

Atkins, P.J. (1984) Sir George Barham (1836-1913) milk wholesaler and retailer, pp 157-61 in Jeremy, D.J. (Ed.) *Dictionary of Business Biography* vol. 1 London: Butterworths

George Barham, son of Robert Barham of the Strand in London, was born on 22 November 1836. After an education at private schools, he began his career in 1851 as a junior clerk in a barrister's office. Two years later he was apprenticed to a builder and learned the trade of carpentry. This occupation was insufficiently challenging, and in his spare time George worked as a 'balancer' in the milk trade transporting milk surplus to the requirements of one dealer to a dairy where a shortage had arisen. It was hard manual work, but it gave George an entree into the trade his father had practised since migrating to London from rural Sussex in 1827. In 1858 George Barham had saved enough capital to buy a retail dairy of his own, and he acquired a shop in Dean Street, off Fetter Lane on the fringe of the City of London.

Barham was an opportunist who profited from the exceptional circumstances which afflicted the dairy trade in the mid-1860s. The rapidly increasing demand for liquid milk from London's middle and artisan classes had not adequately been met by the urban cowkeeper from early in the decade. A number of dairies recognised that new sources would have to be tapped, and proceeded to import country milk from short distances by railway. This was difficult and costly because the railway companies were unwilling to make special arrangements in timetabling, freight rates and rolling stock for what was to them a very minor source of income. The amount of milk railed to London did increase steadily, however, and in 1864 George Barham decided to form his Express Country Milk Co. The following year this investment bore fruit in a spectacular fashion because a serious outbreak of rinderpest amongst the cows of London's cowsheds reduced the milk supply to a trickle. Barham was not the first dairyman to import milk to London by railway, but he was undoubtedly the most enterprising. He travelled to the dairying areas of England and persuaded farmers who were butter and cheese producers to sell their milk in liquid form, no mean feat in view of the ingrained custom that had built up over the decades or centuries. He was granted special concessionary freight rates by Sir James Allport (qv) of the Midland Railway and, using the new Lawrence capillary cooler adapted from the brewing process, he was able to arrange for substantial supplies to be transported from as far afield as Derbyshire. This large scale and long distance traffic was revolutionary and the milk trade was never quite the same again. When the cattle plague had run its course, the urban cowkeepers re-established themselves and the quantity of railway milk declined, but Barham and his imitators had proved that a re-structured trade was possible and even desirable. Gradually intra-urban production became uncompetitive and costly, and the appellation 'dairyman' came to mean a wholesale milk dealer or a retailer, rather than a cowkeeper.

The Express Country Milk Co expanded gradually after its initial outstanding success. In 1880 its first branch dairy was opened, and in 1881 Barham reformed his enterprise as the Express Dairy Co Ltd. In 1890 it became a public company and gained a royal warrant in 1895. George Barham avoided the fluctuating fortunes of many London dairy companies in the competitive atmosphere of the 1880s and 1890s by broadening his interests beyond milk retailing. In 1866 he had started the Dairy Supply Co for the dual purpose of milk wholesaling and the manufacture and sale of dairy utensils, and in 1885 acquired the British rights to the Laval cream separator, which in its modified form as the Alfa-Laval separator, was to transform the processing of milk. Later, with his son George Titus (qv) he started a chain of teashops. Both these diversifications were successful and provided capital for a growing network of Express milk shops and depots throughout London.

George Barham's contribution to the development of the dairy industry in England was outstanding. He not only pioneered a new supply system, but also acted as a catalyst in the development of a trade organization. He was a founder-member of the Metropolitan Dairyman's Association (1873), and the Dairy Trade and Can Protection Society (1880). He helped to found and was a trustee of the Metropolitan Dairymen's Benevolent Institution (1874), of which he was president in 1880, and joined the British Dairy Farmer's Association shortly after its formation in 1877, to become a trustee and a council member from 1880 until his death, vice-president in 1901, and president in 1908.

Barham was also active in the collection and dissemination of information about developments in dairying. He was chairman of the BDFA conferences which visited the Channel Islands in 1891, Denmark and Sweden in 1897, the Home Counties in 1902, and the Midland Counties in 1908, and acted as vice-president of jurors at the International Agricultural Exhibition at Amsterdam in 1884. At his own expense he equipped a model dairy at the Great Centennial Fair at St John's, New Brunswick in 1883, sent a private commission to encourage clean milk production in India in 1889, and organized educational demonstrations at the Jamaica Exhibition at Kingston in 1890. He also advocated rural education in Britain through the medium of travelling dairy schools, and acted as an examiner for the Dairy Produce and Minor Food Products Association. For some years he served on the governing body of the British Dairy Institute at Reading.

The public life of George Barham was distinguished. In 1874 he was called to give evidence to a parliamentary Select Committee on the working of the Adulteration of Food Act, 1872, and was influential in the amendment of certain clauses which were deemed oppressive to the dairy trade. He was also a bitter opponent of the importation of butter substitutes such as 'butterine'. This was sold fraudulently as if it were the genuine article and seriously affected the livelihood of farmhouse and factory butter producers. Barham drafted a parliamentary bill which forbade the word 'butter' appearing in the title of the substitute. A modified version eventually passed into law as the Margarine Act (1887).

When the railway companies unilaterally decided in 1893 to increase their freight rates, Barham spearheaded the dairy trade's opposition. His evidence before the various commissions of enquiry was largely instrumental in the dairy industry achieving a privileged status with respect to the tariffs charged for liquid milk. In 1896 rates on average were actually lower than in 1892.

Later, in 1900, George Barham again brought his progressive and individualistic ideas to bear upon a major problem confronting milk producers. He sat on the committee appointed by the Board of Agriculture to inquire into the standard desirable for milk quality, and produced a minority report of his own. The regulations subsequently framed were based upon this rather than upon the recommendations of the majority of committee members. In his conclusions Barham had the support of practically every dairy association in the country.

George Barham was knighted in 1904. He was a JP for Middlesex and East Sussex, mayor of Hampstead in 1905-6 and High Sheriff of Middlesex in 1907-8. He served for a time on the vestry of St George's Bloomsbury, and was twice elected to the East Sussex County Council. His one excursion into parliamentary politics was unsuccessful, when he contested West Islington for the Liberal Unionist Party in 1895. Among his many other interests he was chairman of the Hackney Carriage Proprietors' Benevolent Institution, chairman of the London General Hospital and treasurer of the headquarters fund of the 19th (Bloomsbury) Rifles,

Sir George's forbears made their fortune in the iron industry, but lost their land in 1721. In 1885 he took the opportunity of buying back the estates at Snape and Tappington Grange, Wadhurst, thereby re-establishing his family's links with Sussex. He also farmed in Middlesex.

Barham's remarkable energy is attested by the wide range of his activities and interests both within the dairy industry and in community service. He was a fluent speaker, with old-fashioned manners but also a strongly disciplinarian streak to his character. His resourcefulness, self-confidence and innovative instinct were key elements to a personality which was indelibly stamped upon the Express Dairy Co, upon the London milk trade, and indeed upon the English dairy industry. His was the dominant influence for change and improvement over a fifty-year career of distinction.

Sir George Barham died on 16 November 1913, seven years after his wife Margaret nee Rainey, whom he married in 1859. His two surviving sons Arthur (qv) and George Titus also made careers in the dairy industry. His estate was valued at £259,222 gross.

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