

# Axminster and the London Butter Trade, 1780 to 1840

## Introduction

This document draws heavily on Charles Vancouver's highly informative 1808 report entitled 'General View of the Agriculture of the County of Devon; with observations on the means of its improvement', which formed part of a much larger series of reports produced for, and published by, the Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement. This book can be found on-line via the archive.org website, or in an edition published in 1967 by David & Charles Reprints of Newton Abbot. A copy of the 1967 re-print is held in Axminster library.

What Vancouver provides is an educated overview, not just of farming in Devon just after the turn of the century, at a time when foreign trade was being severely disrupted by the Napoleonic wars, but also of the social and economic conditions which were influencing the investment and farm management decisions of landlords and tenants alike. This was a time when very few small-to-medium owner-occupier farmers were to be found, certainly in East Devon.

His report provides a significant amount of detail about grassland management and the economics of dairying in East Devon, and what he writes is very much in tune with what other contemporary writers reported.

After commenting on the high quality of the grazing he identifies dairying as the main farming activity. Most of the butter (which was the main product of the dairies) was sent to London. It was made from fresh cream, and not from clotted or scalded cream, which had by then been "*... entirely abandoned in all the large dairies, as well as in most others that supply the larger markets in the country*".

The local dairies of the time almost all milked North Devon cows, which nowadays would be considered an exclusively beef breed. The explanation appears to lie in the "*... great demand and high price given for the calves of this breed for raising ...*".

After leaving milk to stand for 48 hours in cooled vessels the butter making process began. "*In summer, it is churned every day, and cheese is made of the skimmed milk. In the autumn, this [is done] ... every other day; and in winter, sometimes, but not always, twice a week*". Butter made in this way was considered to taste fresh, with good keeping qualities, particularly when compared with butter made from clotted cream, which was often found to taste smoky. The butter was then salted in small barrels (firkins) weighing 48lbs. The London butter merchants would do their best to wash any excess salt out of the butter after it arrived in London, so that they could sell it at a higher price.

With the exception of a type known as 'Membury', the local cheese, which was made as a by-product of butter-making, was considered to be "*... of an inferior quality, and generally destined for domestic use*". Membury cheese was made from full milk, and mostly came from Membury and the Yarcombe valley.

Vancouver reports that although some dairies were managed by the farmer and his family, most were rented out to specialist cow keepers or dairy men. He notes that the cost of renting a dairy varied between 9 guineas (a guinea being worth £1 1s) and £10 per cow, with the farmer providing about 2½ acres of pasture and meadow ground to supply "*... the*

summer food and winter foddering of each cow, during the 42 weeks she is supposed to be in milk. The remainder of the time the cows are fed with straw in the farm-yards, and in day-time range at large over the coarse grounds and commons”.

A cow with her second or third calf at heel was reported to be worth about 13 guineas. When her milking life was finished, she would be fattened for sale, providing further justification for the popularity of Devon cows in dairies, despite the availability of more specialised dairy breeds, such as the Shorthorn.

Vancouver sets down in some detail the typical costs and returns of a 20-cow dairy, which was a typical size of enterprise. It was usual to keep a bull on a dairy of this size, at the same cost and rent as a cow.

As can be seen from the budget below, for every cow that they kept, dairymen generally bought one pig at the beginning of each season at £1 each, which they fed on waste milk and whey, and sold at the end of the season, when fat.

<b>Typical budget for a dairy of 20 cows and one bull</b>			
	£	s	d
<i>Annual income:</i>			
Sale value of butter (1lb per cow per day for the first 20 weeks, plus ½lb per cow per day for about 20 weeks, making 206lb per cow or 4,120lb in total at 1s per lb)	206	0	0
Sale value of cheese (1¼ cwt per cow, making 25 cwt at 25s per cwt)	31	5	0
Sale value of 20 calves (i.e. one calf per cow per season) at 28s each	28	0	0
Profit from feeding whey etc to 20 pigs at 25s each	25	0	0
<b>Total cash income</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
<i>Annual costs:</i>			
Rent for 52½ acres of pasture and meadow land (38s per acre)	99	10	0
Parochial payments (10% of net rent)	9	9	0
Tithes (2/6d per acre)	6	11	3
Wages, board and lodging of a dairy maid for a year	16	0	0
Wages of a man for foddering, cleaning cow sheds etc (20 weeks at 8s)	9	0	0
Cost of hay making (17½ acres at 8s per acre)	7	0	0
Cost of fuel for use in the dairy (8s per cow)	8	0	0
Annual wear and tear of dairy utensils	4	0	0
Annual depreciation (see below) in the value of the dairy (10s per cow or bull)	10	10	0
Cost of capital (£350) at 5%	17	10	0
Allowance for contingencies (5% on gross value of produce)	14	10	0
<b>Total costs</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Net profit to the cow keeper and his family</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>

The depreciation charge was there to provide a fund with which to replace cows as they come to the end of their useful life. In a herd of 20 cows, 3 or 4 cows might need to be replaced each year.

Vancouver also comments that “... *one dairy-maid would not be able to perform more than half the work required for a dairy of 20 cows. The remainder is therefore supposed to be supplied by parish apprentices, and the farmer's wife and daughters, all of whom are seldom without the necessary qualifications for such employments; being, with very few exceptions, careful, neat, tidy and industrious.*”

Further corroboration of the general picture of dairying and butter making which is painted by Vancouver can be obtained from other sources, which confirm that most butter was covered by fixed price agreements almost all the way from udder to table – between farmers and dairymen, dairymen and local merchants, and local merchants and London cheesemongers. One visitor to Axminster in the 1780s was reported as being unable to obtain any butter, because all the larger dairies were under contract to London dealers.

During this pre-railway period all freight went by road or sea, and butter from East Devon and West Dorset was one of the main cargoes that the road hauliers carried. The normal charge for transporting 1 cwt of butter to London by fast road transport (5-6 days) was 9s from Exeter, or 8s from anywhere between Honiton and Dorchester (i.e. just under 1d per lb). Most other goods paid a higher unit carriage charge, reflecting the importance of butter to the overall economics of road haulage, and its relatively high density, and the robustness of the wooden firkins when packed alongside other items.

Several sources use Cambridgeshire butter as the benchmark for price-setting in London. Cambridgeshire butter was salted enough to keep for ten days or a fortnight, and in 1795 was sold in London for 3d per lb less than the very limited volumes of fresh butter, and 2d more than heavily salted Irish butter. Butter from Dorset (and East Devon) ranked just below Cambridgeshire butter in desirability and price terms, because it was more heavily salted than butter from Cambridgeshire, but much less so than that from Ireland.

Although comparable coastal shipping records have not been found, it is thought likely that much of the butter from the Exeter area was more heavily salted than Axminster butter, and sent to London by sea, while the closer to London (and the further from the coast) a farm was, the more likely its butter was to be carried by road.

James Davidson, the chronicler of all things pertaining to Axminster, included in his papers as stored in the Devon Heritage Centre a list of ‘Occupiers of land that are titheable to the vicar, 1828. Number of cows kept’. This is followed in his notebook by an equivalent list of cows kept on farms which were exempt from tithes.

What is not stated is precisely how the information on the numbers of animals being kept was collected. However the large number of farmers with 20 cows, and the absence of any with 17 to 19 or 21 to 25, is consistent with Vancouver’s findings as reported above.

The total number of cows in Axminster parish as recorded by Davidson came to 919 (776 on titheable land, and 143 on exempt land), with most of them being kept by farmers with 10 or more cows. These larger herds accounted for 77% of those on titheable land, and 85% of those on exempt land.

Some of these cows were kept on remote farms (e.g. Shapwick), but there is no realistic way of reliably separating these out from the main body of data, because the farms are only named in a minority of cases.

In descending order of scale, the numbers are as follows. Farms marked with an asterisk (\*) were exempt from tithes.

<b>No of cows</b>	<b>Proprietors</b>	<b>Sub-total</b>
40	George Davey Ewens, John White.	80
32	Henry Fowler.	32
26	John Seaward.	26
25	Lawrence Mellar.	25
20	Thomas Barns, John Bradfield, James Gill (Slymlakes*), John Harvey (Woodhouse), Francis Harvey, James Hoare, Robert Mullins, William Mullins (Lodge*), George Phippen, Mr Row (Balls*), Samuel Swain, James White (Millbrook / Sector*), William Whitemoor.	260
16	Thomas Baslyan, James Denning, Thomas Gould (Yetlands), John Welch.	64
15	James Chick, William Newbery (probably Symondsdown), James Swain (Abbey).	45
14	James French, Benjamin Hodder, James Pavy, James Rendall, George Slyfield.	70
12	Henry Bussell, Jack Hill, Mr Wakley (Weycroft*).	36
10	Bernard Cox, Richard Denning (Furzley), Richard Denning (Tolshays), Richard Denning (Park), William Henley (Horslears*), William Norman (Raymonds Hill*), Samuel Stoodley, John White (Shapwick*).	80
< 10	Other small herds on titheable land.	180
< 10	Other small herds on exempt land.	21
<b>Total</b>		<b>919</b>

It is not possible to say whether there were three separate cow keepers called Richard Denning, each with 10 cows; or one with 30 cows spread over three farms, though the latter seems more likely. The same general point applies to James and John White.

By way of context, there are about 40 named cow keepers in the table above (the precise number depending on the answer to the question posed in the previous paragraph), while the 1831 census counted 99 farmers in Axminster parish in total, of whom 67 employed non-family labour and 32 did not. By the time allowance has been made for all of the smaller cow keepers, it is clear that most Axminster farms had a dairy in the late 1820s.