

# Milk Matters

*Discover milk and dairy products in the Fells and Dales area of Cumbria*

**Cumbria is one of the largest 'milk fields' in the country, producing over 800 million litres per year. More than half (60%) of Cumbria's milk supply is sent out of the county. The rest is either manufactured into cheese and milk powder (35%) or processed as liquid milk (5%).**

Today, the main dairy farms are in the lowland areas: Eden Valley, on the Solway Plain, along the west Cumbrian coast and around Kendal. In recent years, faced with relentless price squeezing by the milk buyers, many smaller dairy farms have gone out of business whilst others have increased their herd sizes to remain viable.

Originally, most farms would have kept a small number of 'milch cows' as part of the need for self-sufficiency, with any surplus turned into cream, butter and cheese for local consumption and for sale at markets.

Up to the 19th century the Longhorn was favoured as a multi-purpose animal providing meat, hides and milk. Later, selective breeding produced cows that gave more milk such as the Northern Dairy Shorthorn, which became a common dairy breed up to the 1960s. Gradually, Dairy Shorthorns were displaced by specialist dairy cows, such as the Friesian, Holstein or Ayrshire breeds that were capable of giving higher yields of milk.

## Milk

Cows convert grass and water into milk. But it is only when a cow has calved that she is capable of producing milk. The first milk or 'colostrum' is given

### **Did you know ...**

*In the mid 19th century a dairy cow gave around 4 litres of milk per day. By 1950 this had risen to 10 litres. Today, the average dairy cow yields 20 litres of milk per day!*

to the calf, which is gradually weaned off its mother's milk by being given milk substitutes. The cow is then milked for about 10 months. The highest milk yield is produced during the first weeks after calving (a Friesian can produce 30–40 litres of milk a day). This decreases until the cow 'dries off' about 8 weeks before her next calving. The milk yielding or 'lactation period' is around 300 days during which a cow will produce about 1000 gallons (4,546 litres) on average.

Milking is carried out twice a day – in the early morning and late afternoon. In bygone days, a bucket and stool would be taken to the fields to hand-milk each cow. The stools were usually 3-legged to give stability on uneven ground, and the wooden milking pails were generally wide and squat in appearance. The mass production of metal milk churns in Victorian times allowed regular collections of milk by horse-drawn milk floats and later by milk lorry.

The change from hand milking to a mechanical process began in the mid 19th century and was largely completed by the 1960s. Cows are now driven to the milking parlour where cups are attached to the udders and the milk gently extracted by suction. The milk passes into a refrigerated storage tank where it is kept cool until collection. The process of milking cows can be observed from the viewing gallery at Low Sizergh tea room.

From the storage tank, the milk is transferred directly to tankers which deliver it in bulk to a local creamery, such as the Dairy Crest Creamery at Aspatria. Here the milk is pasteurised and converted into cheese and whey products.

Before closure in the 1990s, the Express Dairy at Appleby collected milk from over 400 surrounding farms in the 1930s and processed 380,000 litres of milk per day, much of which was turned into cheese and whey products. Raw milk was also sent to London on 'milk trains'.

In 1933 the Milk Marketing Board was set up to guarantee collections of milk and to provide regular payments to dairy farmers – 'milk cheques'. The MMB was disbanded in 1996 and superseded by a

number of farmer-controlled businesses such as First Milk, Dairy Farmers of Britain, Wiseman Dairies and Arla – 80% of all the milk produced in Cumbria is currently bought by First Milk and Dairy Farmers of Britain. However, a small number of dairy farmers market their milk directly, such as South Lakes Organic Milk and Low Sizergh Farm.

## Butter

*Eat butter first and eat it last  
and live till a hundred years be past.*

Old Dutch proverb

Butter-making was a regular part of farming life in Cumbria. Before the days of refrigeration, milk would quickly turn sour if not used. The best way of utilising surplus milk was to turn it into butter or cheese for a longer keeping life. Most farmhouses had a dairy or buttery (on the cool northern side of the house) where butter and cheese were made by the women of the household.

Butter (and cheese) was relatively expensive to purchase, so there was an incentive to make enough for the household's consumption and sell the rest.

### Did you know ...

*carrot water or marigold flowers were often added to butter to give it a richer colour!*

Individual farmers would gather at the weekly markets to sell their butter and other produce. For example, the Richardsons of Watendlath took butter and eggs to Keswick market every Saturday in the 1920s. The village of Mardale (flooded in the 1930s to create Haweswater reservoir) sent 3000 lbs of butter a week to Manchester in the 1860s. The 'butter money', derived from the weekly sales, was regarded as an essential source of ready cash.

To make butter, fresh milk was poured into a setting dish and left overnight for the cream to rise above the milk. The cream was then skimmed off and transferred to a churn. Churns could be of various shapes and sizes but all were designed to agitate the cream to separate the fat (butter) from the water (buttermilk), which could be strained off. Churning thickens the cream, which eventually coagulates into golden-yellow curds (reminiscent of scrambled egg) and a residue of watery whey (buttermilk). The butter was removed from the churn, washed thoroughly to remove any traces of buttermilk and then patted using butter beaters or 'Scotch hands'. This removed any excess moisture and 'worked' the butter into rectangular blocks or rounds. Finally, a distinctive stamp would have been pressed onto the block before the butter was stored in a cool place. Some of these old butter stamps were intricately carved, using designs that were specific to each farm.

## Did you know ...

*the Irish buried their butter in peat bogs to 'ripen' and improve its flavour.  
Some butter barrels were left in the bogs for years!*

Dairying was regarded as an important and essential occupation for rural women to master, but much of the butter and cheese output was of variable quality and consistency. To improve dairying standards, a dairy school was established at Newton Rigg in the late 19th century. Newton Rigg also operated a migratory dairy school, equipped with all the necessary equipment, which toured the more remote areas of Cumbria to instruct women in the art of butter and cheese making.

Today, Sue Forrester is Cumbria's sole producer of traditional butter, sold under the label 'Cream of Cumbria'. Sue began making butter in 2000 to use up milk produced over the quota allowed. Although the churn is mechanically operated, Sue still uses old-fashioned butter

beaters to shape the butter into a block and then adds a distinctive mark, passed down from her grandmother. Sue's freshly made butter is available at farmers' markets and specialist food shops.  
[www.creamofcumbria.co.uk](http://www.creamofcumbria.co.uk).

## Cumberland Rum Butter

Rum butter is made of sugar, butter, rum and nutmeg. It was traditionally eaten at a christening – butter signifying the richness of life, sugar the sweetness of life, rum the spirit of life and nutmeg the spice of life!

### Recipe

*Take 2 oz of unsalted butter. Gently soften the butter, add 4 oz of soft brown sugar and beat to a cream. Add rum and spices (nutmeg and cinnamon) to taste. Keep chilled until required.*

## Cheese

*'Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet,  
eating her curds and whey ...'*

The flavour of cheese depends on the quality of milk from which it is made, which in turn depends on the pasture grazed, its location and the season – hence the huge array of different flavoured cheeses in the country. However, in Cumbria, cheese-making was never as widespread as butter making. Cheese-making, as for butter-making, was undertaken by the women of the household. It was usually carried out in the spring when cows were grazing on new grass – known as 'grass cheese' or 'pasture cheese'. Later in the year, a small amount of 'fog cheese' or 'hay cheese' might be made.

One gallon of milk makes around 1 lb of farmhouse cheese. The milk is heated to around 24°C and a bacterial culture added to sour the milk. Rennet is stirred in to help the milk coagulate and produce

a firm junket. The junket is broken up and gently heated to release the 'whey' from the 'curds'. Once the whey is drained off, the curds fuse into a solid mass. This is cut into slabs and stacked, then cut again and re-stacked – a process called 'cheddaring' that allows more whey to be extracted. The blocks of curds are then 'milled' into small pieces and salt added (salt inhibits the growth of potentially harmful bacteria, stabilises the curd and enhances the flavour). The milled curds are packed into moulds and pressed for between 8 and 48 hours. This expels more whey and allows the curds to knit together. The young cheese is then knocked out of its mould, washed in warm water and 'dressed' (wrapped in muslin or calico) before going to the cheese store to mature. The cheeses are turned each day to ensure an even distribution of moisture. Over time, a thin hard rind forms on the outside and the flavour develops through the continuing action of micro-organisms and enzymes. Generally, the longer a cheese is allowed to mature, the stronger the flavour.

## Did you know ...

*The name 'Keswick' means 'cheese farm'!*

Local cheese-making began to diminish in the wake of motorised transport, as it became easier to sell the milk directly to large creameries rather than process it on the farm. The creameries collected milk from a number of dairy farms and started producing uniformly flavoured cheeses and butter all year round.

The number of farm-made cheeses, dependent on local skills and expertise, declined rapidly. Today, there are only five producers of farmhouse cheeses in the county.

## Did you know ...

*A hard cheese from West Cumberland was known as Whillimoor Wang!*

**Thornby Moor Dairy** at Crofton Hall (Thursby, Carlisle) is run by Carolyn and Leonie Fairbairn. Carolyn began making cheeses in 1979, using milk from goats, sheep and cows. Their milk is sourced from single herds 'to capture the essence of Cumbria in the flavours

of our cheeses'. Around 9 different cheeses are produced ranging from soft goat's cheeses to mature hard cheeses. Tours by prior appointment. **Tel: 016973 45555.**

**The Cumberland Dairy** at Long Marton near Appleby was formed in 2004 by a group of dairy farmers. Their milk is turned into a range of award-winning cheeses –Blengdale Blue, Keldthwaite Gold, Cobble Tasty and Roegill Red. The cheeses can be found in farm shops, delicatessens and food fairs throughout the region. **Tel: 017683 61946. [www.thecumberlanddairy.co.uk](http://www.thecumberlanddairy.co.uk)**

Other Cumbrian cheese makers include **Eric Horn** of Slack House Farm who make Birdoswald Organic Farmhouse Cheese ([www.slackhousefarm.co.uk](http://www.slackhousefarm.co.uk)), **Low Sizergh Barn** (near Kendal) who produce Kendal Creamy and Kendal Crumbly organic cheeses from their own milk ([www.lowsizerghbarn.co.uk](http://www.lowsizerghbarn.co.uk)) and **Wasdale Cheese** who make 4 varieties of handmade cheeses using local unpasteurised sheep and cow's milk. (tel: 019467 26044 or [www.wasdaleweb.co.uk](http://www.wasdaleweb.co.uk)).

## Ice Cream

As butter and cheese-making have gone into decline, so ice cream making is on the rise. The number of farms making and selling sell ice cream using milk from their own dairy herds is expanding:

### **Buttermere Ayrshires Ice Cream**

**Tel: 017687 70277**

### **Holme Farm Ice Cream**

**Tel: 015395 32991**

### **Abbott Lodge Ice Cream**

**Tel: 01931 712720 [www.abbottlodgejerseyicecream.co.uk](http://www.abbottlodgejerseyicecream.co.uk)**

### **Wellington Jersey Ice Cream**

**Tel: 01900 822777 [www.wellingtonjerseys.co.uk](http://www.wellingtonjerseys.co.uk)**

### **Natland Mill Beck Farm Ice Cream**

**01539 729333**

**Cumbrian Cottage Ice Cream**

**Tel: 01228 670518**

**Orton Grange Ice Cream**

**Tel: 01228 711410**

**Windermere Ice Cream**

**Tel: 01539 447876 [www.windermereicecream.co.uk](http://www.windermereicecream.co.uk)**

**English Lakes Ice Cream**

**Tel: 01539 721211 [www.lakesicecream.com](http://www.lakesicecream.com)**

**Luchini's Ice Cream**

**Tel: 017687 73668**

**Brysons**

**Tel: 017687 72257 [www.brysonsofkeswick.co.uk](http://www.brysonsofkeswick.co.uk)**

**Twentyman's Ice Cream**

**Tel: 01900 881247**

**Dipper Foods Ltd**

**(incorporating Slee's of Winskill & Taste of Eden) Tel: 01768 881221**

**[www.dipperfoods.co.uk](http://www.dipperfoods.co.uk)**

## Further Information

Information on the dairying industry in Cumbria can be found in 'Home Grown in Cumbria' by Annette Gibbons, 2005. Other sources of information are below:

**The Dairy Council**

**[www.milk.co.uk](http://www.milk.co.uk)**

**The Butter Board**

**[www.naturalandtasty.co.uk](http://www.naturalandtasty.co.uk)**

**British Cheese Board**

**[www.britishcheese.com](http://www.britishcheese.com)**

**Museum of Lakeland Life, Kendal**

**Tel: 01539 722464 [www.lakelandmuseum.org.uk](http://www.lakelandmuseum.org.uk)**

**Dent Village Heritage Centre, Dent**

**Tel: 01539 625800 [www.dentvillageheritagecentre.co.uk](http://www.dentvillageheritagecentre.co.uk)**

## Getting around

For details on public transport, please contact  
Traveline on 0870 608 2608.

Email: [info@traveline-cumbria.co.uk](mailto:info@traveline-cumbria.co.uk).

Website: [www.traveline.org.uk](http://www.traveline.org.uk).



**LEADER+ (Cumbria Fells & Dales)**

**The Old Stables, Redhills, Penrith, Cumbria CA11 0DT.**

**Tel: 01768 869533**

**Email: [info@fellsanddales.org.uk](mailto:info@fellsanddales.org.uk).**

**Website: [www.fellsanddales.org.uk](http://www.fellsanddales.org.uk).**

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