Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NINETEENTH CENTURY DAIRY EQUIPMENT H214



Cheese making has a very long history in Britain. Primitive cheese-making tools have been found in Iron Age and Roman settlements. For most of the time cheese would have been made with sheep's milk, but in the eighteenth century cow's milk gradually became the favoured ingredient. The cheese mould (sometimes known as a 'cheese vat' or 'chesset') and lid (called a 'follower') in this box probably date from the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth century an increasing number of farmers changed to dairy farming. Wages increased for many workers as the Victorian Period progressed and they could afford to buy more milk, cheese, butter and meat. Profits from growing corn declined as bad weather in the 1870s made for poor harvests and with large steam ships bringing in more and more imported grain many farmers started meat and dairy farming to make a living. Finally, railways helped the distribution of milk and dairy products. Cheese has a longer shelf life than the milk from which it is made.

The Victorian Period saw some changes on the farm in the way cheese was produced, but the basic procedures remained much as they had centuries previously.

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The first job was to milk the cows. This was done twice a day, early in the morning and again at lunchtime. The milkmaid would sit on a stool facing the cow's tail and place a bucket just forward of the udder. She would take two teats and squeeze them in sequence from the top down, using her upper finger to make a seal and moving the milk downwards. This action copied the sucking movement of the calf's tongue and mouth. Gradually the bucket would fill up - on average a cow would produce 17-25 pints (10-15 litres) per day.

Then the cheese making could begin. The first step is to put the milk into a large tank, heat it to 80ºF and add a liquid called rennet.



Natural rennet comes from the fourth stomach chamber of young calves. When added to milk it has the effect of separating the milk into a kind of rubbery gel called curds and a thin watery liquid called whey. The photograph on the left, taken in 1952, shows a cheesemaker from County Durham adding rennet to milk. The photograph was taken in one of the last farms in the area that produced home-made Wensleydale cheese.

The jelly-like curds are the material from which cheese is made. Most of the rest of the cheesemaking procedure involves separating the curds from the whey. At one time dairymaids broke the curds by hand, squeezing each piece to remove the whey. Another method was to use a wooden or metal cutter known as a curd knife, pictured on the right, to chop up the curds. This helped to release the whey. The curds were then scooped into a crockery basin with a perforated base that was lined with a muslin cheese-cloth. The whey drained away through the base. Nowadays this by-product of cheese making is often concentrated and dried for use in the production of other foodstuffs. In the past, however, whey was a valued drink of both farm workers and townspeople, while also being an important source of food for the dairy farm's pigs.



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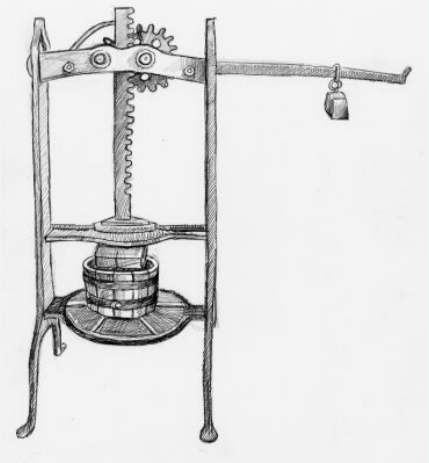
The still moist curds were then placed in a cheese-cloth which was in turn put into a wooden mould like the one in this box. The purpose of such a mould was to press the curds into shape whilst also draining off the last remaining whey. This mould is made of oak wood and has 13 staves which are bound together by the galvanised iron hoops. The base has a pattern of holes drilled into it to allow any remaining whey to drip out.

The lid (or follower) was put on the curds in the cheese mould, which was then put into a press to squeeze out the last of the whey. There were many different designs of press, but the purpose of all of them was the same - to apply a steady pressure to dry out the cheese. The drawing on the right shows the kind of press which could have been used with a mould such as this one. Sometimes pressure was applied simply by stacking stones on top of the mould. The more pressure that was applied, the harder the cheese.



When the cheese had been in the press long enough to have achieved the right consistency it was turned out and taken into a cool store room to age. This aging period could last from a few days to several years. As a cheese ages, microbes and enzymes transform its texture and intensify its flavour. Some cheeses were turned over each day so that they dried out evenly and the fat globules did not settle at the bottom. The harder and drier the cheese, the longer it would last.

