

Object(s): Butter making equipment

Object Number(s): STMEA:75.A.78.1, STMEA:76.A.79.9a-b, STMEA:76.A.79.10 and STMEA:76.A.79.11

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Butter making equipment

Most people use a variety of margarine-based spreads to put on bread and toast. In former times, butter was the only option for almost everyone. Today, butter has seen somewhat of a revival as we turn away from margarine and spreads to more traditional accompaniments to our slice of bread.

These objects in our collection reflect a former era when butter was made by hand in small local dairies with any surplus sold to customers in the locality.

Our first object is a 'Butter Churn' (STMEA:75.A.78.1) which was made by R.A. Lister and Company of Dursley in Gloucestershire. Research suggests that R.A. Lister, who were perhaps better known for their small petrol and diesel engines, made a number of these churns between 1890 and 1910 from offcuts of wood from their garden furniture making business¹.

It is a very simple wooden frame in which is placed a small wooden barrel with a spindle through the centre. The barrel can be spun 'end-on-end' by turning the handle at the end of the spindle. The whole mechanism serves to turn the barrel end-on-end, and spinning the contents inside – a process known as "Churning" from which the object derives its name. The result is similar to whipping cream with a whisk or mixer, except that this process requires muscle power rather than electricity.

Formerly used at Mill Farm near Stradbroke, the churn produced sufficient butter (40 – 50 Lbs per week) to supply the farm and local customer's needs. As local demand diminished, the churn continued to be used, supplying the farm needs until 1975, when it was bought for our collection. Since then it has been used at the Museum to demonstrate the butter making process.

¹ R A Lister and Company [Internet]. En.wikipedia.org. 2020 [cited 12 August 2020]. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R_A_Lister_and_Company



Image: Richard Hall. A Butter Churn at Museum of East Anglian Life²

Our next two objects are all 'Butter hands' (STMEA:76.A.79.9a-b and STMEA:76.A.79.10) – a pair and one single hand. Butter hands are called by various names, depending on which part of the country they were being used. You might hear of them being called: "Scotch hands", "Butter beaters", "Butter hands", "Butter workers" or "Butter pats"³. Nevertheless, they all serve the same purpose which is to mould and shape the butter after it has been churned. Our butter hands are all wooden and probably made from Sycamore wood, which is popular for making wooden kitchen utensils because it is very close grained and doesn't easily stain. Our Butter hands are ribbed on one side and flat on the other. The ribbed side was used to help remove any residual buttermilk while the butter was mixed and pressed into shape. The smooth side gave the butter its final shape.

The final object is a butter mould and stamp with an etched impression of a swan on water (STMEA:76.A.7911). This would have been used to produce a decorative finish to the butter. A romantic notion is that it could have been used to distinguish the butter's place of manufacture; perhaps Mill Farm had a pond nearby with resident swans. Alas I have found no evidence of this being the case.

² Hall R. A Butter Churn at Museum of East Anglian Life. 2020

³ Scotch hands [Internet]. En.wikipedia.org. 2020 [cited 12 August 2020]. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scotch_hands

The Butter making process

Butter is usually made from cows' milk, although it is possible to use milk from goats as well. Mary Taylor⁴ produced a very interesting blog piece about making butter on the farm in 2013 in which she tells us that after the cream had been separated from the milk, it was put into a butter churn and turned until "it made a thumping noise". At this point, she knew that the cream had turned to butter.

Mrs Shirley Hall⁵ remembers her grandmother making butter on their farm at Reymerstone in Norfolk:

"My grandfather had a small herd of Red Poll cattle. They were always produced very creamy milk. There were eight cows in all. Grandmother always worked the dairy which I remember was a very cold room, even in summer. It had whitewashed walls and red clay tiles on the floor. Butter was made once a week throughout the year. "

"She used a separator to skim the cream from the top of the milk and churned the cream, with a little salt, in a small barrel which had to be wet to stop the cream sticking. In the summer time, it always took longer to produce and grandmother could be churning for up to an hour before the butter was made."

"There was a residue from the process (*Buttermilk*), which she poured into a bucket. It was used to feed the calves and pigs on the farm."

"The butter was pressed into 1lb lumps using wooden butter hands. In the summer time, she would wrap these in Rhubarb leaves to keep them cool in the heat.... There was plenty of butter, milk and cream. Enough for the farm and the regular customers who came to farm to buy it. Some was also taken to the village shop, with milk and cream each week."

Making butter on the Abbots Hall Estate

In 1903, Abbots Hall was bought by Captain Herbert Davey Longe, J.P. He bred and exhibited Silver laced Wyandotte Chickens. Abbot's Hall Farm also had a small herd of Red Poll cows which produced enough butter, cream and milk for the estate with any surplus sold from the Crowe Street Cottages or on a milk round in Stowmarket and won prizes at the Suffolk Show held in Stowmarket in 1956.

For many years milk from the Red Poll cows was processed by Mrs Emily Wilding in a small dairy behind the cottages Crowe Street cottages, attached to the estate. Emily was a well-known figure in

⁴ Taylor M. Butter making on the farm [Internet]. North Craven Heritage Trust, Journal 2013. 2013 [cited 12 August 2020]. Available from:

<http://www.northcravenheritage.org.uk/NCHTJ2013/2013/Buttermaking/Buttermaking>

⁵ Hall S. Recollections of my Grandmother making butter on the farm. Stowmarket; 2020.

Stowmarket. She lived with her husband Frederick (Fred) who was the farms foreman. She was formerly a cook for the Longe family of Abbots Hall, where she met her future husband.



Image: Emily and Frederick Wilding.⁶

Emily recalls⁷ that she produced milk, cream and butter from a small dairy behind her Crowe Street Cottage. The dairy had walls of Lath and Plaster to keep the room cool but damp free - any mould would contaminate the milk. It had a cement floor with a drain in the middle for waste water. The dairy and equipment had to be kept scrupulously clean Emily washed her milk pans and 'Fleeter' (a skimmer used to take the cream from the top of the milk), first in cold water then hot water and finally dipped them in and out of boiling water to sterilise them. This operation as well as scrubbing out the dairy had to be done every day.

Milk came up from the farm, one milk churn at a time; usually by 7 am. The herd was milked again in the afternoon when another delivery came to the cottage, this would also be 'Fleeted' (skimmed) and fed to any calves on the farm or sold as "12-hour milk", often used in baking. Even though it was only a small herd, there was often enough milk, cream and butter to supply Abbots Hall and customers at homes and shops in the market place, Tavern Street, Station road, Stowupland street and Ipswich street as well as others who came to the cottage door.

Emily's stepson Kenneth, would deliver dairy products in Stowmarket. He had two, two Gallon cans from which the milk would be measured out into jugs at the customer's door. Butter was made each Thursday and sent up to Abbots Hall. Most weeks there was sufficient to make up about 10lbs of butter. Any surplus butter was be sold at 2/- a pound and delivered by Kenneth on his rounds. Milk was sold at 2d a pint.

⁶ Image: Museum of East Anglian Life. Accessed 14/04/2020.

⁷ Wilding E and Wilding K. Recorded Interviews with the Museum of East Anglian Life; 1975.



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Running a dairy and dairy herd was a big commitment and small farms like that at Abbots Hall farm, were gradually being overtaken by modern and larger scale production methods. The dairy herd was eventually given up in 1947 and with it went Emily's small cottage dairy.

Butter or Margarine, which do you prefer?

During the 1970's, people were actively encouraged to buy margarine as a 'healthy' alternative to butter. Research at the time, linked a high intake of saturated fat in butter and other products with an increased risk of coronary heart disease.

Later research suggested too that margarine was less healthy than butter because, being based on vegetable oils, it contained high levels of Trans Fatty Acids, which are linked to other chronic illnesses.

So perhaps the jury is still out and for the time being at least, it seems the choice is yours. I know which I prefer, how about you?