

The Development of Fish and Chips: The Powerhouse of the Victorian Working Class

Nick Schuima

Senior, History

The British expanded exponentially during the eighteenth century, creating a vast empire with trade across six continents. Goods and crops were distributed into and out of mainland Britain which sparked the Industrial Revolution. Cheap labor was needed to powerhouse the emerging factories, so rural peasants moved into cities, developing the working-class. Into the nineteenth century, London became a melting pot of imported cultures. London was the “New York City” of its day. Tea from China became a popular British drink; Indian spices developed into Tikka Masala, which became an English favorite. For the working-class, a dish that was affordable, flavorful, and easily accessible was imperative. Due to the influx of cultures into

London, street food staples like fish and chips swiftly became popular. The Jewish population consumed fried fish during their Sabbath, since it was Kosher. Although fish was always available across Britain, frying it in the Jewish tradition became increasingly common and popular in the nineteenth century. Potatoes, a staple crop from the Americas, was notable for its hardiness and nutritional value. Since London was the capital of the British Empire, trade and culture flooded the city. Potatoes and fish were conveniently imported and accessible. Potatoes were especially noted for their ability to feed many after the mid-century famine, when the potato crop failed and hundreds of thousands starved. By the 1860s, the dynamic duo of fish and chips as street food transformed London’s working-class. The proletariat could easily consume fish and chips on the streets during their lunch break. The bourgeoisie class strived for their workers to consume a quick and

substantive meal by their workplace, as opposed to going home and taking time away from labor. Since fish and chips provided carbohydrates, fats and proteins, the life expectancy of the lower class in the Victorian Era grew exponentially due to sustainable nutrients. The origins of fish and chips trace back to Jewish immigrants for the fried fish, and Belgian and French influence for crisped potatoes. Nonetheless, the dish is culturally synonymous with British cuisine today. Fish and chips ultimately sustained London's growing industrial population, providing an economical, convenient, and delicious meal.

Following the Napoleonic Wars, the British Empire approached its peak as the largest and most prosperous trading network across the world, with relative peace. France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, all once with bountiful trading networks, slowly faded into the shadow of the British. The capital of the British Empire, London,

expanded significantly, resulting in an increase of the population of all classes.

With an increasing urban proletariat population, London required a steady supply of food to nourish the inhabitants. The potato was a powerhouse crop that was able to provide a substantial meal at a low cost, providing more nutrients than grain alone.

The spud originated from the Americas and transferred overseas. Unlike some crops, like the cacao tree, the potato was able to grow in the cooler climate of the British Isles. In "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas,"

Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian proclaimed,

The New World crop that arguably had the largest impact on the Old World is the potato. Because it provides an abundant supply of calories and nutrients, the potato is able to sustain life better than any other food when consumed as the sole article of diet... This nutritious crop has been so widely embraced by Old World populations that today the

top consumers of potatoes are all Old World countries.¹

London, being the capital of the British Empire, was able to have a steady supply of imported potatoes. With increasing availability of potatoes in London, it was imperative for the ruling class to promote the poor to consume the spud because of its high energy content. Peasants traditionally survived on grains and other locally produced crops. Potatoes, being a newer European commodity, took years for the lower classes to appreciate and use the crop. The bourgeois class saw the value in potatoes, due to their versatility and high caloric count. Rebecca Earle, in "Promoting Potatoes in Eighteenth Century Europe," reasons that,

As the president of the Horticultural Society of London noted in 1812, in one of the many articles he penned on potatoes, the discovery of a new source of food was 'just so much added to individual, and national wealth.' This framework stressed the

connections between efficient agricultural production and commercial prowess, the supply of nourishing food, and national strength and security. This was why author after author insisted that potato eaters were "di costituzione robustissima" [extremely robust] and made healthy workers and soldiers.²

With the convenience of potatoes in everyday marketplaces in the early nineteenth century, the bourgeois class believed that spuds were able to powerhouse the poor to work longer hours. Since potatoes were so affordable, the working-class was able to consume potatoes without financial hardship. During the early Victorian Era, the popularity of potatoes continued to grow amongst the lower class, as London became the epicenter of commerce across the dominating British Empire.

Britain is a large island surrounded by the sea. For centuries, people along the coast consumed fish due to its widespread

¹ Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian, "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24, no 2 (2010): 169.

² Rebecca Earle, "Promoting Potatoes in Eighteenth-Century Europe," *Eighteen - Century Studies* 51, no 2 (Winter 2018): 156-157.

availability. London is about fifty kilometers from the nearest coast, allowing fish to be transported up the River Thames for trade. Fish provided beneficial protein and fat, both important macronutrients. Due to widespread accessibility, the price of fish was never expensive. There are many ways to cook fish, but frying them in a particular way was unique to the urban London Jewish population. Following the Spanish Inquisition, many Iberian Sephardic Jews fled for Britain. The Jewish population brought with them their traditional methods of frying fish. Panikos Panayi argues in *Fish and Chips : A History*, “Fried fish was originally a Shabbath dish which could conveniently be cooked on Thursday or Friday morning, and eaten cold by Sephardi Jews on Friday nights or Saturdays.”³ With the convenience of fish in London, the tight-knit Jewish community could follow their Kosher laws and practices for the Sabbath.

³ Panikos Panayi, *Fish and Chips : A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 110.

Preparing fish to be consumed at a later period was unique to the Jewish community, since Jewish law forbade work on Saturdays, including frying food. Panayi also claims, “While a variety of ethnic groups fried fish, it seems that frying became especially associated with Jews and that the use of batter had a particular Jewish connection, especially when it involved just eggs and flour...Jews appear to have become associated with fried fish both through myth and reality.”⁴ The use of oil to fry fish was associated with Jewish cooking during the early Victorian Era. Although there were numerous ways to prepare fish, preparing it according to Jewish customs was unique to London’s Sephardic Jewish community. Victorian chef Alexis Soyer argues, “The same fish as before mentioned as fit for frying, may be fried in this manner... In some Jewish families all this kind of fish is fried in oil, and dipped in batter, as

⁴ Panayi, *Fish and Chips*, 113.

described above. In some families they dip the fish first in flour, and then in egg, and fry in oil. This plan is superior to that fried in fat or dripping, but more expensive.”⁵ Outside of London’s Jewish community, it was customary to fry fish in fats or drippings, but the outcome was not as good. Frying fish the Jewish way was deemed preferable, even if the oil cost slightly more. By the 1860s, the Jewish community began to sell their fried fish in the streets, as an affordable dish for London’s working poor.

Before the development of fish and chips vendors across London, the Jewish method of frying fish needed to be popularized amongst the mainstream British. Fried fish, in the Jewish manner, was traditionally common in the tight-knit Sephardic community in London. Their simple method of frying fish, with flour, egg and oil, was not the standard method of fish consumption during the early nineteenth

⁵ Alexis Soyer, *A Shilling Cookery for the People* (London: Geo. Routledge & Company, 1854), 28.

century. Newspaper ads provided a meaningful way to promote fried fish, with shopkeepers selling sauces to accompany fried fish. In an June 6th, 1839 edition of *The Standard*, the newspaper ad states, “SOHO sauce, for fish... the proprietors of this highly celebrated sauce, solicit the attention of the epicure to its peculiar rish, piquant, yet not predominating flavour which justly entitled it to the pre-eminence it has to rapidly attained. Dinmore’s essence of shrimps for boiled and fried fish, admired for its mild and delicate flavor.”⁶ SoHo was historically a community for the upper class, but by the Victorian Era had transitioned to more lower-class residents. Newspapers reaching out to the locals about fried fish and how a simple sauce can enhance the flavor was a crucial point in spreading the popularity of fried fish. An ad for sauce promoting how delicious it was with fried fish easily prompted people to at least try it.

⁶ “Multiple Classified Ads” *The Standard*, June 6, 1839, 1. British Library Newspaper.

Even if they did not enjoy the sauce, they may have discovered how delicious fried fish was. This newspaper ad, strategically for SoHo, promoted fried fish for London's poor. Although the dynamic duo of fish and chips had yet to be merged, the people of London were expanding their horizons by consuming fried fish with sauce to accompany the dish.

Although fish was in abundance across London, the potato suffered great loss in the mid-nineteenth century before it became the other half of fish and chips. During the early Victorian Era, until the great potato famine in Ireland, Britain enacted certain Corn Laws which allowed high taxes on imported corn and some grains. This was to promote internal trade across the mainland, but it was extremely controversial. The lower house of parliament, the House of Commons, discussed the issues with the Corn Laws.

Certain members were for and against the topic, but it was still open for debate until the famine struck. During these sessions, the House of Commons discussed which foods would be better and more affordable for the working-class. On a Tuesday, June 28th, 1842 session of Parliament, Mr. Cheers proclaimed the following,

Vice President of the Board of Trade most strongly applied, he meant the great article of corn. With respect to fish, it had been said, and rightly said, that if it could be got cheaper, then the food of the people was interested and we ought to allow fish to come in, so that they might obtain better food ; the same argument was applied to potatoes ; then why should the same argument not be applied equally to corn as fish and potatoes, he confessed in a difficulty to conceive.⁷

Some members of Parliament did strive for the betterment of the British people, despite their socioeconomic status. By reducing certain tariffs on goods, like fish, corn and potatoes, the lower classes could obtain the important macronutrients of carbohydrates,

⁷ "House of Common Tuesday, June 28" *The Times*, June 29, 1842, 4. The Times Digital Archive.

fats and proteins. In return, the rate of starvation would fall, and productivity would increase for workers since they would have access to a bountiful meal.

Unfortunately, the Corn Laws did not dissipate until after the great potato famine struck Ireland, and the crop continued to fail for a few years. Ireland was a possession of Britain during this time, and the immediate lack of action against the failed crop, starvation and death remains controversial. With the failed crop in 1846, there was an immense fall in the food supply chain. Nonetheless, some members of Parliament did find value in providing affordable food to the lower classes, even before the potato famine forced Parliament to take action.

Although Parliament took years to repeal the tariff heavy Corn Laws, the foundations that potatoes and fish could fuel the working poor was emphasized. It took over another decade for the first fish and chips shops to

emerge across urban London, as some members of the government realized the benefits of providing affordable food to their workers.

Although potatoes were around Britain for a couple of centuries, they were not very popular until the nineteenth century. Potatoes were traditionally dehydrated before being consumed, which was often bland and flavorless. In the late eighteenth century, chefs in both Belgium and France began to fry chunks of potatoes. This new recipe revolutionized the potato, creating a hot, delicious and affordable dish. According to Panayi,

As a street food, chips appear to have taken off in France during the nineteenth century, perhaps slightly earlier than in Great Britain, and they rose to prominence there during the second half of the nineteenth century, just as in Great Britain. A similar pattern emerged in Belgium, where chips first became popular in the 1840s and had become a widespread street food by the end of the nineteenth century.⁸

⁸ Panayi, *Fish and Chips*, 113.

Despite the origins of fried potatoes across the English Channel, the popularity of chips increased significantly when it finally combined with fried fish on the streets. Fish and chips together took a few years to take off, since there was a negative Jewish connotation with fried fish. Britain was a relative safe haven for the Jewish community compared to other mainland European nations such as France. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain's Jewish population gained legal status, as evident by Benjamin Disraeli serving as Prime Minister. However, anti-Semitism remained prevalent. Fried fish was initially viewed as a smelly Jewish food that filled London's ghettos. Panayi also states,

Most associations of fried fish link the smell with the Jewish inner city ghetto. In these two cases the people concerned have moved out of the areas traditionally associated with them, yet the smell remains. It has almost become a racial taint, similar to the anti-Semitic visual stereotypes which focus upon physiognomy. While Jews might move out of the

ghetto their appearance and smell will always give them away.⁹

The social hierarchy of London placed Jews, regardless of their socioeconomic status, with the lower ranks of society. Although the upper class would not have ventured out and ate greasy street food, the English working-class had the chance to benefit from the cheap and fast meal during their lunch break. By the 1860s, fish and chips vendors, most of whom were Jewish, began to sell their fried fish and potatoes. Andrew Smith, in *Potato: A Global History*, proclaims, "Most chips were made by drying or dehydrating the fruit or vegetable, but potato chips were fried. In England this 'chip' terminology became ingrained in 'fish and chips'. These were originally popularized by Joseph Malin, who opened the first combined fish and chip shop in London in the 1860s."¹⁰ The dynamic duo of fish and chips quickly became a London

⁹ Panayi, *Fish and Chips*, 120.

¹⁰ Andrew Smith, *Potato: A Global History* (London: Recktion Books, 2011), 63.

favorite and soon revolutionized urban centers across Britain. With potatoes and fish readily available, street vendors had the opportunity to sell hot meals at a good price. Instead of a father going home for lunch, he was able to consume a quick meal outside and head back home. For the upper class, the working poor and the Jewish community both received the negative connotation of being subpar for eating smelly food outside. Fish and chips became popular so fast, street vendors became an increasingly favorable job to keep up with demand. In *A Dangerous Class: The Street Sellers of Nineteenth-Century London*, Stephen Jankiewicz argues,

Further, the supply of potential street sellers was immense... London's vast casual labour force, probably involved over a tenth of the city's workers. This size and diversity of the casual labor supply was both a source of strength and a limitation for the competition for customers, and made organization among them, as a collective, more difficult... The expansion of their numbers also,

presumably, would have made them more visible to the other citizens of the city, enhancing their cultural footprint.¹¹

London's original street vendors for fish and chips were the Jewish people, but as the demand for the dish increased, labor from other working-class people filled new positions. London during the late 1860s and 1870s saw a magnificent transition, where convenient lunch options were available. London's fish and chips popularity with the working-class complemented the city's rapid growth in both population and life expectancy in the mid- and late Victorian Era, since the people had access to a substantive meal with high caloric content.

During the mid-Victorian Era, it was not uncommon for the father, mother and children of the lower class to go to work during the day. Families with more means just had the father and older boys go to work, as the mother tended the house.

¹¹ Stephen Jankiewicz, "A Dangerous Class: The Street Sellers of Nineteenth Century London," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (2012): 395.

Nonetheless, affordable street foods were a quick and easy way to feed people. If everyone in the house worked, they could suffice on fish and chips. If it was just the men working, fish and chips were an efficient meal to enjoy on their lunch break. In “London Labour and the London Poor: The Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Cannot Work, and Will Not Work”, Henry Mayhew proclaims, “Men and women, and most especially boys, purchase their meals day after day in the streets... Fish of many kinds tempt to a luncheon ; hot-eels or pea-soup, flanked by a potato ‘all hot,’ serve for a dinner.”¹² Although warm meals were popular amongst all of the working-class, fish was especially favored by young men, who were the most valued workers due to their perceived youth and productivity. Providing

¹² Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: The Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Cannot Work, and Will Not Work* (London: Charles Griffin & Co, 1861), 166.

these boys with a wholesome meal contributed to their health, which made more efficient workers. For the street vendors, setting up a position near a large place where young men worked was crucial for their fish and chips business. John Walton, in “Fish and Chips, and the British Working-class, 1870-1940” states,

Miss Malvery worked for a big, good-tempered, good-natured widow, who began her day at 4:30 a.m. with coffee laced with gin... After breakfast, preparation began in earnest, for this was a ship with a lunch-time trade: With the assistance of the surly driver, the fish purchased at the markets was sorted, cleaned, and cut up into small pieces. Then several baskets of potatoes were scrubbed and washed. After this they were put in a machine that cut them up into small slices... This completed, fired had to be lit in the furnaces, over which frying pans were soon to be set. The fish was fried in a specially prepared oil. Each piece of fish, before frying, was dipped into batter.¹³

London’s street sellers worked long hours in all sorts of conditions, but it was worth it

¹³ John Walton, *Fish and Chips, and the British Working Class, 1870-1940* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), 75.

because street food was in high demand during the late-Victorian period. Vendors had to get up early in the morning to prepare for the lunch wave of people, who were looking forward to their hot meal. Fish and chips provided all the necessary macronutrients for workers to be productive at their workplace, as they headed back after lunch. The Victorian Era saw the transformation of the poor, from famine-stricken peasants to well-fed working-class people. Due to the power of the British Empire, if a crop failed in one place, it could be easily imported from another, providing a constant supply. Since the diet of the poor changed significantly, the life-expectancy of these people increased substantially. In “How the Mid-Victorians Worked, Ate and Died”, Paul Clayton and Judith Rowbotham argue,

Analysis of the mid-Victorian period in the U.K. reveals that life expectancy at age 5 was as good or

better than exists today, and the incidence of degenerative disease was 10% of ours. Their levels of physical activity and hence caloric intakes were approximately twice ours. They had relatively little access to alcohol and tobacco; and due to their correspondingly high intake of fruits, whole grains, oily fish and vegetables, they consumed levels of micro- and phytonutrients at approximately ten times the levels considered normal today.¹⁴

With the widespread availability of fish and chips across London, people that traditionally survived on grain were given a balanced diet. Working long shifts in the factory, while consuming oily fish and potatoes allowed people to become healthier. This change in lifestyle increased the life expectancy of the working-class. Although fish and chips are still around today, people live more sedentary lifestyles, hence why the benefits are not as prevalent anymore.

Since the British Empire was so prodigious, imports of potatoes and fish

¹⁴ Paul Clayton and Judith Rowbotham, “How the Mid-Victorians Worked, Ate and Died,”

were easily accessible across the capital of London. Even though fried fish originated among the Jewish community of London, and fried potatoes were popularized across the English Channel, the dynamic duo of fish and chips revolutionized urban London. Fish and chips provided London's working-class population with a hearty meal that consisted of carbohydrates, proteins and fats. Street vendors selling fish and chips prospered significantly in the mid- and late Victorian era, as people consumed the hot meal right outside of work in the streets and alleyways of London. In the years leading up to World War I, fish and chips went from solely street vendors to pubs, where it became a part of British pub fare. The days of worrying about famine were soon forgotten, due to the wide network of British trade across the globe, ensuring imports of food. In the nineteenth century, the life expectancy of the British working-class expanded considerably, as people had

continuous access to substantial, hot meals. Despite the non-British background of this platter, fish and chips ultimately became a national dish for Britain.

Bibliography

Clayton, Paul and Judith Rowbotham. "How the Mid-Victorians Worked, Ate and Died." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 6, no. 3 (March, 2009): 1235-1253. doi:10.3390/ijerph6031235.

Earle, Rebecca. "Promoting Potatoes in Eighteenth-Century Europe." *Eighteenth - Century Studies* 51, no. 2 (Winter, 2018): 147-162. doi:10.1353/ecs.2017.0057.

"House Of Commons, Tuesday, June 28." *Times*, June 29, 1842. *The Times Digital Archive*.

Jankiewicz, Stephen. "A Dangerous Class: The Street Sellers of Nineteenth-Century London." *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (2012): 391-415.

Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor: The Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Cannot Work, and Will Not Work*, vol. 1. London: Charles Griffin & Co., 1861. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*.

"Multiple Classified ads." *The Standard*, 6 June 1839, p. 1. British Library Newspapers.

Nunn, Nathan, and Nancy Qian. "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (2010): 163-188.

Panayi, Panikos. *Fish and Chips : A History*. London: Reaktion Books, 2014.

Smith, Andrew F.. *Potato : A Global History*. London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2011.

Soyer, Alexis. *A Shilling Cookery for the People*. London: Geo Routledge & Company, 1854.

Walton, John. *Fish and Chips, and the British Working-class, 1870-1940*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000.