
Major Patrick Rance: the story of a Streatley turologist

Such was the fame of Wells Stores in Streatley that when I came to Goring 30 years ago, people I worked with in London told me how lucky I was to live so close to the best known cheese shop in the country. Some had travelled many miles to visit it or had ordered cheese from the stores by mail order.

In fact it was sixty years ago in 1954 when Major Patrick Rance and his wife, Janet, moved to the village grocer's shop opposite the Bull Inn and started to build its international reputation as a cheese supplier. Before they came to Streatley, British traditionally made cheese was in terminal decline in a market dominated by processed cheese, often sealed in plastic and sold by supermarkets everywhere. The slow decay of our farm cheese-making craft started with the First World War, when we lost so many of our young agricultural workers. This continued with the Second World War when much of our dairy land was turned to arable and consequently cheese making on farms nearly finished altogether. Even after 1945, any spare milk collected by the Milk Marketing Board was sent to central depots

where it was industrially processed into uniform shrink-wrapped blocks of a tasteless characterless product.

It was from Streatley that the Major almost single-handedly re-created the British farm cheese industry. He travelled the entire country, ferreting out the traditionally made cheeses he remembered savouring in his youth, arranging to sell those he found and becoming a renowned evangelist for real cheese. He has since been described as ‘the godfather of the revival of farmhouse cheeses in England and elsewhere’.

Patrick Lowry Cole Holwell Rance was born at Southend-on-Sea on 18 March 1918, just before the end of the First World War. He was the youngest of a vicar’s five children and started a regular army career at Sandhurst at the age of 18. Commissioned a year before the outbreak of the Second World War, he was a Major by the age of 24 and took part in the Anzio landings in Italy in 1944. By the end of the war, he could speak five languages (French, German, Italian, Polish and Swedish) and was something of an expert on classical music, butterflies, Shakespeare and bacteriology.

In 1951 Major Rance married Janet Maxtone Graham whom he had met in Austria in 1948 when he was touring Europe with friends. She was the daughter of Jan Struther who had written the novel *Mrs Miniver* (made into a popular movie) and a number of well loved hymns such as *Lord of all hopefulness* and *When a knight won his spurs*. Janet Rance had previously been assistant editor of *Good Housekeeping* magazine and continued as a journalist for many years after their marriage, writing under the name of Janet Graham for the *Reader’s Digest*.

At first they lived in Patrick’s bachelor flat in London’s Mayfair where the Major worked as a director of the public opinion research department of the Conservative Party. In 1954 (when he was in his mid 30s) the two of them had a complete change of direction when they bought Wells Stores. At the time, the shop’s stock included Alka Seltzer, Bombay duck, bootlaces, crisps, crumpets, dog food, elastic, French butter, greeting cards, hot water bottles, ice cream, Jersey milk, Kleenex, lychees, mushrooms, nylons and three cheeses: Dutch Edam, New Zealand cheddar and Danish blue.

In the many years the family were in Streatley, they never changed the sign above the door which even today remains as Wells Family Grocer. This dates back to when the stores and bakery were originally run by three sisters, Miss Letitia Wells, Miss Emily Wells and Miss Mary-Ann Wells (nicknamed in the village as Faith, Hope and Charity). These ladies ran both businesses for many years and employed several men as bakers and to deliver bread and groceries by horse and cart, but this came to an end when the last Miss Wells died in 1936.

The Major and his wife lived next door to Wells Stores, in Jessamine Cottage which, as they had seven children, quickly became known as Decibel Cottage. Many local people remember not only the noise of the children but the Third Programme (later Radio 3) which played continually in the background. However, the overwhelming sensation was the all-pervading pungent smell of cheese, which was not just in the shop but also maturing in the cellar and towards the end of the year in the hall where parcels of Stilton were stacked prior

to being mailed all over the world as Christmas presents.



Patrick Rance and his son Hugh outside the shop 1985 [GSLHS collection]

A visit to Wells Stores became a regular treat for people from all over Berkshire and Oxfordshire and further afield, and they often brought their house guests with them for an unforgettable experience. Many, many cheeses (some say 200) were displayed on open tables in the shop with customers allowed to touch and sample the unusual specimens. Major Rance himself made quite an impression, wearing his trade mark monocle under his right eyebrow or hanging by a black cord over a blue striped apron and a multi coloured Hawaiian short-sleeved shirt. He invariably had a pint size mug of cold tea behind him from which he took an occasional sip. When serving customers, he relished describing with great enthusiasm some of the innumerable cheeses on display, displaying an encyclopaedic knowledge of every obscure farm, from where the ideally ripe pieces came. A tasting followed when he would offer slivers of different delicacies at the end of sharp-pointed knives, to try and tickle the customer's palate.

Although Major Rance was incredibly busy with his business and bringing up seven children in a small house, he still found time to be an active member of Streatley Parish Council, to sing with his wife in the church choir, be Chairman of Berkshire Council for the Preservation of Rural England and a founder member of the British Academy of Gastronomes. He also regularly addressed various local societies on the merits of farmhouse cheeses.

In 1973, the English Tourist Board commissioned him to write an article on British cheese but once he started writing, he couldn't stop and his life's passion culminated in *The Great British Cheese Book*, published in 1982. For the first time, home-produced cheeses were documented and explained. He inspired a new generation of farmers, producers and retailers to bring a food culture back from the brink.

For the six-year task of researching and writing the follow up, *The French Cheese Book* (published in 1989) he decided to move, with his wife, to a farmhouse in Fontveille in the Provence region of France. Whilst writing, he preferred to be in his bed rather than at his desk and, with classical music constantly playing, he wrote everything in a scribbled longhand, often on scraps of recycled paper, bewildering his secretary who had to painstakingly type everything out.

Regrettably, in 1990, new business rates at a time of recession caused the Streatley shop, now run by son Hugh Rance, to close. Hugh had just expanded with a second shop at Stert Street in Abingdon but this was bought by Gill Draycott, who had worked at the original Streatley shop. The business still trades under the name of Wells Stores from Peach Croft Farm at Radley but the original shop in Streatley is now a private house.

When his wife Janet died in 1996, the Major was desolated and inconsolable. He survived her by three years and during his last few days in hospital, he was still solving obscure clues for his visiting children's crossword puzzles and listening to classical music. He died 15 years ago on 22 August 1999, aged 81.

Locally, Major Rance will be remembered, amongst many other things, for always being immensely polite to his customers, whatever the provocation. Martin Smith from Goring recalls visiting the shop in the 1960s, "As I went in, a lady was sampling several cheeses when Major Rance enquired, 'And would Madam like to order anything?' She replied, 'Have you any Primula Cheese sections?' but his monocle stayed put as he produced some from below the counter and said, 'Is there anything else?' Her reply was, 'I'm having a little dinner party next Tuesday; would a little Cheddar keep until then?' 'I dare say so as it has been in my cellar since last October', was his reply. She departed with her purchases and he turned to me with, 'Yes Sir, can I help you?'

Alan Winchcomb

Sources

This article is based on an obituary by an un-named author in the *Guardian* on 31 August 1999, an obituary by Leigh Hatts in the *Independent* on 13 September 1999 and the reminiscences of various people in Streatley and Goring.