on the usual professional beggar’s wail and semi-starved facial expression’ (Beach, 2015: 144, 152). When supplied directly from their rear-area camp, an additional difficulty was the rendezvous with the lorry or wagon. Matters came to a head in September 1917 when German artillery spotters were apparently alerted by the noisy hand-pushed trolleys used to move the food up to the dug-out (Beach, 2015: 205–07, 209). Another problem was damage in transit. Vince ‘found that the rations had come up in a very bad state, the sugar wet [...] through contact with water and it settled on the meat, making a nice mess of everything’ (Beach, 2015: 204). Vince was also involved in collecting and delivering rations. He recorded his experiences of taking a vehicle to the ‘gigantic ration dump’ where ‘lorries, limbers [...] wagons, carts, boxcars, all are jumbled together, but the rationing is done quite quickly in spite of the long queues waiting’. He ‘eventually [got] served, dropping raw meat, bacon, loaves of bread and so on into sandbags, carry[ing] them on our backs to the waiting boxcar’ (Beach, 2015: 228, 234). Finally, Vince was able to supplement his frontline rations with items purchased from military units’ canteens or sent from friends and relatives. Canteens are seldom mentioned in 1916 but become a regular feature from mid-1917 (Beach, 2015: 102, 158–59, 195, 199, 207–08, 219, 288, 251, 282, 291; Shirley 3–6). This reflects the gradual proliferation of these facilities and it is notable that in early 1916 Vince only mentioned a regular battalion’s canteen. Presumably because of their imperial garrison

experience, such units led the development of this provision (Fuller, 1990: 81). In contrast, parcels from home are more prominent during Vince's infantry service. Their decline after mid-1916 may be explained by the higher pay he received after transfer to intelligence or the fact that his father was sending him money instead (Beach, 2015: 51, 54, 56, 58, 65, 113, 135, 217, 227; Shirley 2–6).

II. Consumption

Vince's diary entries permit a certain amount of quantitative analysis regarding his consumption of food and drink. Vince spent 1,056 days on the Western Front up to the Armistice. The first 200 days were spent in the infantry, of which 76 days (38 per cent) were in the somewhere within the entrenchment system, including frontline, reserve positions, and dug-outs. The bulk of his service was, therefore, on intelligence duties, and during that period he spent 348 days (40 per cent) in the trenches. Recent research has suggested a revised benchmark of British infantry units spending just under 50 per cent of their time at the front, so Vince's overall

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF TIMES FOOD TYPES MENTIONED.

Meat	
Non-specific and stews	20
Tinned	14
Bully beef	16
Other beef	13
Bacon	32
Other pork	11
Biscuit	15
Fish	11
Bread	39
Eggs	51
Dairy	
Cheese	22
Other	24
Potatoes	34
Vegetables	12
Fruit	18
Confectionery	
Chocolate	20
Jam	19
Cakes and pudding	16

trench experience was less than the norm but still broadly comparable (Grayson, 2016: 185). But it must be noted that Vince's intelligence work was 'seasonal'. In the autumn of 1917 and the two subsequent winters he would spend periods of up to a month at the front listening to German communications with short rest periods in between. In contrast, the summers of 1917 and 1918 were spent on prisoner handling and interrogation; work that was conducted in the rear area. Vince did not chronicle his every meal and especially when he was set into a routine, he did not mention common occurrences. For example, in the summer of 1918 the entries suggest that Vince was frequenting cafés on a nightly basis but without recording them individually. That said, an aggregation of his food and drink mentions does provide a useful summation of his wartime diet (Table 2).

Meat	
Non-specific and stews	20
Tinned	14
Bully beef	16
Other beef	13
Bacon	32
Other pork	11
Biscuit	15
Fish	11
Bread	39
Eggs	51
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Cheese	22
Other	24
Potatoes	34
Vegetables	12
Fruit	18
Confectionery	
Chocolate	20
Jam	19
Cakes and pudding	16

The array of Vince's food references reflects the dietary tastes, restrictions, and concerns of other British soldiers. Britain was not renowned for an adventurous cuisine and its army's rations reflected that. A comparison with German Army provisioning highlights cultural differences: under 'Spices', soldiers were issued with 'caraway, clove, bay leaf, marjoram and cinnamon' in addition to the rather basic British offering of 'salt, mustard and pepper' (Lummel, 17). The majority of Vince's comments relate to meat in a range of forms, indicative of the longstanding British perspective that meat — preferably beef — was the key to powerful masculinity (Rogers, 2003). Meat, together with bread, had always been central to

British Army provisioning. In an 1899 survey, Colonel George Furse had noted that ‘nothing will conduce to the health and strength of the fighting man as fresh bread and fresh meat’ (Furse, 1899: 292). Vince’s diary shows that not all the fresh beef was especially edible and comments on its toughness, even after extensive stewing, was a frequent complaint. There were potential physical issues with the poor quality of the meat. On one occasion Vince reported that ‘lack of food mastication resulted in my being violently sick’ (Shirley 5). Logistical pressures meant that much of the meat consumed by Vince and his peers was tinned. While the labels on the cans of stew produced by the Maconochie company claimed that they contained the ‘finest beef’, the experience of many soldiers suggested otherwise, with fat and gristle dominating. Bully, or corned, beef was more common, and it is evident that this, together with hardtack biscuit, was the fall-back position for many meals. Like many men, tinned meat played havoc with Vince’s digestion and the diary has several references to its impact, ranging from violent diarrhoea to severe constipation, the latter relieved by the infamous ‘No. 9 pill’ (Beaver, 2006: 363; Beach, 2015: 48–49, 167, 171). Meats other than beef were available and War Office records highlight the prevalence of meat substitutions, primarily by its sale of 5.5 million rabbit skins over the course of the war (War Office, 1922: 580). Rabbit was a food of the poor and Vince’s disgust at its frequent appearance on the menu while training at Moseley, however, was a reaction to the form in which it was delivered, with a preponderance of rabbit heads (Shirley 1). Vince also consumed plenty of pork, usually in the form of bacon, which had the advantage of being both flavoursome and speedily prepared. Unlike other men, he also mentions a number of pork dishes consumed in local cafes and restaurants, something rare in the ranks where men were constrained as much by their pre-war food preferences as by finance.

Bread was also central to the British diet, even for those in income groups where a more varied intake was possible. Vince’s pre-war diet was unlikely to have included the quantities familiar to the working-class ranker, but it was an item by which he set considerable store. Bread was often in short supply on the Western Front, despite the British Army’s efforts to remedy this through the introduction of mobile bakery units, and soldiers were forced to seek supplies elsewhere. Vince noted that this was a ‘fine art’ and that the best way was to ‘keep in touch with a *boulangerie* as if it were a Stock Exchange’ (Beach, 2015: 47). The army favoured hardtack biscuits that were easier to transport and store, but as most men’s accounts indicate, they were highly unpopular. The dense squares were tasteless and difficult to consume, even for those with good teeth, and jokes about their alternative uses abounded (Marsay, 2000: 34). But Vince and his friends did not use them as kindling, nor as postcards, picture frames or canvases for oil paintings as others did, but they were employed as ammunition in late-night food fights after an evening’s drinking (Beach, 2015: 48).

TABLE 3
NUMBER OF TIMES DRINK TYPES MENTIONED.

Hot drinks	
Tea	23
Coffee	28
Cocoa	22
Beer	32
Wine	42
Spirits	22

Vince's numerous references to eggs reflected the enthusiasm of most British rankers. They were a food for which, according to another soldier, the men had 'an unconquerable passion' (Jones). Their intrinsically feminine associations in terms of both biology and traditional husbandry had a particular valency in the predominantly masculine world of the Western Front. This, combined with their availability from local sellers and easy preparation, made eggs a much-favoured food (Duffett, 2012: 216–17). Important too was the matter of food safety. Eggs were unlikely to be contaminated and if they were rotten, that was made only too clear once cracked. Other foodstuffs often concealed their unfitness for human consumption until it was revealed through extreme digestive disturbance. Such instances were usually meat-related, as Vince experienced but other items could also prove dangerous, as a colleague discovered after eating a tin of poisoned salmon (Shirley 6).

Middle-class soldiers like Vince had the advantage of parcels from home which were more plentiful than those received by working-class rankers, whose families struggled to provide for their men. Vince also benefitted from a wide and generous circle of friends and an extended family who kept him supplied. Many of the meals described in the diary had their foundation in such packages and, while candles were useful and tobacco pleasing, it was food that evinced the greatest pleasure. Vince rejoiced in a range of treats whether it was the 'chicken and asparagus for supper from Auntie Truda' or the 'Kunzles chocolates from Millicent', with the latter coming from the famous Birmingham confectioners of that name (Shirley 6; Roberts, 2013). Vince had a sweet tooth and found great solace in confectionary, noting the importance of a 'snack-in-bed tit-bit', preferably chocolate, but nougat could suffice (Beach, 2015: 195). In an uncertain world, there was comfort in the familiarity of retiring with a sugary treat, ideally combined with a good book and a reasonably comfortable billet.

Vince was also very fond of cocoa which clearly satisfied the sweet tooth evident in his confectionary consumption. It also served as a stimulant, sustaining him in exhaustion in June 1916 when he made 'a strong cup of cocoa to keep awake' (Shirley 4). The British Army had long regarded cocoa as an important addition to the men's diet. The 1899 [Army Service Corps] *Supply Handbook* noted that

it was ‘especially suitable for counteracting exposure to cold and fatigue’ (Boyd, 1899: 169). Its popularity in nineteenth-century Britain owed a good deal to the growth of the temperance movement, but for many it was seen as a particularly nourishing foodstuff with almost medicinal properties (Othick, 1976: 86). As evidence of the dietary esteem in which it was held, cocoa paste had, with meat concentrate, formed the first ‘emergency rations’ tins distributed to British soldiers in the African campaigns of the previous century (Boyd, 1899: 163) (Table 3).

Hot drinks	
Tea	23
Coffee	28
Cocoa	22
Beer	32
Wine	42
Spirits	22

While Vince’s diary has many parallels with the general eating experience of British rank-and-file soldiers on the Western Front, his drinking diverges from the norm in his frequent enjoyment of coffee. For the working classes, tea was the hot drink of choice, indeed the 1899 handbook stated that ‘tea may be regarded as a national beverage, and is much appreciated by the soldier’ (Boyd, 1899: 166). The power of a brew to revive the spirits was confirmed in countless diaries and memoirs. Tea, half an ounce a day, was a key part of the ration and differentiated the British Army from those of Italy, France, Germany, and the USA which all

TABLE 4
NUMBER OF DAYS PER MONTH ALCOHOL IS MENTIONED.

	1915	1916	1917	1918
January		0	4	–
February		6	–	3
March		7	3	2
April		1	2	0
May		3	3	4
June		2	3	0
July		6	3	2
August		13	1	1
September		10	1	2
October		9	1	2
November	–	7	6	0
December	0	11	–	
Total		75	27	16
Average		6	3	2

received coffee (War Office, 1922: 586). In Britain, coffee was a drink of the middle and upper classes not the ranks. Additionally, Vince's access to local restaurants made for a closer engagement with French food ways and that included their favoured hot beverage. When at leisure, Vince often took his coffee with rum, an addition to the daily allowance provided by the army. Each soldier was supposed to receive a quarter-gill (c.35 ml) daily. While it could be delivered in neat form, it was often provided mixed with the tea and Vince 'thoroughly lost [his] temper' when on one occasion he dropped his mess tin full of this precious commodity (Beach, 2015: 70). The issue of rum in the trenches was contentious: many commanders regarded it as 'undesirable' because 'it is difficult to supervise, and leads to drunkenness' (Bull, 2008: 83). Other than the rum ration, spirits were supposedly the preserve of officers and their messes (Manning, 1999: 126). Therefore, Vince's references to plentiful rum, whisky, and even curaçao are suggestive of considerable proliferation despite the official rules.

The diary makes numerous references to alcohol consumption. Most rankers, unable to move as freely as Vince, were restricted to the smaller, locally improvised estaminets where alcohol was often in very limited supply. Perhaps too, his background and experience of continental Europe allowed him to embrace a style of drinking that was alien for many men. The rankers were generally happier with the beer that was available in estaminets and wine was regarded as something rather out of the ordinary and not necessarily appealing. For example, Oliver Coleman was delighted with his first taste of red wine, which he described as 'hot!' (Coleman). For most rankers, details of their drinking are relatively sparse and this may well be a consequence of the absence of diaries as lengthy and detailed as Vince's. When veterans came to recall their experiences post-war, alcohol consumption was not a topic that featured widely in their memoirs, published or unpublished.

As Table 4 shows, alcohol consumption is mentioned less frequently in 1917 and 1918 although the diary entries do indicate regular drinking during that period. It seems likely that Vince's consumption was fairly consistent across the war, but he felt it was less remarkable during the later period. Vince recorded 10 instances of drinking beyond his normal level (Beach, 2015: 63, 118, 121, 123–24, 127, 136, 255–56, 258, 294). The first came in February 1916 when he was turned down for an officer's commission. Five occurred in the autumn of that year, two of which were pre-arranged parties. Christmas Day was spent at a training camp where Vince 'went to a neighbouring village, visited every café and got very genial with everybody [and had] no recollection of returning to camp but know we were singing all the time'. In May 1918 celebrations related to him being awarded the Military Medal resulted in Vince becoming 'rather oiled'. During the same month he also took advantage of the fact that he was temporarily attached to a sergeants' mess which was generously supplied with whisky. Finally, in October he and a colleague went absent for 24 hours in order to have a 'wild evening'. Such opportunities for excessive drinking were rarely recorded in other personal accounts. On the contrary, there were more complaints about the absence of

alcohol or its diluted state, like Walter Petty who complained in his diary that the wine he had managed to obtain tasted ‘more like red ink and water’ (Petty).

	1915	1916	1917	1918
January		0	4	–
February		6	–	3
March		7	3	2
April		1	2	0
May		3	3	4
June		2	3	0
July		6	3	2
August		13	1	1
September		10	1	2
October		9	1	2
November	–	7	6	0
December	0	11	–	
Total		75	27	16
Average		6	3	2

Turning to qualitative interpretations of his consumption, Vince’s diaries are a rich source because of the details he recorded which chart a growing interest, and developing confidence, in food preparation. Vince came from a middle-class suburban family and the 1911 Census noted three female servants in his household (Beach, 2015: 2). From this we can infer that, like most males of his class, he had at best a very limited understanding of meal creation. It is, therefore, unsurprising that, a few days after joining up, he was taken aback by his first ‘fatigue’ stint in an army cookhouse:

The stuffy kitchen air, the smell of raw meat, kitchen refuse, seeing how the meals are prepared, the dirty and messy work, all combined to have an internal eruptive effect on one, especially, as in most cases, like mine, it was the first experience of working in a kitchen. (Beach, 2015: 26)

Vince’s reaction was common amongst the men most of whom, even those who were servant-less before the war, would have had very little kitchen experience, given that food was ‘women’s work’. Vince would have had a sense of this specifically female space and was likely to have found the all-male environment of the army’s cookhouses unsettling on an emotional as well as a purely physical level. Just as concerning was the serving of meals, the basic niceties were absent and the touching of the food by its servers was particularly upsetting. Vince’s revulsion at the ‘dirty hands’ in the Moseley cookhouse at the outset of his service echo the ‘filthy fingers’ that William Tilsey also found repulsive (Beach, 2015: 24; Tilsey, 1931: 121). For many soldiers, men preparing and serving food was in itself a worrying sight. George Hill was upset by their rough

presence in the cookhouse which ‘compared oddly with [...] mother’s housewifely care’ (Hill, 2005: 17).

As their service progressed and familiarity grew, mealtimes became less shocking, not least because of the move away from the mass, standardized provisioning of the initial enlistment barracks. In the summer of 1915 the more improvised nature of mealtimes in tented camps began to encourage men to become more active in all aspects of food preparation, both the ingredients and the technical challenges of their cooking. Skills amongst the soldiers were limited, but during training exercises on the Yorkshire Moors, Vince was tutored in the ‘art of cooking a good chop’ by one of his comrades:

A shallow cross trench or slit was dug in such a manner that the wind blew down one of the grooves. Paper, twigs and wood would be loosely piled over the centre, a match set the lot alight, a good lump of margarine next was dropped into the mess tin and holding it over the fire, in fifteen minutes the chop was done. (Shirley 1)

As well as experience in making toast in a hut on Salisbury Plain, this seems to have been the sum of Vince’s culinary skills when he deployed to France at the end of 1915 (Beach, 2015: 44). He was, however, a keen learner and his diary describes in considerable detail the techniques that he rapidly picked up. In December 1915, Vince helped to prepare breakfast bacon for the whole section and acquired useful tips from how to energize a weak fire with bacon fat to keeping the cooked rashers warm (Shirley 2). Throughout 1916, the meals that Vince prepared were somewhat basic; mainly heating tins of Maconochie and frying eggs, with the occasional foray into slightly more adventurous territory, such as the ‘Welsh Rarebit [...] followed by turkey and tongue, finished with peaches’ (Shirley 4).

At the beginning of 1917 Vince took command of a listening station where amongst the new personnel was Bill Auckenthaler, a Frenchman in the British Army (Beach, 2015: 91). Bill was renowned for his cooking skills and this contribution to the team was much appreciated. The diary makes several references to the need to ensure that the cooking facilities in their billets met with Bill’s approval, because his temper was easily triggered by failures in stove provision. Bill also showed considerable ingenuity in expanding their culinary tools and Vince wrote admiringly of ‘a very excellent frying-pan arrangement [...] made out of a biscuit tin’ (Beach, 2015: 230). Bill’s cooking was worth the additional effort. On one occasion he added truffles to the meal, which was not an ingredient encountered by most British rankers. It is evident that Bill enjoyed cooking and regarded it as a pleasure rather than a duty, with Vince noting that, on one quiet evening, he ‘amused himself by making some soup’ (Beach, 2015: 237). Bill may have had pre-war cook’s training or restaurant experience, but, for whatever reason, the hackneyed superiorities of French gastronomy were realized in his relationship with the other soldiers.

Overall, Vince's diary reflects the importance for soldiers of finding a small group of other men with whom the collecting, scrounging, and cooking of rations could be shared. Away from mess halls, eating with the same set of pals was the most effective use of time and resources, because for each man to have had to prepare individual meals would have been a burden. The sharing of these responsibilities was both effective and comforting. While Vince could not claim to have matched Bill's talents, his diary demonstrates an increasing interest in cooking and by March 1918 he was able to write proudly of 'a stew of chunks of meat, onions, bully, pea soup, mustard, pepper and Devonshire sauce' (Beach, 2015: 237). It is also clear that the contents of parcels were usually shared between the groups, which provided welcome additions to the basic rations issued by the army. The attention to detail apparent in matters like the type of stove used and the cooking equipment speak to an uncommon level of domestication. Taking on the traditionally female roles of cooking and nurturing with food in the trenches was by necessity a limited affair, given that the physical conditions did not lend themselves to full replication of home. It was when men, like Vince and his friends, were living in small units that they were able to create something that approximated more closely to their civilian experience (Duffett, 2012: 157). As quoted at the start of the article, the diary's most poignant reference to the differences between military and civilian eating was made at the outset when the shock of the Moseley camp caused Vince to long for the 'the clean tablecloth [...] fresh flowers' and general happiness of meals at home (Beach, 2015: 25).

III. Civilians

Like other British soldiers, had Vince been reliant solely on the official rations he would have been much hungrier and have suffered a great deal more from the 'menu fatigue' associated with the monotonous army diet. Too often the promises written into the military dietaries were reduced to tins of bully beef and hardtack biscuit which, while operationally efficient, did little to satisfy hunger for fresh food. Vince was in the fortunate position of receiving money in lieu of parcels from his father, sums that helped to finance his transactions with local food and drink suppliers. Combined with the relatively static nature of his work, this gave Vince easy access to a range of shops, cafés, estaminets, and restaurants.

Craig Gibson has charted the complex relationship between the French population and their military guests, highlighting the commercial opportunities it presented which could be offset by the damage and disorder that accompanied the stationing of great numbers of men on their land (Gibson, 2014: 157–87, 222–72). Vince's diary shows how local citizens enhanced the soldier's diet, as well as some of the problems that arose. Within minutes of landing at Boulogne in November 1915, Vince had purchased apples and chocolate from the women selling their wares at the quayside. But by the end of the first week he was unable to get a meal at

any of the ‘6 or 8’ establishments that he had tried, evidence of the pressure under which the local businesses were operating (Shirley 2). The French food economy, however, remained relatively stable and while there were shortages they were minor compared to those in Germany for example where, by the end of the conflict, around 50 per cent of all civilian foodstuffs were sourced through the black market because of failures in official supply (Blum, 2013: 1070; Cronier & Le Bras, 2020). Variations in the availability of café and restaurant meals caused Vince, like other soldiers, to explore other options. Stocks could be limited in the local shops and the majority of Vince’s purchases were eggs bought from individuals rather than conventional retail outlets. As previously noted, bread was often in short supply and soldiers’ needs were secondary to those of the local population. Stapleton Eachus noted that in one village the baker was forbidden to sell loaves to the men and in another they were forbidden entry to the shops until after 4 pm, which was presumably to give the French first choice (Eachus). However, few men went as far as T Dalziel who actually stole bread from the French workers passing through his sentry post (Dalziel). When supplies had been obtained, local women were often very happy to prepare that food and invite the soldiers into their own homes to eat it, whether for money or a portion of the meal itself. Such food was usually a mixture of the pretty basic ingredients available to the soldiers in the local shops or canteens rather than *cuisine de terroir*, such as the ‘sausages, peas, chips, eggs and pears’ enjoyed on 30 May 1916 (Beach, 2015: 77). While the meals were simple, they were hot, fresh and served by a woman in a pleasing domestic setting, no doubt prompting memories of an earlier and happier civilian existence, with maternal undertones (Dunn, 1987: 175).

Unlike the great majority of rankers, Vince’s middle-class background meant that he was likely to have had experience of eating out in fully commercial eating enterprises, not just the more homely *estaminets*. Eating in cafés and restaurants was not widespread amongst the pre-war working-class and most cooked food purchases, such as fish and chips, were consumed in the familiar surroundings of home (Burnett, 2004: 107). In Vince’s case, in 1917 his French language skills further aided him to become a regular at Madame Pruvost’s hostelry in Arras (Beach, 2015: 142, 158–59, 181–83, 219, 235). He described sharing a table with two French railway officials and a local government employee:

We start the meal with potage, vegetable soup, and then Mme Pruvost fills our glasses with beer, at the same time serving us with meat and vegetables. The party all tuck their serviettes in at the neck and make a big noise whilst slopping the soup down but otherwise are extremely polite [...] After the meat and several glasses of beer, the latter are emptied and we also have a glass of wine with the cheese and fruit. Peculiar but nice custom this. Then after an exchange of cigarettes, folding up of napkins, we shake hands, bow slightly, wish each other *au revoir* and *bon chance* and depart. If guests are present, the drinks vary. I have had white wine, beer, red wine, more white wine,

champagne and coffee and rum, all for lunch and all for the ridiculous price of 2½ francs.

At another luncheon, Vince's social and linguistic confidence caused him to transgress military-social norms. Having arranged to meet two women and then commenced a meal at the hotel's restaurant in Doullens, he recorded that 'the truth dawned on me that we had strayed into an officers' dining room'. Vince's discomfort reflected the rigid divisions of rank in the British Army; Frank Richards recalled that he only witnessed officers and men eating in the same establishment on a single occasion throughout his whole war service (Richards, 1994: 16). Although the officers turned a blind eye, Vince's embarrassment was heightened by one of the women producing her own 'napkin with blood-curdling crimson borders', before spilling the wine, which prompted 'a shriek, then hysterical laughter' (Beach, 2015: 271–72). The linguistic, geographic, and financial privileges of Vince's position in France allowed him entrance to worlds from which the ordinary ranker was excluded. These were, however, civilian spaces where the rigid hierarchies of the British Army were not policed as strictly as they were in places of military consumption.

IV. Conclusion

The richness of the diary provides a valuable contemporaneous window into soldiers' eating and drinking practices. Much of what we know has been gleaned from memoirs where many veterans' food recollections have been fundamentally shaped by the perceived wider injustices of their service (Duffett, 2012: 223). Vince's diary offers the opportunity to test subsequent assertions against one man's actuality and although his experience was unusual in particular aspects, overall his account demonstrates the same emotional and social relationships with food as those of other rank-and-file soldiers. In terms of the particularities, he did not have the distrust of 'foreigners' that was evidenced in other men's limited interactions with civilians along the Western Front (Gibson, 2014: 167). Vince was able to immerse himself in local eating cultures with enthusiastic confidence. His diary is of particular interest not only in its rich detail, but also because Vince gives us a record of both soldiers' eating and a glimpse of the café society that was usually only enjoyed by officers. Even then, however, his experience was distinctive because of his language skills and his own background which made him open to different cultural practices. Vince was able to develop closer relationships with local business owners — and often their daughters too. His account of these communities paints a more positive picture than the general experience, where tensions often ran high in estaminets as years of British presence had left the French 'sullenly hostile' (Gibson, 2014: 175, 227).

Aside from this additional engagement with local society, Vince's diary shows the common centrality of food in the soldier's relationship with the army.

Initially, it was the point around which the differences between civilian and military life were most keenly felt. The grubby roughness of the mess hall, contrasting powerfully with the civilized meals of home and table manners, became even more forceful signifiers of degrees of civilization (Elias, 1978: 125). The shortages of food and difficulties in obtaining supplies angered Vince not just because he was hungry, but also as symbols of the British army's failures of care towards its men.

Like other Tommies, Vince found groups of pals with whom he not only lived, but also cooked. The sharing of both meals and the food parcels from home was central to the bonds formed between men. The growth of his interest in food preparation demonstrates the importance of meals as sources of comfort and also the desire to recreate a comforting sense of domesticity. Also, by shifting away from their dependency upon 'the system' for the provision of hot meals, Vince and his comrades exercised strong personal agency within this dimension of their everyday lives. This speaks to the wider argument that British soldiers were not simply passive victims of their wartime circumstance (McCartney, 2005: 1; McCartney, 2014: 299–302).

The quantitative analysis of the entries confirms previous research findings in terms of both the types of food available and their relative popularity with the soldiers. Additionally, the higher volume of food references in the first years of service is indicative of the process of acculturation whereby army eating became, over time, less shocking to the men. Vince's diary, therefore, confirms the fundamental significance of food for soldiers not merely its physiological necessity, but also its emotional and social power in an alienating military world.

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