Exploring Britain’s fish and chips

Journalist Jack Newberry explores the origins of one of the nation’s favourite dishes.

It’s a cold, wet afternoon in Manchester, but there’s still a long queue outside Hammond’s fish and chip shop. ‘Fridays are always busy,’ says forty-two-year-old fryer Terri Thomas. ‘Most of our customers come after work and have fish and chips with curry sauce – it’s our most popular order.’

As Terri liberally sprinkles on salt and vinegar from supersized bottles, it’s hard to resist the mouth-watering smell. She offers me a double portion, neatly wrapped in newspaper, and I grab a plastic fork and tuck in. Delicious!

In a recent UK survey, people were asked to name things they considered typically British. At the top of the list (in front of the Queen) was fish and chips, a traditional dish that has been enjoyed by the British for generations, and can be described in at least twenty-six different ways.

Battered fish and fried chips are a classic double act, yet they started life as solo performers, and their roots are not as British as you might think.
Fish fried in batter was introduced to England in the fifteenth century, arriving in London with Jewish immigrants who had fled their homes in Portugal to escape persecution. As these new immigrants settled down in the East End, their pescado frito became standard fare – so much so that on a visit to London in the late 1700s, Thomas Jefferson wrote that he had eaten ‘fish fried in the Jewish fashion’. By the Victorian era, fish fried in batter had become a regular part of the British diet, often sold by street sellers who carried it on large trays hung around their necks.

The origins of the chip are less clear. Depending on who you believe, we were given the chipped potato by either France or Belgium in the seventeenth century. According to popular folklore, one winter when the rivers froze over and there were no fish to fry, an adventurous housewife cut up some potatoes in the shape of fish and fried them instead. However, the first recorded appearance of chips in England was in Charles Dickens’ novel A Tale of Two Cities (1859), which mentions ‘husky chips of potatoes, fried with some reluctant drops of oil.’ Fried chipped potatoes were popular with the working classes during this time, especially migrant labourers. (3)

Then, in 1860, a Jewish Londoner called Joseph Malin, noticing the success of fried fish and chipped potatoes, decided to combine the two. He started a fish and chip shop on Cleveland Street in the East End of London and business was so good that many other shops opened soon after. Luckily, fresh fish was in plentiful supply thanks to the rapid development of steam trawling in the North Sea, and new railways were connecting ports to major industrial cities. (4) This rise in the number of fish and chip shops shows that the Industrial Revolution was fuelled by fish and chips!
According to one historian, ‘the government knew it was vital to keep families on the home front in good heart’ – and giving them fish and chips helped! During World War II, the government acknowledged the power of this traditional dish again, and made sure fish and chips weren’t included in the wartime ration* book.

Today fish and chips is still one of the most popular fast-food takeaways in the UK, with about 10,500 ‘chippies’ selling nearly 276 million meals a year. Some people eat them as a lunchtime snack, others as an evening meal, and a few people actually serve them at wedding banquets! They’re also a popular ‘comfort food’ in tough times, which might explain the rise in sales during the economic crisis.

At Hammond’s chip shop, the queue is getting smaller now. I watch the locals trudging back home through wind and rain, clutching their wrapped-up portions, and feel a sense of continuity, belonging and pride.

Fish and chips are a great British tradition with a fascinating history; a tradition which, like many others, has its origins elsewhere.

**ration** = a fixed amount of food