

BRITAIN'S CHRISTMAS STOCKING

"Operation Plum-Duff" gets off with a manicure parade for service cooks preparing the Army's Christmas puddings. A spit-and-polish start to the big menu-of-the-year. Though Christmas comes but once a year, Army tradition demands that they still do it all by numbers.

At Woolwich Barracks, refusing to soften up under the Christmas spirit, the Cook-Sergeant starts things rolling with parade-ground precision.

One thing is certain about this year's Christmas dinner - the old song about "Army Duff! Army Duff! Soldiers don't get half enough!" just won't apply. And if it tastes as good as it looks, they'll probably all wind up Cook-Generals. And if there's any truth at all in the story that the Army marches on its stomach, they won't get far on Boxing Day.

Down at London Docks, there's enough good cheer arriving by the barrel to keep a Tribunal going for a year - the fruits of a record season for wine harvests.

Franco's contribution to Britain's festivities and the barrow-boys' benefit - mandarins. Plentiful supplies of all fruits (except oranges, bananas, peaches, pineapples, apricots, sultanas, currants and raisins) will be in the shops in good time.

All roads lead to Covent Garden, where something of the old time Christmas hustle gives the market its busiest weeks. "Huts to austerity" is the keynote - and the promise of full sideboards for everyone.

Prospects are anything but bright in the feathered world. At Olympia, the National Poultry Show at least proves that there are such things left in Britain as drumsticks and wishbones. 4,000 exhibits attract buyers from all over the world. But with prime poultry fetching record prices, it's an expensive way to make certain of a Christmas dinner. Yes, you.

What an ordeal for the poultry. None of them quite know whether it's their points that are being admired or the person's nose. Birds are so scarce that everything on two legs with feathers can gate-crash the show.

Safe from the oven - no wonder the cockerel crows.