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Yorkshire Cheese-making

Kate Mason

Throughout the world, people in most pastoral countries make cheese in one form or another. Milk, a highly perishable food, is converted into a nutritious, easily stored and readily transportable commodity. Each region has its own type of cheese, due to variations in the type of soil and vegetation, and to the modifications in the processes involved in the conversion of liquid milk to cheese.

In the North of England, there are two varieties still made, Lancashire and Wensleydale. Until 1939, great quantities were made in farmhouses, but the rigid food control of the war years put an end to domestic cheese-making. By the end of the war, conditions in farming were quite different from pre-war days, and in 1946, there were only twelve farmhouse cheese-makers for Wensleydale on the Milk Marketing Board list. By 1954, these had been reduced to four.

The history of cheese-making undoubtedly goes back to Roman times, and it is possible that the Romans brought the technique to Britain. A utensil found at the Roman fort above Bainbridge in Wensleydale is almost certainly a curd strainer. The Anglian and Danish settlements in Yorkshire, and the names associated with them, such as Skipton (sheep), Keswick (cheese), 'erghs', 'booths' and 'seats' (summer sheilings) show the importance of sheep, cattle and dairy produce in the economy of the county.

The first written evidence relating to cheese in Yorkshire is found in the accounts of the Abbeys. The Bolton Abbey accounts of 1290-1325, for example, have records of letting 'Adam de Elshow takes the letter of How with 17 cows and is bound to answer for each cow with 4 stones of cheese and 2 stones of butter 6d.'¹

The cheese was consumed at the Abbeys, and it is recorded 'There were this year 1310 consumed at Bolton in Craven 147 stones of cheese made from ewes' milk'.²

It is likely that over the whole of the inhabited parts of the North of England, cheese was made for subsistence and for rent, and undoubtedly the great Cistercian houses influenced their tenants. The monks of Jervaulx are traditionally supposed to have introduced the recipe for Wensleydale cheese to the dale and to have given it to the landlord of the Cover Bridge Inn at the dissolution.³

1. Thoresby Society (1924), XXX, p. 129.

2. BOGG, EDMUND, *Higher Wharfedale* (1904), p. 183.

3. PONTEFRAC T AND HARTLEY, *Wensleydale* (1936), p. 229.

It is possible that the Cistercian abbeys, particularly Jervaulx in Wensleydale and Rievaulx in Cleveland, introduced their own method of cheese-making. It is hard to see that they did more than encourage the growth of dairying, because the making of a Wensleydale type cheese spread from Dentdale in the west, over Swaledale and Teesdale, and across the Cleveland hills, practically to the sea near Whitby in the east.

Ewe's Milk Cheese

The earlier cheeses were made of ewe's milk and at a later unknown date, the change-over to cow's milk took place.⁴ Tusser in Suffolk in 1557 advised the milking of ewes after weaning the lambs at Philip and Jacob (15 May) and also said that a skilful housewife could make cheese of mixed or unmixed milk at her pleasure and will.

The making of ewe's milk cheese lingered on in the Cheviots until the last century. William Bingley in 1816 wrote 'From the milk of the Cheviot sheep great quantities of cheese are made, which is sold at a very low price. This, when three or four years old, becomes very pungent and is in considerable esteem for the table'.

Cheese from ewe's milk continued to be made in Farndale in Cleveland until early this century. After the lambs are speyned (weaned) ewes have to be relieved of their milk; this milk was made into cheese to be eaten at harvest, on at least two farms; Stilton House, Helmsley, and Low Hagg Farm, Fadmoor.⁵

Skim Milk Cheese

In medieval times, it was the practice to remove cream for butter-making from the milk, the value of butter in the days when only animal fats were available was invaluable. The resulting skim milk cheese was of a harsher, drier texture than whole-milk cheese. In later centuries, it became customary in some districts to make a whole-milk cheese, and in other to make butter for sale and skim milk cheese for home or local use, depending on their relative profitability. There seems to have been an area centred on Wensleydale and Cleveland, where whole milk cheese was made, and this area was surrounded by districts which made butter for sale - southward to Craven there was the skim milk cheese known as *Whangby*.⁶ The area extended westwards towards the Lakes, where Whillymoor cheese called 'lank and lean, but cheap and clean' was made. Alexander Craig Gibson tells us that at Keswick cheese fair, the vendors were wont to cry their ware as 'Whillymoor cheese - clear baith of dirt and butter'.⁷

4. K. Calvert believes it to have taken place by the mid-seventeenth century. (*The Story of Wensleydale Cheese* (1946), p. 5.)

5. B. Frank, Hutton-le-Hole letter to writer. I am indebted to him for much information on Cleveland.

6. 'Whang', a thong, 'whangby', tough, leathery.

7. McINTIRE, *Lakeland and the Border long ago* (1949), p. 223.

Marshall, who was born in Pickering, in his volume on the *Rural Economy of Yorkshire*,⁸ described the agriculture of the Vale of Pickering. He gave an excellent account of the economy of a butter and skim cheese farm. He wrote: 'Whole production of the Vale under survey,

- (i) Calves for the butcher for rearing.
- (ii) Butter for home consumption and the London market.
- (iii) Skim cheese for home consumption.
- (iv) Hog liquor.'

He continued: 'Cheese, skim cheese, provincially old milk cheese is the natural accompaniment of a butter dairy. In the lower parts of the Vale, towards the banks of the Rye, some new milk cheeses are made of a quality nearly equal to the Gloucestershire, but on the marginal parts of the vale, this species of cheese is seldom attempted. There is nothing striking but the curd mill; a utensil of the dairy which I have not met with elsewhere and which is new to this district.

'In making skim cheese the curd is broken up in the whey, when the curd has subsided laded off, the remainder with the curd is thrown into a coarse strainer; and having lain abroad in this (spread over a large tray with a hole in the corner to let out the whey which drains through the cloth) until quite cool, the corners and loose parts of the strainer are gathered together in the hand and the curd is squeezed as hard as the hands can press it. The curd in the strainer is then put into a vat and set in the press for a few minutes to discharge the remaining whey more effectually. The whey having done running, the curd is taken out of the press, re-broken as finely as possible, salted and returned to the press.

'It is in the final breaking the curd mill is used, the labour of doing it by hand when a large quantity of curd is to be broken is almost intolerable. In a large dairy the curd mill is found invaluable.*

**The utensil consists of two rollers working on a thin deep cleft, one above the other, on the principle of the common cider mill of the southern Counties. The upper one is stuck with iron spikes, an inch long and one and a half inches asunder. The lower one is closely set with bevel headed nails, rising with a sharp angle or point about one tenth inch out of the surface of the other. The curd partially broken up is put into a hopper, the bottom of which is the upper roller, this working against the side of the box, prepares the curd for the bottom roller; which being finer, and working closer, grinds it down to small granules. The rollers are about 6 inches diameter and 15 inches long. They are both of them turned by one crank put on one end of the axle of the upper roller. On the opposite ends of the rollers are fixed two even toothed, wooden wheels working in each other and giving motion to the lower roller.

8. MARSHALL, W., *Rural Economy of Yorkshire* (1796), part 2, p. 201.

'The consumption of skim cheese is principally in the neighbourhood of its manufacture. It is eaten by almost all ranks of people. If well made, it is not only palatable, but, I apprehend, a very wholesome food. To have it in perfection, it should be "kept one year under another"; that is should not be eaten under a year old. The price on a par of the last ten years has been 2s to 2/6 a stone (14-lb).'

Cheese-making Districts

Until the early seventeen hundreds, cheese-making was almost universal. Wordsworth⁹ describes the appearance of the Lakeland cottages in the seventeen fifties 'an orchard of proportional size; a cheese press often supported by some tree near the door - two or three cows furnished each family with milk and cheese'.

Whittaker,¹⁰ referring to his childhood at Linton-in-Craven, near Skipton, said 'Almost everything was in common, cheeses were universally made at home; but as few kept a sufficient number of cows for this purpose, village partnerships were formed and the milk of several farms thrown together in succession (in 1740 every housekeeper in the township kept a cow)'.¹¹

The districts in which butter was the chief saleable dairy product circumscribed a large area of the Pennines and north Yorkshire moors where cheese was the chief product. Dentdale, Garsdale, Ravenstonedale (in Westmorland), Baldersdale, Cotherstone Colsterdale, Swaledale, Nidderdale, Coverdale and Cleveland were all major cheese producing areas as well as Wensleydale. The south-west boundary seems to have been the River Ribble, the north-west boundary was not so well defined. The cheese-making area did not go as far north as the Tyne - Celia Fiennes¹² remarked disdainfully of cheese near Newcastle 'They have a very indifferent sort of cheese, little things, looks black on the outside, soft sower things'.

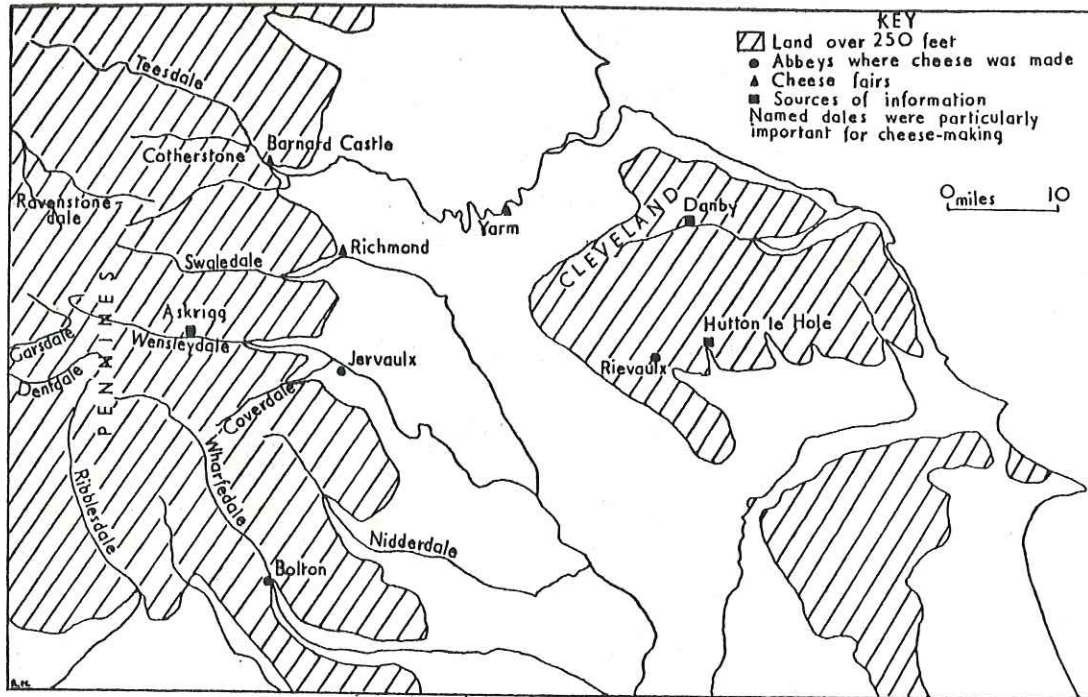
These dales are all limestone areas - carboniferous limestone in the Pennines and Oolitic limestone in Cleveland, or their soils are on the whole base rich. Although the cheese was basically the same, there were small differences from one dale to another. Dentdale made a very hard cheese. Coverdale milk also made a firmer curd than the Masham district milk, Coverdale could make 1½ lb. cheese to the gallon of milk compared with 1 lb. per gallon in the lower part of Wensleydale. It is fair to assume that these Wensleydale cheeses were by then (1800) whole milk cheeses, although there is no written evidence

9. *Guide to the Lakes*, 5th ed. (1835), p. 63.

10. *History of Craven*, 3rd ed. (1878), p. 548.

11. The custom of combining milk from two or more farms must have been quite widespread, both Fuller and Defoe noted it for Cheddar, and Celia Fiennes noticed the same custom in Cheshire. This I believe to be one reason for the large size of both Cheshire and Cheddar cheese.

12. MORRIS, C. (ed.), *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes* (1947), p. 211.



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on that point – certainly the cheese was well esteemed and in steady demand. There was a very good market on the doorstep, the iron workers of Cleveland, the coal miners of Durham, and lead miners of Swaledale, Weardale and Teesdale all ate cheese at work; meat went ‘off’ and particularly in the warm underground pit workings.

In the nineteen-twenties, the demand for white unmatured cheese came mainly from north Durham, where ninety per cent. was sold unmatured. The blue veined cheese, which elsewhere is always higher priced than the white type, was described by Durham consumers as ‘rotten’ and was unsaleable in that area.¹³

Cleveland Cheese

The Cleveland Area is separated from Wensleydale by the Vale of Mowbray (the northern extension of the Vale of York). In the nineteenth century, Cleveland cheese was as famous as Wensleydale and was of the same type, although I am informed that it did not go blue. This cheese was often sold at Danby Cheese Fair which started in the early nineteenth century and continued until about 1922. It was held on the second Friday in October and was a dispersal centre for the dales of Westerdale, Danby and Glaisdale. Wagon loads are

13. H.M.S.O., *Report on marketing of dairy produce in England and Wales* (1932), part I, p. 42.

also said to have been sent from Hutton-le-Hole. Prizes were given for the best three cheeses over 10 lb. weight and for the best three under 10 lb. weight. The prices latterly are said to have been 85s to 88s per cwt. according to the dairy from which they came.¹⁴

The Cleveland cheese was made daily from May till October, presumably butter was made before and after these dates and cows would be spring calvers. The equipment used varied according to the size of the farm. On a small farm, a zinc bath tub was used (probably replacing an earlier circular brass cheese kettle). On a larger farm, the milk was placed in a water cavity kettle with tinned inner vessel, 3 inch cavity and oak staved outer vessel with brass strapping on top edge,¹⁵ standing on a wooden frame 8 inches high. There was no special making room and the kettle was generally placed in the farm kitchen where it was warm, and hot water was available. The milk was warmed in the smaller cheese kettle by setting a bucket of hot water in the milk. Thermometers seem to have been in use for a considerable time. I have one cheese recipe copied in 1892 from an earlier recipe believed to be about 1840, which specifies a temperature of 86 °F when rennet is added.

The recipe used was very similar to the typical Wensleydale cheese, except that the curd, after cutting, was heated to a rather higher temperature and the cheese was pressed for three days instead of 24 hours, this was probably why it did not go blue. It is noticeable too that the curd was drysalted whilst Wensleydales were often brine salted.

The decline in cheese-making in Cleveland started in the middle of the last century when milk was needed to supply the rising population of Teeside. The making of cheese continued at Ajalon House Farm, Fryup, until 1940 when war time and shortage of liquid milk made it impossible to carry on.

Wensleydale Cheese

Wensleydale was the centre of a large area of the Pennines which included Swaledale, Cotherstone, Colsterdale, Coverdale, Dentdale, and Nidderdale, all of which made very similar cheeses. Many of these dales were very remote and cheese-making again continued in many of these districts until the pressure of war and shortage of milk brought it to an end. Even here competition from the liquid milk market started much earlier when the two main railway lines penetrated the district – the westward Carlisle to London line drew milk for London from Garsdale,¹⁶ and the eastward Northallerton to London line drew milk from the lower part of Wensleydale.

14. Letter to writer from F. Weatherill, Hutton-le-Hole, to whom I am indebted for much of the information on the making of Cleveland cheese.

15. Outside measurements 3 feet 6 inches × 2 feet 3 inches × 1 foot 6 inches

16. Hence 'Express dairies'.

Rider Haggard visited Wensleydale in 1901 and describes a large cheese farm.¹⁷ He wrote 'everyone who kept two cows would make cheese although not so much was turned out as formerly, as a good deal of milk was sent to Liverpool'.

'Mrs Graham was kind enough to show me the process of manufacture of Wensleydale cheese - Fresh milk, 100 gallons having been brought in and rennet added, it was allowed to stand for 20-30 minutes, after which the curd is broken down and allowed to settle. When it has stood a while in the same vessels, the whey is strained off through a coarse and fine cloth. Subsequently the curd is broken up and after one ounce of salt has been added to four pounds of curd, it is wrapped in coarse cloth and put into a wooden tub without a bottom, called a vat, which is set in a press. On the second morning, the portions of curd are transferred into a fine cloth, and replaced in the press, where the pressure is continued until evening, when so far as the making is concerned, the cheese is finished. She said that the danger was that the trade in Wensleydale would be spoilt by the many bad cheeses that were put on the market under that name. Such cheese, when tasted by consumers, set them against the brands.'

The organisation of the farms and methods of cheese-making varied slightly according to the situation and type of farm, but farms in the lower part of the valley with considerable arable land, took as much pride in their cheese as the higher hill farms whose main livelihood was a flock of moorland sheep. Generally the size of the herds (by now mainly shorthorns)¹⁸ seems to have been fairly small, and ten to twelve cows were quite usual, this would imply a production of, at most, 30 gallons of milk turned into 30 lb. of cheese daily. As in Cleveland, cheese was made from May to October. One family at least - staunch Methodists - did not make cheese on Sundays¹⁹ but the milk was 'set up' on Saturday night and Sunday morning and the cream skimmed off for churning to provide the household with butter, and surplus cream being returned to the following day's cheese.

This farm was well provided with labour, having men living in, the farmer's wife made the cheese aided by her daughters, and domestic help, both daily and living in, was employed to see to the house.

The kitchen seems to have been the general making room. The older cheese kettles were copper, but circular tinned ones were in common use within living memory. The first cheese kettle in this locality with strainer and tap was made for this farm.

17. HAGGARD, H. RIDER, *Rural England* (1901), II, p. 245.

18. One family, Willis of Carperby, had a 200-year connection with Wensleydale cheese and still own a noted shorthorn herd.

19. Recollections of her father's farm by Mrs Lumley, Skipton.

The actual method of making was typical of many Wensleydale farms, the firm renneted curd was cut into large squares, left for a while and then cut up with a curd breaker. The curd was very little stirred and, unlike the Cleveland cheese, was not heated, or only very slightly heated. The whey was ladled off by placing a linen scrim cloth on top of the whey, as a strainer, and ladling the whey off with a small wooden bowl. The remaining curd was placed in a big square linen strainer cloth, the corners folded over to make a bag and hung up to drain until tests (by taste and smell, and later by pressing a piece of curd against a hot iron, and drawing threads from it) showed that it was ready to be milled and placed in the cheese vats or chessfords.

Cheese moulds (cheese vats or chessfords) were of two shapes, flattish and tall – the latter known as stilton shape, indicating that they were not the original type in use. The cheeses were quite small, varying in weight from 6 to 14 lb.

Pressing was light, usually the cheese was turned only once in the press, salting varied, some makers using brine, soaking the finished cheese for two or three days,²⁰ others salted the curd before it was put into the cheese vats. The light pressing, by leaving the curd slightly loose, encouraged the later growth of blue mould.

After pressing, the cheeses were bandaged with calico and sewn with a special lock stitch which left horizontal marks on the rind. They then went into the ripening room where they were turned daily for two months at least, and then every other day until sold.

June cheeses were accounted best and were usually set aside for Christmas use, by which time they were a really good blue. 'Fog cheese', that is cheese made when cows were grazing the 'fog' or aftermath, and 'hay cheeses' made when the cows were being fed hay, were not considered so good.

Much cheese went to cheese fairs at Yarm, Barnard Castle, and Richmond, much was also sold to cheese factors who stored it and marketed it. Mrs Lumley stated that their cheeses were labelled with the purchasers' names and stored till Christmas. (In Yorkshire, cheese is traditionally served with Christmas cake and also with apple pie.) Their cheese made 7d to 7½d a pound in the nineteen-twenties, but a neighbour who sold whole milk counted himself better off with milk at 6d per gallon.

Factory Cheese-making

The first Wensleydale cheese factory was started at the end of the nineteenth century, by a cheese factor who was obliged to pay the same price for poor cheese as for good cheese. At least in the factory, the milk was all under his control, and the cheese could be marketed sooner if it seemed a type which would not keep to maturity. Shortly afterwards, a farmer,

20. CALVERT, *op. cit.*, believes the brine salted cheese to have the finest flavour.

Cheese Presses

Cheese presses, or parts of them, are the most durable remains, and often the only indication, that cheese has ever been made in a particular area. Being extremely heavy, they nearly always remain *in situ*, although the writer knows of one weight being used as a counterbalance weight on a tractor. The most primitive type of press does not leave any identifiable parts, and I think must have been the one seen by Wordsworth in the Lake District. One of that type was used at Danby by Mr Weatherill's mother. This type of press consists of a long timber lever adjusted to impose the weight directly on to the cheese vat, the end of the lever is sometimes fixed in a hole in the wall, sometimes to a bolt, sometimes to the trunk of a tree.²³

The type of press common in the Pennines had a large oblong stone suspended by a screw between side posts. The stone usually had a shallow groove down each side (or in a double press down one side) to guide it between the side posts. The base also was often of stone, channelled to allow the whey to drain. When not in use, a block of wood was placed under the press stone to support it. In the northern dales at any rate, the presses were often outside the house, sometimes built into a wall. The illustration in Pl. 1 shows the situation of one in Swaledale, although it has unfortunately lost its press stone. These press stones frequently survive, occasionally with the screw still in place. I know of them as far south as Keighley, sometimes roughly dressed stone, sometimes quite elaborately carved and dated. There is one in the Craven Museum, Skipton, initialled and dated, S.T.A. 1739.

A type of lever press has been collected from Cleveland (one is in the Castle Museum, York), and has also been found in Teesdale. The press illustrated in Pl. 2 is from Carlton in Cleveland, now in the Bowes Museum. The stone weights are large, but not parallel sided, and they have a hook in the top instead of a screw.

Iron presses were introduced early last century, but stone presses continued in use for much longer, indeed there is a double stone press at Bradley, near Keighley, which was in use until about forty years ago.

Appendix

Recipe for Wensleydale cheese made at Askrigg in Wensleydale in the nineteen-thirties by Mr and Mrs Middleton:

'During the summer months, the evenings milk was carried to the farmhouse from the outlying laithes in back cans and siled into cheese kettle. Next morning, the cream was lifted off into a dish and kept separate. The temperature of the skimmed milk was raised by heating buckets of milk (square buckets) in fire side boiler and then this was mixed with warm mornings milk to give a temperature of 85°F. The cream was stirred in and a small quantity of rennet added (about one dessertspoonful to 20 gall.). This was allowed to stand until it was well set and the curd gently broken by a cutter (Pl. 3). It was then allowed to stand again about one hour and cut again very finely and allowed to stand until the curd settled. The whey was then run off and the

23. WILSON, REV. J. (ed.), *The Farmer's Dictionary* (1845).

curd lifted into a strainer cloth which was tied and hung up on a metal hook for a few hours to drain well. The curd was then crumbled by hand into small cheese vats (cheese chessfords we call them) containing cloths, and the vats closed with sinkers for lids and put into cheese presses for 24 hours. They were turned, and dry clean cloths put in after twelve hours.

'After pressing, the cheese were immersed in brine (this was made by heating water on the fire, and salt added until it would bear the weight of an egg) for 2-3 days, depending on the size of the cheese. The cheese were turned over in the brine night and morning. They were then lifted on to dairy shelves for a few days to drain well, and removed to cheese room until they matured ready for sale.

'During the winter months, the salt method was used. The curd was hung up in a bag as previously mentioned and when sufficiently acid (tested with hot poker) it was put through cheese grinder and salt added (1 oz. to 4 lb.).

'The cheese were then pressed for 48 hours, and then removed to cheese room. June cheese were usually kept till Christmas when they would have developed a nice blue mould.

'My husband and I worked hard, and the return was 3d to 4d per lb. in 1934.'

Cleveland cheese as made at Ajalon House Farm, Fryup, from 1930 to 1940.

Strain nights milk into cheese kettle and stir gently occasionally during evening to prevent cream setting on top. Strain mornings milk into this and heat to 84 degrees. Then add one dram rennet to every 4 gallons of milk, stirring gently 3 or 4 minutes to mix thoroughly. Cover and leave 50 minutes, by which time it will be junket. Cut in criss cross fashion and leave to settle for 10 minutes. Then gradually raise temperature to 94 degrees, stirring gently and thoroughly all the time and taking at least 20 minutes to do this. Leave for an hour then drain off whey and remove curd to draining tub, shovelling it in to a large linen cloth strainer. Tie the corners crosswise, place a wooden board on top and leave for an hour. Cut into large squares every hour, mix up, re-tie cloth and place small weight on top of board, increasing weight each time it is cut. In 3 or 4 hours, when it seems acid enough, heat a heavy poker in the fire, apply a piece of curd to it, then draw away, and when you can draw fine threads about an inch long, it is ready to vat. Now weigh, chop fairly small or put through a curd mill, and add salt at rate of 1 oz. to 3½ lb. curd, mixing well. Line vats with strainercloth wrung out in cold water and fill with curd, press down well and fold surplus cloth neatly over on top, put in the lid, put necessary sinkers on top and put in cheese press (metal) apply light pressure.

Next morning, take out of vat and put upside down on same strainer, put back in vat and fold surplus over, put on lid and more sinkers if necessary as cheese gets smaller through pressure.

Next morning, take out of vat, put upside down on fine butter muslin strainer, put back in press with more pressure still. Next morning, take out of vat, discard strainer, cut off any thin bits round edges to make a good shape, run a rather hot poker round cut edges to seal, rub sparingly with butter or lard, put a calico bandage round and stitch securely in place. Store on shelves in cool darkened room and turn every day for six weeks, then every other day until mature, when it will have developed a blue mould on a fine skin and will need turning only occasionally.

Note. Temperatures for setting, and time for taking up and setting varied a little from farm to farm due to differences in land, grass, feeding etc. affecting acidity of milk. Weather was another factor, so that on hot or thundery days, one kept everything a little cooler, and on cold days a little warmer.

A. M. Raw. Feb. 1967