

SURVIVAL OF A THOUSAND YEAR-OLD CRAFT

Jonathan Russell meets the Saltmaker of Maldon

The quaint old Essex town of Maldon, although a thriving seaport earlier this century, does not spring readily to mind as a source of that culinary necessity, salt. Yet it is, and has been since Roman times. Down on the bank of the River Blackwater, just a stone's throw from The Hythe, once bustling centre for the rust sailed barges which plied between the town and the capital, stands Maldon Crystal Salt Company. Here, sea salt manufacture is carried on using centuries-old methods updated to make use of new materials and fuels, yet still following traditional recipes; a combination of sea, sun, wind and fire which create the soft white crystals unique to this area. Clive Osborne is the third generation of his family to manufacture sea salt in Maldon, the company having been bought by his grandfather at the end of the First World War. But saltmaking in Maldon has been carried out on the banks of the Blackwater since the Roman legions tramped by by-ways of East Anglia.

According to legend, salt was first manufactured here unintentionally nearly two thousand years ago by slaves of one Casius Petrox, commander of the legion which was billeted on the town. The fog, damp and icy winds which swept across the open marshes to his camp were an anathema to a man more used to the sunnier climes of Italy and caused his bones to ache. His only solace was to bathe in sea occasion and that the slaves, fearful of punishment for not having the bath ready, kept the fire burning. As a result the temperature was near to boiling so they still did not avoid their master's wrath. However the temper was assuaged a little when Casius noticed small white crystals at the bottom of the bath: his slaves had inadvertently discovered a method of producing salt from seawater.

Anger turned to praise after Casius sent samples to his brother officers who asked for more. Demand increased so the slaves made more and

more salt and the commander resigned his commission to devote his energies to saltmaking. Although this cannot be verified, the Domesday Book of 1086 listed 45 saltpans in Essex and there is certainly archeological evidence that salt was manufactured on the site in medieval times.

Even after the departure of the Romans in the fifth century, saltmaking continued to flourish along the Essex coast despite the unwelcome attention of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes who followed. It even survived the marauding hordes of Vikings in the tenth century and continued throughout the Middle Ages. At that time, sea water was run into shallow ponds alongside the river and allowed to concentrate by evaporation. It was then boiled in leaden pans with the salt crystallising out on cooling.

The attraction of the River Blackwater for sea salt processing remains the same as it was centuries ago. The extensive marshlands around the estuary are covered twice daily by the tide. As it recedes, a combination of sun and wind evaporates the water leaving salt on the marshes. The next tide gather this salt in solution and carries it up river where it is drawn off into the salt works and stored after rigorous filtering. Essex is one of the drier counties in Britain and, as less rainwater flows into its rivers those like the Blackwater tend to be among the saltiest in the country.

Managing director of Maldon Crystal Salt, Clive Osborne, told me that although some of the hardware had changed, methods had not. Water was drawn from the storage tanks into 10 feet square evaporating pans mounted on a system of enclosed brick flues designed to provide a specific heating pattern. In his father's day coal from the North of England pits provided the heat source but now more energy efficient natural gas is used, but sophisticated thermostatic controls have still not removed the need for skill in maintaining correct temperatures.

'You still have to listen to the tell-tale sounds of the hot pan and watch movements on the surface of the liquid as well as the actual formation of crystals,' he said. 'Unlike conventional European sea salt crystals which tend to be solid and hard, Maldon salt crystals have an inverted pyramid structure which is much softer and easier to crumble between finger and thumb. You will notice a difference in flavour too. There's none of the bitter after-taste found in other salts.'

Liquid in the pans is brought to a 'galloping boil' and during this process certain trace impurities rise to the surface as lees which is skimmed off. The heat is then reduced to just below boiling point and, as the mother liquor concentrates, crystals begin to appear on the surface. As the crystals become heavier they sink and, after about 15-16 hours, heating is stopped and the contents of the pan allowed to cool slowly overnight. The following morning crystals are carefully harvested using a traditionally made wooden hoe, placed in drainage bins for 48 hours and then dried in a dehumidified room. Then they are ready for packaging.

Today, Clive Osborne and his sister Gillian carry on the family tradition established by their step-grandfather 'Pop' Jim Rivers and carried on by their late father, Cyril.

There are currently only six salt manufacturers in the United Kingdom and Maldon Crystal is the only one producing sea salt. Such is its success that the company's reputation spreads far beyond these islands. More than a fifth of its production is exported to Australia, the North American Continent, Scandinavia and the Far East. The remaining production is eagerly consumed at tables up and down this country. A far cry from Casius Petrox.

Maldon sea salt is sold in most major food supermarkets, health food and specialist delicatessens.