

BRADFORD MADE
Heritage Brought to Life
Stories from Bradford's Communities

KS 1/2 (AGE 5-11)
Activity Pack

WHO'S COOKING NOW AND THEN?

The History of Bradford Dinner Ladies



LOCAL STORIES
FOR LEARNERS



BRADFORD 2025
UK City of Culture

PACK AT A GLANCE

Bradford was home to the UK's first ever school dinners, served at Green Lane Primary School in 1906. But the role of the people (most often women) who cook, serve and plan school dinners is rarely discussed in schools. In this pack, learners hear about the realities of school dinners across the years and consider why school dinners are important.

This pack contains photos from Green Lane's 1907 dinners as well as today's lunches. It also includes a zine by artist Ruth Fettis depicting dinner ladies past and present. Learners are encouraged to create a picture or zine representing their own experiences of school dinners.

- Recommended for:** Ages 5-11 (Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 Learners) can be adapted for older learners
- Includes:** Story / Archive images / Timeline of school dinners in Bradford / Discussion prompts / Zine / Art and creative activities for different age groups
- Links to:** History / Heritage / Art / Local learning / PSHE

HOT MEALS,

WARM HEARTS

Patricia's Life as a Bradford Dinner Lady

An interview between Hannah and her Nana, Patricia

Introduction:

Did you know that the first school dinners in the UK were served right here in Bradford in 1906? But who cooked them? And why are school meals so important?

In this interview, **Hannah** speaks to her Nana, **Patricia**, who worked in school kitchens for over 30 years. She shares stories from the kitchens of local Bradford schools and what it really means to be a dinner lady!

Starting Work in School Meals

Hannah: So Nana, when did you start working in school kitchens?

Patricia: Well, it was 1974. I needed a job to help out with money, since my husband wasn't earning much and we had two young girls. I was walking through Holmewood Estate one day and a friend's mum told me they needed help in the kitchen at Rycroft School. I went up there, and no interview or anything—they just asked when I could start. I said, "Tomorrow!"

Hannah: And how did you find it?

Patricia: I loved it. The headteacher was kind enough to let my youngest daughter (your mum!) start school early—she was only four and a half—so I could take the job.

Hannah: Did mum get extra portions?

Patricia: Ha! No. But they were good portions. We had tables of eight, and each table got a big tin of steak pie with mashed potatoes and two veg. We cooked everything fresh: carrots, cabbage, cauliflower. No tinned veg. Even desserts were made from scratch with meringues piped by hand.

Hannah: That's really intricate—making your own meringues!

Patricia: Oh yes. Whipping the egg whites, piping every one by hand. And they got one with their chocolate flan.

Learning to Cook and Family Life

Hannah: Nana, have you always liked cooking?

Patricia: Well, I've been cooking since I was 16.

Hannah: Did your mum teach you?

Patricia: No, I picked it all up myself. I cooked everyday at home, always a warm meal on the table. That's what your mum and Auntie Carol say. I'd have a meal ready for when grandad got home—quarter to five, like clockwork. Sometimes egg, chips and beans. That was his treat once a week!

Working in Schools

Hannah: How long were you a Dinner Lady for?

Patricia: Thirty-two years! I worked at loads of schools—Highfield, Tong, Fairfax (now Bradford Academy). I was what they called a "veg-hand" but often stepped up to assistant cook.

One time at Carlton Bolling, I was rushing and someone didn't tell me they'd already salted the tomato mince. I added more salt. The kids came back out shouting, "Who made this? It's awful!" I said, "Sorry kids, it was me!"

The Kitchen – Challenges and Routines

Hannah: Was the job physically demanding?

Patricia: Oh yes. Lifting heavy sacks of potatoes, tipping them into buckets, and the 'rumbler' which would peel them and sometimes I'd be distracted and the potatoes would come out as tiny bullets. A full bucket wasted!

Everything was heavy—cleaning, scrubbing, bending down, lifting pans. And then the Swill Room...ugh. We had big drums for waste food. One year we broke up for summer and the Swill Man didn't come. When we came back? Maggots everywhere. On the ceiling, on the floor, crawling out of the bins.

Hannah: Oh no!

Patricia: We kept everything spotless in the kitchen during term time. We had brass piping under the sinks and I used to polish it until it shone. The managers from the head office would do spot checks and we were always ready.



Illustration by Ruth Fettis

Care Beyond Cooking

Hannah: Was it mostly women doing these jobs?

Patricia: Aye, nearly all of us were women. Many of us were mums trying to work around school hours. I liked school hours—it meant I could be at home with my children during school holidays. I didn't want to put them out to be looked after. And I was lucky—our headmaster let me bring my kids to school early. They'd sit in the library reading while I started work.

Some jobs, like lifting heavy sacks or tipping flour into the hoppers, they said were "for the lads," but I did it myself most days. You just got on with it. The work was hard—scrubbing, lifting, cooking—but we kept the schools going, and we loved it.

Hannah: Do you think people know how important that work was?

Patricia: Not really. It's behind the scenes, isn't it? But school dinners matter. Some kids didn't get much else that day. We fed them well, with love. You weren't just a cook—you were part of their day. The kids knew you, you looked out for them.

Carlton Bolling and Retirement

Patricia: In 2001, I went to work at Carlton Bolling Upper School as assistant cook. I finished there in 2006, when I retired.

It was more complex—older kids meant more choice. Quick meals like cheese rolls, chips, beans. Or a full dinner—stew, mash, Yorkshire puddings. We still cooked fresh, and we packed meals for other schools too. Hot meals, proper sauces. We even made parsley sauce on Fridays for fish!

A Cooking Legacy

Hannah: Was it a difficult job overall?

Patricia: Sometimes. But I enjoyed it. I liked the friendships with the other ladies. And the kiddies—seeing their faces when their favourite was on the menu. "Fish and chips today! Mushy peas!" they'd shout. They got proper food. Made with care.

Hannah: You passed that love of cooking on to Mum, didn't you?

Patricia: She taught herself too—just like me. She's a great baker, your mum.

Nana Patricia



**A History of Bradford
School Dinners:** →

A HISTORY OF BRADFORD SCHOOL DINNERS

Who was Margaret McMillan?

Margaret McMillan was a campaigner who came to Bradford with her sister to help improve the conditions working people were living in. At the time, lots of people worked in the mills and had poor quality housing. People were not paid enough, so their lives were difficult, and children had to work. Margaret wanted to change this.

Timeline

1892 – Margaret McMillan led the first ever medical inspection of school children in the UK. She found that many children did not have enough to eat or access to clean places to wash, especially the poorest children. She said that “the condition of the poorer children was worse than anything that was described or painted.” Margaret recommended that children should have free school meals to help them grow up healthy, but it would take over 10 years for this to happen.

1906 – The government passed the Education Provision of Meals Act (thanks to Fred Jowett, a Bradford MP, and Margaret McMillan).

1907 – The very first school meals were cooked and served at Green Lane Primary and sent to other schools in the area. The Headmaster of Green Lane was Jonathan Priestley, father of J B Priestley (a famous author from Bradford).





1939 – Half of all councils in the UK are providing school meals.

1949 – The government decides it's too expensive to give all school meals for free and allows local councils to charge 6d a meal.

1974 – Patricia starts working at Rycroft School.

1980 – The government gets rid of its rules defining healthy school meals and says councils can make their own rules.

1980s – Bradford school cooking is made central at Cook Chill – Patricia moves to work there.

2006 – Jeanette Orrey, who led Jamie Oliver's campaign for healthier school meals, came to visit Bradford to see the healthy food being served – "Last year it launched a new menu with only fresh meat, poultry and vegetables produced within 30 miles of the district." She was impressed by what she saw.

2006 – Patricia retires.

2020 – Manchester United and England footballer Marcus Rashford campaigns for children around the UK to have meal vouchers over the holidays during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2025 – pictures from Green Lane.



A role for everybody

'Dinner ladies' is still a term used today, but we now know the role as 'lunchtime supervisors' or 'School Cooks' because the people in these roles are sometimes men too!

Will worked at Saltaire Primary School in 2013, he told us a bit more about what life was like working in a school kitchen at this time:

"It's a really busy place to be, which I liked. You're doing different things. You're never doing the same thing for more than about 40 minutes before you're on to the next task. So you don't have time to get bored, and there's very little time to sit around."

"One of the jobs was to make 120 paninis neatly in 40 minutes. I don't know if that's possible, but I tried and couldn't, so! Anybody who thinks it's a doddle, they've not done it."

"Some people, both students and staff, didn't seem to value the role of dinner staff and looked down on us, but others realised the real importance of it, and understood that being fed is an important part of being able to learn. In terms of doing a job which is helping social justice, it's probably actually one of the most important jobs I've done, because at that school lots of children were on free school meals. Actually, being able to provide a hot meal for somebody when it's going to be probably the only decent food they get each day, it's just really important."

"I was the only man. There were about eight women and me, so I was a bit of a curiosity, I think. What's this man doing here? Everyone would ask. I think the job is mostly done by women because childcare is still predominantly done by women, and it's a job which fits around that. The hours meant that I could drop my daughter off at school, finish and be back in time to pick her up. We don't give the glamorous jobs to women generally."



Illustration by Ruth Fettis

**Continue to investigate,
dig deeper, learn and create:** →

INVESTIGATE

Below are questions to ask learners after reading the interview with Patricia together. You can use these as a starting point for discussions, writing activities or worksheets.

- Why are school dinners important?
- Who cooks the dinners in our school?
- What do you think was different about the school dinners in 1906 compared to 2025? What has stayed the same?
- Think about Patricia's story. Would you like to be a dinner lady? Why/why not?
- What did Patricia like about her job?
- Patricia had to cook all the dinners at home for her husband and children, as well as working all day. Was that fair?
- What other jobs are done in school to look after everybody? Who does those jobs?
- One school dinners company found that 92% of its staff were women. Why do you think most school lunch staff are women?
- Are there other jobs around the school that are done mainly by women, or mostly done by men?
- In Japan, children serve school dinners and clean their own schools. Would this be a good way to run schools? Why? In small groups/partners, come up with three reasons it would be better for children to do it and three reasons it would be better for adults to do it.
- Imagine a day when no dinner ladies came into school. What would happen? In small groups, come up with some ideas and act it out.

Click to explore artist Ruth Fettis' zine about dinner ladies

<https://bradford2025.co.uk/resource/whos-cooking-now-and-then-the-history-of-bradford-dinner-ladies/>





LEARN AND CREATE

Speaking/creative writing task

Imagine you were Fred Jowett in parliament in 1906 trying to persuade MPs to vote for the creation of free school meals. Write or perform a speech to show the importance of school meals.

You could mention:

- Problems for children at the time
- Why a healthy diet is important

What other reasons do you think are important?

Meet a dinner lady: Interview Task

In a small group, come up with 10 questions you'd like to ask a dinner lady.

Then ask a dinner lady from your school these questions! It could be during this lesson or at another time when you have a chance.

Write down the answers the dinner lady gives, or you could record your interview as a video. Can you write a story about the dinner lady's experiences or show the video in your class?



Illustration by Ruth Fettis

Art Activity – 5-7 year olds

(Key Stage 1)

Educator to take photos of lunchtime staff before this activity or invite lunchtime staff to class to be drawn!

Look at the front cover of Ruth's zine.
Choose a dinner lady or someone else who helps you in your school or setting—this could be a TA, personal assistant, cleaner, caretaker, lollypop person, etc.—and draw them as a superhero with their superpowers.
Try to capture the bold, bright, and direct style of Ruth's illustrations in your artwork.



Art Activity – 7-11 year olds

(Key Stage 2)

Inspired by Ruth Fettis' zine about dinner ladies, make your own zine about school dinners.

It could include:

- History of school dinners in Bradford
- Your favourite school dinners
- A dinner lady/lunchtime assistant at your school who you would like to thank for something
- Something interesting, strange or funny that has happened to you during school dinners
- Anything else related to school dinners!

How to make a zine: www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxqr9e3wCxl (up to 1:30)



Top tips from artist Ruth Fettis

- Keep it simple, you are communicating something. A Zine is not a book – it's not as precious, you can be direct (maybe messy, bold and playful too?)
- Listen to the story / stories – you don't get art from nothing!
- Art is a process
- Enjoy yourself
- Don't get upset if an idea doesn't come to you straight away. Be free, think about it first and wait for your idea to come. Talk to your friends and to a dinner lady if you are lucky enough to know one.

To create the zine booklet follow this video. It might be helpful to plan what will go on each page before you start drawing and writing!



Become a researcher: Historical Task

Ask an adult you know about their school dinners.

You might want to include:

- What food they ate
- Who cooked them the food
- If they enjoyed school dinners or not

Then add their experiences to the timeline about school dinners included in this pack. You could also use the internet to research other moments in the history of school dinners to add to the timeline.



DIG DEEPER

The introduction of “school-feeding” is an example of Bradford innovation in social welfare. From its earliest days as a booming wool town through the 1890s and 1900s, the fast-growing city saw great poverty among its industrial workers and their families. It became a centre of radical ideas and practice in alleviating these conditions, often strongly influenced by Nonconformism: social obligations and the value of education.

This period saw the fight of Oastler and Forster against “Yorkshire slavery”- cruel conditions in factories – and later the Manningham Mills strike, which led to the founding of the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

Read an article about the importance of Bradford at this time of school dinners here:

[81. Scotch Barley Broth and Fruit Tart: Jonathan Priestley and the “First School-Feeding” in Bradford](#)

To find out more about the woman behind Bradford’s school dinners:

[Margaret McMillan](#)

What other parts of history might be hidden or forgotten? Whose stories get remembered?

[Discovery of photos in the NSMM archives here.](#)

[Photos of 1908 School dinners at Green Lane Primary School](#)

[Activity pack about the start of Free School Meals from the National Archives](#)

[Jeanette Orrey visits Bradford to sample healthy school dinners](#)

[Marcus Rashford’s campaign for free school meals during COVID](#)

– what happens normally during the holidays for children on Free School Meals?

[Marcus Rashford talking about his experiences of poverty](#)

[Marcus Rashford making school dinners with Jack Monroe](#)

Think about the people who help our schools to run and how this could be organised differently:

[Why do Japanese students clean their classrooms](#)

NOTES FOR EDUCATORS

Educators will be aware of the need for sensitivity around discussion of free school meals, child poverty and state benefits. This is particularly important currently, with many families experiencing food insecurity and relying on food banks. Please check that the resource pack is suitable for your learners before use.

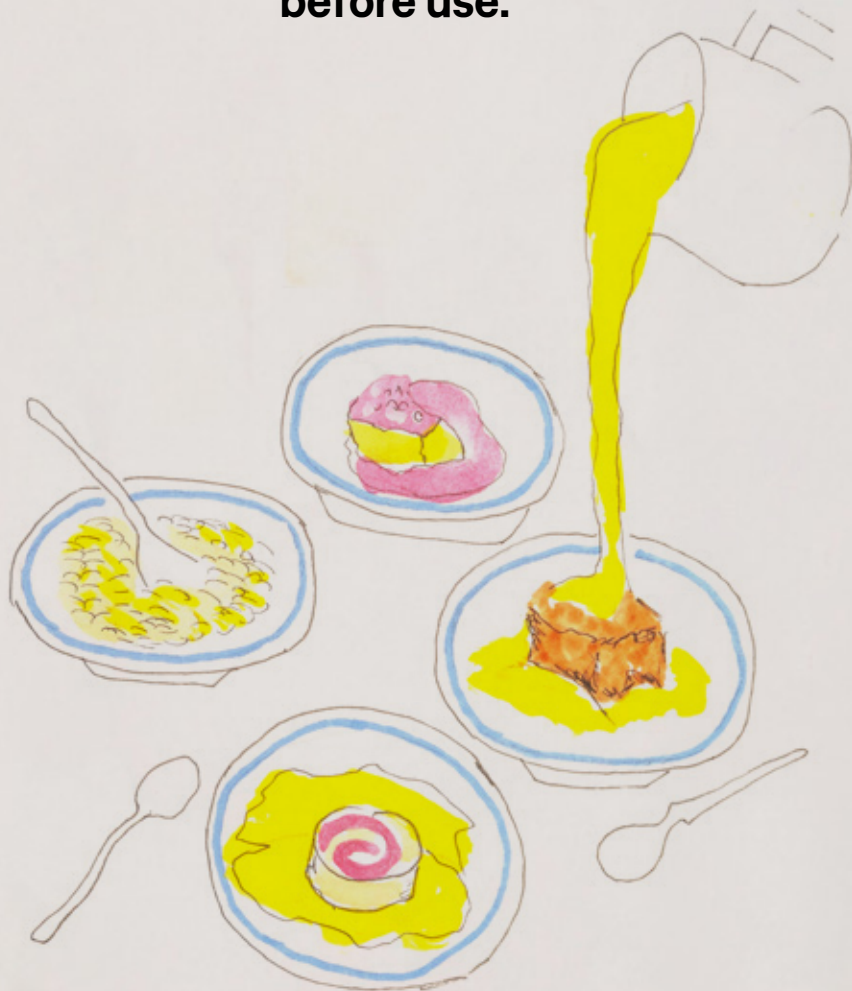
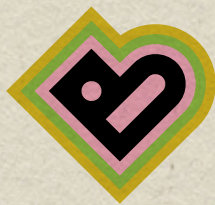


Illustration by Ruth Fettes



BRADFORD 2025

UK City of Culture



This resource was co-created by the Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture Cultural Learning Team and Lily McTaggart. The artwork was created by Ruth Fettis, and the photography by Nida Mozuraite in collaboration with Green Lane Primary School. With thanks to Hannah Jackson, Patricia Wright, and Will Quick for their contributions.

Writing by Joanna Jowett
Graphic design by Lee Goater

This resource was commissioned by Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture, with support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The Charles and Elsie Sykes Trust.



BRADFORD 2025
UK City of Culture



Made possible with
**Heritage
Fund**

**The
Charles & Elsie Sykes Trust**