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UNCERTAIN PROGRESS: BRITISH KITCHENS IN THE 1920S

ABSTRACT British domestic kitchens are a product of long evolution but went through a period of great innovation one hundred years ago. Some sections of British society started to take an interest in a space that had been largely disregarded. The "servant problem" and suburban building were factors in this changed perspective. By reference to period newspaper archives, the nature of those changes can be demonstrated in some detail. Although there was a narrative of efficiency, and design ideas from Europe and the United States, progress for British kitchens was piecemeal and conflicted by fuel-choice issues as well as the question of how to equip the space for personal use. Ideas that survived this period of experimentation were to form the basis of kitchen development in subsequent decades.

KEYWORDS: 1920s, kitchen equipment, domestic space, newspaper narratives

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INTRODUCTION

> Early in 1920, a "Woman and Home" newspaper columnist reflected on the *Daily Mail's* "Ideal Labour-Saving House" competition and praised the imagination of contestants.

> The kitchen, with its innumerable labour-saving devices, sounds rather like a fairy tale; there is everything at hand for cooking, while the fitments are easily moveable for cleaning. One anthracite stove heats the house, and the rooms are provided with radiators. (Hampshire Advertiser 1920: 6)

The column ended with the wry comment that "the owner of such a house might well think herself nearly in Utopia" (ibid.). This was said when aspiration was often eclipsed by a need to make the best of things. The social, cultural and economic consequences of World War One (1914–1918) were still being felt by those trying to re-establish their lives in the aftermath. Yet, it was in the 1920s that British kitchens actually started to acquire the visual and functional characteristics that are commonplace today. As the decade opened, the kitchen could be physically and psychologically remote for better-off households, operated by servants, and practically invisible so long as it functioned well. As if to signify this *de facto* invisibility, some house sale advertisements failed to mention the kitchen although other rooms, garden and location features were described.[1]

However, for many such families, the invisibility of the kitchen was to change over the decade, because the "Servant Problem"[2] made widespread employment of domestic staff more difficult (see, for example, Guardian 1921b). Furthermore, expansion of urban white-collar employment in some parts of Britain fuelled substantial suburban house building to accommodate them (see, for example, Jackson 1973; White 2001; Wildman 2012). There was also something of a fashion for converting the interiors of large older properties to a number of apartments ("flatting") (Times 1921a). In these changing circumstances, kitchens needed to be re-thought and, for this, there were new "efficient" fixtures and fittings being advertised. Importantly, newspaper columns of the day began to see the kitchen as a topic for discussion.

By contrast, for poorer households, the kitchen could be practically invisible as a separate room, since their rented accommodation was often cramped and minimally equipped. Their unhealthy living conditions were becoming a matter of municipal concern, and slum clearance offered a chance to improve matters even if the scope for change was limited by the scale of deprivation. In Glasgow, the medical officer of health was to say of new 1920s tenement[3] housing; "the kitchen of former days—where the work of the household was conducted during the day and the family frequently slept at night—is replaced by a 'living room' with attached scullery; and every house

is provided with a bathroom and water-closet" (Worsdall 1979: 128). Similarly, new local authority flats in Dundee had "a gas cooker in the tiny kitchen—which is on the American plan—a place to cook in, not to eat or sleep in or live in" (Guardian 1921c: 12). Municipal schemes of the 1920s provided some notable improvements,[4] but overcrowded and insanitary conditions persisted elsewhere because the poorest could not meet the higher rents for anything better. Even in the final years of the decade, newspaper columns were reporting slum problems as intractable (Times 1928, 1929b). Calls for improvement to many such homes were unsurprisingly made in terms of public health rather than efficiency but these were not incongruous.

How this "modern kitchen" discourse begins to take shape in the 1920s emerges from the diffuse actions of architects and builders of new housing, and old house conversions; and in the efforts of individual manufacturers and retailers trying to provide solutions for changing domestic circumstances. Initially, this involved better-off households but there were subsequent beneficiaries elsewhere. As with many social developments, reappraisal of the kitchen as a domestic space would have been led by people who had agency—awareness of new ideas and resources to make them happen. For that reason, this is the focus provided here.

A TIME AND A PLACE

The 1920s were to be a dramatic period in Britain. The scarring effects of regional economic problems as old heavy industries stalled in adverse international markets, and the emergence of new industries elsewhere,[5] formed a landscape of widely differing circumstances. Some households were impoverished and immobile in places that offered poor employment prospects, others were able to benefit from opportunities in light manufacturing, retailing and, especially, in the growth of white-collar employment (Mowat 1955; Blythe 1964; Branson and Heinemann 1971; Constantine 1980; Lewis 1980). Speculative housebuilding and, more subtly, building for owner-occupation rather than rental, was to characterize some areas after 1918 (Merrett with Gray, 1982). However, much of the housing stock was still privately rented and was to remain so throughout the decade.[6] In this sense, the 1920s were transitional, materially and culturally: massive changes were happening, whether one could participate or not.

Within these broader currents, there was a small but ultimately significant change starting to happen in households across the country: domestic kitchens were being reconsidered. Without a servant, it was said that the kitchen "arrangement which we find in the average house is wholly out-of-date and inconvenient" (Phillips 1923: 36). In Europe, architects and designers had argued for rational configurations of equipment in kitchens to improve efficiency, with the articulation of how this could be done being most evident at the well-attended,

and much discussed, housing design exhibitions in Vienna (1923) and Stuttgart (1927). These were showcases for innovations that had been in the making since the start of the decade (Bullock 1988; Hochhäusl 2013). For the Stuttgart exhibition in particular…"the issue of kitchen design and domestic economy loomed large in the organizers' thoughts, with their commitment to rationalization and standardization" (Kirsch 1989: 25). The cooking-niche and the live-in kitchen at Vienna and, most famously, the Frankfurt kitchen at Stuttgart were design developments for different domestic needs but all had the narrative of rational space use in relation to the tasks undertaken there. Rather than users adapting to the deficiencies of what was already in the kitchen, cookers, sinks and work surfaces could be positioned for best ergonomic effect. Moreover, there was a parallel concern with the benefits of prefabrication for some parts of these designs since that was also rational. An enthusiastic British newspaper report of the 1923 Vienna exhibition praised the convenience and aesthetic appeal of the kitchens on display and, in reference to fitted cupboards and seating, added…"it makes one wonder why furniture is…[thought of]…as something external to the building and outside the architect's sphere" (Wilson 1923: 6). American ideas were congruent, if less formalised, and more influential with the British public. Since the early 1900s, American shortages of domestic labour had been attributed to better-paid factory jobs and were seen as underpinning changes in the kitchen; electrical appliances and better layouts could reduce drudgery and supplant paid help—partly or fully (Guardian 1927a). The timing of individual household changes varied with location and income, but the idea that kitchens of the future could look very different, and be an attractive environment, gained currency in America and, eventually, elsewhere.

Cultural influences from America generally were becoming more important for everyday purposes with the popularity of cinemas, and the incidental window on new ideas that film provided for British audiences (see Glancy 2014). Even an article on clothing fashions was to acknowledge their more general influence:

> They have revolutionised our domestic habits. The kitchen to most women, is the pivot of the home, and even if some of the American labour-saving devices are apt to require more skilled attention and time than the old-fashioned methods, anything which endeavours to lessen the drudgery of 'woman's work' is welcome and deserves encouragement. (Guardian 1923a: 6)

Ahead of many British homes, American design ideas were providing new appliances for food preparation and household management tasks. This was not a quiet revolution; appliances were to be on show. With the caveat that this mostly applied to newer American

homes, Muriel Harris enthused about labour-saving measures and what, for many people, was a re-purposing of domestic space. Instead of endlessly carrying dishes back and forth, "why should not the kitchen be the dining room too, and thus leave the sitting room free for other users" (Harris 1924a: 6)? Although this combined use was nothing new to cramped and impoverished households, it represented a profound change for those who separated the working conditions of the kitchen from the pleasures of the table. As a consequence, the "the kitchen is the largest and the brightest room in the house. It is white and shiny, with clean paint and well-kept pots and pans" (ibid.). Having the kitchen in the foreground of household activities for reasons of choice rather than necessity would have been a significant transformation for many British homes. A study of interwar kitchen use was to say the: "the period witnessed a relocation of the kitchen from the margins of the household to a more central location within it, albeit still closeted from other spaces in the house" (Meah & Jackson 2013: 580).

Since the early years of the century, the quest for more efficient ways of operating had gained ground in American businesses, with managers giving attention to the way that tasks were structured, and how individual workers might be trained to perform them to best effect. Although the focus of what became known as "Scientific Management" was on workplace organisation, and very different in scale and purpose to the kitchen, there was common ground in the language of efficiency and economy that subsequently permeated most 1920s' commentary on kitchen practices and equipment (Paris 2019). In America, for example, Christine Frederick (1913), had been an early champion of improved domestic efficiency "with the use of the new labour-saving devices such as fireless cookers, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines that were just then coming on the market" (Rutherford 2000: 70). This emphasis was evident, for example, in the way that the kitchen was perceived as a series of problems to be solved in order that housewives might be freed from drudgery (Guardian 1921b). Young architects were urged to serve a six-month apprenticeship to a charwoman as part of their training to better understand the importance of good domestic design (Guardian 1922a). There was also a call for personal reflection on what was involved: "every housewife who is anxious to produce maximum work with minimum labour should therefore survey her kitchen premises and discover for herself which parts can be improved in order to save labour, steps, and time, and to produce more efficient work" (Guardian 1923b: 6). There was also a wider utilities context to efficiency: more households had fuel options. Putnam, for example, uses the symbolism of the home being connected "as a terminal on a vast network" (Putnam 2006: 146). The kitchen was thus able to draw external support in the form of utilities to reduce domestic labour requirements.

The pace of change for kitchens was variable within and between socio-economic groupings: some had much greater control over their domestic space with the possibility of earlier engagement with new ideas and, importantly, with their implementation. The narrative of domestic efficiency was significant since it had generated the manufacture and retailing of new consumer goods, but in Britain there was a perhaps surprisingly slow acceptance of time-saving household products, as compared with time-user innovations like radio (Bowden & Offer 1994). However, better-off families often needed to reduce or replace their reliance on full or part-time domestic service, and were more able to achieve that goal. So, what exactly was the nature of their changes? What were the problems they confronted in these changes and the options they considered?

HISTORICAL SOURCES

It is always difficult to establish why changes happen as they do, especially when the interplay of causal factors is viewed retrospectively. However, cultural records of everyday life a hundred years ago do exist in the form of newspapers and offer the best opportunity we have for understanding kitchen narratives as they were expressed at the time. Articles, letters to the editor and the framing of advertisements all offer insights far beyond the reach of oral history, and which are too granular for formal histories of the period.

In the 1920s, British newspapers were stratified in socio-economic terms and this is salient. The Times, with its strong political and financial coverage, was a serious newspaper for both wealthy and professional households. In regional terms, London-based newspapers dominated sales but the Manchester Guardian was of national importance with an extensive urban hinterland and, even twenty years later, was produced in "the only centre from which effective and early distribution can be made in the north of England and to some extent in Scotland" (Berry 1947: 116). Data for this content analysis were therefore primarily drawn from the digitized archives of the Manchester Guardian (Guardian Archives 2021)[7] and The Times (Times Archives 2021) using the search term "kitchen" for dates between the start of 1920 and the end of 1929. Both newspapers were increasingly conscious of the importance of female readers even if that was mostly restricted to a "women's page."[8] Reviewing "kitchen" narratives in these newspapers, repeated themes were identified and used to structure this account of the way that ideas were presented to reflect and inspire reader interest.

Saving time and effort was an important theme throughout the period and, with few exceptions, became something of a cliché in British newspaper coverage of the domestic kitchen, as well as underpinning sales messages in numerous advertisements. However, achieving the ideal of a "modern kitchen" was mediated through practical

questions about equipment availability; and the "legacy kitchen's" structural limitations.

COOKING FUELS

Coal use for domestic cooking and heating was deeply entrenched and, although not framed in the current concerns about climate change, there was an animated discourse about urban air pollution. This referenced the domestic kitchen as part of the problem and as a potential location for improved ways of operating. The Ministry of Health Committee on Smoke and Noxious Vapours Abatement had reported that "at least half the total output of smoke is domestic, and at least six per cent of the coal ordinarily burnt in domestic grates escapes as soot" (Guardian 1920a: 9). It was argued that old-fashioned kitchen ranges were a particular problem. Reporting a gas exhibition in Birmingham, it was said that 40 million tons [*circa* 40,642 kt] of coal were annually used in domestic fireplaces and, although this was less than 5 *per cent* of the total, it had a disproportionate effect on the production of sooty smoke by "crude and wasteful methods of burning coal" (Times 1923b: 7).

At a Smoke Abatement exhibition and conference in Manchester, the Lord Mayor suggested that "the country needed educating, particularly at this moment when houses were going up in thousands, in the right types of grates…"everybody was agreed upon the wastefulness of the old-fashioned kitchen grate, and yet those grates were going into new houses by the thousand" (Guardian 1924a: 11). To reported applause, he said "It ought not to be tolerated" (ibid.). More than four years later, the same point was reiterated at an Architects' Conference in Manchester, The Lord Mayor—himself an architect—argued they should be allied with the Smoke Abatement Society because of "the exceptional position an architect was in to influence his client to install methods of heating that would avoid polluting the atmosphere"…"To fit into a kitchen in a new house an old-fashioned Yorkshire range was nothing but an anachronism, and yet, he believed, some people still demanded these monstrosities—the last word in expense and inefficiency" (Guardian 1929a: 13).

However, even towards the end of the decade, the coal-range was not totally eclipsed by the alternatives: 'the coal range still plays a part in so many households' (Guardian 1927b: 8). There were those who preferred coal-fuelled ranges, or had little choice since that is what they had, and changing involved a new fuel supply as well as new appliances. Moreover, coal, and appliances using coal, were forcefully advertising to protect their traditional dominance of the domestic household market. A trade catalogue for Triplex Patent Grates, confronted the threat of gas and electricity with more efficient coal use: "are you satisfied to continue wasting fuel, energy and patience on your obsolete Kitchen Range?" (Triplex 1929: 3).

Convenience was the touchstone in many rival advertisements. "No modern housewife will ever revert to the use of the old kitchen range once she has enjoyed the reliability and ease of cooking by gas" (Guardian 1927c: 14). Urban households were best able to consider alternatives since electricity and gas supplies were more readily available. For the British Commercial Gas Association, the emphasis was economy as well as convenience.

> What simplicity you see in a gas-run kitchen! What cleanliness! Here is fuel—invisible, every-ready, *unfailing*—controlled by simple taps. Here is equipment, using that fuel economically and well, to meet your household needs—to preserve your food and to cook it to perfection; to give hot water constantly at basin, bath and sink. There is no labour. There is no extravagance. There is no waste. Surely this kitchen is your ideal? (Guardian 1929b: 12)

If not, there was electricity but in many places that was primarily for lighting and "only slowly were homes to absorb the other benefits" (Ward and Ward 1978: 10). Electrical supply improvements, especially for the higher currents needed to operate cookers, were often mentioned. One company in London was to report that…"we have of late years concentrated our efforts chiefly in developing the use of electricity for purposes other than lighting…and that the public are now more thoroughly appreciating than formerly the wonderful comfort and convenience at their disposal by the use of electricity in their homes" (Times 1924a: 21). Later that year, Hull Corporation's Electricity Committee was aiming to extend the supply to neighbouring towns (Times 1924b: 21).

As a fuel, electricity had much to recommend it. On display at an "electric home" exhibition in London were devices far removed from the usual kitchen fires and ranges. At its most prosaic, "the muffins on the cosily-set tea-table are kept warm in an electrically heated dish and the tea is made with the aid of a handsome electric kettle" (Times 1923c: 8). At another London exhibition, "a model dwelling consisting of bedroom, parlour and kitchen is on view, where cookery and electrical demonstrations will be given daily" (Times 1924c: 21). This exhibition was to last for a week and all older girls in local schools were to visit.

The quest for long-term customer loyalty to a particular fuel was not limited to rival advertisements or even exhibitions. The end-papers of popular cookery books were ideal for reminders. Warne's *New Model Cookery* (Wijey 1926), for example, carried advertisements for the Radiation New World cooker, emphasising the ease of temperature control; the Valor Perfection cooker using oil and offering freedom from the cleaning required by coal ranges; and generic exhortations to try cooking by electricity since it was cleaner and easily regulated.

Although commentary about the relative merits and drawbacks of different fuels could be partisan, all reflected the desire for improved efficiency. A Manchester Building Trades Exhibition had focused on…

> "…the modern housewife, who has let it be distinctly known that she wants everything in the shape of labour-saving arrangements and devices, and is not content to go down fighting against handicaps that should have been remedied long ago. Once alive to the evil effects of smoke from antiquated fires and fireplaces she becomes interested in the enlightened use of ranges and smokeless fuel, of gas and electricity. Cooking and cleaning have to be done with a minimum of work"…."She may inspect numerous heating system applicable to the kitchen or to the whole house." (Guardian 1929c: 15)

At a meeting of the Architectural Association, a speaker outlined the importance of designing houses, and their constituent rooms, with efficiency in mind. Not only was the wider use of gas and electricity suggested but the need to consider labour-saving devices was…"even more important in the country than in town homes because the scarcity of servants was greater" (Guardian 1922a: 9).

KITCHEN FURNITURE

Kitchens lacked the design coherence that would characterise expectations in future decades. Other than a cooker of some kind, and a sink, little could be regarded as standard. Work surfaces were a continuing problem. For some, the kitchen table had great importance since it was often the only surface suitable for food preparation activities—as well as perhaps being the usual family dining table and where letters were written, or board games played. For a worksurface, a height suitable for the principal user was the ideal but, for various reasons, was probably not the norm. An easily cleaned surface was needed and while a porcelain enamel top was prized, and available to fit over existing tables, many would opt for a paraffin-waxed surface or linoleum glued to the wooden table top. Clean surfaces were problematic without constant effort (Guardian 1922b). An old wooden table top, even at the right height, needed regular cleaning: one relatively cheap and easy solution was to cover it. "Some of us are still waiting for the porcelain-topped table of our dreams and while we wait are making the best of the old-fashioned deal top covered with American cloth" (Guardian 1927d: 8). This was easier to clean and a bright addition to the kitchen. The general lack of workspace was reflected in the enthusiasm shown for an enamelled iron tray that could be used for hot pans and cake tins as they were taken from the stove or oven. A heat-resistant, easy-clean surface would give "an air of efficiency to the whole kitchen" (Guardian 1923c: 8). To make the best of available space, folding

tables attracted some attention: "made of wood with a white porcelain top, the wall table folds flat when not in use, but is just as strong as any other. It has been designed for the kitchen…" (Guardian 1927e: 6). Porcelain enamelware tabletops were aspirational as easily-cleaned surfaces but difficult to accommodate given the variation in table sizes and other uses they might have.

The kitchen sink was a matter of concern since it is used in so many daily activities. Making it more efficient—in terms of height, materials and ease of cleaning—was important but that had "not impressed itself…at all upon the minds of plumbers and house-builders" (Guardian 1920b: 5). Placing sinks tables and cupboards at the right height for comfort and efficiency was a frequent comment and not simply related to the legacy of older fittings installed in, but not necessarily designed for, the space they occupied. At a time when more kitchen appliances were being advertised, the complaint was that "only the most enlightened manufacturers take height into consideration and it usually rests with the housewife herself to adjust her equipment to suit her needs" (Guardian 1927f: 8).

Kitchens routinely lacked storage space and tackling this problem led to extensive promotion of freestanding multi-purpose kitchen cabinets. There was a great deal of enthusiasm for the practicality of this one item of furniture. In many ways it epitomises the quest for efficiency.

> Concentration of equipment has become a by-law in the modern home. Of this, the kitchen cabinet is an excellent example, it serves three distinct purposes. The top portion consists of most scientifically planned storage rooms [*sic*] for all the ingredients that are in general culinary use. The flap which forms the door of the store cupboard lets down to form an excellent porcelain-enamelled table top upon which to work—with special side attachment, chopping board and mincing machine rest—whilst the bottom half provides ample space for pots, pans and cooking utensils. The modern housewife with her kitchen cabinet placed conveniently near her stove and her sink can sit down to her tasks and perform them calmly and efficiently without unnecessary expenditure of energy and time. (Guardian 1927g: 8)

A display advertisement proclaimed the Colonial Kitchen Cabinet to be the housewife's friend since they were "the most sanitary, dust-proof, self-contained and totally-enclosed cabinets on the market" (Guardian 1920c: 10). One article gave detailed attention to materials and design used for such cabinets since they were relevant to functionality. The cabinet, typically 1.8 m tall and a little over 1 m wide, had shelves to house tins and jars as well as pots and pans. To make it robust, the pot cupboard should be "lined at the bottom with zinc"

(Guardian 1924b: 6). The table top "should be made of basswood, because it is easy to clean" (ibid.).

Interest in the efficient use of space meant that innovative designs tried to satisfy several storage and work surface needs with least intrusion. "It has been found possible to embody a storage cupboard, a working surface, and a place for all utensils in one piece of furniture, and thus saving the housewife endless time and steps…" (Guardian 1922c: 6). The drop-down or prop-up work surface was important since few other food preparation surfaces were available in most homes, other than the multipurpose kitchen table perhaps. The article went on to suggest ways in which an old open-dresser might be converted to take advantage of these modern ideas, and thus make an old piece of furniture more functional. As ever, cost was a factor for new ones: "every housewife is agreed on the usefulness of the labour-saving kitchen cabinet but unfortunately the price of this item is beyond many pockets" (Guardian 1924c: 6). Enthusiastically, in one advertisement for a Modern Homes Exhibition, kitchen cabinets were described as "wonderfully convenient devices [that] enable you to prepare an entire meal without leaving your seat" (Observer 1922: 8).

AMBIENCE

Piecemeal refurbishment of the kitchen, and its integration with other domestic space, can be seen obliquely in lifestyle articles. The prevailing smell of a house often depends on the "arrangement and position of the kitchen"…"a question not often enough gone into, either by architects or by prospective occupiers" (Guardian 1927h: 6). "Though it is an aspect of housekeeping that is seldom if ever touched upon in print, it is one that frequently calls for remark in real life" (ibid.). If there was electricity to hand, the housewife might also consider a ceiling fan. "They work from the electric light, and can be fixed in any position, on a wall or on the ceiling. They are particularly useful in a passage leading from the kitchen as the smell of cooking can be prevented from pervading the house by turning on the fan for a few minutes" (Guardian 1929d: 8). For some, better ventilation might be possible with an electric fan which could be rented from electrical accessory shops, or with a fan powered by kerosene (paraffin) or gas "as many people are not provided with electricity" (Guardian 1923d: 4). Ceiling fans were also mentioned in the context of kitchen heat (Guardian 1922d, 1924d). Heat could be excessive with coal-fuelled ranges, especially in Summer: this was not lost on those advertising the more controllable electric and gas cooking appliances. Health factors were emphasised in a display advertisement.

> "For Health's Sake—use Electricity." "The electric kitchen is as cool as a cellar; no dust; no dirt; no smell of cooking. The

> electric cooker is half the size of the old range, it requires no flue or chimney and can be fixed in the most convenient position in the kitchen. The heat in the oven and the hotplates can be regulated with absolute certainty." (Guardian 1927i: 8)

An old kitchen floor might also need refurbishment for practical or aesthetic reasons. One article advised housewives how to lay linoleum for best effect…"the efficient method is to cement [glue] the linoleum to the floor—and this is a task any handy housewife can undertake for herself" (Guardian 1922e: 5). There was a similar call for action two years later (Guardian 1924e). However, even in later years of the decade, readers were still being advised on how to deal with this problem. "How many kitchens have a perfect floor, that is, a floor which is comfortable to stand upon, sanitary, easy to keep clean, and long-lasting in wear" (Guardian 1927j: 8)?

Perhaps unexpectedly, there was occasionally a hint of nostalgia to off-set so many articles urging kitchen progress. Muriel Harris was to remind readers that there was more to the modern kitchen than new appliances. After an old kitchen…"with its slanting mellow lighting and its glowing fire, the shiny, economical, full-speed-ahead kitchen seem extraordinarily arid and uninviting" (Harris 1924b: 6). The growing popularity of aluminium saucepans, light-weight and easier to keep clean, was also a trend to be counterbalanced, "it is noticeable that although so much aluminium is seen copper kettles are coming back into favour" (Guardian 1929e: 8). Reaction was also suggested in muted enthusiasm for the clean modern look that some aspired to. "With the usual white-walled kitchen, bright colours, such as blue or red are very attractive and prevent the all-too-hygienic look which makes some of them appear like laboratories. The old kitchen, despite its inconveniencies, naturally ran to picturesqueness…." (Guardian 1929f: 6).

INCIDENTALS

Some households had to contend with a lack of servants for the first time so there was something ironic in a column on fashions for aprons and pinafores. New designs had "come in for those who are not maids" (Guardian 1929g: 6). This point had been made more generally: "only since mistresses have had to be their own maids has the kitchen adopted the various devices which make work rather less of a labour" (Guardian 1927k: 8). It was not simply the replacement of servants in middle-class households, the size of kitchens in flats and new sub-urban housing was also to drive demand.

> In these days of smaller quarters and scanter service, utensils that are cheap and ingenious and labour-saving at the same time are a necessary [*sic*] rather than a fad. One sees that

> makers of common utensils, and especially of heating and lighting appliances, are now driven by the urgency of the market to think out useful dodges. (Guardian 1922f: 6)

While Americans might have been leading the way in terms of electrical labour-saving equipment, others had ideas worth sharing. Sharp knives, wire saucepan brushes and glass or white enamel rolling-pins in their various ways made easier. Although the USA was the more usual reference point for newspaper articles, there was sometimes another country's ideas to consider. "The French in particular have a number of kitchen conveniences, most of which are small but which make a great deal of difference" (Guardian 1927k: 8).

As households focused more on their kitchens as places to make comfortable and convenient, small consumer items—gadgets—were desirable. Amongst other ideas, there was a wooden grip that "fits on the handle of a kettle or pan and protects the hand from heat" (Guardian 1924f: 4). A device to hold crockery when washing up after a meal "is to be bought for about 8 s. 6d. [0.425 GBP] in any of the big shops" (Guardian 1927l: 4). Scissors and shears were "invaluable in saving time and labour" (Guardian 1927m: 10). Along with "an extremely ingenious little revolving knife, useful gadgets for kitchen tasks included a mincer—actually described as a super-mincing-machine—which was"…"the latest idea in labour and economy saving in the kitchen" (Guardian 1928: 8). A bread cutter involving a metal hoop and a guide for the bread knife was reported without much obvious enthusiasm (Guardian 1929h). A column-filler reminded readers that kitchen sets were now available. "Made of white wood, a kitchen set consists of a pastry-roller, steak beater, and four spoons all in a varnished rack ready to hang on the wall" (Guardian 1929i: 8). Even appliances had been suggested in a full-page Christmas Shopping feature: "electric gifts are attractive in design and appearance, and capable of immediate and constant use" (Guardian 1927n: 4). The new possibilities created by electricity were evident. "The increased use of electricity is responsible for many convenient and dainty contrivances, and appliances in the shops and departments concerned with that industry. Gifts that perform useful functions at home by the aid of a switch are among the comforts of modern life" (Guardian 1927o: 5).

While such gifts might have been generally welcomed as affordable expressions of new ways of thinking about the kitchen, there was an interesting reaction to what was now being gifted. An enigmatic column filler spoke of the disappointment of kitchen gifts but conceded a decorative box might be a saving grace. To disguise a lack of imagination, "a decorative box hides much that once would have been considered quite unsuitable for a gift at any time, such as kitchen sets, ovenware, knife-sharpeners, and fish slicers"…"Christmas seems the time for the exchange of little luxuries rather than an opportunity for

the presentation of practical gifts"…"Most people would find it very difficult to supress a feeling of disappointment upon opening a pretty box on Christmas morning to discover that the contents included a batter-spoon, a perforated ladle, and an apple-corer" (Guardian 1929j: 4). Disappointing or not, gadgetry tends to follow where innovation has created new needs, and it is probably safe to conclude that changes in kitchen use made items of this kind catch the eye of shoppers newly sensitized to such practical requirements.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There can be no doubt that the 1920s were a decade of transformative designs but what of the process of transformation? Newspaper narratives of the day characterised the kitchen as a focus for progressive ideas. Playing against the backdrop of the "servant problem," the once largely-invisible kitchen was now problematic. For many members of better-off households who might previously have had little reason to concern themselves with kitchen equipment, layout and functionality, greater engagement was needed, if not unequivocally welcomed. In this process, there was innovative thinking about the time and effort that cleaning and food preparation now demanded of householders themselves, rather than servants. Mrs. Peel (1917) had articulated the solution: the house had to be organised around labour-saving principles, and this was still the narrative of the 1920s. As one columnist was to say…"the up-to-date and well-equipped kitchen comes nearer solving the difficult servant problem than any other factor" (Guardian 1921d: 5). Moreover, suburban house building, and the re-purposing of large old houses into flats, meant that new kitchens had to align with the practicalities of space and cost. America had led the way with electrical appliances to replace labour but their more profound contribution to the modern kitchen was perhaps a willingness to display what had been the domestic backroom: family life could be enacted here as readily as elsewhere in the home. Although this was not new among those who had no choice, it was a fresh idea for others.

This engagement with the kitchen was to raise questions about storage for equipment and commodities, and surfaces to meet practical needs. With growing commercial interest in homemaking, good design and modest cost were important but, so too, was ubiquity. Kitchen cabinets, tables and 'tops' had their differences but were widely retailed to fit as many homes as possible. Freestanding kitchen cabinets, the American Hoosier and British Easiwork ranges for example, were products with well-known names and were advertised widely but available from local stockists where they could be inspected (Hampshire Telegraph 1920; Scotsman 1926; Worthing Herald 1928). Moreover, articles on kitchen decoration and linoleum floors suggest thought being given to the look of this space, as it would be with other rooms.

For some, this kind of limited updating might have been all that was possible to reflect modern style.

Other factors operated in the background. The rise of new industries and occupations in parts of Britain meant there were innovations for those who could avail themselves. Not least of these were cooking appliances to benefit from the increased availability of gas and electricity supplies. Clean, controllable heat was an oft-stated theme in newspapers, alongside the health benefits of reducing atmospheric smoke by changing to gas or electricity. That said, new efficient coal-ranges remained strong competitors: they were not immediately eclipsed.[9]

That is an important feature of the decade. The "modern kitchen" is more easily recognised with hindsight than imagined at the time. Kitchen changes advertised and discussed in 1920s newspapers mostly involved piecemeal replacements of cooking equipment and movable fittings. This is particularly understandable in rented accommodation but there was also no sense of integrated design here even if there was a background narrative of labour-saving efficiency. Improvements that could be made might therefore be characterised as "isolated functionality" (Hand and Shove 2004: 241). As a consequence, everyday experiences of domestic kitchens "were often far removed from the idealised discourses of efficiency and labour-saving" (Ryan 2018: 93). Bullock's (1988: 188) assessment of the Frankfurt kitchen and other design initiatives in the 1920s was that these ideas had currency "in shaping the approach of architects and others involved in housing"…[but their]…"value in practice remained limited." That would seem to have been the case in Britain as well. A more extensive application of those principles was a long time in gestation. By comparison with 1922, analysis of 1952 Good Housekeeping Magazine content had celebrated progress in terms of fitted kitchens that now…"physically [embodied] a modernist materialisation of practice [and] also [signified] an aesthetic of coherence and stylistic order" (Hand and Shove 2004: 243). Modernism, as a word, is said to have been rare in architectural circles during the 1920s (McLeod 2014). However, progressive ways of thinking about kitchens were in evidence even if they had to confront the problems of fuel supply and the *ad hoc* substitutions of new for old items of furniture or equipment. The design of new factories, cinemas, bus stations and the like in those interwar years meant representations of modernism were widely visible but domestically this was hampered by competition from other styles popular at the time. Nostalgia for a more distant reference point, as in the cautious conservatism of mock-Tudor suburban housing, was more reassuring even if enthusiasm for household items like colourful furnishings, angular crockery and the styling of new electrical items were evidence of a different trajectory (Ryan 2018). For those with agency, pragmatic kitchen changes were happening and period newspaper content analysis provides us with illustrations of that in some detail. For others, change could only be aspirational: beyond reach at

the time. Although notable design ideas were emerging in the 1920s, many British households would have to wait decades for the efficient equipment, surfaces at the right height and cupboards close to hand, that would better reflect the requirements and routines of the domestic kitchen.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. See, for example [with original capitalization and punctuation]: "Hale: Lisson Grove—TO BE SOLD, with immediate possession, a Well-built, Pre-war Semi-detached HOUSE: 2 entertaining, 5 bed rooms: electric light and gas: good gardens: 1 minute from Hale station…" (Guardian 1921a). "Bournemouth. Near. In beautiful district, close to Golf and Sea. Modern Bungalow-style RESIDENCE in splendid order; two reception, three bed and dressing rooms, bath room, compact offices. Electric light. Company's gas and water. Modern drainage. Garage with room. Bungalow. Outbuildings. Delightfully planned grounds, tennis and pleasure lawns &c. In all about One Acre" (Times 1927). As seen in the second example, "offices"—short for domestic offices—was a term alluding to kitchens and sculleries without actually mentioning them.
2. For context, wage disparities meant it had been cheap enough for many middle-class households to employ domestic servants but this was to change (Lethbridge 2013). Being "in service" had been major female employment before World War 1 but new opportunities for women during the war, and in some sectors afterwards, created what has been termed the "servant problem." This referred to the perceived crisis of staff recruitment and retention. Todd (2009) has argued a tendency to overstate the "servant problem" since there was a change to daily help rather than live-in staff. Adverse labour markets meant many still sought this work where prospects were poor but better wages were increasingly attractive if factory or retail jobs could be found.
3. A Scottish tenement is a "domestic building of more than one floor, all the houses of which are reached by a common entrance and stair" (Worsdall 1979: *ix*). Often regarded as synonymous with "slum" in later decades, many were very stylish and all represented better housing for their original residents.
4. It is easy to forget just how basic housing needs were. Starting in 1922, the Becontree Estate in East London was a public housing project to alleviate poor conditions. An early resident recalled the excitement of having "electric light and a bathroom

and a scullery with running water"…"with all the cupboards and the stove and everything. I thought it was just like a palace" (Willmott 1963: 7).

5. See discussion in Lyon and Ross (2016).

6. As late as 1938–1939, a study of middle-class households was to find that even among this relatively affluent public sector white-collar sample—having an income of at least £250 a year—35 per cent were renting their accommodation (Massey 1942).

7. For clarity the Manchester Guardian is referred to as the Guardian throughout although the formal name change was not made until 1959.

8. The Times had experimented with *The Woman's Supplement* (Times 1920) and a regular *The Woman's View* page covering a broad topic range—from "Starting a small restaurant" (Times 1922a) and "On building a house" (Times 1921b), to the more prosaic 'When cook is away' (Times 1921c) and "Paris fashions" (Times 1923a). From sporadic beginnings, but with growing realisation of this important readership segment, in 1922 the Manchester Guardian had Madeline Linford editing three columns six days a week for women with 'no concessions to popular jargon, slang or colloquialisms' (Scott 1971: 11).

9. A BBC household talks compilation was still explaining the advantages of gas and electricity for cooking (BBC 1928).

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