

THE ORIGINS OF STILTON

Richard Landy

'When all seems lost in England, there is still Stilton, an endless after dinner conversation piece to which England points with pride.'

Robert Benchley

The origin of Stilton cheese is a subject which has exercised people for more than two centuries. The view of the Stilton Cheese Makers' Association (SCMA) is that a blue-veined cream cheese was first made in the area around Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire, soon after the enclosure of the old open fields. A number of named Leicestershire originators and locations have been proposed at different times and these have been repeated by many writers over the intervening years. While the SCMA – for example in its application for Protected Designation of Origin in 1996 and in their application for a Trademark in 1966 – has always asserted that the cheese was first produced in Leicestershire and was never produced in the village of Stilton and that moreover, that Stilton/Huntingdonshire could not have produced Stilton cheese because it lacked the cattle to support a dairy industry, we would take issue with these claims.

The first literary references to Stilton cheese were made by William Stukeley, in his *Itinerarium Curiosum* of 1722, and by Daniel Defoe, when he visited the village in 1724 and declared it 'A town famous for cheese'. To give these observations some flesh and bone, I have gathered the evidence presented here from historical documents and published texts. It is confined to seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources as little significant new information has been added since then. I have tried to exclude speculation and unsupported supposition as well as irrelevant general history, using instead, wherever possible, exact quotations.

One of the earliest Leicestershire names to be mentioned in connection with Stilton cheese is that of Lady Beaumont. It is said that a cream cheese was produced at Cole Orton Hall in the early seventeenth century for family consumption, and became known as 'Lady Beaumont's cheese'. Later, Thomas Beaumont is said to have passed on the recipe for this cheese to the nearby Ashby family at Quenby Hall where a Miss Elizabeth Scarborough produced the cheese in the dairy. Miss Scarborough is said to have later married a Mr Orton of Little Dalby near Kirby Bellars in Leicestershire and began making the cheese there in the early 1730s.

In the 1740s Frances Pawlett, a skilled cheese-maker and resident of Wymondham in Leicestershire, is recorded as entering into a business arrangement with Cooper Thornhill, the famous landlord of the Bell Inn, Stilton, to produce and source the cheese exclusively for him. As a result of his business acumen and her skills, its fame continued to spread from Stilton. These are indeed verifiable people connected with the cheese-making trade, the only problem is that the dates are not consistent with the fame of Stilton cheese.

In an age long before refrigeration, the production of cheese was (as it still is) the most effective way of preserving milk. The discovery by the present author of a complete third-century Roman cheese mould in Stilton (the only complete example ever discovered), as well as fragments of several others, shows that cheese was being produced in Stilton at least 1,700 years ago. Cheese has always been made in all parts of the country on many different scales, from individual farmhouse production, through to estates and organised cooperatives. Different types of cheese were sold all over the kingdom to suit all purses and palates: manual workers eating it for nourishment and gentlefolk for digestion. In the early seventeenth century the West Country produced the finest, in the form of Cheddar, but Cheshire, Gloucester and Suffolk cheeses commanded the widest sale. A metropolitan market for cheese had been established in London by the middle of the seventeenth century.

Early travel writers are an invaluable source of information not only for what they say, but also for what they do not. Given that we know Stilton cheese was famous by about 1720, it must have begun to have been made in considerable quantities a number of years prior to this, requiring, amongst other things, large numbers of cattle. Daniel Defoe was quoted by the Stilton Cheese Makers' Association in its application for PDO status in 1996. Partly in preparation for his book *A Tour Through The Whole Island of Great Britain*, Defoe made journeys into every corner of the country and, as already mentioned, acknowledged Stilton as 'a town Famous for cheese'. This assertion was not based on a single visit for he was very familiar with the whole district.

Although his early life is uncertain, it is known that Defoe's grandfather, Daniel Foe, was a farmer from near Peterborough, between Etton and Peakirk. Defoe's father James was born there, then sent to London when he was about eight as an apprentice-butcher. His grandmother Rose, following the death of her first husband, married a Thomas King of Orton Longueville, Peterborough. Defoe himself is thought to have been born in Colchester in 1659 and led a fascinating life which later included terms in prison for both dissidence and bankruptcy. He was rescued from the latter largely by the efforts of Lord Harley, who lobbied the Queen and government on his behalf. He was released and his debts paid out of secret service funds. He was then engaged as a pro-government pamphlet writer and as a spy-master against the Scottish Jacobites. Lord Harley's estate was at Wimpole Hall near Cambridge and he is known to have stayed at the Bell Inn, possibly even meeting Defoe there to keep their encounters confidential. His Lordship said he disliked the cheese he ate at the Bell Inn, but this need not, necessarily, be seen as a comment on its quality (as has been suggested) but merely on his tastes. It is, after all, permissible to dislike Stilton cheese, and Defoe's own remarks about the mites in Stilton are less than complimentary. Defoe himself thought Cheddar the best cheese in England.

In the early years of the century, Defoe was constantly travelling the Great North Road due to his involvement in anti-Jacobite espionage. His alias then was Alexander Goldsmith. Later in life he turned to commerce, dealing in commodities as diverse as leather, horses, wine and woollen cloth. When he was in his 60s (which would have been the early 1720s) he is also known to have been trading in large quantities of cheese and oysters out of a warehouse in Tower Dock, London. He was well aware of, and frequently comments upon the places of origin and manufacture of a wide range of goods. His remarks in *A Tour Through The Whole Island* contain much information about the region of the East Midlands. He notes that round Stilton,

Here again is the most beautiful range of meadows and, perhaps not to be equalled in England for length. They continue for above 30 miles in length from Peterborough to Northampton, and in some places are near two miles in breadth; the land rich, the grass fine and good and the cattle, which are always feeding on them, hay time excepted, numberless.

At Huntingdon he observes,

Here are the most beautiful meadows on the banks of the river Ouse, that I think are to be seen in any part of England; which, in the summer season, are covered with such numerous herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, as are hardly credible.

When he reaches Lincolnshire, he remarks,

I have only to add, that these fens of Lincolnshire are of the same kind, and contiguous with, those already mentioned in the Isle of Ely, and in the counties of Cambridge and Huntingdon, and that here, as well as there, we see innumerable numbers of cattle, which are fed up to an extraordinary size by the richness of the soil.

As we follow him into Leicestershire, the tenor of his observations changes,

Leicester stands on the river Soar which rises not far from that high cross I mentioned before: They have a considerable manufacture carried on here, and for several of the market towns round, for weaving of stockings on frames; and one would scarce think it possible that so small an article of trade could employ such multitudes of people as it does; for the whole county seems to be employed in it: as also Nottingham and Derby...The largest sheep and horses in England are found here, and hence it comes to pass too, that they are in consequence, a vast magazine of wool for the rest of the nation...The Foss way leads us hence through the eastern and north eastern part of the county and particularly through the Vale of Belvoir or as it is commonly call'd , of Bever, to Newark in Nottinghamshire: in all this long tract we pass a rich and fertile country, fruitful fields, and the noble river Trent, for twenty miles together, often in our view: the towns of Mount Sorrel, Loughborough, Melton Mobrai, and Walton in the Wolds, that is to say, on the downs; all these are market towns but of no great note.

In his travels through Leicestershire, and Nottinghamshire for that matter, Defoe makes very little mention of the presence of cattle, and none whatsoever of the production of cheese, whereas he does for Cheddar, Cheshire, Suffolk and Gloucester cheese (the majority of the latter he says, is made in Wiltshire).

A travel writer contemporary to Defoe, a remarkable woman called Celia Fiennes, also passed through every county in England at the end of the seventeenth century. She wrote of Leicestershire in 1698, in *Through England On A Side Saddle In The Time Of William And Mary*,

Here you see very large fine sheep and very good land, but very deep bad roads. From hence to Leicester Which they

call but 13 miles, but ye longest 13 I ever went and ye most tiresome, being full of sloughs, yet I was near 11 hours going but 25 mile, as they reckon it, between Wansford [5 miles from Stilton] and Leicester town – a footman could have gone much faster than I could ride.

As she rode towards Nottingham she reports, much as Defoe,

at a distance we see Beauvoir castle, the Earl of Rutland's house, and a prospect of more than 20 miles about, shewing the diversities of cultivation and produce of the earth. The land is very rich and fruitful, so the green meadows with the fine corn fields which seemes to bring forth in handfulls. They sow most of barley and have great increase, there is all sorts of graine besides, and plains and rivers and great woods and little towns all in view. They make brick and tile by ye town – the manufacture of the town mostly consists in the weaving of stockings, which is a very ingenious art.

The manufacture of stockings in Leicestershire was still being emphasised a century later by Arthur Young. He has been described as a tireless propagandist for agricultural improvement and spent most of his life travelling in England, Wales, Ireland and France. When the government created the Board of Agriculture in 1793 (as a response to the war with France, which seemed to threaten Britain's food supply), he was appointed secretary, directing further major agricultural surveys. When revisiting Leicestershire, he insists mostly on the large number of sheep in the county, while admiring also the efforts of his acquaintance, the celebrated breeder Robert Bakewell, to increase the number and quality of cattle in the mid-century. Young also wrote, 'Slept at Leicester, a place thriving very rapidly, and much improved since I was here before. The stocking manufacture is in such demand, that they cannot get hands to answer it; a man with an engine earning from 20s. to 30s. a week.'

In 1793 the Leicestershire historian John Gough Nichols published his *History of Leicestershire*. In his view the origins of Stilton

cheese lie at Little Dalby where Mrs Orton began production in 1730. *The Memoirs of John Martyn and of Thomas Martyn: Professors of Botany in the University of Cambridge* written by George Cornelius Gorham in 1830 tells us that Nichols acquired this information from his friend and colleague, Professor Martyn. He, in turn, had been given the story by Edward Hartopp, who was his ward and an undergraduate at Cambridge University. Hartopp was resident at Little Dalby Hall and was born there in 1731. Hartopp and Martyn's relationship was close, the professor not only stayed at Little Dalby Hall one winter, but also (together with his wife and infant son) travelled with Mr Hartopp – for reasons of the latter's health – on the Continent for two years after 1778.

Thomas Martyn's father was John, the second Professor of Botany at Cambridge, who had been awarded the post in 1734 following the death of Richard Bradley with whom he had, it is recorded, a bitterly acrimonious relationship. He eventually vacated his Chair in favour of Thomas in 1767. Perhaps there was some degree of spite, in respect of his father's differences with Bradley and/or loyalty to his pupil's assertions, in relating the Little Dalby story to Nichols, because Thomas Martyn would surely have been aware that Bradley had already written extensively about Stilton cheese, first in a series of monthly articles on horticulture in 1721/22, which included the recipe for the cheese, which was later published in his *General Treatise of Husbandry and Gardening* (1726). The articles and book would probably not have had circulation wide enough to have reached Nichols. Bradley was informed by his friend John Warner, a respected horticulturalist with a 'celebrated' garden in Rotherhithe, Kent where he specialized in growing vines. He is described as 'A gentleman eminent for his skill in the most curious articles of horticulture,' and introduced the Black Prince and Black Hamburg grape varieties into Britain. In the published letter, he sent Bradley a receipt to make a cream cheese and said that it was for the 'Famous' Stilton cheese. He went on to comment:

at the Sign of the Bell is much the best cheese in Town;

the Man of that House keeping strictly to the old Receipt, while others thereabouts seem to leave out a great part of the Cream, which is the chief ingredient.

Richard Bradley mentioned Stilton cheese again in his *Country Housewife and Lady's Director* (1727, the 1736 edition republished by Prospect in 1980), advising that the people of Stilton should be careful to keep to the 'antient' way of making the cheese to maintain its quality. 'The Master of the Blue Bell Inn Stilton,' he wrote, 'provided me with one that was excellent in its way, and yearly furnishes as many customers with them as give him timely notice'.

In 1732 Bradley published another book entitled *The Gentleman and Farmer's Guide for the Increase and Improvement of Cattle* in which he devotes no less than four pages to a recipe and a detailed description of the production method. In response to suggestions that because the cheese was pressed, the result would be a hard cheese like Parmesan, he observed,

As to the Fashion of this Cheese, it is about eight inches high, and about seven Inches the Diameter over the Top. It is so soft, that when we cut it at a year old, or about the Christmas next after the making, one may spread it upon Bread like Butter.

The John Warner recipe is the earliest published recipe so far identified and, together with Bradley's further information, gives the earliest first-hand accounts of a cheese called Stilton being made in that village (or anywhere else). Plainly, it must have been produced there for some time previously to acquire both the fame and the link to the locality.

The owner of the (Blue) Bell Inn at this time was John Brownell. His father Richard was described as 'Gentleman and Postmaster of Stilton and Stamford.' John Brownell was said to be 'possessed of a handsome fortune and interested in the science [of botany].' He was an acquaintance of Bradley's and was himself connected

to a Cambridge college. Richard Bradley had been awarded his professorship largely on the promise to build, 'out of his own purse', a physic garden for the University but was unable to do so after losing most of his money in what he only cryptically refers to as 'the Kensington incident'. Following this, Bradley had been in negotiations with Brownell to fund the garden and it was agreed that upon Brownell's death, this would be done out of his estate. Bradley died first however and when Brownell did die, for some unknown reason, the funds were 'diverted to another purpose'. The garden was eventually built during the Martyns' tenure of the Chair.

In a book called *The Compleat Grazier* by a 'Country Gentleman', published in 1776, the anonymous author gives an authoritative recipe for the method of making Stilton cheese, similar to but more specific than either John Warner's or Richard Bradley's earlier accounts. He finishes by saying,

When the milk is come, break the curd with a fleeting dish, or otherwise, as small as you would do for cheesecakes, and after that salt it and put it in the cheese vat, pressing it for two hours.

The whey must then be boiled, and when you have taken from the boiling whey such curds as will rise in it, (commonly called wild curds) put the cheese into the whey, and let it remain there for half an hour; then put it again into the press, and when you take it out, bind it up close on the sides with linen rowlers.

This cheese must be turned twice a day for the first month...

As to the fashion of this cheese, it is about eight inches high and about seven inches the diameter over the top; generally weighs eighteen pounds and is sold for 12 pence per pound, by all that make it in Stilton, though the true method of making it was followed but by one house that I could find, when I was there.

Cuthbert Bede, also mentioned later in this article, gives a very similar description of the size, shape and even the price of the cheese in 1866, nearly a hundred years later. In 1776, Beatrix Farrand and Eliza Webber published *A New Display of the Beauties of England*, in which they wrote of Huntingdonshire:

The soil is in general very fruitful. In the hilly parts, or dry lands, it yields great crops of corn, and affords excellent pasture for sheep. And in the lower lands the meadows are exceedingly rich and feed abundance of fine cattle; not only for slaughter, but for the dairy and the cheese made at a village called Stilton near Yaxley; known by the name of Stilton cheese, is usually stiled the Parmesan of England.

This was a direct quotation from an earlier book called *The New Present State of Great Britain* published in 1770 by J. Almon. In this we find the comment about Leicestershire that, ‘The principal business of this county is agriculture, it has no manufacture but of stockings, and that produces considerable advantage.’ The similarity of their wording would lead most people to infer that they relied in the still older, *The Geography of England: Done In The Manner of Gordon’s Geographical Grammar*, published for R. Dodsley in 1744. This says, ‘The pastures and meadows are exceedingly rich, feeding fine cattle either for the butcher, or the dairy, as the Stilton cheese (the Parmesan of England) sufficiently evinces.’

The use of the phrase ‘the Parmesan of England’ refers to the fame of the cheese, not to any physical similarities. Dodsley’s book mentions eight different cheese-making areas in England but confines its comments on Leicestershire to, ‘The chief commodities are corn, fish, flesh, fowl, wool, beans and horses for the collar. The county is chiefly taken up in farming, but the Stocking Manufacture is much encouraged, and turns to a very good account.’

The period 1790–1793 was the turning-point. Prior to this the majority of writers identified Stilton as the place where the cheese originated and was made for many years. Thereafter, accounts of its

production seem to shift the centre of activity to Leicestershire. William Marshall's *The Rural Economy of the Midland Counties* (1790) states,

Leicestershire is, at present, celebrated for its "cream cheese," – known by the name of STILTON CHEESE. This species of cheese may be said to be a modern produce of the Midland District. Mrs. Paulet of Wimondham (sic), in the Melton quarter of Leicestershire, the first maker of Stilton cheese, is still living.

Then, three years later, John Nichols, mentioned earlier, ascribes the invention of the cheese to Mrs Orton of Little Dalby.

The 1793 reports were re-examined by Marshall in 1815 when he wrote *A Review of the Reports to the Board of Agriculture*. He published extracts of Mr. Monk's account of Leicestershire which gives the 'grand secret' for making Stilton cheese on page 193. The recipe says (of the curds), 'keep gradually pressing it till it becomes firm and dry'. At the end, Marshall has added an interesting footnote: 'N.B. The dairy-maid must not be disheartened if she does not succeed perfectly in her first attempt.'

In the dairies which I visited, the cheeses, after being taken out of the wooden hoop, were bound tight round with a cloth, which cloth was changed every day until the cheese became firm enough to support itself; after the cloth was taken off, they were rubbed every day all over, for two or three months, with a brush; and, if the weather is damp or moist, twice a day (and even before the cloth was taken off, the top and bottom was well rubbed every day).

If Stilton cheeses were not pressed in the hoop or vat, the reporter surely should have said so.

Later in the same publication, on page 231, under the title 'the best receipt' for making Stilton cheese, written by a reporter from Leicestershire named Pitt, is:

put the curd into a sieve to drain, it must not be broke at all, but as the whey runs from it tie it up in a cloth, and let it stand half an hour or more; then pour cold water upon it, enough to cover it, and let it stand half an hour more; then put half of it into a vat, six inches deep, and break the top of it a little to make it join with the other; then put the other half to it, and lay a half hundred-weight upon it, and let it stand half an hour; then turn it and put it into the press, and turn it into clean cloths every hour the day it is made; the next morning salt it, and let it lie in salt a day and a night; keep it swathed tight till it begins to dry and coat, and keep it covered with a dry cloth a great while. The best time to make it is in August.

A very instructive article on the making of Stilton cheese was published in 1893 by G. Kemp, who ran a Stilton dairy at Manor House Farm, Sedgebrook near Grantham in Lincolnshire. It was published by the Royal Agricultural Society of England and covered information on buildings, utensils, draining-room and manufacture. Under the last topic he says that:

Before commencing to fill the hoop, it will be necessary to place it upon a piece of board, on which to carry it to the drainer; a sinker made of wood, and just sufficiently large to pass easily inside the mould, being placed on top of the curd. As a rule, no other weight should be used, though sometimes it is necessary to do so. No directions as to weights can safely be given, the knowledge must be gained by experience and observation. There should be no logical distinction between the use of weight on top of the hoop, and light pressing.

In 1811 *A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Huntingdon* was published for the Board of Agriculture. The author, Richard Parkinson, quotes directly from Nichols in respect of Mrs Orton,

but also adds an important passage gained from George Maxwell, of Fletton Lodge, Peterborough, who was the author of the first report on the County of Huntingdon to the Board of Agriculture in 1793. George Maxwell was an agriculturalist and steward to Lord Eardly. He was born at Folkesworth, adjacent to Stilton and this extract is recorded:

But Mr. John Pitts, Landlord of the Bell Inn, Stilton, and Mr. Maxwell, contend with the greatest probability of truth, that the famous Stilton cheese was first made at Stilton in Huntingdonshire.

Pitts' reasons for maintaining that opinion are given in the following account, drawn up from his own relation of the case.

Mr. John Pitts, Landlord of the Bell Inn at Stilton says, that he has every reason to believe, that the cheese known under the name of Stilton, was originally made at that place; that one Croxton Bray, a very old man, who died about the year 1777, aged about eighty years, remembers very well when a boy, that he, his brothers and sisters, and the people of Stilton in general, sent their children about to collect all the cream in the neighbouring villages, for the purpose of making what is called Stilton cheese. The receipt for making it is, the cream of the evening and morning, and the new milk all mixed together. This must have been long before Mr. Cooper Thornhill's time. Mr. Thornhill selling great quantities, and wanting more than could be had at Stilton, and knowing that Leicestershire produced excellent milk, and having relations in that county, he sent a person to them to instruct them in the mode of making it.

None of this cheese is now made at Stilton, though there is every reason to believe that it originated there, and not in Leicestershire.

It is evident from this testimony that cheese began to be made at Stilton when Croxton Bray was a boy, which must have been previous to the year 1720, at least ten years earlier than the time when it began to be made at Little Dalby in Leicestershire according to Mr Nichols, who candidly admits the cheese bearing the name of Stilton did not begin to be made at Little Dalby till about the year 1730.

Stilton Church records show that Croxton Bray's family were indeed residents of Stilton from at least 1688 when his father Thomas married Ellen Taylor. Croxton Bray was baptised in 1714 and had three sisters and two brothers. He is recorded as being a churchwarden and witness to many of the marriages which took place in the village during the first half of the eighteenth century. He was buried in Stilton churchyard on the 13 December, 1776. John Pitts died in 1808. His obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* referred to him as 'Greatly respected'.

Manufacture of cheese in Stilton seems to have continued long after production took off in Leicestershire. There is evidence that it began to decline in quality because *The London Encyclopaedia* of 1829 reports the agriculturalist Joseph Hazard's comment that:

though the farmers about Stilton are remarkable for the cleanliness of their dairies, they take very little pains with the rennet; for if they did they would not have so many faulty and unsound cheeses.

In the early nineteenth century, the travel writer William Cobbett became famous for his published 'Rides' through many counties of England. In *A Geographical Dictionary of England and Wales*, published in 1832, he says of Leicestershire:

Cheese has of late years, been made in good quantity, and a large cheese fair is annually held at Leicester for the sale of it. It so much resembles in quality that which is made at Stilton in Huntingdonshire, that it also is called Stilton Cheese.

In 1866 the Reverend Edward Bradley (*aka* Cuthbert Bede), Rector of Denton, near Stilton, wrote a 4,000-word article entitled ‘“The Hero of Stilton” and Stilton Cheese’, which remains to this day the most extensive single body of information concerning Cooper Thornhill. This piece also appeared in *The New York Times* in that year. Bradley casts doubt on whether the cheese was ever made in the village, or indeed the county of Huntingdonshire, but does go on to mention first-hand, contemporary knowledge of the cheese being made by the landlady of an inn at Warmington, just over the border in Northamptonshire, about five miles from Stilton.

In the early 1800s the coaching trade was gathering pace and was entering its ‘golden era’. The people of Stilton were apparently content, by this time, to have their cheese brought to them, without lifting a finger, as they were increasingly occupied in servicing the travellers and coaches that rolled into the village day and night. Huge amounts of grain were grown on the uplands and root crops on the newly drained fens. Huge numbers of horses needed to be stabled and grazed and cattle and sheep – for slaughter in the London markets – were now reared and/or fattened on the local pastures.

The decrease of cheese-making in Stilton coincided with an increase in production in Leicestershire. This had reportedly been initiated by Frances Pawlett’s arrangement with Cooper Thornhill in the 1740s, though John Nichols wrote that in 1756 there were only three people in Leicestershire making the cheese. Employment in wool production weakened due to the introduction of new spinning and weaving machinery, which required far fewer skilled workers. Cheese production, from both sheep’s and cow’s milk, became increasingly important. The early Leicestershire Stilton dairies would naturally wish to claim as much authenticity for their cheese as possible. They would eagerly support and promote so respected a commentator who gave them this.

In the course of time, the people of Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire came to believe that Stilton had originated in the region. The fact that no contemporary account

s of such cheese exist, and given the parlous state of roads and transportation in the early eighteenth century, as well as the absence of any evidence of large numbers of cattle or cheese-making in Leicestershire at the time must cast doubt on this presumption.

The critics of the Warner/Bradley recipes will say that these are for a pressed cheese and Stilton is not pressed. It is true that it is not pressed today, but most of the early recipes (until at least the late nineteenth century) mention pressing in some form or other. It was part of the development of the cheese that has led to the current product and production practices of today.

In their PDO application, the SCMA says that in 1911 a group of twelve pioneering farmers formed a company to make Stilton cheese. At this time they described it thus:

The cheese is made in cylindrical form (it has also been made in square boxes, as well as tied up in nets to form acorn shaped cheeses) from full cream milk from dairy herds with no applied pressure.

However, around this date a cheese called Stilton was being produced beyond the geographically defined area by other processes. The weight of the earliest evidence shows Stilton cheese originating and produced in the village of Stilton some time before 1720. It continued to be produced there until at least the end of the century. As Frances Pawlett was not born until 1720 she could not have been the originator of the cheese, although she may have played an important role in its development. Thus far however, there has been no published record of her recipe or method to state that she was not using pressing or weights on the hoop or vat, or a different recipe from Richard Bradley's – or even that her cheeses were blue veined.

Mrs. Orton is recorded as having produced the cheese at Little Dalby, but not prior to 1730, so the beginnings cannot be found there. The documentary evidence is clear in revealing that no one person invented Stilton. It has evolved over the course of time from

its origins in the village of Stilton, to the current product, produced now only in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire and which today, differs from the Stilton cheeses produced even as recently as thirty years ago.

At the beginning of this account the name of Lady Beaumont was mentioned and that a cheese was produced at Cole Orton Hall in Leicestershire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for family consumption. The recipe for this was said to have been passed down through the Beaumont family. George Ashby is said to have told John Nichols that it was from Cole Orton that this recipe was passed on to the Ashby family at Quenby Hall and that it was known as Lady Beaumont's cheese. So from whence did the Beaumont recipe originate?

In 1614, Thomas Beaumont of Cole Orton, married Elizabeth, daughter of Henry Sapcote of Elton Hall, Huntingdonshire. Elton is five miles from Stilton and was then usually described as, 'Elton, near Stilton'.

The medieval history of the Sapcote estate at Elton is laid bare in the Roxburghe Society publication of the Elton manorial records as well as in the cartulary of Ramsey Abbey. They show that vast quantities of livestock as well as 'a stone dairy, equipped with cheese presses, settling pans, strainers, earthenware jars and churns.' Records indicate it produced at least 200 cheeses per year in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Elton pastures are the very same that Defoe mentioned as 'the most beautiful range of meadows and perhaps not to be equalled in England for length'. An eighteenth-century stone dairy building still exists today at Elton Hall and has now been converted into a Loch Fyne Restaurant. It is, therefore, perfectly plausible that if Lady Beaumont's cheese was being made in the seventeenth century at Cole Orton and was eventually passed on to Quenby, its origins could lie in a local recipe brought into Leicestershire by a Huntingdonshire gentlewoman.

It has previously been accepted that Stilton was a distinctive blue-veined cheese which achieved considerable fame at an early

date and this has been promoted and marketed by the SCMA for many years. Although these ‘new’ references have now been acknowledged by the SCMA, the cheese produced in Stilton is now being described by them as a ‘hard, white, cooked, pressed cheese’ – hardly the attributes which would have made a cheese so famous. These comments are also at odds with descriptions by Defoe, Bradley and others.

It is now being proposed by the SCMA that it was only when production shifted to Leicestershire towards the end of the eighteenth century that it magically transformed into an unpressed, blue-veined cheese, though no contemporary commentators thought to mention that the Leicestershire cheese was a different species to the Stilton which had been widely known for many years. After all, Richard Parkinson wrote in 1811 in his account of the cheese that Cooper Thornhill ‘sent a person into Leicestershire to instruct them in the mode of making it’. As if in confirmation, Cobbett wrote in 1832 that the Leicestershire Stilton ‘so much resembles in quality that made at Stilton in Huntingdonshire that it too is called Stilton cheese’.

The last, and amongst the earliest, recorded reference to Stilton cheese to be cited is found in a long and rollicking poem (of a remarkable 1,333 verses) written by the Reverend Cuthbert Ellison in 1725 (and therefore contemporary with Stukeley, Defoe and Bradley) entitled *Most Pleasant Description of Benwell Village in the County of Northumberland*. The word ‘cheese’ is mentioned several times throughout the poem but Stilton is the only one specifically named. Verse CCLXIII of Book I reads:

Of Pullets young
And cold Neats Tongue
You shou’d find no great lack,
Eke of Green Geese,
And *Stilton* Cheese,
Your mouth shou’d keep sweet smack.

The reverend gentleman's closing verse is more ribald than you might expect:

Thus have You heard
From Rev'rend Bard
A merry pleasant Farce;
If't does not please Ye,
Nor makes You easy,
Then come, and kiss my ——.