



# Make Do and Mend: Keeping Family and Home Afloat on War Rations

*Jill Norman (Contributor)*

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With the nation's industrial output concentrated on the war effort and a clothes ration in place by June 1940, basic clothes were in short supply in wartime England and high fashion was an unknown commodity. Adults were issued as little as 36 coupons a year to spend on clothes, but a man's suit could cost 22 coupons, a coat 16, and a lady's dress 11. The need to recycle and be inventive with other materials became more and more necessary, and so the government issued a series of leaflets containing advice on how to make fabric and clothing go the extra mile. Reproduced in this intriguing collection, these pamphlets included tips on recycling curtains into dresses and instructions for turning old sheets into underwear. Covering darning, patching, knitting, and more, this is a nostalgic look at the innovative thriftiness of the 1940s.

## **Make Do and Mend: Keeping Family and Home Afloat on War Rations Details**

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## **From Reader Review Make Do and Mend: Keeping Family and Home Afloat on War Rations for online ebook**

### **Kim says**

reproductions of official wartime pamphlets.

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### **Paige says**

Pro: Excellent collection of original source material. I love it. This stuff is hard to find.

Con: I was expecting a little more analysis beyond the Intro. Not much of a Con, but...

Note: Yeah, I know my review of Eating for Victory is exactly the same. Both were ordered at the same time from the same vendor, so I received both and read both at the same time.

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### **Robin says**

Nice little book. Reproduction of a wartime guide for British people living on rations.

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### **Susan says**

There are some really interesting pamphlets in this compilation - the "Preparing For Baby" pamphlet is a bit of an eye opener. However, there is a lot of repetition throughout the collection that makes some sections a bit tedious.

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### **Kimberly King says**

Wow. Certainly was a different world back then!

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### **Hilary (A Wytch's Book Review) says**

A wonderful compilation of the wartime leaflets sent out to every family to stop waste - some of the ideas can be used again in the credit crunch times!

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### **Antonomasia says**

First of all, don't read this as an ebook, however low the price. (Paper copies are only £2.81 anyway.) The e-version is a monumental faff due to the user-unfriendly vagaries of zoom on desktop and tablet, which *won't stay zoomed* - and as the book is colour repros of 1940s British government leaflets, i.e. pictures of lots of small type, it's no more suitable for an ordinary B&W ereader than comics are.

I'm surprised this book has such a high average rating: it's a historical primary source with a lot of detail, some of it repetitive (though that repetition brings home the repetitive grind of wartime existence), about sewing, coal fires, rationing regulations and that sort of thing. Its ideal reader is probably a civil servant with interests in domestic crafts and modern history. Okay, there are probably quite a few of those about, but it's not, like, everyone.

It contains the sort of fine detail that, at earlier times, was usually lost to history. Who (other than people over 65 or so) knew that ironmongers used to sell things called potmenders, a kind of patch for a saucepan with a hole in it? (How do saucepans end up with holes? That's the world I live in.) The book gives the most comprehensive guide to darning I've ever seen, and will make you consider herringbone stitch for lots of mending jobs. And in the unlikely event you had a house with a coal fire foisted upon you, this collection of leaflets would tell you obscure and useful hacks that could otherwise take years of experience to work out. (Instructions for how to work with so many different types of cooker are given: it's very visibly a midpoint between Victorian [coal fired ranges] and late twentieth century [electricity and gas]. I thought about Ruth Goodman in the BBC historical farms series and how much more cleaning work she found coal fires created, and how glad she was to be rid of them.)

It's not just the coal heating that makes this a strikingly different world. (And so recently, I want to say, as part of me, never having quite unlearned the markings of time I knew as a kid, feels like this was forty-odd years ago, not seventy.) It's well known that C21st fast fashion clothes wear out more quickly and are made of lower quality fabrics than many items from longer ago. Yet very few of my clothes have needed mending; pocket linings, and the occasional cotton jersey top, mostly. So how few clothes must people have had, and how long they must have kept them, for mending (and pre-emptively reinforcing clothes) to be a major household task. The war was 6 years. I've often had clothes older than 6 years that which didn't need repairs; but if I'd had to wear each garment I owned twice or three times as often, maybe they would have.

Things I wanted to note, which, so far, don't gel into a few neat little subsections:

Quite a few things tally with extra-frugal advice one may run into these days - I mean Jack-Monroe-struggling-to-get-by-on-benefits sort of thing, or for living off-grid. But this was for *everyone*: cut down hot meals to a minimum; if you're using the oven (something, TBH, I only do a handful of times a year. because of the extra work in cleaning it) don't just cook several dishes in it at once, but as it cools, put bowls of water to warm up in it and use them for washing up.

There are practises I grew up with - as probably many others did whose parents remembered rationing - like only putting small amounts of water in the bath. (As a kid, I thought a bath meant water that only just covered your legs when you sat with them flat down. I was silently confused by media images of people in baths that were literally full, but didn't really think about, or understand, the difference and the contexts until well into my teens. Either way, I hate baths, and don't think I've had to have one for nearly 15 years.) On the other hand, there are common sense things I can't believe I didn't used to know until quite recently, such as chopping vegetables smaller so they cook more quickly. And how did it not occur to me before that darker coloured clothes could be dried in the shade outdoors? There's advice I wanted to take in the past: "don't carry a handbag under the arm of a coat or dress" to prevent wear - but with fat A4+ work bags, not just a nifty little 40s handbag, it's hard to avoid and so you get bobbling galore. There are things I always forget: apparently it uses "15% less gas to bring food to the boil in a covered saucepan"; in cookery I have the equivalent of "were you born in a field?" syndrome: I usually blank out lids and their purpose, even if they're right in front of me. Must try harder. And there's advice that, surprisingly and rather delightfully, sounds as if

it's from 1740, not 1940: if you live in a rural area and need a mattress for a baby, make one from chaff stuffed into cloth you've sewn together.

It's a different world of items I wouldn't know what they were without looking them up: gas poker; bath geyser (I think one of my grandmothers used to refer to this); irons that need their temperature testing on newspaper (do they mean electric without dials? or a lump of iron on a handle that you heated on the range? Either?). A blousette, is that a vest? Coatees? Magyar nightdresses? (I guess they are the ones with yoke fronts.)

Why would towels have cuts in them from razors? Presumably you couldn't leave those razors to dry as they might rust? There appears to be no such thing as an unpicker!?! I love unpickers. They had to unpick using razors or scissors; how messy. How much lower the price of thread and yarn must have been compared with ready-made clothes to make all this mending and knitting financially sensible, not just a principle or a hobby. Rayon sounds awful, such a fuss to look after it, makes you wonder why people bothered with it, but presumably it was fashion. To deter moths without being able to seal jumpers in plastic bags, you had to wrap them in newspaper and seal with gummed paper, and take them out once a month or so to air outdoors and iron them. (So much more work to maintain clothes than we are prepared to put in. If you had to do all this, you wouldn't want anywhere near so many items.) You weren't supposed to wash blackout fabric in case it faded; instead, more ironing to kill pests. (But the houseproud must surely have washed kitchen blackout, it would have stank from cooking smells in winter.) It's assumed almost anyone has a couple of dining chairs they could tie string between to make an indoor washing line. (It's my perception that smaller households often don't have these now, only a sofa. They are not the staple they used to be.)

What are often now seen as cool / twee vintage clothing designs with waistbands or front panels or borders, or collars and cuffs of contrasting fabric came from the ideas here of replacing worn out edges, and ways to expand clothes that had become too small for the wearer.

I've read elsewhere that, like Mrs Beeton's manual, much of the advice in these leaflets was actually directed at younger women, those in their twenties who'd only quite recently married and hadn't developed all the skills of their counterparts ten or fifteen years older. (And, as is quite commonly remarked in domestic histories, the average level of sewing skills in those days was what would now be considered quite high level professional. Those who saw the lovely old lady who won the first series of *The Great British Sewing Bee* will have seen this in action.) I suppose now some might make slippers as a craft exercise - it was in that silly and facile book on Hygge I posted about a couple of weeks ago - but not with the complexity shown here, making soles of rope and other materials. Few would now reverse a shirt cuff, though I have heard of people (well, people's grandparents) cutting sheets in half when they were worn in the middle, and sewing them back together the other way round. There are frequent references to one's scrap bag; it sort of seemed remarkable to me that this was something everyone had, then I realised I sort of had one, but fancier because more modern, principally cheap shirts and neutral coloured cotton jersey items I don't much like, which would be suitable for making into cloths or other things. (When I started considering whether it was worth selling a shirt depending on its likely price relative to the cost of the number of handkerchiefs that could be made out of it, I realised I appeared to be learning.) But I'm not sure anything else would have told me that it's better to patch older fabric with other older fabric, because new is more likely to pull itself away in the wash.

Most of the sewing advice leaflets feature "Mrs Sew and Sew" who looks over-cheerful and has the face of an unbranded brunette Sindy analogue sold in newsagents circa 1980. It's easy to imagine that if there had been a forties equivalent of Mumsnet, there would have been all sorts of swears and rants about how annoying she was. All the other cartoons are much more personable and human; I don't know why they chose this one to be used so frequently.

It's heartening to see it said that many women were already getting good at home repairs (what would now

be called DIY), but in giving instructions for those who weren't, I did wonder they didn't give better advice on how to hold a hammer close to the top; horribly, horribly easy to hammer one's fingers without that sort of control. (Scares me too much that I can't not include it, even if it doesn't fit well in the review.)

Earlier this year, when I finally got round to watching *Wartime Farm* for the first time, I had an epiphany. (Took so long, because I had thought I wouldn't be interested in it - a hangover from the time when I ignored all possible material about The War because of boredom with relatives talking about it and watching everything to do with it when I was a kid.) Turns out that it's an epiphany many have had, or maybe an idea I'd heard in the past and forgotten. But if society actually took prevention of climate change and resource depletion seriously, or, for that matter, when they kicked in, this is what life would look like. (The way that many ordinary people on the centre right seem to have accepted post-credit-crunch austerity as necessary, despite being a little worse off than they were before 2008, shows that it's simply a matter of how these things are sold to the public.) Seeing it in practice, over eight hours, made it far more vivid than a book would. But if *Wartime Farm* gives some idea of how it might look, some of the *Make Do and Mend* leaflets, especially the one which gives the full regulations for clothes rationing (100+ numbered clauses) gives an idea of how it might work administratively. I would love to have one or two people to talk to who were seriously into this idea, and we could thrash out all kinds of minutiae about how things might work and what and what not to allow (which we would inevitably disagree on a little). If only there were ultra-flexible options on *Civilization*, to try it out as a simulator.

One of the most intriguing and, it seemed, draconian, features of clothes rationing was that it even included second hand items. There would have undoubtedly been some flouting, but you even had to make jumble sales official and take coupons at them. I concluded in the end that they did this because otherwise it would have been too easy to pass off black market new clothes as used. (Were clothes swaps / swishes allowed? It doesn't say.) But all this does make one think about what unpleasant level of control or intrusion is needed to maintain a system like this when conditions of shortage are not equal everywhere that goods could come from. Household textiles - sheets, tablecloths and so on, were not rationed, however. They must have been a good supply of fabric to make clothes from.

I've heard it said somewhere that the UK rationing system was essentially, or very close to, a form of communism that actually worked and had the consent of most involved. It comes across repeatedly in these leaflets that there are no exceptions, everyone must pull their weight and tighten their belts. (Goodness, how would it work with today's super-rich? They would probably leave the country, just as plenty went to America in 1939.) One of the mottos that appears many times in these leaflets: *Remember fair shares, don't buy more than you need.* (Though of course some would have had far more clothes and far better housing than others in the first place.) Running a society by the kind of maxim requires an awful lot of trust in the system and a very high level of organisation to provide for people so that they \*will\* trust, at a time when instinct would have been, above all else, to hoard.

It is taken as read that making small savings on behalf of a greater cause is important and right: Dripping hot water taps should be fixed because *a drip every second can waste a hundredweight of coal a year.*

*if one household gave up toast for a year, there would be 2000 extra bullets for the war effort*

*No economy is too small to count.*

*Do you know that one single family reducing fuel consumption by the equivalent in gas, coal or electricity by the equivalent of 5lb of coal per day during the thirty weeks of colder weather could save enough fuel to produce:*

*2000 more cartridges and bullets*

*3 more sten guns*

*2 more 25-pounder shells*

*10 more rifles*

*If every family did the same it would mean all the following:*

*1000 more heavy bombers*

*5000 more spitfires*

*5000 more 6in guns*

*1 250 000 more rifles*

*5 000 000 more 6in shells*

*5 000 000 000 more cartridges*

*5000 more light tanks.*

It's so incredibly sad, and shows how so many humans can take the affairs of other humans extremely seriously, (and are told to) but not also those of the natural world. All that was considered of the utmost gravity and importance when it was to help fight a war, yet so many see it as namby pamby or silly to do such things to conserve resources and reduce emissions. That is ultimately a problem of political will and how environmental campaigns were managed that meant politicians didn't take them as seriously as necessary, although accidents of timing didn't help. (I think this is an interesting analysis of that, though by no means the last word.)

I really used to be baffled by wartime nostalgia (there was so much more obvious fun to be had in the exuberant 60s and 70s, provided you steered clear of Saville and his cronies)- and I still think there are downsides to the naive ways WWII imagery is invoked. Owen Hatherley even wrote an entire small book on the implications of the Keep Calm and Carry On Design fad, *The Ministry of Nostalgia*, and it's been satirised more obliquely and aggressively by this street art.

I'm nearly ten years late to the party, but I can really feel now how this sort of rationing era material can bolster one in learning how to be frugal, whether that is for one's finances, for environmental reasons or both. (Even the leaflet about what to do if bombed out, the sense of background insecurity that this might happen, now has echoes with the housing crisis, in a way that wasn't quite so widespread in 2008.) I've accepted that I am rather more susceptible than I'd like to be to consumerism's imagery and general suffusion of everything, and that I need to keep a certain amount of material at hand to keep me on the track I really always needed to be on, but didn't quite know how to manage - and to glamourise and romanticise it, because like it or not, that's something I absolutely need in order to be able to stick at things.

Perhaps the most useful single phrase in the book, to adopt for frugality, is the functional opposite of "treat yourself" - or of "get yourself something nice" which a lot of middle-class people like me grew up hearing from relatives at Christmas, not necessarily realising that if one was a student or lower paid adult it might have to go on essentials (and then, subconsciously confused, later comes the delayed splurge). I suppose it would be a dull world if absolutely everyone was this way - the rest of us need a few fabulous individuals to cheer us up, dammit, but it needn't be ruinous. (The book adds a "n't" and it's interesting how the feeling of the sentence changes with and without that, but I'm going to leave it out here as it feels more positive to me right now: ***Could I manage without it?***)

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