

CREAMERIES

By Austin Cregan

I previously wrote separate accounts of creameries including the travelling creamery, which appeared in various publications over the years. In this article, I have brought together some of what I wrote previously with additional commentary added. My working life as a creamery manager is detailed elsewhere in this book, so suffice to say here that upon graduating from UCC as a qualified creamery manager, my first post was in Scarriff, where I worked on the ‘travelling creamery’ system. Subsequently, I held the managerial post at Tullybrackey Creamery from 1957 until I took up a similar post at Greybridge Creamery in 1978, where I remained until my retirement in 1996.

A whole transformation of the Co-Operative movement happened in the space of seventy-five to eighty years between the end of the nineteenth century and the latter quarter of the twentieth century. Co-Operatives came and went in the space of this period. The day of the horses, ponies, donkeys and carts all lined up at creameries and their branches, especially in the Munster region, all disappeared with the advent of bulk or “on farm” milk collection. With the advent of economic and industrial expansion, all the smaller milk suppliers disappeared into factories and business premises while others emigrated, all making a good living outside the dairy industry.

Historical Perspective

The Co-Operative Creamery movement began in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century, generally accepted as dating from 1889. The first Co-Operative in Ireland was built in Dromcollogher, Co Limerick. The new Co-Operatives were located mainly in the dairying areas of Munster and South Leinster. As dairying became a very good source of income, farmers in these areas had an enormous advantage over those in poorer and more scattered regions in the west of Ireland – mainly Kerry, Clare, Galway and West Cork.

In the earliest days, milk was collected from the farmers at certain stands or points around the district by a ‘long car’ (horse-drawn). Later, engine driven trucks were introduced, which were able to carry about twenty churns or cans. Six or

eight suppliers congregated at these centre points daily at a pre-arranged time, delivered their milk and took back skim (milk of the previous day with the cream separated for butter making). This skim was used for calf feeding.

A Co-Operative Creamery was built at Greybridge in 1911, more or less side-by-side with the Cleeves factory premises, and both working as separate units and taking in supplies of milk daily, but this only lasted a short time and eventually Cleeves closed down their branch.

Incidentally, with the advent of Co-Operatives, the name “factory” was changed to “creamery”. Around this period, there were factories in operation at Grange (site converted into dwelling houses later) and at Bruff (now demolished). This latter was privately owned and was rented to Cleeves at £100 sterling per annum. Cleeves considered Bruff a suitable area depot as it was adjacent to a number of their factories, but because they were unable to secure a five-year lease, they made Knocklong the “Area Headquarters” and it was in operation up to the early 1970s. The Cleeves headquarters was at Lansdowne, Limerick City, where the manufacture of sweets and confectionery and butter-making was carried out.

Around 1927, when the Dairy Disposal Board (DDB) came into existence to promote markets for dairy produce, it was thought advisable to close all creameries with an intake of less than two thousand gallons of milk daily in the peak period. Bruff and Grange were closed down around this time, and suppliers were diverted to the nearest creamery.

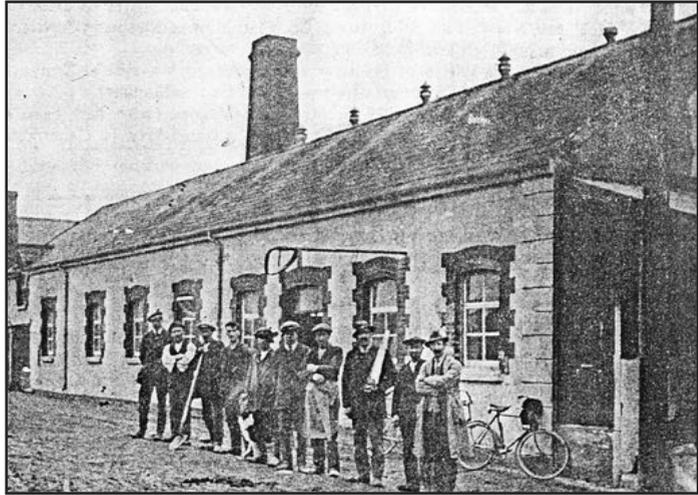
The building of Tullybrackey Creamery commenced in 1927. There was a problem in boring for water, but eventually a sufficient supply was found at a depth of eight hundred and eighty feet. The creamery commenced operations in 1930.

Considerable changes took place in the working of the creameries over the ensuing decades. Initially, the steam-driven machinery was operated by coal-fired furnaces attended by firemen at six o'clock a.m. daily. Milk was conveyed by donkey, pony and horse and cart. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that tractors and trailers came on the scene. All of these were used to carry the cans or tankards.

Further change followed again with the advent of tractors and bulk tanks, or the larger suppliers had refrigerated tanks installed on their premises, from which milk is transferred by suction pump into large tanks on lorries and conveyed through the country to the different milk collecting plants, such as Golden Vale Creameries and Mitchelstown Creameries, to mention but two operating on this side of the country.

The milking machine took over from milking by hand, the bigger farmers couldn't get on without automation. My own father had a milking machine in Manister in 1947/48, when I was just a young fellow. They were available for a time before then, but for not very long. In the early days of automated milking, the quality of milk did not always improve – in fact, the opposite was the out-

come in some cases – this was because farmers didn't clean the equipment adequately after milking. Rubbers, buckets and other parts coming in contact with the milk needed to be thoroughly cleaned. Otherwise, there was a significant risk of contami-



Outside old creamery in Grange – included is Owen Dillon, Old Road.

nating milk as it flowed through the equipment from cows. Over time, people became more aware and more expert.

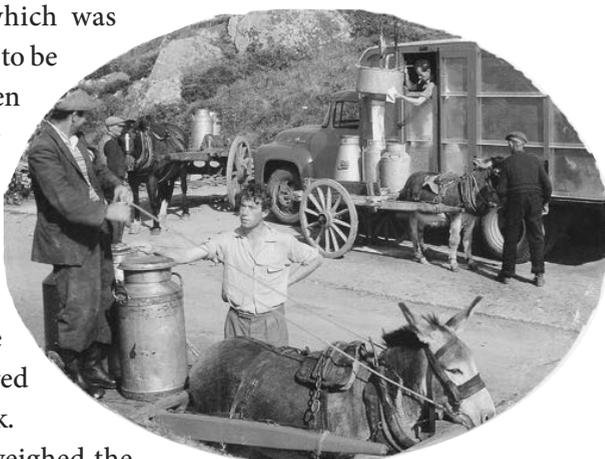
As the practice of milk cooling became prevalent, milk quality improved significantly. The farmer who had running cold water available passed it through prongs immersed in the churns of milk, thus cooling down the recently-produced milk. The quicker you could cool the milk, the better quality milk you would have the following day. Nowadays, milk is collected from suppliers by special lorries. A sample is taken at a collection point, and this is put through a range of tests at a central laboratory. Contamination by water has severe consequences for a supplier.

Travelling Creamery

The idea of the “travelling creamery” was first mooted by the Dairy Disposal Board (DDB) during the mid to the late 1940s, and these travelling creameries were subsequently located at the DDB central creameries in Clare, Kerry and West Cork, mainly.

The travelling creamery was built onto the chassis of a Ford V8 lorry. At first, a steel floor was welded onto the chassis, and a timber structure was fitted to the steel floor. This formed a complete enclosure. Two doors were then fitted, one at the back and one at the front, on either side of the timber enclosure. An opening was cut out, low down near the rear door, to allow the cans of milk to be poured into a container attached to weighing scales. When the manager had weighed and recorded the amount of milk of each supplier, he released it into a three-hundred gallon holding tank which was bolted to the floor of the truck. A separator was positioned on the floor of the ‘creamery’ behind the cab of the lorry. Piping had been fitted underneath the steel floor to take the milk from the holding tank to the separator. This operation was done by a small milk pump which was fitted for the purpose. The cream flowed into cans placed under the cream outflow chute, and the separated skim milk was

pumped out to a drum which was attached to a weighing scales, to be collected by the supplier when he pulled around to the other side of the 'traveller'. The truck driver did this part of the operation. He also looked after the separator and milk pumps as well. The whole operation was powered off the drive shaft of the truck.



Travelling Creamery.

The manager, having weighed the supplier's milk, recorded the detail in a daily record book under the supplier's creamery number. He then marked the supplier's pass book and entered the amount of skim that he was entitled to take home (which was 80% of the volume of milk brought to the creamery).

A specially prepared level piece of ground was already in place at each collecting point. This was critical as the separator had to be perfectly level for proper separation of cream from the whole milk. A spirit level was a necessary tool on each 'traveller', and when placed on top of the separator the 'drop' had to be dead centre. This was where the manager's engineering skills came to the fore. At the milk intake point, a sample for butterfat testing was taken from each supplier. The sample was placed in a bottle, which contained a preservative tablet and was taken back to the central location and placed in a locked cabinet for testing for butterfat, twice a month. This was standard procedure in all co-operatives, as farmers were paid on a butterfat content basis. When all the milk had gone through, and tanks were rinsed out, the separator brakes were put on, as it had to be locked properly for the journey over rough roads to the next port of call.

A whole new era commenced with the introduction of pasteurisation by the Department of Agriculture in 1967. An order was made that all milk for human consumption had to be pre-heated to 75-80 degrees centigrade. The travelling creamery became obsolete, and small branches were built to accommodate suppliers in the more populated areas. Others diverted to the central creamery, and the very small suppliers ceased production altogether. This method of milk separation finally ended as did a simple way of dairy farming life.

Grange Creamery

Grange Creamery was founded as a Co-Operative Dairy Society at the turn of the twentieth century and operated until the early 1920s. The first chairman of the Co-Operative was James O'Connell, Grange Hill, whose son John was the member of the

committee in Greybridge, representing Tullybrackey. They lived at Grange Hill where the O'Sullivan family now reside (not to be confused with Lough Gur House).

Mr J Landon was the first manager at Grange (1907/1908), followed by Mr TM Manly in 1910, Mr W Grogan in 1915 and Mr Wm O'Brien in 1920. Mr MJ Harnett (later at Manister Creamery) became the manager in 1924, followed by Mr P Hickey in 1927.

Mr Hickey was the father of Liam Hickey, later to become Chairman of Limerick County Council. The workers included Jack Bourke, Tom Sheahan, Owen Dillon, Ms Keogh (cheese-maker) and Anne O'Riordan (butter-maker).

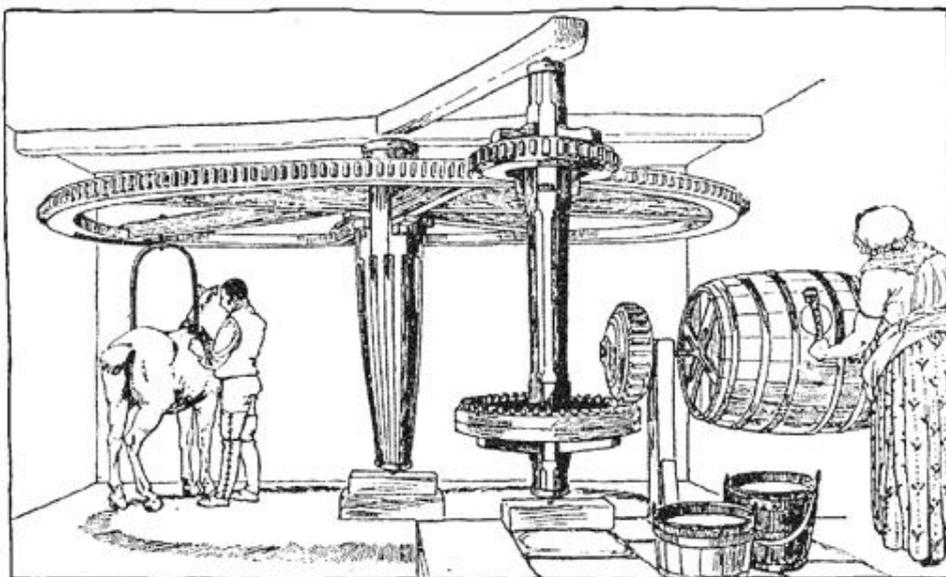
Like many other Irish creameries, Grange went into cheese production in 1919/20, to take advantage of the very lucrative British market. Unfortunately, the market collapsed in 1921, some creameries being left with cheese stocks that had to be sold off at knocked-down prices. Additionally, creameries were left with bills for recently purchased cheese-making equipment. Markets in general were depressed in the post-war period. Grange Co-Operative must have encountered difficulties around this time when it was taken over by Cleeves in the early 1920s.

The Cleeves Company encountered financial trouble, and in December 1921 they wrote to the employees, seeking a wage reduction of thirty-three and a third percent. After a protracted strike, the company was liquidated on 13th November 1923.

The business was subsequently taken over by a new company founded by a group of southern businessmen – The Condensed Milk Company of Ireland Ltd (1924). This business operated for a few years and was then purchased by the Irish Government in 1927, the business transferring to The Dairy Disposal Board, who transferred some creameries to Co-Operative hands. The Board (DDB) closed a number of unviable creameries, which appears to have been the fate of Grange Creamery. John Ryan was the last manager to serve in Grange. His son, Jimmy, who subsequently resided in Kilfinane, was a creamery manager who spent most of his working life with Kilmallock Co-Operative Creamery.

The manager's residence was the house where Mrs Annie O'Keeffe subsequently resided for many years. When the creamery closed in the late 1920s or early 1930s, it was bought by James Connolly NT. He converted it into three residences where the Hynes, O'Connell and Ryan families now reside.

The former creamery building (now three private houses) is listed in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (Reg No 21903201), the category of special interest being "architectural". The NIAH's recorded details of the 'building' include the following – *Detached nine-bay two-storey former creamery, built c 1890. Now divided into three private houses. The former creamery is a notable feature in the landscape. Converted into three houses in the early twentieth century, it still*



Horse-powered milk separator.

retains its overall form. The building forms part of a group of related structures with the former school and butter-making building in Upper Grange.
(www.buildingsofireland.ie/niah).

Tullybrackey Creamery

At Tullybrackey Creamery, the raw milk came in at one end of the building, was separated within using a process involving steam, and the skim milk was taken by the farmers at the other end of the building. Farmers were permitted to take home 80% of the milk volume which they brought to the creamery – in the form of skim milk, which was used to feed calves and pigs. As milk was taken into the creamery from the supplier, the manager took a sample in a bottle, which was tested and securely preserved for fifteen days. Milk was tested for butterfat content, twice each month from March through September. Butterfat content could vary significantly, from around 2.9% or 3% up to 3.7%. The higher the butterfat rate, the more the farmer was paid per gallon of milk. A dairy produce inspector from the Department of Agriculture visited the creamery periodically and carried out independent tests on the retained milk samples, comparing those results with the results that the manager had obtained from his testing. The same procedures were operated throughout the State.

The milk samples that were taken and securely stored for up to fifteen days were kept sweet by adding sodium bicarbonate in the form of a tablet, thus preserving milk for testing purposes. In later times, the methylene blue test for milk was introduced. This testing method, which arrived in the 1960s, involved the addition of blue dye to the milk sample, and the longer the blue dye remained intact in the milk, the higher was the milk grade awarded. Initially, the incubation

period was three hours, and this became five hours subsequently. The man who passed this test, after five hours, was deemed to have a top-class quality product and was paid accordingly for his milk. Lower graded milk had a lesser price.

A committee, elected by the three creameries, Greybridge, Manister and Tullybrackey, set the rate from time to time, to be paid to their milk producers. Greybridge was the main creamery, the other two creameries being branches. Greybridge creamery nominated eight members to the committee, while the branches nominated four each, making a total of sixteen members. In addition, the chairman of the Greybridge Co-Operative chaired the committee as a full member. This gave the balance of power to Greybridge. The chairman of Greybridge, for a long time, was John Feely of Fedamore – he became President of the ICMSA in the 1950s.

Milk yields and butterfat levels varied from one breed of cow to another. The quality of pasture land was also a contributory factor. The use of fertilisers had an



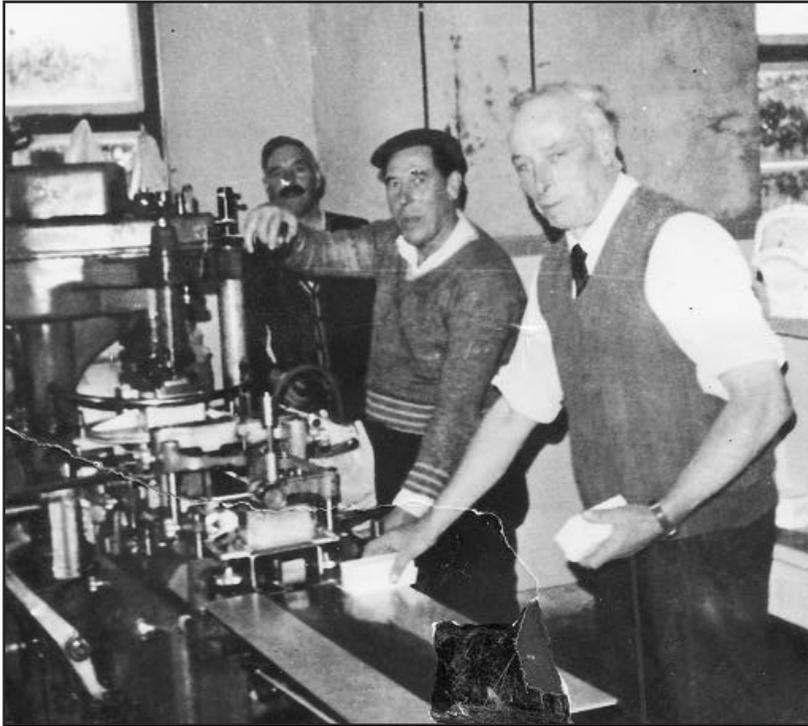
Residences developed from former Grange Creamery.

impact as well. The Friesian breed of cow was a high yielder, but high-yield cows had poorer butterfat levels than low yield cows. A Short Horn cow would return three to three and a half gallons of milk a day, but was a good butterfat producer. The Friesian

cow would yield five to six gallons a day, but the butterfat level wouldn't be as good as for the Short Horn breed. However, the Friesian was and remains the animal of choice.

Work at the creamery commenced in the morning at seven-thirty, and it was eleven o'clock in the morning before all suppliers had delivered milk. In the summertime, the creamery was taking in between 3,500 and 4,000 gallons of milk a day – a lot of weighing, separating and testing, indeed. The creamery was a separating station and didn't make butter or cheese. Each day, twelve to fifteen cans of cream were collected by lorry around midday – the cream was taken to Greybridge and placed in vats, where it was cooled down quickly.

When rationalisation came in 1975, machinery was dismantled at Tullybrackey, which was reduced to a milk intake station only, with Greybridge operating as the principal station, with all business of the suppliers transacted there. Tullybrackey Creamery closed its door finally in 1979.



Paddy Delaney, Tom Brouder and Ned Kennedy butter-making at Greybridge.

Any news at the Creamery?

A way of life that will never be seen again came to an end with the closing of creameries. Similar impacts arose from the closure of rural post offices and local shopping outlets. Back in the 1930s through to the 1960s, a store of information was collected at the creamery. In those times, radios were scarce, and many people did not buy newspapers. Those who had access to such media, passed on information gleaned to others, whether in respect of war events, results of hurling matches, local gossip, birth, deaths and marriages, and indeed about national and world news in general. When farmers or farmers' boys came home, the first question asked of them was, "Any news at the creamery?" How life has changed since then; a unique and simple way of living is never to be experienced again.

[Back to top](#) ↑