‘*The poor man’s bread*’: the watercress trade in Victorian Worcestershire

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Watercress, *nasturtium officinale*, is a hardy perennial, rich in iron and one of the oldest known leaf vegetables consumed by mankind. Wild crops have grown in southern Britain since time immemorial, and early traces are known locally from excavations in Roman Worcester.[1] By the 1860s its distinctive green leaves and white flowers could be seen scattered along the rivers, streams, and springs of Worcestershire, with particular concentrations in the Malverns, Lickey Hills, Teme Valley, and Severn and Avon Vales.[2]

Though now lauded as a ‘superfood’, during the 19th century watercress had a reputation as the staple plant of England’s urban poor, who consumed as many as 32,000 bunches each day as salad vegetables (‘*the poor man’s bread*’) and as ingredients in homemade medicine.[3] Much of this demand was met through commercial farming, and the Worcestershire countryside played a central, if largely forgotten, role in supplying watercress to hungry mouths across the West Midlands.

Watercress farming in 19th-century Worcestershire

Most scholars agree that the commercial cultivation of watercress in Britain began in Springhead, Kent, in 1808, and spread across rural southern England from the 1820s onwards.[4] While the arrival of commercial watercress farming in Worcestershire dates no later than the mid-1840s, its local heyday belongs to the half-century thereafter, with at least 102 commercial growers active in the county during the period 1850-99.[5] Cultivation was largely restricted to the Triassic sandstone belt in the north of the county, but scattered growers could also be found in the Malvern Hills and the Vale of Evesham (Fig 1). Some were established local farmers like John Russell Cookes, whose cress beds formed part of a 510-acre estate at Woodhampton in Astley, but many others were of more modest stature, such as the Ombersley smallholder Thomas Smith and the Fladbury market gardener Charles Taylor. Women growers were not uncommon, and the names of cultivators like Eliza Green of Belbroughton and Maria Boaz of Comer Gardens frequently appear in newspaper records.

Despite their differences in sex and scale of operations, the appeal of watercress to Worcestershire’s 19th-century growers would have been very much the same. The plant thrives in marginal and wet locations that are otherwise ill-suited to arable farming or livestock pasture, and has a special preference for the kinds of shallow, clear waters that can be found in many of the county’s brooks, springs, and millponds. It requires relatively little maintenance through manuring or weeding, has few natural predators, and, once planted, can produce as many as ten crops each year, yielding a return on investment of as much as £40 per acre in 1887.[6] From the grower’s perspective, watercress was a fairly low-effort and low-risk investment, which allowed waste land to be converted into a productive and modestly profitable asset: an ideal form of Victorian ‘alternative agriculture’.[7]

Using a combination of documentary, cartographic, and archaeological sources, it is possible to paint a general picture of how watercress farming was organised in 19th-century Worcestershire. Planting beds were typically lain in or near streams, brooks, or ponds, like those recorded at Fockbury Mill in Dodford and Grafton, Heathy Mill in Kidderminster Foreign, and Pike’s Pool in Lickey End (Fig 2). Most made use of pre-existing landscape features – Pike’s Pool, for instance, is thought to be a surviving medieval fishpond – but a few examples of purpose-built ‘industrial’ beds are shown on historic maps, like those owned by the Partridge family of Brookhouse Farm near Bromsgrove.[8] The beds were prepared by removing weeds and detritus, levelled with wooden rakes, and were planted in rows during the summer and early autumn. Harvest began in the winter, when the first ‘pinches’ could be plucked from the water, but peaked in the springtime around April and May, when handfuls of watercress were cut with sharp knives, collected in baskets, and stored in a cool place before

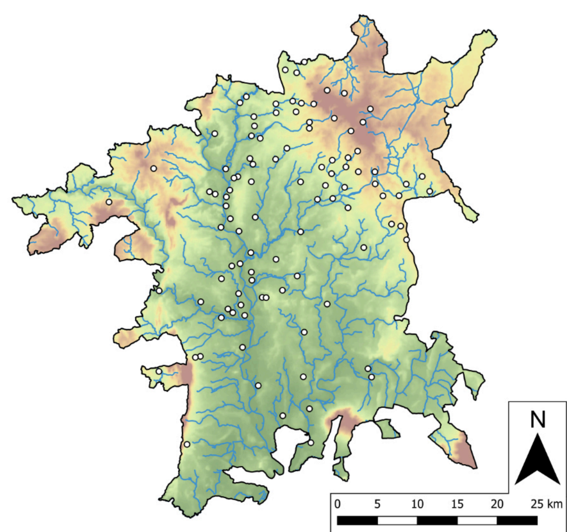

Fig 1: Commercial watercress growers in Worcestershire recorded in census returns and newspaper records, 1850-99

Fig 2: Watercress growing at four Worcestershire sites: a) Fockbury Mill, Dodford and Grafton; b) Heathy Mill, Kidderminster Foreign; c) Pike's Pool, Lickey End; d) Brookhouse Farm, Bromsgrove.

despatch to market the same day or the following morning.

Buying and selling watercress

While most of Worcestershire's watercress was grown in the countryside, its consumer base was largely urban. Since watercress is best eaten fresh, its principal markets were usually local towns like Bromsgrove, Droitwich, Kidderminster, and Worcester, which most growers could easily reach in a day's travel by foot or horse-drawn cart. However, 19th-century developments in road and rail transportation would eventually deliver county produce to more distant markets, and by 1896 the *Berrow's Worcester Journal* could approvingly note that local watercress was *'much in demand in Birmingham and the Black Country towns'*.[9]

Throughout the Victorian period most watercress growers in Worcestershire sold their produce wholesale to local greengrocers, who apportioned it for sale to retail customers in shops and on market stalls. Since greengrocers paid a premium for fresh produce, growers went to some efforts to ensure their wares arrived in optimal condition. In 1865 it was noted that Thomas Gardner of Pike's Pool would encourage workmen to thoroughly wash his watercress before shipping it out to the Bromsgrove market, where its freshly-cut, wet look would prove irresistible to local grocers.[10] In a number of cases, however, growers chose to cut out the middleman and retail as grocers in their own right, as seems to have been the case with the St Johns market gardener Alfred John Osbourne.[11]

While greengrocers were crucial players in Worcestershire's watercress trade, an important secondary role was played by independent 'hawkers', who bought and sold small quantities of generally low-grade produce in the streets and door-to-door (Fig 3). Like their London contemporaries, whose lives are so vividly described in Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, Worcestershire's 19th-century watercress hawkers were often impoverished people living at the margins of society. Many, like the Bromsgrove watercress hawker James Liddall (*'an old man, very deaf'*), were aged and infirm, while others like Thomas Jones of Malvern and Harriet Evans of Worcester were routinely fined and censured for drunkenness and public nuisance.[12] In Worcester the *'repulsive localities'* of Dolday and Newport Street were hubs for watercress hawkers, and it was here that a reporter for the *Worcestershire Chronicle* would describe an evening encounter with *'the dirtiest, most repelling woman I met…[who] was mending a basket, in which perhaps to-day she is carrying watercresses to be sold'*.[13]

Though aggressively policed by the local constabulary, Worcester's hawkers plied their trade through the city's western slums, and in places like Copenhagen Street *'watercress crying in the streets'* became a familiar part of the urban soundscape.[14] Sadly, however, some trade practices had unintended

Fig 3: A watercress hawker, as depicted in Richard Phillips' 1804 book 'Modern London' (public domain, courtesy of the British Library)

consequences for hawker and consumer alike. It has been suggested that certain 19th- and early 20th-century typhoid outbreaks in London were partly caused by watercress hawkers vending sewage-grown produce or refreshing their wares in contaminated water. The same may have been true in Worcester: one victim of the city's 1849 cholera outbreak was *'a poor woman named Price, a vender of water-cress living in Hound's-lane'*.[15]

Risk-free investment? Worcestershire's watercress thieves

While watercress has few natural predators, 19th-century crops were often targeted by criminals, and between 1850 and 1899 no fewer than 254 people were prosecuted at the Worcestershire Petty Sessions in 188 cases of watercress theft. Known as *'Sunday morning prowlers'*, thieves haunted the county's watercress beds in the early hours of the weekend, and were most active during the height of the spring growing season in April and May.[16] Individual thefts could be quite consequential, resulting in significant losses of produce, damage to growing beds, and, in some cases, violent assaults of farmers and their employees.[17]

Many successful prosecutions for watercress theft were against repeat offenders, the most notable of whom was Worcester's Joseph Barnsley (1859-1918). Born in Birmingham and resident at Evans' Lodging House in Dolday, a notorious haunt for transients, prostitutes, and petty criminals, Barnsley supplemented his income as a labourer and street hawker with an underworld career in a '*regular gang of thieves*'. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s he and his associates – Abraham Golden, Albert Hedge, Thomas Shuter, and John Williams – were in and out of gaol with convictions for pickpocketing, assault, and watercress theft, the latter of which earned him the nickname of 'Watercress Joe'. Barnsley and his gang were responsible for several of the county's major heists, including the theft of 40lbs of watercress from a Malvern farm in 1887, and frequently came toe-to-toe with the law. In one memorable incident, Barnsley and his co-conspirator Shuter were arrested in Hallow for stealing watercress, broke free of police custody at Pitchcroft, and were eventually recaptured near the Droitwich canal with the handcuffs still affixed to their wrists.[18]

Many thefts prosecuted at the Petty Sessions, however, involved small quantities of watercress worth only a few pence. Such cases usually involved the young and working poor, and were apparently driven by poverty. In 1895 two Kidderminster youths, John Jones and Honor Phipps, were each fined 6*d.* for stealing watercress at Chaddesley Corbett, but the court noted that *'the lads said they should not have taken the cress, but they had nothing to eat at home'*. One year later, two first-time offenders, Henry Grove and George Taylor, were charged with stealing 20lbs of cress from Hartlebury, and plead to the court that *'their children were 'clamming' and they were tempted to take the watercress to get them some food'*.[19]

While the defendants in both of these cases accepted that they had committed crimes, others did not, and appeals were frequently made to a customary right of common forage known as 'mouching'.[20] In May 1882, for instance, George Cox of Dolday was charged with having stolen 5½lbs of watercress from a farmer at Martin Hussingtree, but the case was dismissed after he noted that the plants were growing beside a footpath, and were therefore 'fair game'.[21] This defence was often anticipated by the courts, whose prosecutors would stress the distance at which offenders strayed from paths into private fields.

Matters were complicated, however, by informal agreements brokered with tenant farmers. In 1884 the tailor Thomas Lewis was charged with having stolen watercress out of a field near Malvern, but pleaded that *'the former tenant of the farm had given him permission to pick them, and he did not know of any change in the tenancy'*.[22] Clarity was essential, and it is in this spirit that William Hanson, the tenant of Battlefield Farm, posted a notice in the *Bromsgrove and Droitwich Messenger* declaring that *'I have NO LONGER the AUTHORITY to give any Person PERMISSION to GATHER WATERCRESS on BATTLEFIELD FARM'*, and that any trespassers

would be *'PROSECUTED with the utmost rigour of the law'*.[23]

From decline to revival?

While watercress continued to be a significant crop into the 1900s and 1910s, its status declined over the course of the 20th century in response to changing diets, increased foreign competition, and, from the 1940s, periodic outbreaks of crook rot disease. By the early 1920s many growers in the Triassic sandstone belt, the home of Worcestershire's Victorian watercress industry, chose to refocus their attention on more lucrative market garden produce like cabbages, carrots, and cauliflowers, and by the end of World War II nearly all of the county's former cress beds had either been uprooted or left to silt up.[24] The industry's decline is reflected by a sharp drop-off in the number of prosecutions for watercress theft at the Worcestershire Petty Sessions, a crime that practically disappeared after the outbreak of World War I. In 1950 just 750 acres of watercress were growing across all of England, most of it in Hampshire, and by 1970 this figure had almost halved.[25] By the end of the 20th century, Worcestershire's watercress trade was all but a distant memory, and the 'poor man's bread' had been transformed into a rustic garnish on the side of the dinnerplate.

In recent years, however, there have been signs of a revived interest in watercress. In 2002 a small group of English growers formed the Watercress Alliance, a marketing body whose risqué slogan (*'Not Just a Bit on the Side!'*) drew much public attention and helped double sales in England over the following decade.[26] As of 2021 at least two major horticultural firms, Westlands UK and Zenith Nurseries, were growing watercress at Offenham in the Vale of Evesham, making use of modern greenhouses, polytunnels, and hydroponics to maximise yields in a competitive market (Fig 4). In a health-conscious world ever more drawn to locally-grown traditional produce, might there be life in the old plant yet?

Fig 4: Modern greenhouse complex at Offenham Cross (© Dave Bushell via geograph.org.uk, CC BY-SA 2.0 licence)

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12. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 8 July 1876, 3; *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 28 July 1869, 3; 15 September 1894, 6.

13. *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 1 February 1890, 4.

14. *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 17 May 1890, 6.

15. R. Ford *op cit* fn 2; *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 1 August 1849, 4.

16. *Bromsgrove and Droitwich Messenger*, 3 April 1880, 2.

17. The largest documented theft took place in 1880, when a gang of three men from Dolday stole 88lbs of watercress from a Lower Wick grower: *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 21 August 1880, 4.

18. TNA RG 12/2325; *Worcestershire Chronicle*, 26 March 1887, 6; 1 February 1890, 4.

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