THE LONDON CHEESEMONGERS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Cheese and butter form large elements of the dietary of the modern population, but throughout the eighteenth century they were even more important than they are to-day, and the large quantities of these products, which were handled by the London cheesemongers of the time, are explicable only in this light.

Although we have little to go upon in the way of direct evidence, there is available from the contemporary writers a sufficient guide to the quantities eaten, which remained large even at the end of the century, when the habits of the people were slowly being modified. In 1783 it was within "the compass of no very aged man's recollection, when barley bread, with milk and cheese, was the general food of the poor": [1] and it should be remembered that "the poor" in the eighteenth century was a general term used to cover the whole of the working class. Cheese formed a solid proportion of the diet of workhouses, the much-praised house at Nacton in Suffolk serving it with supper on seven days of the week and for breakfast on Sunday,[2] while the aged pensioners at Greenwich Hospital consumed $2\frac{1}{4}$ lbs. apiece during a week in 1802,[3] and a poor labourer and his wife, without children, are said to have eaten a pound a week each in 1808.[4]

Given these conditions, it is not difficult to imagine that the cheesemongers of the metropolis were a wealthy and powerful body, and when to the figures for the average consumption of such individuals is added the weight of figures showing the quantities dealt in by these merchants, the opinion is more than confirmed. In the early years of the century it was estimated that the "County of Chester and its adjacent lands" sent "near 30,000 tons of Cheese to *London* and all other places." [5] Some quarter of a century later, the cheesemongers themselves represented their dealings as being of the following order:

1 *Useful and Practical Observations on Agriculture*, by a Clergyman, p. 217.
2 *Considerations on the Present State of the Poor in Great Britain . . .* 1773, p. 49.
3 *Essays on Miscellaneous Subjects*, Sir John Sinclair, Bt., p. 467.
4 *On the Poor Laws of England*, Rev. Jas. Willis, Vicar of Sopley (at end).
5 *The Compleat English Tradesman*, Daniel Defoe, 2nd ed. (?), 1727, Vol. II. Pt. II. p. 31. This is probably an exaggerated estimate.

> Butter made in Norfolk, Isle of Ely and part of Lincs. and sent to Cambridge by water, thence by land to London weekly is 90,000 firkins (approx.) = 2,250 tons.
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> Quantities of cheese annually brought to London from Warwick, Leicester, Derby and Stafford by land carriage is about 500 tons. From Gloucester, Wiltshire and Berkshire by land annually 2,000 tons.

It may perhaps be interpolated here that Ernle says, with what authority he does not state, the "Gloucestershire cheesemakers sent their cheese to London down the Thames from Lechlade."[1] The statement is probably based upon Defoe.

> Essex, Hertford, part of Sussex, part of Kent, Bedford and Buckingham are supplied from London with 2,000 tons annually (of cheese and salt butter).[2]

These figures are contained in a petition of the several traders . . . being dealers in butter and cheese, within the cities of London and Westminster against the provisions of a Bill, then pending in the House, for limiting the number of horses that might be harnessed to the wagons of the time, a measure which passed into law, with only slight modifications, in spite of the power and wealth of the cheesemongers.

This petition, showing as it does joint action by the cheesemongers, has been accepted as part of the evidence adduced to show that the cheesemongers of the metropolis had formed a combine, or "club" as it was called, controlled the better part of the supplies, and arranged prices,[3] but the most firm foundation for this belief is an explicit statement made by one Mr. Wimpey, a writer on agricultural subjects, in 1770, and it is in connection with the large supplies obtained from Cheshire that he makes the accusation. He says, "The most considerable cheesemongers in London have formed themselves into a club. They are owners of about 16 ships, which are employed between London, Chester and Liverpool. They employ these Ships chiefly in bringing up Cheese to London. They have factors in Cheshire who buy up the Cheese for them and lodge it in their Warehouses at Chester. At their weekly Meetings they settle what Quantities each shall have brought up to Market. By this Means the Market is fed in such a Manner, that they command whatever price they please."[4]

[1] *English Farming Past and Present*, 1922, p. 276.
[2] *Journal of the House of Commons*, Vol. XXVI., 31st May, 1751, p. 273.
[3] *The Middleman in English Business*, R. B. Westerfield, 1915, p. 208.
[4] *Thoughts upon Interesting Subjects*, pp. 39 and 40.

Another grievance is that they will not suffer individual action, "intimidating," by means we can readily envisage, such rash persons as dared it, and of course, because they went North light, the ships could carry freight that way at cut rates, thus further consolidating their monopoly, which was, in the opinion of the day, a scandal and a wicked means of oppressing the consumer, although, if the description, which was repeated verbatim two years later by an anonymous writer,[1] was exact, it probably secured a more regular supply than would otherwise have been available.

The Cheshire cheese trade seems to have been the largest bulk of any branch, judging from the figures given above, and this is not surprising, because "there is reason for believing that cheese has been made in Cheshire for at least 700 years," [2] and it is said that it was so good when the Countess Constance of Chester had a dairy farm in the county, that she presented three cheeses to the Archbishop of Canterbury.[3]

Be that as it may, the trade between the county and London was sufficiently large at the end of the seventeenth century to need regulation by an Act of Parliament designed to prevent fraudulent packing when the goods were being shipped.[4] Overlookers were appointed whose duty it was to see that short weight was not consigned, but this was not thought necessary in the case of the London cheesemongers, "who send their own vessels to Chester for their own goods." Evidently the trade and its methods were stabilised at that date, and the procedure remained the same during the whole of the century.[5]

In 1692 the cheesemongers became involved in a dispute with the Liverpool authorities. A good deal of cheese was shipped from this port, and the authorities of the town demanded from the shippers the town dues on their wares, but the shippers claimed exception from the dues under charter. The dispute lasted until 1700, when arbitrators were appointed, with what result is doubtful. Throughout the earlier documents the defendants (if they may be called so) are cited as "the Cheesemongers of London," as though they were a guild or other corporate body, and this reading seems to have been accepted by Westerfield, but

[1] *A View of Real Grievances with Remedies*, 1772, pp. 274 ff.
[2] "A Detailed Account of the Making of Cheshire Cheese," *R.A.S.E. Journal*, Vol. VI., 1845, p. 102.
[3] *Ibid.* Footnote citing Bell's *Weekly Messenger*, Feb. 22, 1841.
[4] 4 William and Mary, c. 7. sec. 7 and 8.
[5] *Annals of Agriculture*, Vol. XVII. (1792), p. 47 ff. *County Report on Cheshire*, Henry Holland, 1808, p. 315.

the document of 1700 cites them as "Nath[l]. and others, Cheesemongers of London," which may be taken to show that they were not a combine, but were merely cited as the individuals concerned.[1]

That the cheesemongers may have lost the decision is shown by their action in 1709, when they opposed a Bill for building a dock at Liverpool because they would not be able to use it. The Bill, however, passed in spite of their opposition, and a loan of £6,000 was authorised for the purpose.[2] This attempt is again brought in to support their action as a combine, and certainly shows that upon occasion they were capable of concerted action.

During the eighteenth century the cost of living, as we should say, was rising, and since the reasons were not too well understood at the time, complaints were rife. All sorts of improbable people are accused of combination for the purpose of bleeding the consumer, amongst whom the farmers, an unlikely class, figure prominently, as well as the graziers and others. Since the business of dealing in cheese and butter had developed into such a routine as the available documents describe, there is no reason why the cheesemongers should be exempt from the accusation, possibly with more justice than some others.

In the middle of the century it was somewhat vaguely said that "when hitherto these commodities (butter and cheese) were brought to markets, the entering into private contracts for them was prevented; now being removed into factors hands, from out of the reach and out of the sight of the people who have a natural right to purchase them equitably";[3] but this method of dealing in these commodities was well established by the end of the seventeenth century, as we have seen, and it continued for at least a hundred years, although it may have been to the disadvantage of the farmer, who was not always willing to hold the goods until the factor was ready to accept delivery and weigh the cheese, because of the loss of weight involved in keeping.[4]

However the organisation of the trade may have affected the farmer, if it was so concrete as described by Mr. Wimpey, it probably enabled the rapidly growing population of London (1700, 674,350; 1801, 900,000; 1811, 1,050,000)[5] to obtain its supplies of butter and cheese with regularity, and with little other

[1] *Selections from the Municipal Archives and Records of Liverpool*, J. A. Picton, 1883, Vol. I. p. 300 ff.
[2] *Ibid.*, Vol. II. p. 48.
[3] *Considerations on the present high prices of provisions . . .* by a West-Country Maltster, 1764, p. 13.
[4] *County Report on Chester*, Thomas Wedge, 1794, p. 61.
[5] Census, 1811, App., p. 199.

fluctuation in price than the natural increase which was affecting all commodities at the time. A measure of the rate of increase in price in thirty years after the middle of the century is given by the prices at the Victualling Office in London : [1]

				Butter.	Cheese.
				d.	*d.*
Average of five years	beginning		1750	$4\frac{3}{4}$	$2\frac{3}{4}$
,,	,,	,,	1760	$5\frac{1}{2}$	$2\frac{3}{4}$
,,	,,	,,	1770	$6\frac{1}{2}$	$3\frac{1}{8}$
,,	,,	,,	1780	$6\frac{1}{2}$	4

Wages were slightly on the increase, but they did not rise so rapidly as the cost of living, so hardship was endured by all the "labouring poor," as is constantly emphasised in the literature of the time, and these rises in the short space of thirty years would obviously be felt in an age when poor men ate cheese for hunger, rich men for digestion, as Fuller put it some centuries before.

But in spite of the detailed and specific accusation of Mr. Wimpey, and the evidence of concerted action in other directions, the clear-cut, almost modern type of combine or monopoly does not seem to be entirely substantiated. It may have been true that the cheesemongers had formed a club. All sorts of people did in the eighteenth century. The Two-penny club, the Ugly Club, the Sighing Club, the Fringe Glove Club and the Everlasting Club are but a few specimens of these mentioned by the *Spectator*. The result of the forming of a Cheesemongers Club may certainly have been in effect to give a monopoly to a number of the more wealthy dealers, but a too ready acceptance of what is after all a single statement, substantiated only by indirect evidence from other sources, may be doing a grave injustice to a body of men who were only following the traditional, well-known and well-developed practice of their business.

It is true that there is every evidence of concerted action at the beginning of the period, but that may have been because the persons engaged in the trade were cited together, and would obviously have similar interests to protect. They would also doubtless be well acquainted with one another. Again, they took joint action in opposing the Bill regulating road traffic in 1751, while the effect of their club may have been to give them the power to take concerted action in controlling supplies and prices, but that is certainly as far as the evidence permits one to go.

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[1] *Annals of Agriculture*, Vol. VIII. (1787), p. 432.