

Atkins, P.J. (1986) Edwin White (1873-1965) milk wholesaler and retailer, pp 774-76 in Jeremy, D.J. (Ed.) *Dictionary of Business Biography* vol. 5 London: Butterworths

Edwin White was born on his father's farm near Bury, Lancashire, on 12 December 1873, the son of David White and his wife Mary nee Birch. At this time milk production was the agricultural staple in late nineteenth century East Lancashire. It provided a meagre living from poor land and small holdings, but the burgeoning demand of the nearby urban and industrial centres meant that the agricultural depression was less severe here than in the South and East of the country. As a child Edwin delivered the milk before going to school, and later he worked on the farm until he was twenty-five.

In 1898 Edwin and his younger brother James started a ginger beer manufacturing and retailing business in Wolverhampton. They prospered, and to occupy the slack winter months they opened a dairy in Birmingham. With their two other brothers, in 1913 they decided to sell the milk in bottles and, drawing upon their experience in the soft drink trade, installed plant which was a novelty in the area. Their company, Midland Counties Dairy Ltd (MCD), was incorporated in 1923 and subsequently became the largest private dairy company in the country.

After a period of buying through middlemen, Edwin decided to be his own wholesaler. He encountered initial resistance from those producers who had been made wary by the chaotic, competitive state of the milk trade in the 1920s, but gradually they came to realise that they were dealing with an honest company which was willing to maintain their cash flow with prompt payments for milk delivered.

In 1922 Midland Counties Dairy were supplied by 60 producers, and were an unexceptional small dairy firm, but in the same year Edwin White's managerial skill was demonstrated: he decided to initiate an unprecedented scheme of paying farmers for the quality of their milk. This principle was at first doubted, but the concept of bonuses for clean milk obviously had appeal because the cleanliness of the supply improved dramatically. In 1922 only 5 per cent of farmers could meet a bacteriological standard often thousand bacteria per cubic centimetre, but by 1928 this proportion had increased to 60 per cent. Edwin White's decision was triumphantly vindicated as the company's enhanced reputation with the public for high-quality milk boosted their retail sales. Payments were later also made to farmers for butterfat content, and to the workers within the bottling depot for the cleanest machinery. Subsequent attempts by Edwin White to persuade the dairy trade, the Milk Marketing Board and the Government of the benefits in payments by quality rather than quantity failed, however, and MCD's policy was looked upon as an example to admire rather than to emulate.

Between 1922 and 1961 the volume of MCD's sales increased tenfold, to one million bottles a day. Throughout this period the company had been helped by the shrewd and progressive ideas of Edwin White. His mode of direction was authoritarian. He followed up problems in the day-to-day running of the company with little regard to the managerial hierarchy, and this would on occasion cause embarrassment to his fellow executives. His major weakness was his impulsiveness, and the force of his personality was such that some management time was spent in directing his enthusiasms or in correcting their result.

White was president of the National Federation of Dairymen's Associations in 1932, chairman of the Sutton Coldfield Hospital, 1939-46, and a member of the Committee of Management of the Birmingham Skin Hospital for thirteen years. He retired at the age of eighty-eight and died

on 31 January 1965, a few months after MCD had been sold to Unigate for £7.5 million. His estate was valued at £57,416 gross.

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