

**Object(s):** Cheese Vats

**Object Number(s):** STMEA:76.A.79.2; STMEA:76.A.79.3a-b

**Researcher details:** Hannah White, Volunteer

### Introduction

These cheese vats (Figures 1 and 2), were used by members of the Munnings family including Mrs Ellen Emily Munnings, Mrs Mary Munnings at Weybread Mill, and occasionally by Mrs Mary Webster. The vats would have been used as vessels inside which curd was formed and cut or broken into to make cheese. The second vat (Figure 2) has 'PINT' stamped on the side and has a lid made from an old fruit can. The vats have been adapted from corn measures, with holes drilled into the sides to allow the whey to drain away.



**Figure 1.** Cheese Vat (STMEA:76.A.79.2)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Image courtesy of Museum of East Anglian Life



**Figure 2.** Cheese Vat (STMEA.76.A.79.3.a+b)<sup>2</sup>

### **Mrs Ellen Emily Munnings**

In 1851, Ellen Emily Ringer was circa 7 months old and the first daughter of William and Ellen Ringer.<sup>3</sup> She was born in Bungay, Suffolk and lived with her family and servants.<sup>4</sup> The current occupiers of Mendham Mill suggest that Ellen Emily Ringer was “a formidable character, born at Walsham Hall, just a short distance from Mendham Mill, in 1850 and died in 1947. She spent much of her life at Mendham Mill and in old age, was still very much regarded as the matriarch of the family”.<sup>5</sup>

When Ellen was 20 years old she was living with her now widowed 43-year-old mother who was a farmer.<sup>6</sup> The 1881 census tells us that Ellen was married to John Munnings aged 41 years who was a Miller, employing 9 men and 3 boys.<sup>7</sup> The couple had three sons living with

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<sup>2</sup> Supra 1

<sup>3</sup> Ancestry.com. 1851 Census [Internet].

<sup>4</sup> Supra 3

<sup>5</sup> Correspondence dated 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020 with current owner of Mendham Mill [Email]

<sup>6</sup> Ancestry.com. 1871 Census [Internet].

<sup>7</sup> Supra 6

them all under 5 years at The Mill, Mendham, with two apprentice millers and two servants.<sup>8</sup>

In 1901, Ellen Munnings aged 50 years was still married to John Munnings, recorded as a Flour Miller and the couple lived with their three sons and a servant at Mill Lane (Flour Mills), Mendham.<sup>9</sup> Ten years later, at 60 years of age, she is living alone with her husband John aged 71 years.<sup>10</sup>

### **Alfred James Munnings**

It is interesting to note that one of Ellen Munnings' sons was Alfred James Munnings, later Sir Alfred Munnings, the famous artist.<sup>11</sup> At the height of his popularity during the interwar years, Alfred was a fashionable figure in society and often received invitations to paint portraits of country house owners with their horses and rural landscapes.<sup>12</sup> Between 1944 and 1949, Alfred was president of the Royal Academy.<sup>13</sup> The best of his artwork is believed to be at Castle House, Dedham, Essex, his home from 1919, which his widow converted into a Munnings Museum.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Origins of Cheesemaking**

Evidence of ancient cheese vats (strainers) can be found throughout Europe, dating back to the Bronze Age.<sup>15</sup> Baskets were used to separate the cheese curds, but as technology advanced, the moulds began to be constructed using either wood or pottery. The cheesemaker places the curds of cheese into the mould (vat) which is secured with a lid, then pressure is added to separate the whey, which would drain from holes. Historically, goat's milk would have been used to make cheese, this was because the animals were smaller than cows and therefore required less food and were easier to herd and transport.<sup>16</sup>

The production of cheese began well over 7,000 years ago, and it is even documented in Egyptian tomb drawings and in Ancient Greek literature.<sup>17</sup> Cheesemaking may have originated from nomadic herdsmen who stored milk in vessels made from the stomachs of

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<sup>8</sup> Supra 6

<sup>9</sup> Ancestry.com. 1901 Census [Internet].

<sup>10</sup> Ancestry.com. 1911 Census [Internet].

<sup>11</sup> Supra 8

<sup>12</sup> ART UK. Painting 'Mendham, the Mill Pond' by Alfred Munnings [Internet]. Available from: <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mendham-the-mill-pool-near-the-artists-home-951/search/keyword:mendham/page/2> ©The Estate of Sir Alfred Munnings, Dedham

<sup>13</sup> Supra 16

<sup>14</sup> Supra 16

<sup>15</sup> Wikipedia. Ancient Cheese Making [Internet]. Available from:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheesemaking#Ancient\\_cheesemaking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheesemaking#Ancient_cheesemaking)

<sup>16</sup> Supra 3

<sup>17</sup> Supra 3

sheep and goats.<sup>18</sup> It is thought that humans probably first created cheese by accident, as a result of the storing and transporting of milk in bladders made of ruminant's stomachs, which contained rennet essential in the process of curding.<sup>19</sup>

### **Cheesemaking in East Anglia**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, East Anglia was one of the three top cheesemaking regions.<sup>20</sup> The closeness of the region to London gave it an advantage, allowing the cheese to be easily transported to the capital by either land or sea.<sup>21</sup> It became more profitable to skim more off the cream from the farmer's milk before making cheese, so as to produce more butter along with cheese from the same milk.<sup>22</sup> The increasing numbers of working-class poor of London provided a ready market for this low quality but inexpensive 'flett' or skim milk cheese.<sup>23</sup> The flett cheese also found a ready market in the maritime sector of the economy, where it was valued for its durability.<sup>24</sup> Low fat cheese is durable and able to withstand abuse as it expels more whey during the cheese making process, resulting in a much drier cheese.<sup>25</sup>

### **Suffolk Bang**

The Suffolk Bang was a type of cheese produced in Suffolk from skimmed milk.<sup>26</sup> The resulting cheese was extremely hard and regarded as being of poor quality.<sup>27</sup> It was heavily salted to make the cheese last longer.<sup>28</sup> A low-quality hard Suffolk cheese was recorded as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century and by this time it was being exported to London.<sup>29</sup> Trade with London was conducted by sea and continued into the 18<sup>th</sup> century with 985 tons being sold to London in 1740.<sup>30</sup> At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, high grain prices led to Suffolk farmers moving away from dairy production leading to the stopping of the production of the Suffolk Bang cheese.<sup>31</sup> The main consumers of the Suffolk Bang were servants and labourers who

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<sup>18</sup> Supra 3

<sup>19</sup> Supra 3

<sup>20</sup> Kindsted, P. *Cheese and Culture: A History of Cheese and Its Place in Western Civilisation*. 2012. Chelsea Green Publishing.

<sup>21</sup> Supra 25

<sup>22</sup> Blundel and Tregear. From artisans to "factories": the interpenetration of craft and industry in English cheese-making, c1650-1950. 2006. *Enterprise & Society*, 7(4) pp. 705–739.

<sup>23</sup> Supra 27

<sup>24</sup> Supra 27

<sup>25</sup> Supra 27

<sup>26</sup> Supra 23

<sup>27</sup> Supra 3

<sup>28</sup> Supra 3

<sup>29</sup> Supra 3

<sup>30</sup> Supra 3

<sup>31</sup> Supra 3

couldn't afford anything better.<sup>32</sup> The Royal Navy gratefully appreciated this cheese as it provided a long shelf life and to that end they purchased about 1000 tons of the cheese annually up until 1758.<sup>33</sup> After this, the Navy stopped purchasing the cheese as crew members were said to find it inedible.<sup>34</sup> N. A. M. Rodger's anatomy of the Georgian Navy '*The Wooden World*' tells us that "The Navy had always issued Suffolk Cheese, a thin, hard and durable variety, but practically inedible. There were frequent complaints against it, and in 1758 the decision was taken to switch to Cheshire and Gloucester Cheese"<sup>35</sup> The cheese was also reportedly made on a smaller scale for unmarried farmer workers.<sup>36</sup> Edward Moor in his work '*Suffolk words and phrases*' (1823) reportedly says that the very lowest quality of Suffolk Cheese was known as 'Bang'.<sup>37</sup>

### **Further References:**

#### **Suffolk Record Office**

Cheese-Reference Number:HD2448/3/140

Munnings Family-HD2448/3/549

Munnings Family of Stoke by Nayland and Mendham- HD4084/223-Correspondence from E G Munnings, (mother of Alfred J Munnings, the artist) and genealogical material compiled from churchyard inscriptions, directories, and wills, covering the period 1564-1908

Settlement Examination: Mary Munnings now of St Margaret's Ipswich, widow-FB93/G2/516-date 5th Aug 1771

Watermills-K681/2/76/140-Postcard c1940s addressee Rev WM Lummis Bungay, addressor FW Munnings-the mill from the mill pool

Mendham Watermill-HD2833/1/SC282/7-Sale particulars of watermill, Mill Race Cottage, Millers House, Mill Lodge, outbuildings, gardens, and grounds, 7.20 acres. Birthplace of Sir

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<sup>32</sup> Supra 3

<sup>33</sup> Supra 3

<sup>34</sup> Supra 3

<sup>35</sup> Foods of England. Suffolk Cheese [Internet]. Available from:  
<http://www.foodsofengland.co.uk/suffolkcheese.htm>

<sup>36</sup> Supra 3

<sup>37</sup> Moor, E. Suffolk Words and Phrases [Internet]. 1823. Woodbridge: Printed by J.Loder, for R.Hunter. Available from:

[https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6BMLAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6BMLAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)



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Alfred Munnings, R.A. Estate agents: Bidwells. With floor and site plans; int. & ext. col. Photos.