

Memories of Buttercup Poultry Farm



by Bill Scott

The news that The City of Edinburgh Council is to build a new city park on the site of the old Buttercup Poultry Farm – to be called the Buttercup Farm Park – has gladdened the hearts of many of us who remember the Buttercup in the ‘old days’. It is also a fitting tribute to the remarkable man who founded the Buttercup Dairy Company over a hundred years ago and gave away a fortune in his ultimate ambition to die a poor man. His name was Andrew Ewing and, until recently, his achievements and extraordinary generosity have been largely forgotten, except by those of us who knew him, and those old enough to remember the days when grocery shopping meant popping down to the Buttercup, which once had 250 beautifully designed shops all over Scotland.

I was born and brought up at Clermiston Mains, which was Andrew Ewing’s home and the site of the old Buttercup Poultry Farm. My mother and grandparents worked for him, and my aunts were his housekeepers for many years. By the time I was born, Andrew Ewing was eighty years old but I still remember him well, from the tales I was told by my relatives and also from my frequent encounters with the old man, who bore an uncanny resemblance to ‘Mr Chips’, and used to regularly give me half a crown.

[The story of Andrew Ewing](#) is partly one of rags to riches – but there is more to it than that, since his business success was combined with a generosity of spirit that led him to give away a fortune in pursuit of his ultimate ambition to die a poor man.

Born in Stoneykirk, near Stranraer, in 1869, Andrew Ewing was the son of a farmer and in the normal course of events would likely have become a farmer himself. However, fate had other ideas for young Andrew and following his father's early death the family moved to Dundee where he was apprenticed to a local grocer, so beginning a lifelong career in the grocery trade. In 1894, he opened his first grocer's shop and ten years later founded the Buttercup Dairy Company in Kirkcaldy. The first Buttercup shops in Edinburgh were opened in 1908 and in 1915 the company established its permanent head office and depot in Easter Road, Leith.



With his business established, Andrew then began developing a distinctive style and image for his shops, which were all decorated in the same style – predominantly green and white tiles with ornamental inserts. The centrepiece was a mural located on the wall of the entrance lobby; it showed a little girl in a sunbonnet holding a buttercup under the chin of a cow, with the implied question: “Do you like butter?” The Buttercup shops were also renowned for their eye-catching displays, using the company's products and changed every week ready for Monday morning opening. The whole image was rounded off by a high standard of cleanliness, exemplified by female staff, resplendent in their spotless white overalls.

In the early years, the [Buttercup](#) shops sold only seven products: eggs, butter, margarine, cream, tea, cooking fat and condensed milk, although this later expanded to many more goods. Butter and margarine were sold by weight, with butter pats used to shape it into its final form, after which it was stamped with the girl-and-cow logo and wrapped in Buttercup paper.

The beauty and service of these old shops also made a lasting impression on most of those who remember them, including Muriel Spark – author of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* – who

recalls in her autobiography that: “The sparkle and morning freshness of the shop ... formed a mind-picture which accompanied the whole of my youth.” (You can read this below)

For the first eighteen years of its existence, the Buttercup imported most of its eggs from Denmark and Poland. However, Andrew believed that he could produce a better and fresher product by setting up his own large-scale poultry farm. His plans came to fruition, in 1922, when he purchased eighty-six acres of farmland at the top of Corstorphine Hill, on the western outskirts of Edinburgh. Initially the new poultry farm was a fairly modest enterprise with only 10,000 laying hens but by 1928 Andrew had transformed it into one of the largest poultry farms in the world, with accommodation for 200,000 laying hens. The farm itself was laid out like a small town, with six and a half miles of tarmac roadways, illuminated at night by street lights. So impressive was this new enterprise that it became known locally as “Hen City”.



At its peak, the Buttercup Poultry Farm produced over 100,000 eggs a day which were graded, stamped and checked for quality before being packed in felt-lined boxes – each containing twenty-dozen eggs – for dispatch to the Buttercup shops. However, eggs laid on a Sunday had a different destination for, by order of ‘the boss’, they were all donated to hospitals and charities. When totalled up, this amounted to a staggering five million eggs given away every year!

At the heart of the [Buttercup Poultry Farm](#) was the mansion of Clermiston Mains, home to Andrew Ewing, and also known as “the Big House”. It was an imposing whitewashed building that lay at the eastern end of the farm, approached by a tree-lined avenue. The remainder of the small estate comprised a number of cottages, all occupied by my relatives who were given various jobs by Andrew Ewing. In the cases of my grandfather – John Davidson – and Uncle Tom, they had become ill from

working down the pit and Andrew wanted to give them a new healthy life at Clermiston Mains.

This extract from a letter from Ruth Ewing – Andrew’s wife – to my grandmother brings out the exceptional kindness in this offer. “This move on Mr Ewing’s part to take your husband from the coal pits has made me particularly happy ... John has had his share and done his bit in the war so deserves a little bit of sunshine and air into his lungs.”

As my family was to find out, such generosity was far from unusual for Andrew Ewing and during the Depression years of the 1930s, many a person found a small packet slipped into their pocket, containing half a pound of butter or some rashers of bacon.

On the lighter side, tradesmen were also on the receiving end of Andrew’s generosity and former apprentice, Ian Thompson, recalls that on Saturday mornings ‘Mr Ewing’ would make his rounds, giving each tradesman £1 and the apprentices, ten shillings. “Needless to say, we were all peeping around corners awaiting his arrival!”



The beginning of the end for the Buttercup started in the early 1930s as competition intensified and the company was ‘milked’ by Andrew’s continued generosity. Then, in 1936, a major fire at the poultry farm destroyed the hatchery and caused the farm to close two years later. By that time Andrew Ewing was nearly seventy and didn’t have the heart to restore it. By 1949 the business was in such poor shape that many of the shops had to be sold off. But it survived for much longer and the last Buttercup shop closed in Edinburgh in 1965.

Andrew Ewing died in 1956 and was largely forgotten. There was no public obituary, but this extract from the church magazine says much about the man I remember.

It was quite characteristic that a member of the happy “colony” at Clermiston Mains was heard to say after Mr Ewing had ordered some kindness to be done from his sick-room: “Mr Ewing just loves to give things away. It is almost the last pleasure that is left to him now.”

Photos courtesy of Bill Scott, author of [The Buttercup: The Remarkable Story of Andrew Ewing and the Buttercup Dairy Company](#)

(Excerpt [Muriel Spark Curriculum Vitae](#) by [New Directions](#))