

# The White Cliffs and the British Diet Endangered

by Michael Curtis



**The sea is calm tonight**, the tide is full, the moon lies fair upon the straits: the cliffs of England stand, glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Though worlds may change and go awry, the song tell us that *There'll always be an England*, while there's a country lane, wherever there's a cottage small beside a field of grain. This patriotic song composed in 1939 became popular at the outbreak of World War II a great hit expressing optimism and defiance of wartime Britain against Nazi Germany. To the ideal of a picturesque rural England the composers added an urban touch, where's there a busy street, wherever there's a turning wheel, a million marching feet. The song is still remembered today in celebrations. However, Britain like the rest of the world has changed, and cricket, warm beer, green suburbs, may no longer be representative symbols of contemporary Brexit.

Changing Britain can be illustrated by two events, one a

dramatic physical event and the other, a less dramatic but meaningful, variation in the British cuisine.

On February 3, 2021 a large chunk of the White Cliffs of Dover, thousands of tons of chalk, broke off and fell into the Channel. Already, the Cliffs have been affected as the result of coastal erosion due to weather becoming stormier across the Atlantic and the man-made coastal defenses causing erosion. The Cliffs, the tallest of which is 350 feet above the waters of the English Channel, are retreating up about a centimeter a year. Coastal erosion, dependent on the balance between the resistance, erodibility, of the coastline and the strength, erosivity, of the waves and tides affecting the area. These conditions are dependent on a number of factors, topography, geological formations, man-made coastal defenses, and local currents, and therefore the rate of erosion varies, but some areas are at risk of being washed away.

The Cliffs are not simply the most famous facet of the British coastline, the symbolic entrance to the UK as the Statue of Liberty is to the U.S., but are also immortalized in song, literature, and art, and renowned as an international tourist attraction. Since Shakespeare the Cliffs have been seen as a precious stone set in the silver sea which serves it in the office of a wall. There is a cliff whose high and bending head looks fearfully in the confined deep. It is the closest spot to Europe. On a clear day it is the place to see France, Cap Griz Nez, 21 miles away.

The place has become immortalized by the song, *The White Cliffs of Dover*, composed in 1941 and made famous in the version by Vera Lynn who died recently at the age of 103. There'll be bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover, just you wait and see. The song shaped the war time national mood, and was a symbol of resilience, optimism, and hope, and had inspired troops and civilians. Vera Lynn, herself a persona who symbolizes the memories of World War II, wrote that the song reminded the troops "what they were really fighting for."

The steep White Cliffs, white because they are made of chalk which is accented by black flint, has long regarded, symbolically as the barrier to invasion, though Julius Caesar landed there in 55 B.C. and Charles II returned to the country there in May 1660. It is telling, if paradoxical, that this patriotic song of Britain was composed and written by two New York Jews, Walter Kent (Kaufman) and Nat Burton (Schwartz), who were not aware that the bluebird is not indigenous to Britain.

The White Cliffs are symbolic of Britain as are other factors: religious toleration, Big Ben, unarmed police, castles, tea drinking, Stonehenge, Robin Hood, the Beatles, Oxford and Cambridge, Stilton and Double Gloucester cheese, pubs, and Fish and Chips.

Fish and Chips are a national treasure, a delight of moist white fish in a golden batter, served with a plentiful supply of hot chips, a combination that Winston Churchill called "the good companions," and thought so valuable during World War II that this dish was never rationed. In his book *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell put fish and chips first among the factors, that included silk stockings, cut price chocolate, movies, radio, strong tea, and football pools, that kept the masses happy and "averted revolution."

Whether fish and chips (FC) had such a potent political impact is doubtful, but it has certainly been a national institution, enjoyed for centuries by millions who in the past ate with greasy fingers the dish served wrapped in newspaper. FC has competed with the Full English Breakfast, complete with eggs, either fried or poached, bacon, sausages, beans, and brown sauce, as the national iconic dish.

Yet what could be more British than to have a national dish that is multicultural in origin. The presence of fried fish

dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, brought by Sephardic Jews immigrating from Spain and Portugal. Their fish, sprinkled with flour and dipped in eggs and bread crumbs, was cooked on Friday and ate cold on the Sabbath. Chips came from either Belgium or France. When the Meuse and other rivers were frozen, Europeans cut potatoes into fishy shapes and fried them in place of the fish that was not available.

The marriage of fish and chips in shops is disputed. One contention is that it took place in Bow, East London, when a man named Joseph Malin, from a family of weavers and said to be an Ashkenazi Jew from eastern Europe, opened his shop in 1860. An alternative opinion is that a businessman named John Lees began selling FC in a shop near Manchester in 1863. Other outlets followed all over the country, and the dish was the stock popular food among citizens as a result of the development of railways bringing fresh fish to populated areas. This remained the case until the rise of pizza, burgers, fried chicken, and Chinese dishes, food that became popular take away items.

FC became well known. Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* writes of "husky chips of potato, fried with some reluctant drops of oil." Interestingly, film director Alfred Hitchcock, as a youngster, lived in Limehouse, East London, above a FC shop which was a family business,

By 1910 there were more than 25,000 FC shops in the UK, and in 1930s more than 35,000. But in 2021 the number has declined to about 10,000.

The traditional FC national dish is in danger, as a result of climatic global warming, commercial overfishing, and political differences. Dispute with France over fishing rights was one of the main issues in the long Brexit negotiations. About a quarter of French national catch comes from UK waters: the agreed compromise is that EU vessels will continue to fish in UK waters for some years. EU boats, mostly French, catch more

than 90% of Channel cod.

The basic ingredient of FC is choice of white cod, the long time favorite, haddock, plaice, skate, or rock salmon. The problem for UK, more dramatic than the political issue, is that cod may be reduced or even disappear from the FC menu.

FC is still popular; estimates are that 80% of Britons visit a FC shop at least once a year, and 22% visit one every week. But supplies of cod are becoming limited and were being harvested in an unsustainable way, Cod stocks in the North Sea peaked at 270,000 tonnes in the 1970s, then declined sharply, and recovered to 152,000 tonnes in 2017. Cod and haddock which thrive in cool water are moving north because of the warming sea and rising temperature reduces oxygen levels in the oceans. The UK consumes about 115,000 tonnes of cod a year, but only 15,000 tonnes comes from the North Sea: the rest is imported from Iceland and Norway. In addition, the British consumption is increasing of Mediterranean fish such as squid and red mullet.

The eco system is changing and is unpredictable. Caution suggests the need for sustainable quotas that can be fished without endangering future stocks which must be protected for the benefit of the seas, coastal communities, and fish consumers. The issue is not only important for the UK in that the fishing industry employs about 24,000 people, more than half of them working in Scotland.

It also may mean a change in the British diet and national tradition. Hake may be a fine fish, but cod should remain the white fish of choice. It should still be the British icon served with chips to which salt and vinegar are added.