

New stoves at Scutari

Catering for the British Army today is accorded a high priority which was sadly lacking in the Crimean War. Food was badly cooked and the conditions in which it was prepared were usually in unhygienic, smoke-filled kitchens. Tony Smith recounts how one man revolutionised catering in the Crimea and helped to lay the foundations for army catering today

WHEN Alexis Soyer read in his newspaper about the atrocious catering arrangements in the Crimean military hospitals, he wrote to the *Times*, offering his services to the Government to go to the Crimea to put matters right.

An unusual approach, but Soyer was an unusual person. Son of a French shopkeeper, he had fled to England from the revolution of 1830, becoming chef to various members of the gentry and aristocracy, finally becoming *chef de cuisine* at the Reform Club, London.

He dressed outrageously, deliberately retaining his broken English, although he understood the language well, and was a confirmed practical joker. He was famous for his superbly creative cuisine for the upper classes, and for his soup-kitchens for the poor in London, and in Ireland, where he went at the request of the Government in the 'hungry forties'.

A few days after his letter appeared, he was asked by the Duke of Argyll to explain his proposals. He required full authority to obtain everything he needed, without bureaucratic delay. He pledged that he would work with the greatest economy, using the same scale of provisions as currently issued, and that he would never act without the sanction of the doctor-in-chief, respecting the diets he meant to introduce.

He proposed taking responsibility for 200 patients immediately, gradually increasing the number until he was catering for the whole of the vast hospital at Scutari.

A few lines framed and hung in the kitchen

At that time, cooks in many hospitals were not allowed to season their cooking. He pointed out that a properly seasoned diet was 'far more generous and invigorating to the patient'. He was aware, however, that many maladies required degrees of seasoning, under medical direction, 'as too much in some cases would prove equally if not more injurious than the want of it in others'.

He contended that the cook should be as responsible for seasoning the food, 'as the apothecary is for making up the doctor's prescription correctly'. Every recipe was to be printed, in only a few lines, framed, and hung in the kitchens, 'so that any person, even a soldier (provided he can read), will be capable of executing them'.

The Government, faced with chaos in the



Demonstration day for Soyer's stove in August 1855. (The Illustrated London News).

Crimea, and criticism at home, gave him the authority he wanted. He made his preparations. There were no proper cooking facilities where he was going, so he designed a simple stove, having low fuel consumption and efficient regulation, capable of use in buildings, tents, or in the open air. He took a model of it to I K Brunel, then planning new kitchens for the hospitals at Smyrna and (later) Renkioi¹, who, impressed with its features, adopted the design for both hospitals.

Within two weeks, Soyer and a small party of French chefs arrived at Scutari where senior medical staff, together with Florence Nightingale herself, showed him round the hospital. Miss Nightingale's own extra-diet kitchens, although ill-equipped, were clean and orderly, but he was shocked at the awful catering arrangements elsewhere. The kitchens were full of smoke, everything was boiling too fast, and the food, apart from being undercooked, unhygienic and often inedible, had 'the disagreeable flavour of being burnt'.

It was the same in all the hospitals, and Soyer set about changing things as he had promised. Under his influence and instruction, food improved miraculously. Soldiers were permanently allocated to be trained as cooks, he produced fresh bread to replace the rock-hard biscuit ration, and invented a 'Scutari teapot' capable of

producing large quantities of palatable tea.

When Florence Nightingale visited the war zone in the Crimea, he accompanied her to reorganise the catering, both in the hospitals there and among the troops in the field. He used his new stoves, and such was their success, they eventually came into use throughout the British Army, with mobile versions accompanying the BEF to France as late as 1940.

Soyer's health suffered badly through working in the Crimea. Returning home, he lectured at the United Services Institution on cooking for the Army and the Navy. He was co-opted, at Miss Nightingale's suggestion, onto the Barracks and Hospitals sub-Commission, to help improve regimental and hospital cooking. His 'Instructions to military hospital cooks, in the preparation of diets for sick soldiers', was universally adopted, and he supervised the erection of a model kitchen at Wellington Barracks, opening it on July 28, 1858.

He had become increasingly ill, never sparing himself in his work, and, a week later, on August 5, he died. A man of humble origins, admired and respected by rich and poor alike, Florence Nightingale reflected the opinion of all who knew him, when she wrote: 'His death is a great disaster. . . he has no successor'.

¹Victorian who sent a hospital to war' — *HSSJ*, May 5, 1983.