

## 11. SOFT FRUIT

We called them the 'berries,' them being the new school blazers that appeared after the school holidays. The name came about because the owners had picked raspberries during the summer months in order to buy their new clothes.

Berry pickers have always worked on piece work rates either receiving so much per pound, or per tray picked so these jackets would represent several hundred pounds of harvested raspberries.

Fife has never had a large commercial soft fruit acreage. Perth and Angus were the big fruit growing areas. It was in Blairgowrie in Perthshire at the beginning of last century that growers found an area where summers were not too hot and where there were plenty of pickers to harvest the crop. From there, processing factories were set up, initially as canning and jam making enterprises, then, later, joined by specialists in the freezing of fruit.

In fact, it was stated that the growth of the raspberry crop in the years between the two World Wars was brought about by the popularity of the proverbial 'jammy piece.' For those unfamiliar with the spreading of raspberry jam on bread, this was a regular part of the diet for millions of school children and factory workers. And if you did not take a jammy piece to school or work, you would likely get one for your tea when you came home.

Until the opening of the Tay Road Bridge in the mid 1960s growers in Fife did not have access to any processing opportunities and this prevented the county contributing to the soft fruit industry in its two neighbouring counties of Perth and Angus. At that time, these two areas grew three quarters of all the commercial raspberry crops in the United Kingdom.

One of the largest fruit farms in Fife was at Gilliesfaulds, right on the outskirts of Cupar. Pickers came from all directions, many just walking or cycling from the town to the berry harvest.

In the early days, families of travelling people would often encamp on a soft fruit farm and stay there for the season with every member of the family turning out for the picking. But as picking standards rose, the travelling people melted away.

For many, travelling people or not, berry picking was a real family event. While the mother and older children were picking the fruit, younger ones played in the puddles, or the dust at the end of the dreels, or rows. Sometimes the youngest of the family would be wrapped in old fertiliser bags and left to sleep while the work went on around them.

Fruit growers out in the country had to bring their squads to the farm by whatever means of transport they had. Some used old lorries with tarpaulin covers and a few straw bales for seats and went down to the mining villages in west Fife for their workforce. Latterly, former Corporation buses were used for transport and, even out of season, berry farms would be easily identified by the string of old buses in the stackyard. These buses were driven by the men on the farm and because the law said they were not being used for 'hire or reward' anyone with a current licence could, and did, drive these buses.

It was an unlucky day for all concerned when the berry bus was stopped en route for the farm by the men from the 'dole.' Those quick enough to escape from the back of the bus would return to pick another day and any number of false names and addresses were provided, although the civil servants carrying out the raid already knew they were not interviewing John Smith far less Mickey Mouse.

For the farmer with orders to meet, such an event disrupted picking plans not only for that day but for several more to come.

A good grower always divided his picking squad into those who could pick good fruit 'the specials' and those who could not. Pickers who squeezed the fruit when picking were given buckets; those with a gentler touch would be given 'luggies' which could hold several punnets and were tied around to release both hands for picking.

In the fruit-picking hierarchy, being asked to put your fruit into punnets was a plus as pay rates were higher.

Originally, punnets were made of wood chip and would hold one pound, approx. 0.45 kilo, of fruit; later they were made from recycled paper, pre formed. Nowadays, all punnets that are used are made of polythene and the weights vary according to the whim of the buyers.

Full punnets were transferred to trays and they in turn were taken to the weighing stations where the quality was inspected and the piece work rate was paid in cash. Often the weighing stations were manned by students some of whom became entrepreneurs in their own right. One bought potato crisps at the local cash and carry and then sold them to the pickers at a profit. On one occasion, there was an added bonus as the crisp company was offering cutlery in exchange for empty packets. So the student sold the crisps, collected the empty packets and ended up with a canteen of cutlery!

Picking conditions varied a great deal. The first pick of a crop could provide a tidy sum for the picker's pocket at the end of a day. A poorer, thinner crop, or rain, coming mid way through the day, thus reducing earning capacity, would mean a very discontented gang of pickers.

Today the arrival of mobile phone provides an immediate network through which pickers in various parts of the country inform each other of pay rates, and fruit quality. Growers will see their picking team quickly melt away to other farms where it is reputed that picking is easier and the rates are better. Even before the arrival of the mobile, pickers were quick to find out who was paying more and where the berries were better. To combat this, the growers decided on recommended standard rates which were published. This started in 1937 when the suggested rate was half a penny per pound, or £0.05 per kilo for the first 3 pickings, rising to three quarters of a penny per pound, or £0.07 per kilo, for later or thinner pickings.

Those picking for the processing market were also paid on a piece work basis similar to those picking for the fresh market the only difference being that a reduced rate was always paid for picking pulp. They would come to the temporary weigh stations with their buckets of fruit being weighed before tipping the berries into large barrels.

Handlers had to be alert to the tricks of pickers who falsely increased the weight of fruit they brought in to the weighing stations. At the lower end of the crime list were those who put small stones at the bottom of their punnets and then covered them with fruit. At the unmentionable end were those who, hidden by the rows of raspberry canes, decided to relieve themselves in the buckets. Such action was reputed to add a little tang to the raspberry jam and it did add a little to the overall weight of the fruit for which the picker was paid.

This of course occurred in the pre Health and Safety Executive days when there was no statutory requirement to provide on-field toilets.

Perhaps few jam buyers knew that after tipping fruit into wooden or, later on, polythene drums, the preservative used by the processors was sulphur dioxide.

This chemical left the once red raspberries and strawberries a ghostly and ghastly white colour but it did keep the fruit until it was needed in the factory lines.

Producers who grew for the processing market were always vulnerable to imports of cheaper pulp from Eastern Europe. In the mid 1950s the price dropped

from £165 per ton to £55 per ton for pulp. This was partly on account of those countries behind the Iron Curtain trying to raise hard currency but it also reflected a change in eating habit. No longer was the jammy piece an integral part of the diet of the school child or the factory or office worker. More sophisticated processed foods were becoming available.

Because soft fruit has a short shelf life, time is very much of the essence when it is picked for the fresh market. Formerly the big cities had fruit markets which started trading at 5am and supplied the individual greengrocers.

Vans of fruit picked the previous day and held overnight in a cooler did these early morning runs to market.

For fruit heading south to the big city markets in England, the train timetable decided when it could be picked. In Cupar the overnight express took the fruit down to the large conurbations.

Nowadays, big supermarkets dictate their collection times and again the picking force, which today is almost totally, migrant labour, work to that schedule. Once the fruit is picked, it goes off to the packing station where punnets are inspected to ensure all the fruit is up to grade. The hierarchy of the labour force ensures that only reliable workers work in this sorting shed. For the grower, the fickle demands of the major retailers mean a constantly shifting size of punnet size and pricing label as the supermarkets expect the growers to carry out all the pre sale operations.

The traditional soft fruit harvest ran for a month or so in the summer but now with improved husbandry techniques, fruit picking stretches from May to October. Harvesting is further enhanced by largely being carried out under large polythene tunnels. Supermarkets expect fruit every day and they do not consider it an excuse to say that 'rain stopped picking.'

As people become more aware of the health giving properties of eating more fruit, more and more large polythene tunnels are being erected to grow raspberries, strawberries and more recently blueberries.