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PIONEERS OF AN OLD LOCAL INDUSTRY

The Watercress Valley

"WATERCREASES! Fresh green watercresses!"

When this was one of the cries of Old London, we can be sure that most of the "creases" (a pronunciation still occasionally used by old people) came from Hertfordshire, as did the finest wheat in medieval times.

Kent, Surrey and Buckinghamshire also sent watercress to the London markets, but their supplies were relatively small. Hertfordshire growers were quick to develop a useful industry, and by Victorian days cress-beds beside our clear chalk streams were a familiar sight.

In what is largely a family industry, it is pleasant to find that our three local growers, Mr. Dennis Bedford, Mr. J. C. Knowles, and Mr. J. Sharp, continue the good work of their fathers and grandfathers.

There is a world of difference between cultivated and uncultivated watercress. The coarse growth which was formerly found in the stagnant moats of Berkhamsted Castle, though unfit for human consumption, is said to have been sent to Manchester for use in dyeworks.

SPRING BEDS

The watercress you and I enjoy requires a constant supply of pure water. Early producers relied upon springs which kept the water in constant motion at an even temperature. Cress-beds, unlike adjacent streams, are seldom frozen. Thick ice can ruin late winter and spring crops, the best of the year.

With the growth of railway transport and strong demands for watercress from the Midlands and the North of England, to which much of our local cress is still sent by train, the industry grew. More beds were made, and artesian wells were sunk to supplement the springs.

But when pumping lowered the water table in the Bulbourne valley, further expansion of the industry was limited. Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire, with more generous supplies of water, gradually ousted Hertfordshire from its position as the leading watercress county.

At least one local grower sought pastures new and turned them into cress-beds. He was the late Mr. William

Bedford, uncle of Mr. Dennis Bedford, who founded the firm now known as Bedford and Jesty Ltd., of Wareham, Dorset. Today this is one of the largest firms of its kind in the country.

Altogether some 700 acres of watercress are under cultivation in England, and it is not unknown for one acre to yield ten tons a year.

RAPID GROWTH

Under favourable conditions, watercress grows rapidly. A clean, gravelly bottom is essential, and cress-roots are placed out three inches apart. In a few weeks the plants are rooted, and between January and March there are two crops of very high quality. At this time of the year the tender cress is pulled, roots and all.

Taken in wicker baskets to the packing sheds, the cress is bunched, washed, trimmed and packed. Most of this work is done by women. Formerly the cress was sent to market in wicker baskets, but non-returnable punnets, each containing 36 bunches, are now used.

In summer, when the cress grows above the level of the water, it is cut off. Stubble is left behind, as in a cornfield, and after the bed has been cleaned by flooding, the stubble is pushed down with a rake. In three or four weeks another crop is produced, but it tends to be "bloomy" and coarse. There are more crops in the autumn, depending upon the weather, but demand is then small and prices are often unrewarding.

THE BEDFORD FAMILY

In the town of Berkhamsted three generations of Bedfords have cultivated watercress. Many of the beds were dug by Mr. Dennis Bedford's grandfather and father, Mr. Harry Bedford. An uncle, Mr. Frank Bedford, was especially interested in growing watercress at Dudswell and Northchurch, but owing to shortage of water the industry has now left the upper reaches of the river Bulbourne.

Mr. Dennis Bedford, however, carries on the family tradition between Billet Lane and St. John's Well Lane. He remembers summers when he started work at 3 a.m. and did not return home until 6 or 7 p.m., taking a few

minutes off for snacks on the narrow paths between the beds.

Sometimes he worked at the corner of Bridgewater Road, opposite the Castle grounds, in the large, isolated cress-bed which was filled in a few years ago, largely with soil from the Post Office site. A number of other beds between St. John's Well Lane and Lower King's Road have also been abandoned and partly filled in.

BROADWAY AND BOURNE END

At Broadway, in Victorian times, some very small beds kept by Mr. Glenister were taken over and greatly extended by Mr. James Goodall Knowles, as part of his considerable farming interests. He was succeeded by his son, Mr. Alfred G. Knowles, and then by his grandson, Mr. James C. Knowles, who, like Mr. Bedford and Mr. Sharp, sends his cress to many parts of the Kingdom.

The industry at Bourne End was apparently started by Mr. Gardner, licensee of the "White Horse" in Victorian days. His beds were taken over by Mr. Joseph Sharp, who came to the district as bailiff at Pix Farm, and later bought an adjoining farm with the intention of breeding horses and running the watercress farm as a sideline. He soon found cress more profitable than horses.

STREAMLINED

Trading under the name of F. G. Sharp & Son, the business is now carried on by John, grandson of Joseph. Times have changed since it was

the custom for workmen to call at the farmhouse at 4 a.m. in summer for a glass of beer before starting work. This refreshment was available only to men who were punctual; anyone who arrived even a minute or two late was refused the beer ration.

It is an old joke that the watercress industry has always been streamlined. Certainly it was one of the first rural industries to make use of miniature railways; larger growers laid rails along the paths for speeding truckloads of cress from bed to packing shed. Speed in handling and transporting the cress is absolutely essential.

Watercress growers are still among our earliest risers, and among the healthiest, too. It is fascinating to see the men working in the early morning mist, looking somewhat dwarfed as they crouch down with several inches of water swirling around their gum-boots. Perhaps they look a little less picturesque than their fathers and grandfathers, who wore high leather boots.

STILL IMPORTANT

Although today's labour force is not so large as it was in years gone by, the industry is still important locally. Here, as in other counties, growers are hoping to increase sales. They have received some encouraging words from the Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture, which recently stated that, although the watercress industry grew up by providing the poor man's salad, it could have a bright future with a higher social status.

And why not? In France, one of the

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few countries other than England which grows watercress on a large scale commercially, cresson is regularly served in restaurants.

"Those that are dull and drowsy and have the lethargy" were advised by ancient writers to eat watercress, for it had the power "to cleanse the blood in spring and consume the gross humours winter hath left behind."

An even better recommendation, it seems, than the famous apple a day . . .

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