

CHEESE MAKING AND CHEESE CHAMBERS IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

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Cheese making has been carried out in Gloucestershire from the earliest times but appears to have developed into a farmhouse industry in the mid 17th century. The main areas of production were along the level heavy lands of the Severn Vale. Here the cultivation of land was difficult as it is today, and grass production was easier and very productive. These conditions led to the development of a dairy industry based on cheese making. Two types of cheeses were made - Double Gloucester and Single Gloucester.

Double Gloucester cheese was made from the mornings' milk with part of the evenings' milk or the cream of the evenings' milk. These cheeses were made from May till September and were from 15 - 25 lbs. each. They required a period of ripening and were sold at cheese fairs in July, Michaelmas and the Spring. The Single Gloucester cheeses were made from mornings' milk or from the skimmed evenings' milk and weighed 9 - 12 lbs. They were faster ripening and were used mainly for domestic consumption on the farm.

A very good description of the process of cheese making is given in Marshall's Rural Economy of Gloucestershire, (1783). Briefly the cows were milked at 5 a.m. and 4 p.m. by a team of hand milkers. The cattle at this time were Gloucesters, and a mixture of Shorthorns and Longhorns. Usually 20 - 25 cows were kept and one expected to get  $3\frac{1}{2}$  to 4 cwts. of cheese per cow. The milk was set in shallow pans after evening milking and skimmed the following morning and this was then added to the mornings' milk. After setting the rennett was added. Rennett was made by the dairy maid from calves' stomachs which had been cured and pickled. This was an art in itself and greatly affected the cheese made. Following rennetting the whey was taken off and heated, then returned to the vat. This process was repeated until the curd had been properly formed. Then the whey was drained off and the curd salted and packed into the cheese moulds and pressed.

The earliest cheese presses were made of wood and the weight was obtained by a box fitted into the framework. This was raised and lowered by a series of rope pulleys. The weight was made up of washed coarse river gravel which could be added or removed from the box depending on the weight required. A good example of this type of cheese press can be seen in the Gloucester Folk Museum.

The cheeses were pressed and scalded for 2 days with the weight increasing as the curd hardened. The fresh cheeses were then kept in the dairy on shelves for 7 - 10 days. During this time the cheeses were turned daily and the development of a grey-blue mould on the surface was encouraged. It was most important that the rind developed correctly, as a good firm cover was essential to keep the moisture of the cheese and allow the ripening to continue.

After 10 days the cheeses were carried up to a cheese chamber where they were stored until ready for market. The cheese chambers were prepared for the cheeses by rubbing the floors and shelves with bean tops, potato halm, or some other succulent vegetation until the boards were black in colour. The cheeses were then placed in rows and turned twice weekly. The floors were scrubbed with fresh herbs every 2 weeks. This was done to encourage the development of a blue coat on the cheeses. It must have helped to maintain humidity and prevent the cheese rinds from drying out and cracking.

The cheeses were sold in earlier times at the Cheese Fairs at Berkeley, Bristol and Gloucester. Barton Fair was a very important one; Marshall states that even in his time there were 40 large waggon loads. However by the 1790's most of the cheeses were sold through factors, one of the most important being Ralph Bigland the historian and later Garter King of Arms. His cheese rooms at Frocester Court are still in existence and water power was used to turn the cheeses. The cheeses were then sold to shopkeepers in Bristol, London and some were exported to the Continent.

Cheese production in the Severn Vale went into decline in the late 19th century and with the opening of a liquid milk factory by Cadbury Bros. at Frampton-on-Severn in 1924 the decline was accelerated, finally finishing with the 1939 - 45 war. Now there are one or two farmers' wives who make sufficient for the family needs, but none are made commercially in Gloucestershire.

The material remains of this great industry can still be found on many farms in the Vale. Careful inspection of the farmhouses will reveal dairies, whey troughs, whey vats and the heating arrangements for them, the cheese stores and cheese chambers.

Some farm dairies are still intact and retain the shelves and slate troughs. Marshall, very aptly describes a typical dairy as a room set on the north side of the farmhouse, 18 feet by 15 feet. Usually entered from the outside by a door facing north, this door is usually double the outer one, being only shut at night and the inner made of lathes on a light frame-work to increase ventilation in the dairy. A perfect example can be seen at Michael Wood Farm, Lower Wick. The floor is made of sandstone slabs 2 feet by 2 feet imported from the Forest of Dean. Often the floor is sloped to a central stone gutter which leads to the outside to a stone drainage system. The walls and roof are plastered. The ceiling is usually 7' 6" to 8' high. An inner door leads to the farm house kitchen. Some of the walls are lined with wooden shelves and usually two fairly large slate troughs are placed against an outside wall. At Field Farm, Coaley, a lead pipe from the troughs took the whey direct to a trough in some pigsties 40 feet away.

Box-type cheese presses similar to those in the Folk Museum are still in place in the dairies at Lovetts Wood, Hillesley, and at Middle Farm Saintbury, whereas a different type of press made of a huge block of dressed

oolite stone is preserved at Leigh Farm, Leigh, and this type was common in that area.

The whey was heated in large copper basins similar to the more recent hot water coppers. At Blanchworth Farm, Berkeley, there are three of these in a specially built room, and they occur on many farms, usually in a small separate building or room adjoining the dairy. There are several cheese vats on farms but on the whole they are fairly scarce. A beautiful example of one of these is a 90 gallon vat still set on its original wooden stand at the Hurns Farm, Slimbridge. This vat has been in the family for 200 years and is graduated on the inside in gallons. The stand has a simple lever which can be lifted to tilt the vat to drain off the whey. Another good example, which was recently sold for scrap, was fitted in the dairy at Fernley Farm, Ozleworth. An iron vat is now used to store cattle feed at Corner Farm, Coaley. This was made in Gloucester.

At Blanchworth Farm there is a cheese rack in the cheese loft capable of holding 90 single Gloster cheeses. Whey troughs are to be found on several farms. These are large stone troughs 3 feet high and 4 feet square. They are now much in demand for decorative garden troughs but can still be seen in situ outside the dairy at Blanchworth Farm. The whey was stored in these troughs until it was required for pig feeding.

Often the cheese chamber is the only evidence of cheese making to be found at a farmhouse. The cheese chamber or loft was either a room or often the entire attic area of the farm house used as a cheese store. The room or rooms were made with good oak floors, the walls or roof were lined with plaster and painted white. Light and ventilation were provided by windows and vents set at floor level to keep the chambers cool.

Cheese chambers, like most other building features, developed over a period of time. There is documentary evidence that during the late medieval period the storing of cheeses in garrets of houses was common practice over large areas of the country.<sup>(1)</sup> However the idea persisted in Gloucestershire and became part of the farmhouse design in the Severn Vale.

A typical farmhouse was generally one room thick and usually 16 to 18 feet wide. When larger houses were required they were made by adding wings to become L, E or H Shaped. However large the house became it still retained its single span roof. In the north of the Vale timber-framed building continued until the early 19th century when it was superseded by brick. In the Berkeley Vale stone was the principal material until it also was superseded by brick in some areas. In the stone buildings the walls are 18" to 24" thick, and consist of dressed stone or rubble on the outside mortared together, but the interior is of loosely packed rubble.

The upper floors are carried on joists placed across beams. The beams are placed centrally and are very plain, often roughly dressed and with little or no decoration. The exception to this is rare, an example being

Court Farm, Lower Cam. Here the dairy roof consists of finely carved beams forming square panels over the entire room. The first floor boards form the ceiling.

The cheese chamber floor is often set into the walls 3 feet below the eaves. This gives the farm houses their characteristic appearance of a fair expanse of wall above the first floor windows, instead of the windows meeting the eaves as in most houses. This was probably done to give strength and support to the chamber floor and to make the chamber large enough to stand up in without the rafters getting in the way.

The position and type of ventilators varies considerably. An early version consisted of small rectangular openings 2 to 3 feet long and 1 foot wide set just below the eaves. These can be seen at Whitehouse Farm, Stinchcombe, and Baynham Court, Lower Wick. These developed into longer vents 4 feet long and 3 feet wide as at Wortley Farm House and Frogend, Coombe, Wotton-under-Edge. Another version which is fairly common around North Nibley and Coaley is that the vents with wooden louvre boards have replaced the dormer windows. Examples of these are Betworthy Farm, Coaley, Blanchworth Farm, Berkeley and Bassett Court, North Nibley. Finally the vents were placed in the end gables usually in pairs. These can be seen at Brookend Farm and Kingshill, Berkeley and many others.

The storing of cheeses in the attic caused another problem, namely the physical process of bringing the cheeses up to the chambers. This was overcome in several ways. Sometimes a door was built on the first floor so that the cheeses could be loaded direct into the store. The commonest method was to carry the cheeses up the main staircase. This is usually in the centre of the house and much wider than one would normally expect. A door on the first floor led to the second staircase, which was not so wide and ended in the chamber. On several farms an easier way was found by means of a trap door in the dairy ceiling, which often led through a further trap door in the landing direct into the chamber. This system can be seen at Court Farm, Almondsbury, and Mill Hill Farm, Forthampton.

There are several cheese chambers with what at first sight appear to be concrete floors.<sup>2</sup> This type of floor was common in the Cotswolds and was made by laying clay, straw and hazel twigs between the closely fitting timber joists and finishing this off with cement. Examples are Northway Farm, Ashchurch, and Norton Grounds Farm, near Broadway.

This system of storing cheeses was not always as efficient as one would expect from the numbers of chambers to be found. Thomas Rudge, writing in 1807,<sup>3</sup> felt that the chambers were often responsible for poor cracked cheeses of inferior flavour, and suggests that many of the cheese rooms were poorly contrived when situated near the roof of a house. Here the cheeses were exposed to the hot rays of the sun. If this could not be helped then the windows should be as low as possible to the floor to allow cool air to pass over the cheeses.

The dating of cheese making in Gloucestershire is extremely difficult as a description of the dairy husbandry of the County does not appear to

have been written until 1783 by Marshall. However there is an Elizabethan description of cheese making in Somerset<sup>4</sup> so one can surmise that it was being made in Gloucestershire at this time. An inventory of the goods of George Martin,<sup>5</sup> Baynham Court dated 16th June, 1688 includes "Item in the upper loft two hundred cheeses. Item a cheese press." Apperley Hall, Deerhurst, is dated as a 16th century building.<sup>6</sup> Its cheese room on the first floor is contemporary with the rest of the building. The chamber spans the building with a ventilator at floor level on one side and a window at the same level on the other, thus showing that it was never intended as a living room, and must always have been a cheese store. Another early farmhouse, Allcocks, with cheese rooms was described by Thomas Fulljames, in his survey of the Forthampton Estates in 1802.<sup>7</sup> He states that the house was 'indifferent' with three rooms on a floor, a small dairy and underground cellars, four bedchambers over and a cheese room above. It has been dated as 16-17th century.<sup>8</sup> New Hall Farm, Wickwar has a date 1691 over an outside door of the house. This has cheese chambers and the whole building appears to be of one date.

The majority of brick built farmhouses in the Berkeley Vale are of similar design and architecture. Some of these have dates. Actrees Farm, Berkeley Heath, has a later brick wing with cheese chambers dated 1791. Dayhouse Farm, Hill, is dated 1806 and Blisbury Farm, Bevington, 1772. A later brick built house with cheese chamber but of different architecture is Kitesnest, Berkeley Heath of 1830. Blanchworth Farm was originally a stone house with cheese loft; however in 1798 the dairy was added in brick with a large cheese room over. This was reached by an outside stone staircase, and a trap door high on the wall connected it with the existing loft. Many older farmhouses had dairies and cheese lofts added in brick and the type of bricks used make them contemporary with the late 18th century farmhouses. Examples are Oakhunger Farm, Berkeley, Worlds End Farm, Bevington, Rectory Farm, Slimbridge, and many others.

Many cheese lofts and dairies have notices displayed on the loft doors, over outside windows and over dairy doors. This was to claim exemption from the Window Tax which was first levied in 1696 and abolished in 1851. Kingshill Farm has 'Cheefe loft' painted on the loft door as at Apperley Hall, and displayed over the ventilator is a sign 'Cheese room'. At Lovettswood over the dairy door a small plaque 'Dairy' appears, and over a bedroom door at Comer House Farm, 'Cheese Room'.

The distribution of cheese chambers and cheese making is generally confined to the lowlands around the Severn, although there are farmhouses on the Cotswolds with cheese chambers such as Symonds Hall Farm, Wotton-under-Edge. The majority of cheese chambers stretch in a belt from the Bristol Avon up to the Berkeley and Gloucester Vales and on into the Vale of Evesham. Fulljames<sup>9</sup> account of the Forthampton Estate mentions 9 farmhouses with cheese chambers. He also records 4 in the Hailes area and 3 on the Toddington Estate.

There are probably 350 farmhouses with cheese chambers in Gloucestershire, possibly 50 in North Wiltshire and very many first floor cheese rooms in Somerset. In Somerset it was usual for a first floor room to be used as a cheese store but not the attic or loft. There are examples in the Newent area and these may extend into South Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

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References

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