



Allan Greenwood

Hearts of Oat

You may think that making oat cakes went out with the ark. But in one Pennine town it came back with the jet age says STEVE BERRY

Andrew Hartley isn't too perturbed when the people from the Youth Opportunities Programme won't send him any youngsters for training.

He wasn't that bothered either when he saw the type of machinery he is still using being depicted as museum pieces in a craft film.... "I suppose people do think this is a dying industry," he said. "They think it's not worth teaching young people the trade."

Mr Hartley's "trade" is traditional

confectionery, with oatcakes a speciality. Oatcakes used to be the staple diet of the poor weavers around Nelson where Mr Hartley has his hot-plate bakery. Other comparatively rare items on his list include crumpets, potato cakes, muffins, scotch pancakes and welsh cakes — not the foodstuffs that are on everybody's lips, although some of the latter do turn up, via the big bakeries in fairly unappetising forms, on the supermarket shelves.

The most surprising thing about Mr

Hartley's bakery, however, is not so much his allegiance to traditional baking, pitted as he is against the tide of sticky buns and Mr Kipling cakes which satisfy the more well-to-do sweet tooth of today. The most unusual item in the shop is arguably Mr Hartley himself.

He was not offended when I told him that. While on the way to the Milton Street bakehouse, I had assumed he would be in his 90s. I thought, presumably as the Manpower Services Commission had done, that anyone who still made oatcakes today would be making them because they'd always made oatcakes and weren't planning to change simply because people weren't eating them any more.

It turned out that Mr Hartley was half that age, and had been in his early thirties when he started the business from scratch in 1969. Previous experience? He was an aircraft design engineer for a components firm in Burnley, working on such projects as mountings and cowlings for Rolls-Royce engines made in nearby Barnoldswick.

He'd worked on the markets for a while, and then decided he'd be better off making the stuff himself.

"You've just got to wake up one morning and decide to do it," he said. "I had a decent job, and people thought I was crazy packing it in. But in a factory like that you never knew who was next out through the door. It only needs somebody down in Whitehall to say 'We're not producing that plane' and there's a lot of people out of work.

"People were coming and going all the time — obviously there were also those who had worked there a lifetime too — but even my boss at the factory packed up. He's now running a saw-sharpening firm.

"Twenty years ago," he added, "I never thought I'd be making crumpets, but that's life. That's how you get side-tracked."

Mr Hartley started making his confectionery by hand, and picked up odd bits of machinery as other businesses closed down. Waiting spectre-like in the wings, he moves in as yet another North-East Lancashire town's last old-fashioned bakery winds up, and then swoops on the ancient equipment.

He maintains that the historical aspect of the machinery — much of which dates back to the beginning of the century if not earlier — carries no weight with him, and that he would "go modern" if somebody gave him a couple of thousand pounds for it.

But that hardly explains why he

spent many hours cleaning up a set of old weighing scales to stand them on his sideboard at home; or why, when I expressed interest in the device which throws the oatcake mix on to the hot-plate, he rushed downstairs into the cellar to bring out the earlier model.

The “new” model has a lever which projects the mix, on a trolley, down a slope until, by force of its own momentum, the mix is chucked on to the waiting plate at the bottom. Prior to the lever you had to push the trolley by hand. That’s progress!

When an Accrington bakery closed down, Mr Hartley dashed over on a foraging mission. But he was too late... “They’d sent for the scrap merchant, and by the time I got there they’d already put the machinery under the hammer,” he said, outraged.

Mr Hartley never expects to be a rich man doing the lines he’s on. For one thing, the oatcake-eating population is declining year by year.

“I think it’s the older folk who buy them,” he said. “They look back and say ‘Ee, we used to have them.’ That’s only one of the reasons why oatcakes are disappearing, though. The main reason is that you get to the point where you can’t make them any faster — you’ve got to wait for them to bake when all’s said and done.

“The older bakers have retired, but I’ve a fair way to go yet. If you cut out the lines that aren’t economical you’d soon end up with no trade at all.”

His wares are mainly sold in the market stalls in Blackburn, Darwen and Blackpool, and in the pubs in the immediate vicinity of the bakery.

The oatcakes are tailor-made for his customers. In pubs between Burnley and Barnoldswick — but no further afield — they’re sold as the “hard” bit of a delicacy called “Stew ‘n’ Hard”. “If you go outside the area they’ve never heard of it,” says Mr Hartley. “The pub trade wants small, thin oatcakes, while the markets want them a bit different — a bit longer so there’s more value for money.”

His most interesting customer is down in Stratford-on-Avon, where a top chef in a top hotel pays the carriage in order to stuff them with salad and snails. “You wouldn’t believe what he does with our crumpets!” said an astonished Mr Hartley.

Oatcakes can otherwise be eaten with cream cheese and butter, or filled with potted meat, or jam, or even fried.

Just in case the oatcake resurgence doesn’t take off, however, Mr Hartley as one might expect has other cards up

his sleeve. During the summer, when the confectionery business starts to tail off, he just moves upstairs and starts making toffees.

“That was another business that was dying out, so I thought I’d have a do at it,” he explained. He bought out Hardacres, the long-established family firm in Clitheroe, and moved the ageing equipment to Nelson. “We also make a bit of lemon cheese now and again,” he said.

“As long as you don’t try to get too big there’s always somebody who will want quality stuff. But if you move into mass production you have to have a big sale, and then you have to employ people to do jobs that aren’t really productive — they just keep a check on what other people are doing.”

And he concluded: “You can’t do a lot yourself, but you manage.” For the sake of everybody who likes quality, it’s to be hoped he’s right. ■



Allan Greenwood



Allan Greenwood