

Stilton-crazy, after all these years

On the eve of the British Cheese Awards, judge Randolph Hodgson of Neal's Yard Dairy reveals how his business matured. By Sybil Kapoor

Next Friday, the Cotswold village of Stow-on-the-Wold in Gloucestershire will be invaded by 600 British cheeses. Their anxious owners will lovingly lay them out on trestle tables in the hope that they may win one of the coveted prizes in the seventh British Cheese Awards. Judges will pore over every one, from the creamy Shropshire Blue to the fragile, lemony goat's milk pyramid of Cerney Cheese. It is enough to make a Frenchman quiver in amazement – surely these are not made in a country renowned for its rubbery, plastic-wrapped cubes of le Cheddar?

Twenty years ago, such prejudice against British cheeses was understandable. You could buy superb French cheese in Britain but not a hand-made, unpasteurised Cheshire cheese. Even though a few people made such cheeses, they were sold by type. The shopper had no idea whether they were buying a chunk of mass-produced Cheshire or a luscious, crumbly piece of hand-made Appleby's Cheshire. Worse still, many artisan cheesemakers found that their fine cheese was commanding lower prices than their tasteless industrial rivals, as they were too idiosyncratic to conform to the

supermarket's regimental specifications of moist, rindless uniformity wrapped in plastic.

Enter an unlikely champion of artisan cheesemakers. Randolph Hodgson was studying food science at London University. A mutual friend was helping Nick Saunders, an eccentric food entrepreneur, set up a dairy in Covent Garden, London. Appalled by the future prospect of a cosy job in one of the multiples, Hodgson recalls, "I became fascinated by the process of making cheese. I scraped through my degree and persuaded Nick to give me a job." In 1979, aged 23, and with Saunders' help, Randolph Hodgson opened Neal's Yard Dairy in Covent Garden, selling the Greek yogurt, fromage frais and ice creams he'd taught himself to make.

Business thrived in the summer, but as soon as it grew cold, people lost interest in yogurt and ice cream. Hodgson contacted a wholesaler and arranged some conventional cheeses on his counter, but found that he could not shift them. Then, one morning, he received a sweaty piece of Devon Garland in the post from Hilary Charnley, an ex-city worker who had moved to Devon to rear cows and make this cheese flavoured with thyme, oregano and spring onions. Hodgson

was so intrigued that he arranged a visit. It was to prove a pivotal meeting. "I realised that selling cheese was all about finding the right producer, and then the right cheese," he explains. "If I understood the cheese, I could get customers to taste it, and sell it as if it were my own." This was the beginning of a dynamic loop between small cheesemakers and their customers.

During those early years, spurred on by Patrick Rance, cheesemonger and author of *The Great British Cheese Book* (1982), and Jane Scotter, Hodgson's business partner, he trekked up and down the country meeting cheesemakers, to establish Neal's Yard Dairy as a primary source for wonderful British cheeses. Many small British cheesemakers began to cut out the middlemen and sell their cheese direct to him.

All this threatened to change in 1989, when the listeria food scare erupted. Cheeses, especially unpasteurised ones, were demonised. Hodgson, after discussions with Patrick Rance, leaped to the defence of dairy foods, citing countless scientific papers that proved that not only are they not dangerous, but that even properly produced, unpasteurised cheese is safe. A government ban on the sale of unpasteurised cheese was

prevented, and within days Hodgson had also set up the Specialist Cheesemakers Association to give producers a voice. He is still its chairman, and the 120 members lobby the Government on everything from the EC Milk Directive to creating a code of practice for specialist cheesemakers.

Although Neal's Yard Dairy is synonymous with the best, Randolph Hodgson is too modest to consider himself a saviour of artisan British cheeses. Yet as he picks his way through the trestle tables as Chief Judge of the British Cheese Awards, he will also be considering how to safeguard the future of cheeses he has made it his business to encourage. "I want it to be acknowledged that dairy products are one of the safest foods you can eat. It is time that the role that the specialist cheese makers play in dairy industry is appreciated and protected," he insists.

Taste or buy some of the cheeses exhibited at the British Cheese Awards on 30 September from 10am-5pm, at The Square in Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire, admission £2. Neal's Yard Dairy - mail order: (020-7407 1800) Shops: 17 Short Gardens, London WC2 (020-7379 7616) 10 Stoney Street, London SW1 (020-7407 1222)

A LANCASHIRE LASS WHOSE CHEESE FLIES FIRST-CLASS

RUTH KIRKHAM spends her days in the cool of the dairy, making traditional unpasteurised Lancashire cheese from the milk of a herd of 40 Friesian cows. Unlike many dairy farmers, she admits to being happy with her lot. "It's a good way of life," she remarks, in a soft, gently lilting voice, "you live well and work together as a family."

A farmer's daughter, her mother gave her the recipe for Lancashire cheese, handed down from her own mother. It follows the age-old local tradition of mixing the curd from two different days to give a deeper, more complex-tasting hard cheese. "I started 23 years

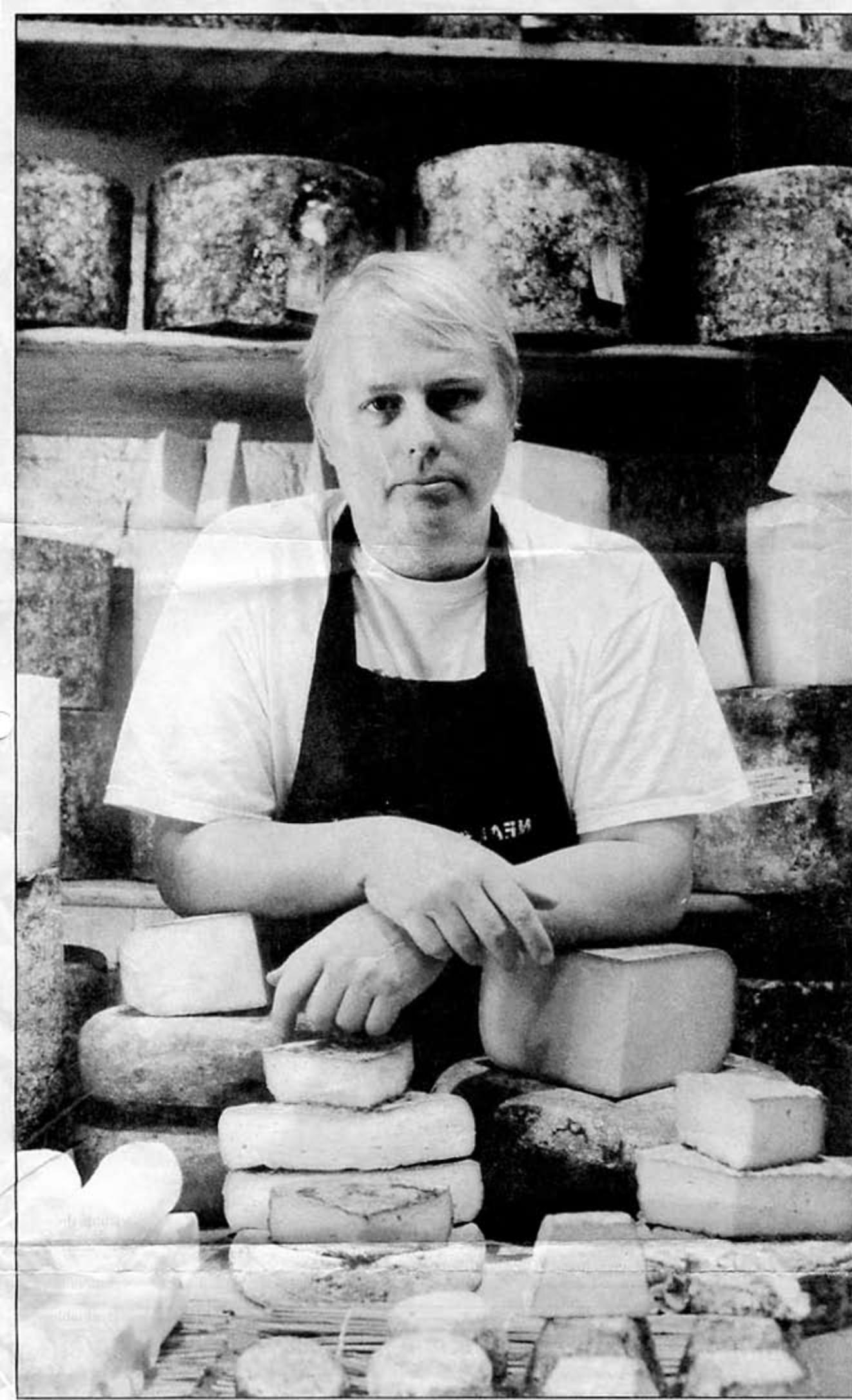
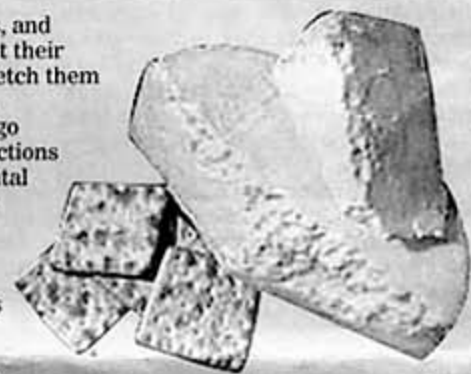
ago with my husband, John," she recalls. "Our cheese was collected and sold every week by Mendip Foods, part of the Milk Marketing Board. They'd grade it, it was always superfine and we'd get about £1 for every pound of cheese."

Then came the 1989 listeria scare, and they were faced with the awful choice of pasteurising their milk for a duller-tasting cheese or losing their supermarket sales. "As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened," laughs Mrs Kirkham, "Randolph Hodgson heard about us and persuaded us to continue making raw milk cheese." They began to sell

direct to shops, and discovered that their cheese could fetch them £2.15 a pound.

They undergo rigorous inspections by environmental health officers and cash flow is always a problem, but Mrs Kirkham's Lancashire, like Duckett's Caerphilly and Montgomery's Cheddar, is among those that keep the reputation of British territorial cheeses alive. Randolph Hodgson secretly entered a wedge of their Lancashire cheese in the 1995 British Cheese Awards

– it won Supreme Champion. Lancashire cheese was rediscovered. "You can even eat our cheese on Virgin airlines," says Ruth Kirkham, "although I suspect it is only offered to first-class customers."



Randolph Hodgson, the unlikely hero of artisan independent cheesemakers

Simon Tobias