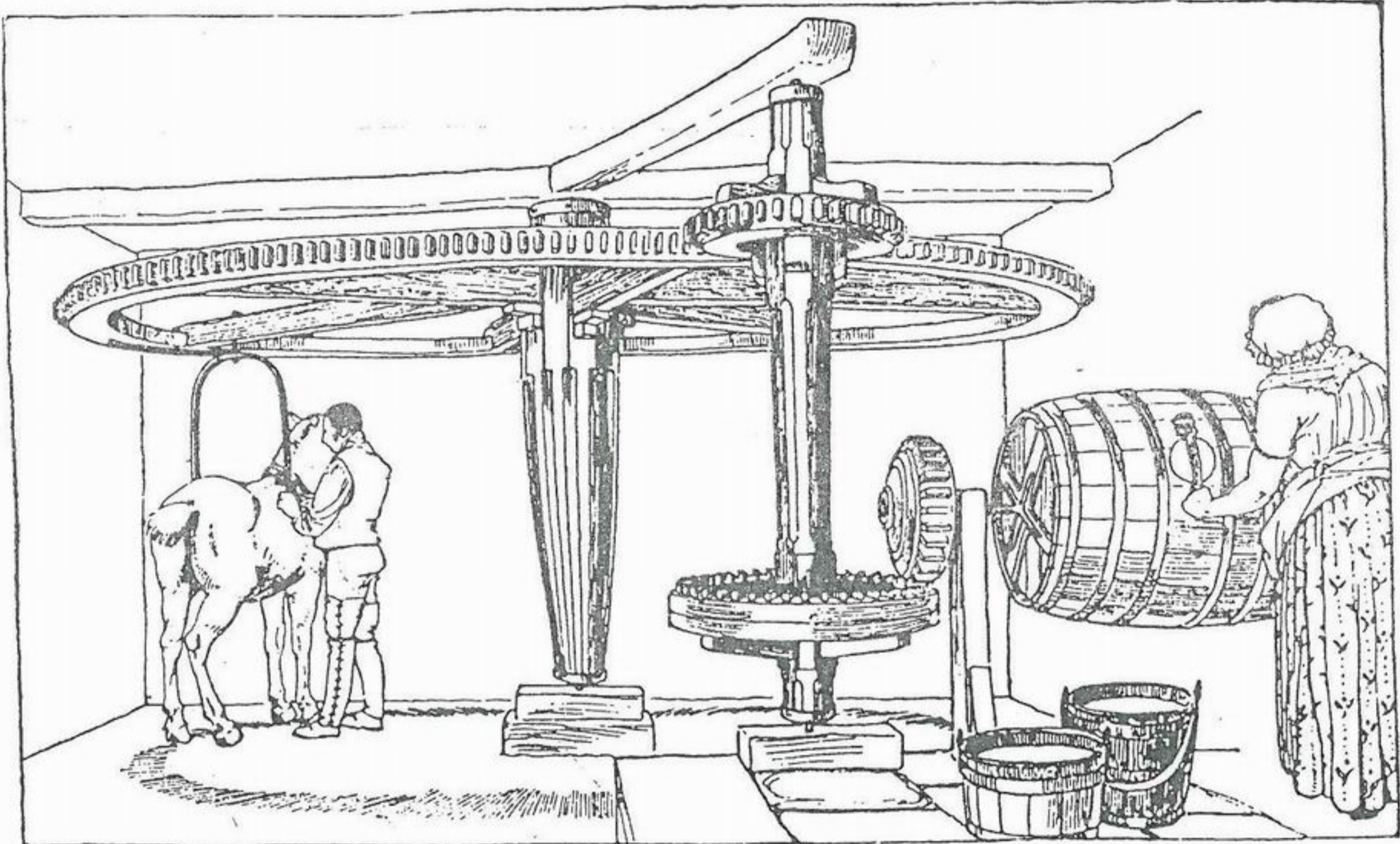


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First

## FARMERS CREAMERY

in the British Isles at Hospital in 1884

By Michael O'Sullivan



Due to the suitability of the land, dairying has played a major role in the economy of the district for centuries. Herds of thirty and forty cows were not unknown in the area in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although the average herd was much smaller than this, increasing numbers of dairy cows were kept in the 19th century with the object of producing butter for export.

The method of buttermaking changed very little from earliest times to the end of the 19th century. It involved setting the milk in tin pans with splayed sides measuring about 2' 6" in diameter and about 4" in depth immediately after milking. The quick cooling essential for cream raising was achieved by resting the pans on cold flags and keeping air in the dairy cool. The cream was skimmed

off after 24 hours standing by tilting the pan and pushing the cream over the lip into the cream tub or crock with the fingers or a wooden skimmer.

In warm weather the milk underneath the cream layer was usually thick at the end of 24 hours and the cream had then to be removed by ladling it off with a saucer or wooden skimmer. The thick skim milk was known as bonnycllobber (*bainne clabar*) and was used for human consumption.

On smaller dairy farms the cream was churned in a dash churn, as dairying became more commercialised revolving barrels and box churns with axles bracketed to the ends and with axle bearings carried on the supporting frames, and provided with turning

handles, were introduced. In the 19th century larger farmers had the churns geared so that they could be turned by horse power.

Whatever type of churn was used, the butter was churned into a lump. The lump of butter was raised out of the buttermilk on to a shallow oak tub or a large sycamore dish. It was kneaded with the hands, in the same manner as dough is worked in breadmaking in order to press the buttermilk out of it and salt was added in portions during the kneading process.

When the working was finished the butter was made up in one or more lumps and floated in a vessel of cold spring water, or in a spring well if such was convenient. It was left until it

became firm and was either brought to the market in lump form or packed in a firkin (a firkin weighed from 56-70 lbs).

Needless to say the butter maker of those days had little knowledge of hygiene. The importance of avoiding bacterial contamination was not known until the late seventies of the last century. It is not surprising that a firkin of Irish butter arriving on the British market would frequently contain layers of butter of varying ages, flavours, colours and textures not to mention aromas. The importance of butter exports to the economy can be gauged from the following figures. In 1835, 72,360 firkins of butter were exported through Limerick port. In the 1880s Tipperary town was the second most important butter market in the U.K. after Cork, and was the main market for the locality, up to 160,000 firkins of butter were exported through the Tipperary market annually.

The introduction of more scientific methods of production, better machinery allowing factory style operation, and the development of co-operatives led to the manufacture of a good quality consistent butter on the continent in the latter half of the 19th century. Ireland failed to adopt developments taking place in Europe and it's not surprising to find that the Danes, Swedes and French had practically beaten us out of the British market by the 1880s. Being a dairying district the farmers around Hospital were very adversely affected by the deterioration of the butter market. In January 1884 the local curate Father M. Power C.C. and some farmers asked Canon Baggot, a Church of Ireland minister who had taken a keen interest in farming, and particularly dairying, to address a meeting at Hospital on 22nd January. Canon Baggot's theme was a quotation taken from a current periodical "Irish butter of every class nearly unsaleable". He pointed out that not only was Irish butter being graded lower than foreign butters on the British market but that some Irish butter was being graded lower than Butterine (an American margarine type product), and that in winter time foreign butter was making a higher price than Irish on the Dublin market.

Canon Baggot said that what the customer wanted at all seasons was an article uniform in package, colour and salt, and reaching the London market within 24 hours of manufacture. He stated that unless the Irish worked through the factory system they could never compete with foreign butter production. He proposed building a butter factory at Hospital. His view was that the farmers in the district should form a limited liability company and keep management in their own hands. The Canon also exhibited a model of De Laval's new separator to the meeting.

A further meeting was held at the courthouse on the 11th February 1884 to make further arrangements for the establishment of a butter factory. A very large crowd attended. Amongst those present were the Rev. William Gubbins, George Harris, Dr. J.-M. Gubbins, Rev. M. Power C.C. Chairman, John Finucane, Richard Harris, Thomas Keyes, John Moloney, William Barry, Michael Riordan, Edmond Byrne, Edmond Mitchell, E. Connolly, John McCormack, William Slattery Hon. Secretary.

Canon Baggot pointed out the benefits that would accrue from the establishment of the factory and stated "that the shareholder did not want to make any great profit in the beginning. What they wanted to do and what he was sure they were capable of doing was to get a better price for their produce and to secure for Irish butter a better name than it had at present". Canon Baggot continued that comparatively little money was required to commence, £600 would suffice, 200 - £5 shares with £3 being paid up. These shares were quickly taken up and in addition the shopkeepers contributed £125. In reality the cost actually worked out at £1,200. A site was acquired and a new building erected almost immediately, using Irish materials where possible, and a well was sunk.

The factory was opened on the 17th April 1884. It was the first farmer built factory in the United Kingdom and was named the Munster Dairy Company, its liability was limited. The directors were - Edmond Byrnes, Knockainey; George

Harris, Adamstown, Elton; John Moloney, Bridge House, Knocklong and Rev. M. Power, Castlefarm. An interesting aspect of the venture was a concerted effort to involve both the Catholic and Protestant farming communities, and this was commented on by the director John Moloney at the opening.

Farmers had the option of delivering either milk or cream to the factory. Deliveries had to be made at 7 a.m. The aim was to have the butter made in the morning and on the train to Dublin and British markets by evening.

Each farmer's cream was churned separately, the butter was weighed and classified and only then became general property. The farmer was paid weekly for the butter made from his milk or cream. A farmer had the option of buying back his skim milk.

Originally the factory had two separators and seven churns, driven by a 10 h.p. Ruby's engine. By June the factory was churning the cream from seventy farmers and were turning out approximately 1,400lbs of butter per day. 1,200lbs was paid for at the rate of 11.5d per lb. and 200lbs @ 10.5d per lb more than any small farmer in Munster was getting on the open market.

Two additional churns were added in June and a second buttermaker employed to cope with anticipated increase in production. Butter was packed in tubs and 1lb packages as well as the traditional ferkins. The proposed use of packages initially caused concern amongst the local coopers. In March at a meeting in Hospital the Munster Cooper Protective Association was formed. The following officers were elected: Martin Meehan, Knockainey, President; Pat Purcell, Bruff, Treasurer and Philip Lavery, Herbertstown, Secretary. A delegation was appointed to meet the directors of the butter factory, the directors succeeded in allaying their fears and at a later meeting the coopers expressed satisfaction with the amount being received from the factory.

Such was the interest in the factory at Hospital that the Great Southern and Western Railways offered special rates to

Knocklong Station for groups visiting the factory. Tuesdays and Thursdays were set aside by the factory as visiting days. Canon Baggot at this time addressed meetings at Clonmel, Ballylanders, Newcastle West and Toomevara. He founded creameries at Galbally in 1885 and at Golden in 1886.

Unfortunately, the creamery was forced to close for the winter season in December 1884, due to the cows of the district having been dried off, and creating a situation which Canon Baggot had from the beginning hoped to avoid i.e. inconsistent supply. He had from the first meeting at Hospital proposed winter milk production, but obviously to no avail.

A group of Kilmallock farmers who were interested in building a butter factory visited Hospital in January 1885 and interviewed some farmers who had supplied the creamery the previous year. They all expressed satisfaction with their returns from the creamery with the exception of a Mr. O'Donnell, Oldtown.

A small number of farmers discontinued supply in 1885, only to discover they had lost out by doing so.

In July 1885 the Munster Bank which had a branch at Hospital collapsed. A riot ensued when depositors were refused withdrawals at Hospital. (Sin scéal eile). In August a meeting was held in the courthouse to call on the directors of the new bank - The Munster and Leinster Bank, which succeeded the Munster Bank, to have a branch and not a sub-office in Hospital. One of the reasons for this was that "it was of the utmost importance that they should have a permanent bank in Hospital for the accommodation of farmers dealing with the butter factory". The petition was successful.

At the third annual general meeting held at the end of March 1886, the following directors attended: Chairman Rev. Michael Power C.C.; John Moloney; E. Mitchell; G.P. Harris, and amongst the shareholders who attended were Rev. Mr. Gubbins; Messrs. J. S. Bennett J.P.;

William Barry; Daniel Ryan; John Nixon; Timothy O'Dea; James Riordan; Thomas Burke; James Curran; William Slattery and James Carroll.

The factory received two serious blows at this meeting, on a turnover of £9,567-10s-10d a loss of £323-13s-1d was shown and Rev. Power C.C. tendered his resignation as he was being moved from the parish.

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24th Feb 1884, 12th Feb, 22nd March, 29th March, 19th April, 29th April, 8th May, 17th May, 24th May, 15th Jan 1885, 31st Jan, 16th July 1885, 1st Sept 1885, 25th Feb 1886, 20th March 1886.

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