

OUR WATERCRESS INDUSTRY

Based on material collected by

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Paddington station is built on a bed of it. A bed will produce up to ten crops in a year (the average is three) and since its growers quote its qualities as an aphrodisiac it may well bring many a good wife to bed in the same year. Such is watercress which — though Dartford in Kent claims to have first produced it commercially — has filled our valleys with a prosperous green for over a hundred years.

Just below Alresford, the Candover, the Tichborne stream and the Alre flow together to form the river Itchen. Along these few miles of chalk stream and river is grown over a third of Hampshire's watercress — and Hampshire is the main producing area of the country.

For centuries watercress grew wild — as it still will do — in the district's streams and ditches. No doubt local people ate it and tinkers would throw bunches of it into their sacks to sell at the market; but wild cress was sufficiently plentiful to meet local demands and too perishable to be transported along poor roads to distant markets. So cress was not grown commercially until the coming of the railway.

It was the Watercress Line that made Alresford's watercress industry. The Line, connecting Alresford with the markets of London, the Midlands and the North, was opened in 1865. The Tithe maps of about 1840, which are minutely detailed, show no cress beds in the district and yet, immediately the railway was open, local farmers began to exploit the streams and springs on their land by making cress beds as is shown on the plan at the end of this article.

It was a welcome source of income for in the late XIXth century corn and meat were becoming less profitable to the local farmer due to overseas competition. But watercress being perishable (having a 'short shelf life' as traders say) could not be imported. Here was an opening for the local farmers. Cress could be picked in the afternoon, taken by horse and cart to Alresford station that evening and be on sale in Covent Garden in the early hours of the following morning.

It is said that John Dorey was growing cress at the Dean in the 1860's and that Thomas Smith, cress grower, was living at the Shrubbery (now Alre House) in 1867. In about 1880 John Mills came to the Nythe and dug out the marshy land there by using two steam engines, one on either side 'of the marsh, with a wire in between them on which was drawn a large scoop. Thus began the Nythe cress beds.

Soon cress was being grown in the neighbouring villages. In about 1896, other members of the Mills family made the cress beds at Bighton and Bishop's Sutton. In 1896, 'Baron' Hunt did likewise at Fob Down and the Dorey family had expanded their beds to Pinglestone. One of their number, John Dorey, is remembered in an interesting way. When the cress beds at Ladycroft were being built about 1890, Mr. Curtis the farmer (grandfather of the present owner) called him in for expert advice and one of the cress beds at Ladycroft is still known as 'John Dorey's'. In the meantime, cress was being grown extensively in Cheriton by Mr. Giles who was known to the villagers as 'the watercress king'.

After the first World War, there was further expansion. By 1925, Frank Roland's beds at Western Court Farm, Bishops Sutton and at Itchen Stoke Mill and the Baker family's beds at Borough farm had been added to the roll. But that was the peak of expansion; modern methods of intensive cultivation and an agreed Code of Practice have squeezed out the casual grower; for example many of the beds at Cheriton have fallen into disuse, but the big growers have developed hugely bringing employment to the district for it is an labour-intensive industry.

In the beginning cress was simply grown in the river or stream bed (hence presumably the term 'cress bed'). Where beds were dug they were little more than glorified ditches with rough earth sides. Nowadays there is a code of practice aimed at removing possible sources of contamination. Beds must have impermeable sides and river water must not enter into the beds, hence the increasing use of bore holes.

The Alresford District provides the essential qualities for first class cress growing —springs forty foot below the surface provide pure, chalk filtered water to the bore holes at the rate of 500 gallons per hour per yard at a temperature of 51° winter and summer. This constant temperature has the advantage of protecting the cress from frost. On a winter's day you can see the steam (known locally as `roke') rising from the beds as the warmer spring water meets the frosty air. As an elderly worker put it; 'if we saw a roke, we knew that old bed must be doing all right'. 'Doing all right' is a typical British understatement; under such conditions 12 tons' per acre of superfine cress can be harvested to supply the country's demand for at least 45 million bunches a year.

Elderly folk (who say `creass' not 'cress') talk nostalgically of the old brown variety with its fine, strong flavour. However, brown cress was prone to disease and was so strong that not as much could be eaten as the growers would wish, so the latter introduced the milder light green French variety. This tended to look 'tired' and we now have the broad leaved American mild cress with its 'fresh' dark green appearance. But Alresford is conservative, "they've got different sorts of creass now", an Alresford senior citizen complained to me. "We used to have the old brown creass — beautiful stuff! This green creass — I don't like it!"

The worker on the beds has changed little in dress over the years except that, before the age of rubber boots, he wore thigh length leather boots, heavily hob-nailed to give a grip on the river bottom and carefully dubbed against the damp. Even so, they were not damp-proof and every morning men would wrap hessian strips around their feet and legs to absorb the moisture and prevent chafing.

We have all of us admired the way the water moves steadily and freely through the cress before flowing down to the next level. There is nothing casual about this process; craftsmen have built sluices carefully designed to control the rate of flow so that the essential 'depth' in each bed can be maintained. There is nothing haphazard about growing cress which is raised annually from seed, though some will be propagated vegetatively using the thinnings of last years' crop. It is harvested by cutting 'hands' (a hand being the amount which one hand can comfortably hold while the other hand slices at about 7" with a sharp knife) or by pulling (which is the winter practice of thinning the crop). There is no off season; if there is cress in the boxes by the beds it is fresh cut that day, and a green salad when there is no other.

In the early days, cress was packed into large hampers called flats and half flats which held 56 and 28 lbs. The packing was done by the pickers and a wet sack would be thrown over the flats to keep the cress fresh until the cart came to take the load to Alresford station. Nowadays cress is packed in small cardboard punnets called chips, because they were originally made of wood veneer. This necessitates a packing shed and specialized packers, generally women. The wet sack has been replaced by modern cooling devices both in the packing sheds and in the lorries that take the cress to market.

But the industry doesn't stand still. A considerable percentage of Hampshire's watercress is pre-packed on automated packing lines for the super-market trade. Already a mechanical harvester has been developed for an entirely new concept in marketing; cress, trimmed, washed and sold in 'jumble' form is virtually table-ready and as such is being marketed by Marks and Spencers with a complete cool chain for distribution and retailing. All that remains is to enjoy the product of your valleys at your table.

Watercress Soup. 2 bunches of Alresford cress. 2 pints milk and water mixed.

2 oz butter. 1 chopped onion. 1 1/2 oz flour. 1/2 gill cream. 1 heaped teaspoon arrowroot.
 Coarsely chop the cress. Melt butter in the pan and add the onion. Cover and cook for a few minutes. Add cress and continue cooking a further 5-6 minutes. Draw aside, add flour and liquid. Blend and simmer about 15 minutes. Rub through a sieve or put through a liquidiser. Add a liaison of the arrowroot slaked with the cream and re-heat. Enjoy and ask for more.

Sketch map of Alresford's CRESS BEDS

The name of the farmer who made the beds and the approximate date appear in brackets.

