

Whatever Happened To Hitchman's Dairies?

When seventy six year old John Hitchman of Prospect Hill, Walthamstow died in October 1911, probate of his estate was granted to his sons who were all Dairy Farmers. These were: Frederick, Samuel and Stephen Hitchman. Probate was also granted to Thomas Hilken, a Ship Broker who was married to John Hitchman's daughter. His effects were: £46,510 -12s- 6d. This was an enormous sum that is equivalent today to a value of £4,637,623.72

Where It Began

In 1851, sixteen year old John Hitchman was living with his family in Bromley by Bow. His father was a Gardener and John was working as a Stonemason. His family had originated in Gloucestershire near Cheltenham. Their home was near to where the River Lea joined the River Thames. In 1870-72, John Marius Wilson's *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* described Bromley like this: *"Part of the land is disposed in market gardens. Many of the inhabitants are employed in calico print works, mills, a pearlsh factory, a brewery, a distillery, and the East and West India docks. ... "* It therefore seems likely that John's father came to Bromley to work in the market gardens.

Ten years later and John has married Ann Matthew, a local girl and they have a two year old son .Significantly for his future he is working as a 'Cow Keeper'. In the days before refrigeration every locality had a Cow Keeper who owned a few cows. This meant that he could supply and sell fresh milk every day to the local people.

A Walthamstow Farmer

Up until 1965, when the boundaries were changed and Waltham Forest was created, a great part of what is now Chingford, was in Walthamstow. John Hitchman came to Hale End in 1867 and rented Wadham Lodge farm in Blind Lane (Now Wadham Road and part of Chingford) which he later purchased in 1898 from Wadham College of Oxford University. Wadham Lodge Farm was sited (looking from Wadham Road down Wadham Avenue) to the immediate right of Wadham Avenue

In the 1871 census, he is described as a farmer of 67 acres at Wadham Farm, in Walthamstow. He had five children and a General domestic servant and was the employer of five men and a boy. In 1881 he was a farmer of 280 acres at Hitchman's Farm in Blind Lane and employed sixteen men and two boys. The increase in acreage means that he was renting or had acquired an adjacent farm or fields.

From 1886, he also leased Clay Street or Chestnuts farm. (Clay Street is now called Forest Road) This farm later became the site of Walthamstow Town Hall and Monoux School.

Milk Provider & Retailer

From 1839 to 1859, there was only one Cow Keeper listed in Walthamstow. A dairyman was first listed in 1866. By 1906 some 46 dairymen were listed, only three of them being Cow Keepers.

John Hitchman began retailing milk in the 1880's. He would have know very early on that the real profit was to be made by direct selling to the public. This was at a time when Walthamstow was expanding from being a number of small Essex villages into the largest metropolitan area of outer London. Initially, the three Cow Keepers would have sold direct to the public in the area around their farms but as the population increased. John Hitchman needed and acquired increasingly more land and cows to meet the ever increasing demand for milk.

'Milk O'



The problem was how to distribute the milk and this led to an increasing number of dairymen who bought the milk direct from the farmer/cow keepers in Walthamstow. Some of these would have their own shop premises where they sold milk and other dairy products and often sold other grocery products. Most of them would have milk rounds where they pushed a hand-cart carrying a milk churn around the streets. They would shout 'Milk O' to announce their presence in the street. Housewives or their domestic servants would bring jugs for the dairyman to fill. John Hitchman became not only a farmer/Cow Keeper but also an owner of a number of dairies.

Left – Although, unfortunately, not a Hitchman dairyman, this shows a typical milkman at the beginning of the 19th century on his 'rounds' with churn and measuring jugs

The Torch Passes

Sometime before 1891, John Hitchman, moved into a large house at 7, Prospect Hill which was one of the most prestigious roads in Walthamstow. Frederick, his eldest son, lived next door at no. 9. In the 1901 census, John described himself as 'living on independent means'. By then, now sixty six years old, he has stopped farming and his sons Frederick, Stephen and Samuel were the farmers and running the family business;

In 1911, John Hitchman of 7, Prospect Hill died leaving his substantial value effects to his family. The family business continue to grow and the family were well known and respected. In 1911, the eldest son, Frederick Hitchman was an elected Essex County Councillor and Walthamstow Councillor for the Wood St Ward.

By now the population of Walthamstow had grown from 7,144 in 1861 to 124,580 in 1911. What had started as a family business supplying milk to Walthamstow villages in 1861 now was trying to meet the needs of an Urban District Council of 125,000 people. In 1918, the firm of John Hitchman and Sons, dairymen and cowkeepers, was sold to a local dairyman - David Alban Davies.

David Alban Davies

We learn from the Welsh National Biography Online (National Library of Wales) that:

'ALBAN DAVIES, DAVID (1873 - 1951), business man and philanthropist . Born 13 Apr. 1873 at Hafod Peris , Llanrhystud, Cards. , youngest son of Jenkin Davies , master mariner , and Anne (née Alban) his wife. On leaving the local school at the age of 14 he worked on his uncle's farm at Hafod Peris , since the family had fallen on hard times. As his brothers had been sent to Llandovery College , he saved his earnings to enter Owen's School at Oswestry when he was 18 years old. On 28 Nov. 1899 he m. Rachel Williams of Brynglas , Moria , Penuwch , in Holy Trinity Church , Aberystwyth ; they had 4 sons and a daughter. Davies and his wife went to London to work with Rachel 's brother Evan who had a successful dairy business . David Alban Davies eventually bought Hitchman's Dairies, Ltd. , which grew into a flourishing business under his direction. In 1933 he built Brynawelon, Llanrhystud and retired there.....'

Unfortunately, I must disagree with this account in one important particular. That is the assertion that *'Davies and his wife went to London to work with Rachel 's brother Evan who had a successful dairy business'*. We know from the 1901 Census (When Evan Williams was only sixteen years old) that David Davies already had a dairy business at 222, Wood Street. It therefore seems likely that it was the much older David Davies who, sometime before 1911, sent for his younger brother-in-law to come to Walthamstow to work with him in his Dairy business.

I believe that by 1901, David Davies at his Wood Street dairy was buying milk from John Hitchcock's farmer sons from their nearby Wadham Lodge and Chestnut farms. He was ambitious and wanted to expand his business. In order to achieve this objective he needed a place where he could store and distribute the large quantity of milk involved in the business and a network of milk carriers. This would enable him to supply and compete better with the forty six other dairymen in Walthamstow. His solution to the problem was to acquire a farm property that he could use as a milk distribution centre and import trusted labour to carry out this work from the same farming area in Cardiganshire, Wales where he and his wife and come from.

Green Pond Road Farm

In the 1911 Census, we find that David Davies wife's twenty six year old brother, Evan Williams, is in charge of Green Pond Farm in Higham Hill, Walthamstow (Where cows were still being kept in 1926). Also working there is a Housekeeper and three Milk Carriers who all list Blaenpenal in Cardiganshire as the place where they were born. This is exactly the same area from which David & Rachel Davies originated.

Using their base at Green Pond Farm, David Davies took Evan Williams into partnership. Although they had bought the Hitchman business they retained and traded under the locally respected and trusted name of Hitchman Dairies Ltd. Over the next twenty years they acquired many retail dairy outlets and expanded the business into Chingford, Leyton, Leytonstone, Wanstead, East Ham and Hackney. In 1925, Walthamstow born Jenkin Davies (The son of David Davies) entered the business and continued to expand the company. He later became the Chairman of *Hitchman's Dairies Ltd*

Their shops sold a range of dairy and grocery products and in the 1960/70's even had a number of sets of 25 theme cards that were sold with their own brand packets of tea for children to collect.



Above : Examples of Hitchman Tea cards. You had to collect 25 individual cards of each theme to make up a set



Left – Another new customer! A 1960's Hitchman's 1/3rd Pint milk bottle that has an embossed stork carrying a baby.

Very many people will remember having having their morning 1/3rd Pint of milk at school. This was because previous research had linked poor nutrition, low income and underachievement in schools and milk was identified as a key food that could help alleviate the problem.



After the war, under Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, the 1946 Free Milk Act was passed providing one third of a pint to all children under the age of 18.

This situation was reversed in 1970 when as one of her first acts as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher stopped the issue of free school milk and earned herself the title of 'Maggie Thatcher, the milk snatcher'

The Walthamstow Avenue Depot.

By 1938, the *Hitchman's Dairies* company had completely outgrown its Green Pond Farm base and transferred their operation to a large, newly built purpose built depot in Walthamstow Avenue (Now part of the North Circular Road) The company continued to grow and when it was sold to United Dairies in 1946 , it was selling 20, 000 gallons of milk a day and employing over 500 people!!



Left – A lovely art deco building. The Holiday Inn Express Hotel on the North Circular Road. It was previously Unigate/Dairy Crest's, St Ivel factory on part of the original Hitchman's distribution depot.

In 1959, the two largest British dairy companies - *United Dairies* and *Cow & Gate* merged to form a new company that they named as *Unigate*. However, in East London they still continued to sell milk as *Hitchman's Dairies*. It will be from this period right up until the 1990's, that most people will remember *Hitchman's Dairies* because their milk roundsmen were daily visitors to very many Walthamstow homes.



Above: Many readers will remember the above different forms of home milk delivery

Sometime in the 1980's, the *Unigate* owned *Hitchman's* factory on the North Circular Road became used by *Dairy Crest* as a '*St Ivel*' factory (*Dairy Crest's* best known brand) it was the U.K's largest fresh chilled, carbonated and long-life fruit juice distribution site with a 58 million litre, £30 million turnover.

Dairy Crest & St Ivel

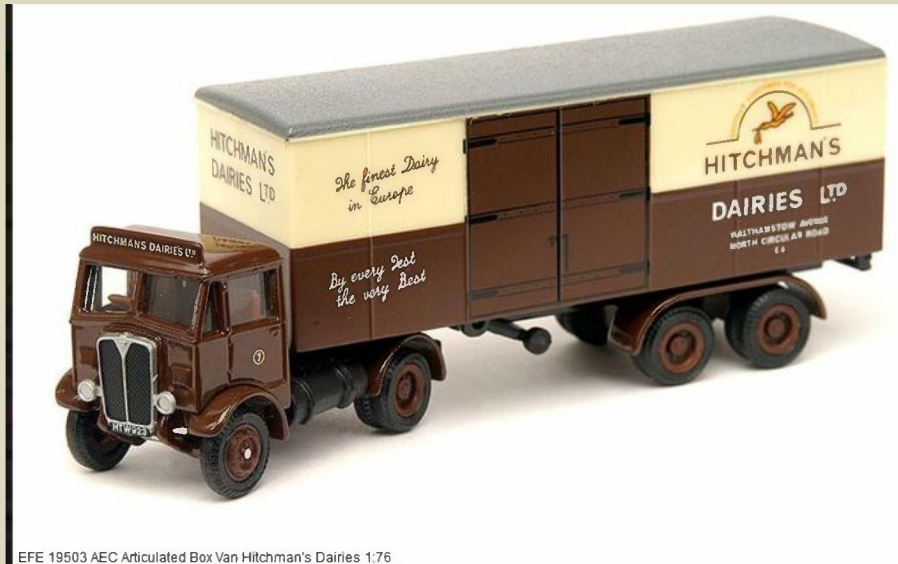
The *Dairy Crest* company was a spin-off company from the *Milk Marketing Board* .In 1933, in response to severe economic depression, the British Government had created a producer run product marketing board to buy and market milk from hard pressed dairy farmers. This was called the *Milk Marketing Board*. By the 1960's they had a surplus of 70-80 million gallons of milk every year and used this to manufacture butter and cheese for the retail and catering trade which they sold under the *Dairy Crest* brand-name of *St Ivel*

The Supermarkets 'Kill-Off' Hitchmans

By the late 1990's, with increased shopper mobility and the growth of the supermarkets, door to door milk sales had dropped dramatically and profits plummeted. In 2000, *Unigate* sold its milk and cheese division to *Dairy Crest*, who, although they continued to sell and deliver dairy and other products to their customers' doors, stopped using the *Hitchman's* name.

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