

## Information sheet no 042

### Ships biscuits

There has always been a need for nutritious, easy to store, easy to carry and long-lasting foods in the Royal Navy. Nuts, fruits, vegetables, live game and fish fulfilled a limited role, but the introduction of cooking and baking various cereals provided a more reliable source of food at sea. Egyptian sailors carried a flat brittle loaf of maize bread called dhourra cake. The Romans had a biscuit called buccellum.

King Richard I (Lionheart) left for the Third Crusade (1189-92) with “biskit of muslin” - mixed corn compound of barley, rye and bean flour. At the time of the Armada in 1588, the daily allowance on board ship was 1lb of biscuit plus 1 gallon of beer. Naval victualling was first regulated by Samuel Pepys in 1667 and provided varied and nutritious rations.

Biscuits – or “hard tack” was an important part of the sailor’s diet until the mid-nineteenth century. Newer preserving methods, such as canning that first appeared around 1813, provided the Navy with better means of providing fresher foods. Beef preserved in tins was introduced in 1847 although Arctic explorers had been using tinned food before then. Additionally, in the mid-1850’s ship design was improved to include baking ovens that provided the sailors with fresh “soft” bread.

Biscuits have always been made to a large and varied recipes e.g. seed biscuits, fruit biscuits, long biscuits etc. The essential and common ingredients were flour and water. Most flour used today is milled from North American wheat or similar hard grain cereals. It would be difficult to produce an authentic historic ship’s biscuit from modern refined flour.

#### Recipe

To produce a similar plain ships biscuit, a medium coarse stone-ground wholemeal flour should be used.

Add water to 1lb wholemeal flour and 1/4oz salt to make a stiff dough. Leave for 1/2 hour and then roll out very thickly. Separate in to 5 or 7 biscuits. Bake in a hot oven approx. 420 degrees F for 30 minutes. The biscuits should then be left undisturbed in a warm dry atmosphere to harden and dry out.

Biscuits are still purchased for the Ministry of Defence for use in operational ration packs but not for general messing.