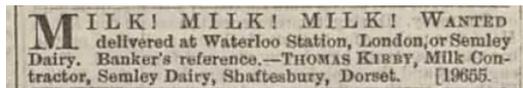


The Dairy 1871 - 1965



Western Gazette 1875

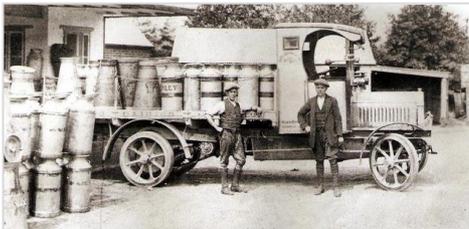


Thomas Kirby 1840-1901

In 1871 Thomas Kirby set up a milk distribution depot (Semley & Gillingham Dairies) at the railway station (opened in May 1859). Semley was able to supply milk direct to the London markets for the first time. Many local farmers had switched from arable and meat farming to milk production due to the influx of cheap imports of wheat from the American/Canadian prairies and pork from the near European continent. For local people, the milk distribution depot brought much needed employment to Semley.

Thomas Kirby was born in Towcester in 1840, the son of a gamekeeper. At the time of his marriage to Sarah Sporle (both were just 16) he was living in Spittal Street, a desperately poor area of Tower Hamlets in London.

Thomas and Sarah went on to have 9 children, the youngest two (Edith and Percy) were born in Semley. When Thomas died in 1901, he was interred at West Norwood Cemetery London in a section known as "Millionaire's Corner". His life was a genuine rags-to-riches story, from humble beginnings to owning prosperous dairy depots in Wiltshire, Dorset and Kent.



Bert Woodrow (right) standing by a Garner lorry, 1920's



Workers at United Dairies depot, early 1920's

In 1920 the distribution depot in Semley was acquired by United Dairies - they built a factory and by 1928 were pasteurising milk and making cheese. Milk was pumped along an overhead glass pipe across Station Road into rail tanks in the sidings for the onward journey to London. The Dairy building still stands today, converted to accommodate an antiques centre.

The Milk Factory

"On 1st January 1965, the Semley depot of Wilts United Dairies, situated opposite the railway station, was the main industry in the village and a source of employment to many families. The Manager for the past 25 years, Mr Hugh Lawton, died early in the new year and was succeeded by Mr Bryan Bence who brought his wife and young family to a newly modernised and redecorated Kirby House in the spring.

On 1st April, the entire group of Wilts United Dairies and Cow & Gate Creameries were merged and changed their name to Unigate Creameries Ltd. Many new methods of working and procedure were introduced. The future appeared to be assured, when suddenly it was announced that the Milk Marketing Board were withdrawing all milk from Semley depot and the factory would close in September, the staff becoming redundant. However, after several unhappy weeks, the staff were told that although the factory would no longer handle liquid milk, the depot would continue to provide some employment of a different nature and some staff would remain. Everyone was found alternative employment either with the Company or elsewhere.

On 30th September 1965 at 3pm, the last road tank load of milk left for London, the machinery came to a halt and an uncanny silence prevailed. For several days the few people left behind wondered if they would ever get used to the change but gradually hope returned and with it, increased activity. Now, at the close of the year, a Powder Packing line for Milk Powder is being installed, part of the premises used for storage, another section is devoted to the repair of churns and, in the New Year, the neighbouring redundant plant stores are to move in from Tisbury. Those of us who have survived the changes are looking forward to the "New Look" with eager anticipation."

The Milk Factory - written by Jesse W. Rays, Semley Women's Institute (undated but probably 1965)



Semley Milking Gang c1905

Caroline Smith (married Fred Knight) seated front row far right

Jan Oliver November 2012/Updated Feb 2015

Images from Anthony Kirby, Rex Sawyer, Karen Satterthwaite, Semley W.I.