

DO YOU WANT CHIPS WITH THAT?



The late, great Humphrey Lyttelton told a story of when he brought his band to Hull to play a concert at the City Hall in the late 1950's. On the bill was the legendary blues singer Big Bill Broonzy from the deep south of the U.S.A. It was a Sunday night and Humph's band were staying overnight at the "White House Hotel" in Jameson Street (more of which later). The concert finished around 10pm. by which time the musicians were hungry and went back to their hotel seeking sustenance. Alas not even a cheese sandwich was available (it was the 1950's, remember). So, what to do?

Fortunately a hotel worker took pity and advised them of a place at the docks where they might find fish and chips. Off they went and, as Humph recalled, had the best fish and chips they had ever tasted. Big Bill Broonzy hadn't known of our national dish and found it utterly wonderful – he never forgot his single visit to Hull.

We remember that our city was in the Premier league for fish in those days. Hull really was the place for plaice but eating out was a rare experience post war although there was no shortage of fish and chip shops; not least Bob Carver's in the Market Place. Little children were taught to say "Haddock and six twice and a patty, please!" at the same time they learned 'Humpty Dumpty'. At the chip shop there would be plaice, haddock and skate from which to choose and, if those had sold out, there was always cod as a last resort – 'catfood' my granny called that. But we were expected to take the food away to eat - the plates were warming at home whilst you went to get it or you sat on bench and read yesterday's news off the paper your dinner was wrapped in.

That was just about all the take-away food you could get. Outside Hull there weren't many places where people could eat out. Pubs didn't bother with food beyond packets of crisps. Macdonald just had a farm and Subway was still underground. At the few local hotel restaurants there were those who dined at the same place on Saturday evenings and spent all Sunday moaning about how awful the food had been – then they repeated the experience the following week. I never understood why they could be so daft but I suppose they enjoyed a challenge and the anticipation that one lucky weekend the food might be passable... as you might say.

An older generation who, recalling Hull the 1920's and 1930's, spoke fondly of "Powolney's" restaurant which was obliterated in the blitz of 1941 but oh, how they did go on about it! - *"Very classy, lovely food and an orchestra that was on the wireless"*. But if you were of the post-war generation and hungry your options were limited. When Hull was still generally a bombsite there was "Jenny's Cafe" which was upstairs in one of the few remaining buildings in Bond Street. Tea and coffee of a sort was served in thick white mugs along with rock cakes the recipe of which, legend has it, involved cement and currants. The place was popular because of its rarity and was usually very busy but difficult to breathe in the fug of cigarette smoke. A bit more upmarket was Field's in Savile Street.

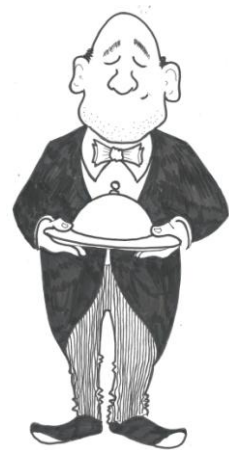


In the days when Hull was not only famous for fish but notorious for its fishy smell and other odours from various sources it was a relief to walk past Field's grocery and savour the smell of freshly ground coffee. Inside was the cafe which had been popular with Hullites since early in the twentieth century as seen in this photo of around 1905. Once upon a time it had an orchestra to entertain takers of tea and delicacies. After the Second World War things were rather less upmarket; the orchestra had gone with the fine china and fripperies but you

could still get a decent bite to eat at lunchtime; my student funds in the 1950's only ran to an occasional Scotch egg. For the better-off there was the grill-room at the Station Hotel but at a time of rationing there seemed to be a profusion of steamed fish and tinned peas.

With the easing of rationing eating out in town slowly began to provide more variety. The "Picadish" at the top of Hammonds was a novelty when it opened. This was so new; lots of little transparent boxes with plates containing various concoctions inside. Somewhere in the BBC archives is a Tony Hancock sketch where he argues with the staff about the contents of his "Picadish" box. At lunchtime, if you were a sophisticated article clerk or typist you probably made for the "Kardomah" in Whitefriargate. This was a good chatting-up place for the young but it was pricey, so a beans on toast might be shared with a friend or perhaps just a coffee and a bun had to do. The 'establishment' - solicitors, accountants and the professional elite of the Old Town might lunch at "The White Hart" or "The George" or maybe the "Broadway" on Ferensway. Unfortunately for the "Broadway" the entrance always had a nasty whiff of drains which was real appetite killer.

Going back to the "White House Hotel" in Jameson Street; there was a lounge just inside the entrance where well-to-do suburban matrons would meet for morning coffee. They knew everybody and about everybody and swapped information between ten and eleven on Friday mornings. The restaurant was where, at a price, silver service was provided by waiters in white tie and tails. The Head Waiter was a small, red faced, cheery chap with a drink problem who often used the hors d'ouvres trolley to keep upright. Round the back in South Street was "Polly's" which was the downmarket end of "The White House". There, at a fraction of the price at the posh end, you could eat much the same fare but interpreted differently on the menu; e.g. 'Potage Agriculteur' in the "White House" restaurant became 'Farmhouse Soup' in "Polly's". The waitresses in "Polly's" suffered no nonsense from the clientele.



If you were a regular in a hurry and in need of a quick bite, you would be catered for pretty quickly. If you had just popped in on the off-chance, you waited your turn and no good trying to catch a waitress's attention because they often had temporary eye problems.

Then International cuisine came to town; a Polish restaurant opened on Princes Dock Side where you could eat zalewajka (if you knew what that was) but there was always something recognisably English on the menu like stew and chips. This culinary revolution in Hull was a bit dazzling for the

natives. The Hoi Sun Chinese restaurant caused a flurry of excitement when it opened. This was something quite new, like a landing of Martians in Jameson Street. The hungry peered through the window at the daring souls trying the 3/9d lunchtime “Special”. This had a menu wholly unfamiliar to the inhabitants of Shanghai and might involve Tomato Soup to begin, followed by the “Special” – a concoction of bean shoots, unidentified meat fragments, rice, soy sauce and crowned with a fried egg. All this rounded off with a dessert choice of ice cream or lychees (eyeballs, as we called them).

As people began to opt for package holidays to sunny places rather than a damp week in Scarborough or Blackpool the demand for the same kind of food that they had enjoyed in Marbella or the Dordogne encouraged the surge in ‘eating foreign’. Nowadays in our home city we can sample dishes from the far ends of the world. You can eat in or out, stay or take-away but, being British there will always be that invitation “Do you want chips with that?”

Richard Pearson