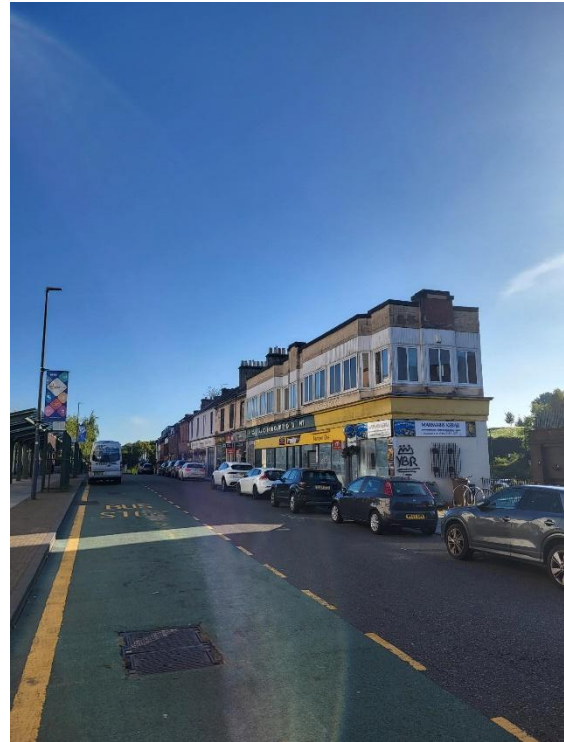


British Restaurant Research: Alloa, Clackmannanshire Scotland

undertaken by Nicola Reid, with thanks to Clackmannanshire Archives, particularly Susan Yule: Archives and Records Management Officer.

A British Restaurant was opened in Alloa on Friday 19th June 1942. “The new restaurant situated one the first floor of adapted shop premises in Shillinghill commands a fine view of the central part of Alloa and bears a resemblance – in its tapering formation – to the promenade deck of a luxury liner.”

After consulting several valuation rolls to identify the property used, and with the expertise of Susan Yule, we found the property owners, Miss Janet C. Hunter and Miss Mary M. Hunter, rented their premises out to Clackmannanshire Council for the venture, and they themselves lived at 10 Church Street, Alloa. The restaurant’s premise was located in Alloa’s Shillinghill area and affectionately became known as the “Shilling Fill”. Today, the lower premise operates as an off-licence and whilst the upper floor has retained restaurant status over the years it hasn’t been operational for the last few following a fire.



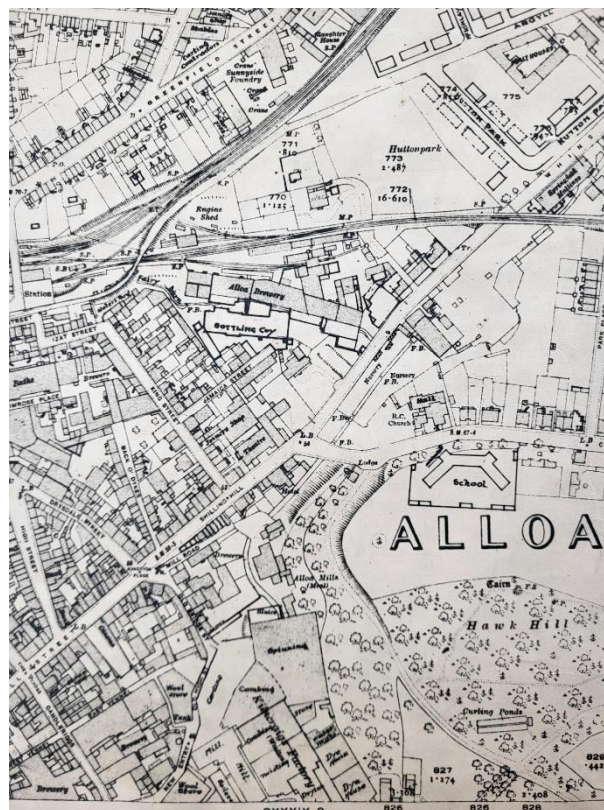
According to The Devon Valley Tribune on Tuesday 9th June 1942, the restaurant was to be open for service between 12 noon and 2pm (days not referenced) and offered 3 courses with the addition of tea. Prices varied from time to time, but were anticipated to be in the region of:

- Soup – 2d
- Meat – 7d
- Pudding - 3d
- Cup of tea - 1d

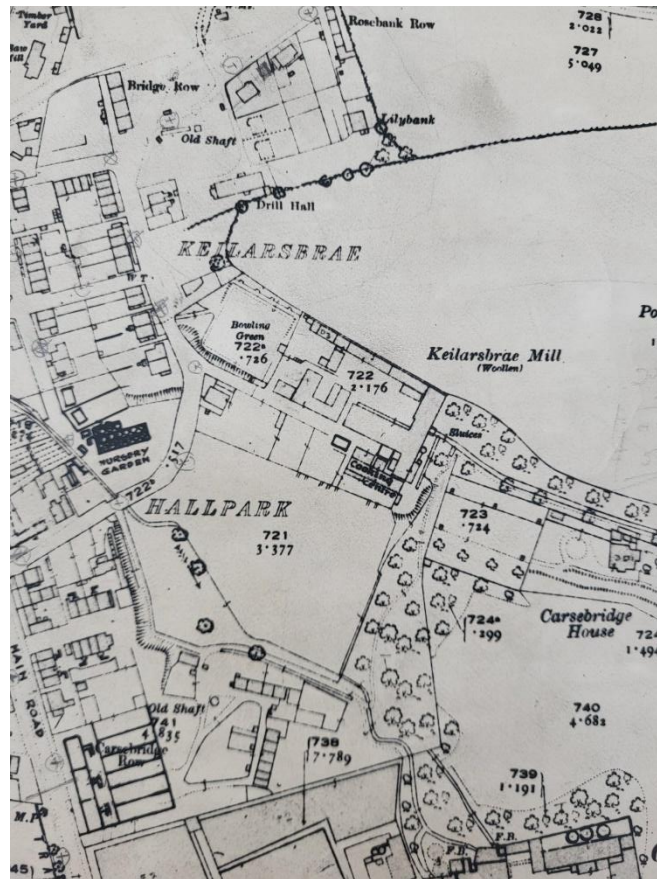
A “cash and carry” service for takeaway meals was also to operate from the same premise at a slightly later date, seemingly catering for an additional 200 customers, on top of the 200-250 seated patrons within the restaurant.

The intention behind bringing a British Restaurant to Alloa was to cater primarily for people who could not conveniently “get home” from work for lunch, and that workers (which increasingly included women workers) would benefit substantially in terms of nutrition and become “a more fit person”. Typically, factory workers would take “pieces” for their mid-day meal, but provisions for pieces were increasingly hard to come by. The scope of these British Restaurant meals would be *out with the ration book* and the installation of such a restaurant would be covered 100% in cost by the Ministry of Food. This notion received widespread support with some noting that the restaurant may also be used as an “emergency feeding centre” in the event of a blitz. It was also noted that a restaurant of this nature may also “relieve domestic difficulties” owing to the call up of woman to support the war effort. However, it was not deemed possible nor suitable to cater for large scale school participation when enquiries were made around the provision for children and, as such, a prior Provost expressed his lack of confidence on this being a success if school children could not be catered for.

Internally, the restaurant was described to be “tastefully” decorated in a citron cream and light green colour palette, seating 100-125 persons at any sitting. Customers would purchase their tickets on the ground floor of the premise for the courses they desire and would proceed upstairs where they would receive each course successively on a tray. Once finished, patrons were expected to use their tray to leave dirty dishes on the counter by the door. With the cash and carry system, customers would be supplied with their selection via a service lift on the ground floor and exit through another door on the same floor. They would be expected to utilise their own utensils.



The kitchen section of the restaurant was supplied by Keilarsbrae Cooking Depot/Centre. This site also supported the local community in the provision of balanced meals, to families and school children and would later become a lynchpin in government schemes fronted by The Education Department, which superseded arrangements facilitated by The Ministry of Food.



The restaurant at Shillinghill cost between £3,000 and £4,000 to bring to fruition back in 1942, which equates to approximately £118,000 - £158,000 in today's money according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator. The Secretary of State for Scotland, Rt. Hon. Thomas Johnston MP, declared the restaurant open at a "very pleasant ceremony" and hoped it would be a permanent venture. He also indicated his hopes to see similar ventures opened in Alva, Tillicoultry and Dollar – which also lie within the Clackmannanshire County boundary – but to my knowledge, through research, I cannot see this happened.

The restaurant in Alloa ran for almost 5 years and appeared to be frequented, in the main, by workers and trainees of nearby factories, such as glasswork and textile manufacturers.

In 1943, the minute of the Finance Committee meeting - held on 19th November– shows recommendation of wage increases for some, perhaps all, workers of the restaurant.

- Miss Bell, Shopkeeper – increase from £2.12.6d per week to £2.15/- per week
- Mrs Adamson, Assistant Cooker (Pastry) – increase from £2.5/- per week to £2.10/- per week
- Mrs Peason, Assistant Cook – increase from £2.5/- per week to £2.10/- per week
- Mrs Bulloch, Assistant Cook - increase from £2.5/- per week to £2.10/- per week

- Miss Barbara Mackie, General Assistant (age 15)- increase from £1.10/- per week to £1.15/- per week.

At a meeting of the Finance Committee on 18th September 1946 an attendee (Mr Miller) *“suggested that with the labour position becoming easier the practice of employing married women, whose husbands were working, might be reviewed and a more liberal policy adapted in favour of widows or other deserving women. The Committee instructed the County Clerk to keep this point in view when engaging staff in the future.”*

I could see from monthly reports of accounts that the restaurant had fluctuating revenue but largely remained in profit but at a meeting held on 17th July 1946 the clerk requested urgent approval for purchasing replacement crockery, cutlery and trays and provided quotes for redecoration and replacement linoleum in the kitchen. These costs totalled £110 but the finance committee approved only the purchase of urgent requirements, being the cutlery, crockery and trays.

At one finance committee meeting, held on 15th January 1947, it was logged that the Ministry of Food were now insisting that where a desire existed to retain a British Restaurant, that the local authority must take over operations from 31st March 1947. The committee recommended speaking to the owners of the building, as it had been repurposed specifically for the restaurant, to understand their desire in extending the agreement.

At a meeting of the same committee, a month later, on 19th February 1947 it was noted that the owners of the premise had indicated they wished to make use of their premise for their own purpose. As such, the clerk had produced and submitted reports which showed the usage of the restaurant, meals served and in which number over a five-day period, presumably to inform any sourcing of a new establishment if The Council wished to continue the service. This observation noted that the majority of patrons were trainees from Bo'ness, at Kilncraigs Factory, and that in the space of a short time (a few weeks) they would be employed back in their hometown. Therefore, a decision on what to do about the British Restaurant in Alloa was delayed, letting external circumstances unfold and be observed further.

One month later a further finance report was submitted, accounting for the operating period of 22nd Feb – 15th March 1947. This showed a profit of £16.19.7. For the following operational month, a profit of £4.19.11 was recorded.

It was during the meeting of 16th April 1947 that the committee discussed the need for reaching a decision on the future of Alloa's British Restaurant. The Ministry of Food was pressing for an answer by 15th May 1947 and indicated that they would only cover the restaurant until the end of 1947. If the council wished to continue the restaurant they would also be liable to repay some of the loan required to set up the restaurant(s) which was approximately £600.

Whilst observing the usage of the restaurant, the clerk noted that daily attendance to the restaurant was 90 persons, with approximately 44-55% were trainees of Paton & Baldwins who would move on the secure work elsewhere by the end of the summer. The clerk has also been unable to source or secure new and suitable premises.

Following discussion – on the motion of Dr Bennett, seconded by Mr Jamieson – it was agreed that Alloa's British Restaurant would be closed from 15th May 1947.

During the finance committee's meeting of 21st May 1947 one of the final reports were submitted showing an operating loss of £8.2.5 which I believe almost acted as confirmation that the right decision had been made, from a financial point of view.

Whilst not directly related to the subject of The British Restaurant, I think it is worth noting recorded discussions on "School Meal Schemes" and "Welfare Foods" which began around the time of The Ministry of Food's withdrawal from the British Restaurant scheme and continued after 15th May 1947. These discussions described the aforementioned Keilarsbrae Cooking Depot acting as a large-scale hub for the provision of free school meals in the county (up to 2,000 in number) and how sites in Alva, Tillicoultry and Alloa were being sought to expand the scheme to more children through "central kitchens". It is worth further note that, on 30th January 1947, the accounts for Keilarsbrae Cooking Depot were agreed to transfer from the finance committee to the education committee from the 16th May 1947 – the day following the closure of the British Restaurant site. At that same meeting on 30th Jan (which was a combined meeting of representatives from both committees) the appointment of a County Organiser of School Meals was discussed. The appointment appeared to be a mandatory request from the Scottish Education Department and so whilst some representatives felt there was not a clear "need" for the appointment at that stage, they did not believe they could push back on it and thus approved the creation of the appointment to the tune of £300 per annum, rising in increments of £15 to £345 per annum. (£9,860.97 – 11,340.11 p.a. according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator)

As the months passed, it would appear the free school meals scheme was in high demand as the Devon Valley Tribune published on Tuesday 8th January 1948 that the Keilarsbrae Cooking Depot was now catering "over 1,000 extra meals". This was in retort to calls for more publicity to be given to the scheme. Spokespersons for the scheme disagreed with this call and said further publicity would put the service under unnecessary pressure and greater publicity could be arranged once the additional sites at Alva, Alloa and Tillicoultry were opened. This public call to action, via a newspaper, appears to be an escalated step in applying pressure to the Education Department and local Education Committee following the same calls being made more conservatively during a minuted county council meeting held on 29th December 1947.

Meanwhile, following a meeting of Alloa Day Nursery House Committee on 8th July 1947, local authority run day nurseries were benefiting from the Department of Health for Scotland's Welfare Foods scheme. This scheme provided free of charge milk for drinking purposes only (or National Dried Milk when necessary) issuing two-thirds of a pint per child, per day, where they attended full day care. Cod liver oil was also provided at the rate of one 6oz bottle per child for 12 weeks, and orange juice would be supplied at the rate of 6oz per child for four weeks, but would cost 5 pence per bottle at that stage.

From all these insights, and with a view to making a more contemporary version of British Restaurants more sustainable in future, I deduce the following:

- Funding is critical, with long term funding scenarios requiring thought – prior to committing – if those sources were to change. I'm not overly surprised that when The Ministry of Food gave notice of their funds coming to an end that it was a much-deliberated consideration for a local council to take over. I appreciate research was undertaken and alternative consideration was given to how they might maintain the British Restaurant in Alloa, but I think the venture was always viewed a much appreciated 'gift' to the region as opposed to a necessary core component in tackling

health and wellbeing within the local community, within county council plans. Today, hybrid funding between government departments and council areas could be a way of securing adequate finance and ensuring vested interests of each body be reached through the initiative, whilst maintaining accountability at a local level.

- Lack of proper infrastructure is prohibitive. Without appropriate premises to adapt, or dedicated premises for the purposes of communal dining, the British Restaurant, nor the free school meals scheme, were actually able to flourish during these times. Maximising existing community infrastructure and assets such as school dining rooms, community halls with kitchen facilities, school transport links or social care facilities could encourage S.M.A.R.T.E.R ways of working and delivery on shared goals, ensuring as many people as possible could take advantage of provision, not just those 'in the know'.
- Younger generations appear critical to the uptake of food-based interventions and are of course one of the most deserving demographics to receive such supplement. The prior Provost, referenced earlier, who expressed his lack of confidence on [The British Restaurant in Alloa] being a success if school children could not be catered for was ultimately correct, as the restaurant began to hold below 50% capacity of uptake whilst The Keilarsbrae Depot (which I believe was multi-generational within the community) soared in popularity and the free school meal schemes later became oversubscribed. Today, with working parents, *plural*, being commonplace; with the significant cost of childcare and wrap around care; the increased cost of living overall; recognition of the importance of nutrition within health and wellbeing (both physically and mentally) and the sense of greater 'disconnectedness' in our ever more virtual world it appears absolutely imperative that we design and devise provision that spans generations and encourages inclusion from the youngest in our society up. Community Suppers could be promoted and potentially hosted via maternity networks, early childcare providers and later into higher and further education. Traditional community fundraisers could focus on, or at least include a food-based element to encourage communal dining over healthy balanced meals and ensure sustenance for those who need it most at a modest price point, as examples.

The pursuit of encouraging a fitter and healthier nation, "a Scotland where everybody thrives" (Public Health Scotland) should not exist in silo, confined only to the prioritising department or funding stream. Only through a collaborative and well-connected network of public, private and tertiary organisations with matched funds - tailored to the needs at a local level - can multi-dimensional benefits be realised: in health, in wellbeing, in learning, in the economic growth and in interconnectedness. As, surely, a *thriving nation* is firstly a well-fed nation.

I would like to conclude with a poem I found during my research within a book entitled "Hard Bitten Times", published in 1984 by Andrew Gallagher. This book recorded the historical aspects of unemployment in Clackmannanshire and whilst it was not directly related to, nor mentioned, British Restaurants I felt this poem - which was originally written by a Mrs N Whyte of Clackmannan in 1921 - was a fitting backdrop to the context in which the introduction of British Restaurants in the 1940s, across the UK, found themselves in great demand.

As you read the poem, please note that, in Scotland today 23.2% of our labour supply are economically inactive (not in work, nor seeking employment) and 3.9% of our available working population are unemployed (according to the Office of National Statistics up until August 2024) and also that, in Scotland today, more than 1 in 4 parents have had difficulty in providing enough food for their children in the last year alone (as shown by a recently commissioned survey by Barnardo's)

They are marching in their thousands
In our country to-day
A great work-less army
It is marching they say
They're not marching for freedom
As they did in days that are gone
They are marching for succour
For their loved ones at home

They are marching in thousands
In our streets here to-day
Thay great workless army
Is not out for to play
They ask you for work
Not a mere pittance dole
That can scarce keep together
Their poor body and soul.

They are marching in hunger
Is it right for to say
These same men once marched
For our freedom to-day
It is hard, hard to think so
And why should it be
In this country so wealthy
We find such misery

They are marching in thousands
In this country to-day
But they'll march yet in millions
Oh soon come that day
When in a great Labour Union
All workers will stand
To fight back their freedom
From a now tyrannised land.

—

Mrs N Whyte, Clackmannan, 1921.

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