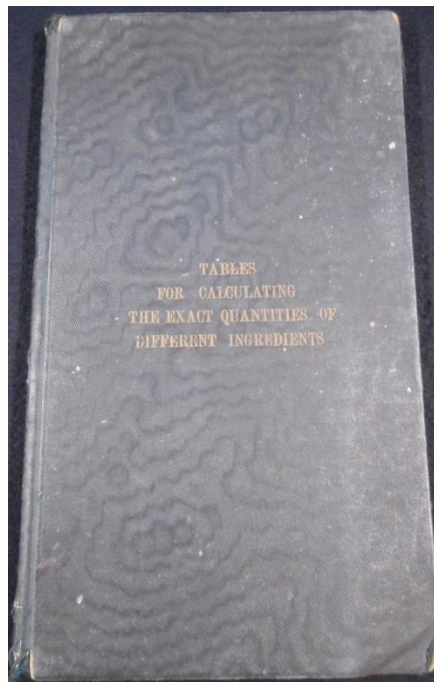


## **“Please sir, I want some more!” Feeding the Alcester Union Workhouse**

Our view of workhouse life, especially mealtimes, may be forever coloured by Charles Dickens and the image of his most famous inmate, Oliver Twist, desperate for seconds to supplement his meagre ration of watery gruel. However, the story of workhouse food and diets is much more varied than we may imagine, which this month’s highlighted document from the Alcester Union Workhouse shows.<sup>1</sup>



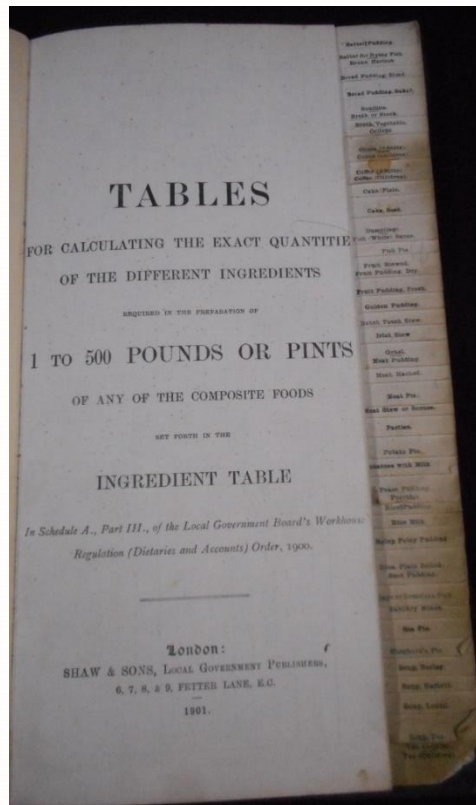
**Workhouse cooks used these tables to calculate ingredients for standard recipes**

*Warwickshire County Record Office, CR798/132*

### **Reform and transformation**

Workhouses existed in one form or another from the 1600s and their provision of poor relief was radically reformed only once by the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834, from a parish-based provision to a nationally overseen system of Poor Law Unions or groups of parishes, running a central workhouse for the whole area. However, it wasn’t until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that supply of an adequate and nourishing diet was standardised. Until then workhouse diets could vary enormously from

including fresh fruit and vegetables grown in the workhouse's own grounds, to the more penny-pinching institutions who considered a diet of bread and treacle to be ample nourishment for all.



Alcester Union's copy of these tables is well thumbed, particularly the recipes for cocoa and coffee.

Warwickshire County Record Office, CR798/132

## Bigger portions, but more waste?

A system of fixed rations began to improve inmates' food intake, but also produced unacceptable amounts of waste food from those too elderly, sick or young to consume their full ration. In 1896 a new regime was finally introduced, allowing inmates to be fed appropriate to their needs (whether working, sick or elderly), and deciding what and how to feed residents became a complicated business. Help eventually came five years later with *The Manual of Workhouse Cookery* offering a range of standard recipes which could be adapted to use the most abundant and economical produce in an area.<sup>2</sup> Supplementing this was a handy book of tables, used to calculate the precise quantities of ingredients needed

for each recipe whether cooked for 5 or 500, essential if you had to work out how much dripping was required for 500 dumplings (31lbs if you were wondering).

The image shows an open historical document with two pages of a recipe table titled "SEA PIE." The tables are organized into columns for ingredients: RAW BEEF, FAT, GARLIC, FLOUR, and FOR CRUST. Each row represents a different quantity of the recipe, ranging from 5 to 500. The document is held open by two black binder rings.

The intriguingly named 'Sea Pie' recipe did not seem to include any fish?  
Warwickshire County Record Office, CR798/132

The inclusion of fresh fruit and vegetables in season, as well as pulses, fish and meat meant that this workhouse diet was a vast improvement on what had gone before and may be even better than many of us can manage today. Oliver might still have wanted more of this food, but for the right reasons!

#### References:

- <sup>1</sup> CR798/132: Tables for calculating exact quantities of different ingredients. Alcester Poor Law Union collection.
- <sup>2</sup> The Manual of Workhouse Cookery is no longer in print, but a full copy is reproduced in Peter Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Cookbook*, The History Press, Stroud, 2008.