

Account of Purley on Thames

Roundsmen

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Introduction

In mediaeval times there were three ways to obtain goods and materials, you could grow or make them yourself, you could obtain them in a local market or by direct barter, or you could acquire them from an itinerant salesman. These itinerant salesmen had well defined rounds. They began at the source of a particular commodity where they loaded up. They then followed a regular path from village to village where the original goods were off loaded and new goods acquired. Sometimes goods were sold for cash but usually the aim was to get back to the original starting point well loaded with all the goods the locals wanted to exchange for the merchant's speciality product.

It is possible to trace many of these routes from place names because in a given area one particular village would be known as being on the route of one of these commodities and at the right time people would come from miles around to get what they wanted. Thus we can trace salt routes starting in Cheshire, flint, lead and iron routes from mining areas and spice and wine routes starting at a particular port.

In the last few centuries these routes were superseded by a more elaborate pattern of trade based on markets in principal towns and carriers plying between town and village. By the late 19th century these too were giving way to more specialist roundsmen who focussed very sharply on a particular commodity, like bread or milk and who worked very closely with the producers, eg dairy farmers or bakers. By the mid 1930s you could buy almost anything from your front door.

The war and rationing dealt a body blow to the roundsmen. Many went out of business and it was really only the milkmen who survived, although in the 1960s and 1970s it became a very competitive business.

In the late 1980s there was a revival as many people, often having been made unemployed, tried their hand at building a business. Many started as specialists but soon realised that in order to make a living it was possible to sell a wide variety of goods. By the 1990s it was almost impossible to differentiate the various roundsmen as will be seen in the sections that follow. These attempt to trace the national trends and where possible to give details of what was happening in Purley.

Milk

Until the consequences of the enclosures reduced the English peasant to the status of an employed labourer, it was customary for each family to keep a cow or a goat in their garden as a source of milk. For a while thereafter, the labourer could go to the farm to get a supply of milk and most farms kept a churn to hold milk for sale at the gate. They soon established a regular clientele and it was but a short step from there to putting the churn in a donkey cart and delivering the milk on a regular basis. This had of course been the pattern in the larger towns for some time.

Milk was measured out using long handled ladles which usually came in half pint, pint and quart sizes although there were other sizes in use. Customers had to provide their own jug which was usually covered with a muslin cloth weighted at the edges by beads to keep the flies off and the dirt out. Refrigeration being unknown the milk soon went off and in the summer it was not uncommon

for there to be several deliveries each day. Some resorted to boiling the milk as soon as it arrived but this changed the taste drastically. However every housewife had a recipe which used the gone-off milk for junkets and such like delicacies so little was wasted.

At first sanitary inspectors checked the premises where milking took place and milk was handled and from the 1930s vets would test the herds for the tuberculin bacillus. After the second world war pasteurisation became the norm and health regulations have become even more stringent over the years. Bottles came in in the late 1920s but tended to be in short supply and some milkmen operated a policy of 'no empties - no bottled milk'.

From the Pangbourne Magazine of 1935 we can get a picture of what was going on locally from the advertisements. T Harper and Sons were established in 1886 and operated from a dairy in the High Street. They offered a twice a day delivery service but only in the Pangbourne village area. They had a three wheeled hand cart and offered sealed bottles if required, no doubt at a higher price. They also supplied new laid eggs and dairy butter and emphasised that they operated under strict veterinary and sanitary supervision.

The Pangbourne Dairy also offered a twice a day service of 'Grade A Tuberculin Tested milk' having recently been fitted out with the most modern machinery for sterilising bottles and dairy utensils. They offered a standing invitation to anyone to come and inspect their premises. They also supplied Devonshire clotted cream, Devon and Cornish butter and cream 'free from preservatives' which made one wonder what other dairymen put in to preserve their cream! No doubt the produce from Devon and Cornwall came regularly to Pangbourne station via the GWR. Jim Ashworth was the proprietor at the time having taken over from a Mr Bayfield earlier. Their dairy was at what is now Collins hardware shop on Reading Road and they competed in Purley with Saunders of Home farm.

Marsh Farm Dairy operated from Marsh Farm adjacent to the Reading Road in Pangbourne, but actually in the Parish of Purley. They were owned by a D C How and made a point of their modern sterilizing plant emphasising that the milk came from their own cows. They too delivered twice daily and also supplied fresh cream, dairy butter and new laid eggs.

Home Farm in Purley had dairy cows and under Robert Saunders was selling milk locally. One of his dairymen was Joseph Kirton who had come to work for him in 1915. From around 1918 he took over the milk round and later acquired it as his own business. After he was married in 1923 he went to live at one of Scrases Farm cottages and later moved to Well Cottage on Purley Rise. In 1945 they bought Yew Tree Farm and were able to provide themselves with their own milk.

He served Purley Village and around towards Tilehurst and was renowned for his service. He would do his round twice a day with his pony and cart, rain or shine and always had a smile and a cheery word for everyone. When any of his customers was sick or had fallen on hard times his measures were miraculously increased in size. In the hardest winters he would load his churn onto a sledge and tow it around himself to ensure that his customers got their milk. When the floods came their son, Charlie, would deliver in the village by boat.

At Yew Tree farm they kept 15 cows, mixed Guerneseys and Friesians, Their first cow, named Daffodil, would yield around 6 gallons a day. When he started the round distributed 20 gallons a day, when he retired it had risen to 150 gallons.

For most of the time the milk was delivered in the traditional churn and Joe was adept at swishing the milk around to give each customer an appropriate mixture of milk and cream. When Alders in Pangbourne gave up in 1965, he bought their bottling plant from them and a cardboard-seal cutter from Williams and was able to offer bottled milk at last. He bought a milking machine in 1967 but was not very happy with it. The cows didn't like it either and he had to replace the whole herd.

Joe finally gave up his round in 1968 and sold it to Cliffords Dairy. A few years earlier Jobs Dairy

and the Co-op had come into the area but had taken only a few customers away. The majority remained loyal, despite a campaign with a loudspeaker van to woo them away. Cliffords sold on some of the round to Jobs to make operations a bit more efficient. Joe died in 1987.

The donkey cart with the single churn had given way to the milk float, a four wheeled horse drawn cart with a very low floor so that the milkman could serve the milk standing by the roadside. The horses got to know their route so well that they needed no guidance, although on occasions they need to be restrained from hurrying to the spot where the most luscious grass grew by the verge. In the 1960s most of these became motorised but petrol engines were really not suitable and the milk industry were in the forefront of the development of electric, battery driven vehicles which are the mainstay of the delivery service today.

By the 1970s competition was getting very fierce and most of the small operators were squeezed out, or joined forces to be able to combat the might of the Milk Marketing Board. In Purley there was a choice between Jobs Dairy, The Co-op, Cliffords Dairy and United Dairies, later Unigate. It was not uncommon for one operator to try to steal business from another and they used to chase each other down the streets, all trying to cover the same area. The nonsense of this became apparent eventually and agreements were reached so that only one, or at the most two served any one street.

By the mid 1980s the smaller operators were coming back into the scene, usually under a franchise agreement. They maintained their own fleet of two or three vehicles and ran their own business but traded under the name of one of the big suppliers. They obtained their milk, ready bottled, from a central bottling plant, eg at Home Farm Sulham to where they returned the empties.

The pint bottle had become standardised in the 1950s and most dairies supplied bottles with their own name on them, however as they were completely interchangeable they were rarely sorted out and most dairies would supply milk in bottles other than their own. The compact bottle came in during the late 1970s. These fitted better into refrigerators, which were now becoming the norm. Originally sealed with a waxed cardboard ring, the bottles were later sealed with an aluminium foil cap. Birds soon learned to peck their way through the seal to sample the milk. This was not too much of a problem when it was just small birds such as tits and sparrows, but when the magpies did it a considerable health hazard was created.

Westwood Farm Dairies was established by Mervyn Saunders of Apple Close c 1984. He traded under his own name and competed effectively with the big-boys from whom he acquired rounds c 1989, gradually eliminating competition. The issue had now become more one of survival of the doorstep delivery rather than market share.

For years the European Commission had eyed the British doorstep delivery system with distaste. To them it was unhygienic and stifled competition. The supermarkets were competing strongly with milk supplied in waxed cardboard containers, originally the pyramid but later using the American rectangular design. The French tried to bring in Long Life milk but this was not to the taste of the British Consumer and it never really took off, despite the lower price. The Milk Marketing Board too was declared anti-competitive and is being phased out. The doorstep deliverymen hit back with a very effective and prolonged television campaign and we still have our doorstep delivery, although now it is only a morning delivery and not even every day.

Sir Julian Rose at Hardwicke Farm was a proponent of organic farming and made a name for himself selling unpasteurised milk and taking on the European Commission in court. They had tried to get his operation declared illegal but he triumphed, at least in court. He made a foray at selling his products in the Purley area, but unfortunately for him at precisely the time when full cream milk, as supplied by the cow was going out of fashion. Health concern had moved the market away from natural milk towards a homogenised blend in which the fat content was closely controlled. Several grades are available but the preponderant choice is the for low fat grades.

Westwood Farm Dairy for its part began moving into a much wider variety of products, eggs were obtained from Manor Farm in Tidmarsh and bread from Warings bakery in Tilehurst. Fruit juices were also a stock in trade. In 1993 they branched out even further into garden compost and similar products.

By the turn of the millennium the supermarkets had won and milk came in plastic bottles of either two, four or eight pint capacity although to conform to European Commission regulations they were marked in metric, for example four pints were marked as 2.272 litres. There were a number of grades, full fat, semi-skimmed etc but the roundsmen had gone.

Bread

Fruit and Vegetables

Fuel

Coal

Heating oil

Paraffin

Gypsies and Tinkers

For over a hundred years the tinker was a well respected itinerant. He sold pots and pans and other household utensils made from tin and similar metals and would stop and repair them if required. As a fraternity the tinkers, who were mainly Irish grew in disrepute as they turned from being craftsmen to scrap metal merchants and scavengers. The gypsies with whom they shared a life style also disassociated themselves from them.

Many kept up their living by turning to knife sharpening which had been one of their original stock in trades. The doorstep market for pots and pans had gone and there was no call for old pots to be repaired. They would usually have a small grindstone mounted on a handcart which they would push from village to village. They would usually sharpen kitchen knives, scissors and garden shears but were generally prepared to turn their hand to anything. They were still around in the mid 1980s but it is some years since one was seen in Purley.

The gypsies would come around selling clothes pegs and similar craft artefacts. Their progress around the country was seasonal as they sought work on local farms at harvest time and spent the winters making their baskets and pegs.

Newspapers

Annetts

M&W

Post Office

Ice Cream

The Avon Lady and her like

Avon, Betterware

Miscellaneous

Corona Man

Mushroom Compost

Ex Offenders