

LOOKING BACK

On cress of a health wave in Dorset

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By Ruth Meech »

LAST week's photographs of watercress beds somewhere in Dorset drew an interesting response from Charles Barter and Tom Amery who run The Watercress Company at Waddock near [Dorchester](#).

Charles emailed to say: "I noticed with interest the photographs 'Take a guess at a bed of cress', in the Looking Back section.

"I have consulted with Bill Jesty, who is now retired; however his family was involved in the watercress industry since the 1890s, but we do not recall there being any watercress beds at [Abbotsbury](#).

"The top photograph shows a very large bed, although difficult to gauge but it looks as though it could be at least an acre which would not be that common even in those days.

"There was a similar bed at Winterbourne Abbas just below the A35 and I can just remember seeing it in the late 50s early 60, but I would be very interested to have more details if they were forthcoming."

He added: "There has been a resurgence of interest in watercress as recent research has shown the full health benefits of this traditional English crop, especially with its cancer-fighting properties and is now seen as the original superfood.

"Most of the production is based in the South of England, primarily Dorset and Hampshire."

Tom, who is the managing director of The Watercress Company, then contacted us with further details and pictures.

He sent in two photographs, one of a letter written by former Watercress Company owner William Bedford, plus two cheques sent to Mr Bedford by his brother in 1891 who ran a fruit merchants in Liverpool.

The letter, which is quite hard to decipher, seems to be commenting on the quality and quantity and cost of a consignment of watercress.

The cheques, which are dated February 21 and 22, 1891, are for one pound, four shillings and five pence and one pound 10 shillings.

William Bedford was the grandfather of Bill Jesty and he moved to Dorset from Hertfordshire in the 1880s and established the watercress farm.

The Bedford family married into the family of Benjamin Jesty, the renowned Dorset farmer who successfully experimented in immunising his staff against smallpox.

Tom said: "The Jesty family were growing watercress and marketing it all across the country. In those days it was known as 'poor man's bread' and was already recognised as a healthy food rich in Vitamin C, iron and calcium.

"It was eaten by the rich and the poor and there was no distinction, like there is today perhaps."

He added that in the 1950s, legislation was introduced stating that watercress could only be farmed from areas with pure springs.

Dorset and Hampshire were – and still are – renowned for the purity of their streams and therefore became one of the most important watercress-producing areas in the country.

"In those days, before the legislation, people would pick watercress from rivers and you couldn't be sure of its provenance.

"In the 1880s it was sold country-wide because of the quality of Dorset's spring water.

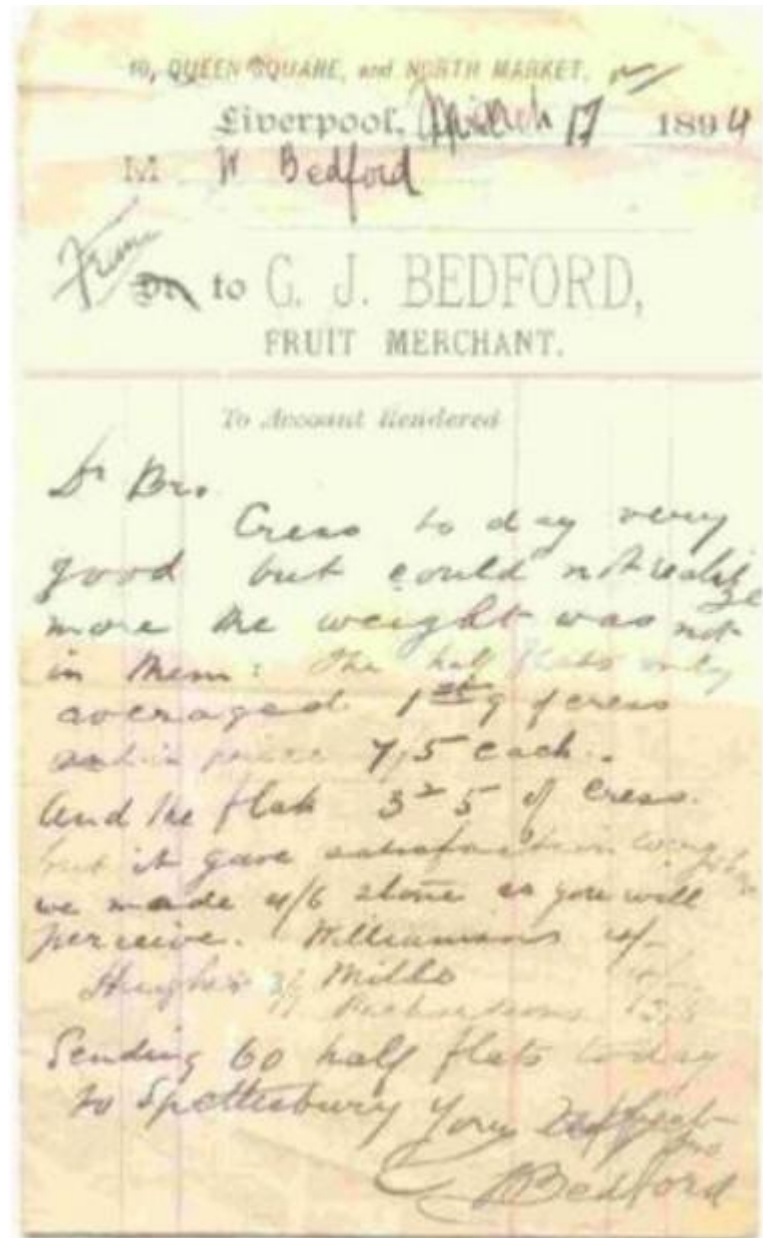
Both Bill and his son Tim are still involved in the Watercress Company.



A cheque sent to Dorset watercress farmer William Bedford by his brother in Liverpool



A cheque sent to Dorset watercress farmer William Bedford by his brother in Liverpool



A letter from William Bedford to his brother accompanying a watercress consignment