

English field bakeries

Introduction

Soldiers - as well as everyone else - have always appreciated freshly baked bread. But who was actually responsible for making the loaves? Read here about how bread baking was organized in the English army.



The section at work, 1908.
(Source 2.)

Feltbaggers, 1914

A field bakery was a company-sized unit which was part of a division's train battalion [1](#)). The company's task was to produce bread for the 22,500 people who were part of a division.

A field bakery section consisted of 15 men, whose capacity was 2,000 loaves per day, equivalent to that of a brigade norm.

The section could set up its ovens in one day and start baking already the same evening.

A Field Bakery



A field bakery section at work, circa 1914.

From a contemporary postcard, drawn by Edgar A. Holloway, Gale & Polden, Aldershot.

The ovens in the pictures were called Aldershot ovens and were used until 1939. The oven was covered with clay, mud or peat, presumably for insulation. The oven's capacity was just over 50 kilos of bread and the baking time was 75 minutes.

Feltbaggers, 1939

To increase capacity, the Aldershot furnace was replaced in 1915 by a type called the Perkins furnace. This furnace was mounted on a structure of railway beams or masonry.



The Perkins oven was also used during the Second World War and the above drawing by Bryan de Grineau, from the Illustrated London News, 15 November 1939, shows a field bakery section in a more modern version.

The English soldiers' slang term for the Perkins oven was "Polly", inspired by a poem called *Pretty Polly Perkins of Paddington Green*. As can be seen from the drawing, the individual ovens were also decorated with names - *Edith England*, *Colleen Ireland*, *Myrna Wales* and *Jean Scotland*. It has clearly been women of some importance to the good bakers, and possibly also a way to tell the difference between the individual ovens.

The tents behind the ovens were used, among other things, to mix and stir the dough for the breads.

Closing

Source 3, which is really a "grasshopper book", contains the following recipe for *Bread made with baking powder* : "Spread the flour evenly and sift the baking powder over it. Make sure that any "lumps" are broken. Flour and baking powder are carefully mixed together. For that to the softest possible water, salt is added, in the ratio of 1 ounce (= 28.349 g) of salt to 7 pounds of flour (1 pound = 0.4536 kg). The water is added to the flour mixture and thoroughly stirred in. The loaves are put in a fast oven."

Perhaps the good field bakers have had more elaborate recipes, or greater experience in the noble art of baking, than the advice they gave to readers of the "green woodpecker book"?

I dare not vouch for the quality of the breads, but should anyone try the recipe, I look forward to hearing about it!

Sources

1. *ABC of the Army* by Captain J. Atkinson (editor), Gale & Polden, Aldershot, 1910.
2. *Army Service Corps 1902-1918* af Michael Young, Leo Cooper, London 2000, ISBN 085052- 730-9.
3. *Field Service Pocket Book, 1914* published by the British General Staff; reprinted 1971 by David & Charles Reprints, Newton Abbot/Devon, ISBN 0-7153-5225-3.

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To note:

1) The then (1914) English term for a train battalion was Supply and Transport Column. The battalion consisted of 26 officers and 402 men, 264 horses (of which 66 riding horses), 142 wagons as well as 4 motor vehicles and 30 bicycles. (Source 3.)