

Britain's Little Pinch of Salt

THE ONLY SEA-SALT FACTORY IN THE KINGDOM

Once upon a time, when Rome ruled over Britain with iron hand, when wolves roamed in the forest, and the sea-fog, breeder of ague and fevers, hung perpetually over the low-lying undrained marsh-lands of the Essex shore, Cassius Petrox, a commander of a legion, was stationed at the Roman town of Maldon. Inasmuch as he came from sunnier climes, he suffered greatly in all his joints through the dank and chilly air of that district. Too far from the curative waters of Bath, he bethought himself of taking baths of warm sea-water, which he caused his slaves to prepare for him. These he found of great service, and he invariably resorted to them after strenuous days spent in impressing the advantages of Roman civilisation on the wild and untutored Briton, hidden, with the wolves and other vermin, in the deep recesses of the woods.

On one occasion it appeared that he was very late in returning to his quarters, where the worried slaves, in their anxiety to please, had for some hours been keeping the bath-water not merely hot, but boiling, and were discovered by their master in the act of attempting to scrape from the bottom of the bath a quantity of white crystals which (unaccountably to them) had formed there. Cassius recognised them as salt, and, owing possibly to a strain of Phoenician blood, at once grasped the possibilities. The slaves were praised instead of beaten, and were ordered to "carry on." Cassius then put up samples in small bags, which he dispatched, with full instructions for dissolving in fresh water, to brother officers at inland stations. Repeat orders immediately followed; Cassius retired from his command and devoted himself (and his slaves) to the production of pure sea-water salt, thus founding the business still carried on (and the only one in existence in England) at Maldon, in Essex.

And if that is not the true story of how the business was started, it may very likely have been so, and, anyway, there is no one is a position to contradict it. For its origins are lost in the mists of time. "It's allus been there"; but authentic history, in the shape of correspondence still preserved, takes it back only to

the year 1705 and that's quite a while ago. Local rumour has it that its founder thought it out as he lay in bed whether with rheumatism or no is not said. He had two ships built "tankers" to fetch the sea-water up from below Osea Island "where the sea was saltiest" and thereby circumvented the troublesome "freshes" flood times of river-water that, mixing with the sea, so diluted the latter that many extra hours' boiling was necessary to get any result at all. Now the sea-water is trapped at the top of the flood tide in a reservoir that holds a week's supply, so that "freshes" can be avoided.

From the reservoir the water passes through two filtering beds into the storage tanks as required. From there pipes lead to the boiling pans some twelve feet square by a foot and a half deep, of a special make of soft steel to counteract the effect of expansion and contraction. These pans are set in brickwork, like old fashioned "set pots," with the flues from the furnace (a furnace to each pan) leading under the whole of the flat undersides of the pans. The old building is grouped around the central brick chimney, and, like many old things, has shown itself best adapted for the purpose intended. Around the fires and foundations is brick; the rest is old timber work, black with age and constant "pickling," and weather-boarded. A roof of tiles of cunningly placed so that the sunlight streams in (and, more important, the steam escapes) through many interstices. It takes two house to bring the pans to boiling point, and then for five or six hours they are kept simmering. Impurities rise to the surface and are skimmed of with a ladle.

The salt falls to the bottom in transparent crystals that are perfect hollow pyramids of paper-like thickness, and of anything to an inch or more square. Scooped out by the means of a flat wooden rake, they are transferred to draining boxes, where the crystals "rough dry." Then to the storage bins. Salt for every purpose is made table salt, cooking salts, and salts for the butcher, the baker and the bath.