

ALMOST A BREWERY: THE STORY OF EDME LTD. 1884 - 2000

ANTHONY LANSDOWN

When did it all begin? 1884 - 1897

Had you stood on the mash tun floor of Edme's Mistley factory in 1999, you could be forgiven for thinking that you were in a medium sized brewery. Five large mash tuns were visible with grist cases above and on the upper floors, malt mills and liquor backs. Only if you went looking for the coppers and hops would you realise that something was wrong, for the wort was passed to vacuum evaporation pans and thickened to 80% solids. This factory made malt extract, used in large quantities by many breweries until the 1960s and to the present by the food industry. The title is correct, for Edme could be said to be 'almost a brewery'.

Sources indicate that, in 1881 Robert Free, Richard Southby and Thomas Amey started a business, at Mistley in the county of Essex, to make and sell malt extract. They called their enterprise The Condensed Wort and Brewer's Meal Company, something of a mouthful by any standards. These three, had various associations with the brewing and malting trade but little was written down about the early struggles of the original company. In 1884, the name of the business was changed to The English Diastatic Malt Extract Company and it is this date that has always been taken as the founding of the company. Documents, in the Edme archives, tell us that on Thursday 20 February 1896 a Mr E.M. Lauderdale took the chair at the first board meeting of The English Diastatic Malt Extract Company Ltd. The meeting was held to amalgamate the English Diastatic Malt Extract and The Condensed Beverage Companies.

A notable event occurred in April 1896. The first Annual General Meeting of the new company was

called but on the duly appointed day only the Chairman and the Secretary turned up; typical Edme! It is comforting for today's management to know that our Victorian forebears occasionally got it wrong.

In the sixteen years between 1881 and 1897, Edme had been renamed, merged, almost sold and acquired three more businesses; so much for Victorian values of prudence and stability. A case could have been made for a period of consolidation. However this was not to be, for one of the businesses purchased was Britannia Malt Extract and Edme acquired their depot at Hammersmith. It was to prove a thorn in the side of the directors.

Financial prudence was certainly extended to the staff. A certain Mr Hook was taken on as a Clerk and Traveler. His work consisted of 'keeping the books, making out accounts and general clerk's work, also calling on likely buyers of extract in the counties of Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridge and Herts'. His salary was to be thirty shillings (£1.50) per week plus expenses!

In the spring of 1897, the London offices were moved to 5 New London Street and the telephone was installed. Also the name of the company was changed to Edme Ltd. This must have come as a relief to minute writers and typists for all of the next hundred years.

Depots, agents and water supplies - 1897-1909

The Britannia Malt Extract Company leased premises in Hammersmith and it was decided to run this facility as a depot, the products being supplied from Mistley.



Figure 1.

From the start this proved to be a poor choice. Hammersmith is first reported to be making losses in February 1898 and at the Board meeting of that month the dreaded words, cut costs, appear. The London office, so recently rented, was moved to the Hammersmith Depot. Other parts of the depot were sublet. Advertising was cut and the roundsmen's wages were reduced to £1 per week plus commission. In September 1898 the depot manager resigned.

The Board acted quickly to take control at Hammersmith and J.E.J. Johnson was empowered to manage the finances of the Hammersmith business. The final victim of the curse of the Hammersmith Depot was Mr J.E.J. Johnson himself. He took up the financial reins in August 1901; one year later the first reference to money not being paid to Edme appears. By November, the arrears had not been cleared and with Johnson absent from the meeting, his fellow directors unanimously called for his resignation as Managing Director. At the December meeting he was formally removed.

Robert Free, one of the original founders of Edme, died in February 1902 and J.H. Lehmkuhl was formally made Chairman of the Company. It is noticeable that Lehmkuhl moved swiftly to put the depot finances on a more businesslike basis.

Little mention has been made of the syrups factory, but it too was causing the directors sleepless nights. The problem was water supply. At the evaporation stage

much water is needed for steam and for condensing and the Edme board were under the impression that an agreement had been reached between them and the Tendring Hundreds Water Company for the supply of 24,000 gallons of water per 24 hours. Robert Free had brokered this deal, probably in the days of the condensed Wort and Brewers Meal Company. It is also significant that Robert Free had a financial interest in the Water Company. In 1898 the situation became critical. The factory manager, Lovell, complaining of excessive overtime and batches of syrup having to be destroyed due to delays caused by water shortage. A new pump and temporary reservoir were installed and an application was made to the Great Eastern Railway to take water from a brook on the site boundary. This appears to have eased the situation somewhat and on 25 May 1899 it is recorded 'at last the meter is fixed and working today'. The arguments dragged on, with arbitration and threats of court action until the death of Robert Free in 1902. At this point the Water Company purchased his shares and solved the problem by terminating the agreement! Rapid action was taken and a borehole dug. When the pump started there was general delight at both the quality and quantity of the water supply.

Despite the production problems, the products were an essential ingredient of many prize-winning entries at large and small Baker's Exhibitions up and down the land. As early as 1897, bread made with the help of Edme products won 1st Prize at the Willesdon Great Show and Edme was awarded a Gold Medal for the best stand. There were many more awards for Edme recorded over the years.

At the March 1899 meeting of the Board, a significant appointment was made when H.A. Dowding became a director. Previously he had been a shareholder, now he was to lead the Company's marketing of malt extract to the brewing trade. As was the practice at the time he acted as an agent for the products. Mr Dowding was a professional brewer and his association with Edme proved to be both long and profitable.

Of interest is a letter of July 1906 from H.M. Customs and Excise stating that they would raise no objection to malt extract being used in the brewer's mash tun. Dowding had been busily selling the product, to brewers, since 1899; perhaps the veil of silence had better be drawn over these 'goings-on'.

At the January 1909 Board meeting Lehmkuhl resigned the chair. His seven years in control had resolved several vexatious issues and brought much needed stability. H.A. Dowding took the chair for what was to be a new chapter for Edme.

Before the war

Lovell, the Factory Manager, had been struggling on for some years whilst the Board dealt with the many squabbles with agents and arguments amongst themselves. Lovell's position with the Company was strengthened with a three-year contract. In March of the following year, Dowding insisted that a Director visit Mistley weekly. By June of 1910, new plant was being purchased. Orders were placed for a Grain Dryer, a copper pan and an air compressor. Mr H. Rose's tender for the erection of a new press room was accepted and this is the first mention, in the minutes, of an association with a local builder, which lasts, to the present day.

Another name that is to be associated with Edme for many years takes to the stage in 1909 when it is recorded that Mr R. Pountney's pay is to be increased by 6 shillings and 6 pence per week.

It is clear from the records that Edme, in the years up to the First World War, was enjoying a period of prosperity. Dowding's work with the brewing industry was showing good profits and the many agencies were performing well. 1911 saw Edme's only involvement with popular entertainment when the Hammersmith Depot was leased to the Entente Cordiale Co. These 'cinematographic people' wanted to convert the premises into one of those new-fangled picture palaces. Some of Edme's efforts down all the years may be like a Charlie Chaplin film but this offer was taken up and lasted for some years. The cinema business ended after the war and Metro-Goldwyn-Edme was never to be.

Work continued at Mistley with the purchase of a Mash Tun in 1912. Concern was still being expressed at the expenditure on coal and it was not until April 1914 that Dowding was able to report to the Board his satisfaction with the Works.

Working conditions for the men were improved in 1913 with Sick Pay being made available. Full pay was to be

given for the first three days and thereafter 10 shillings per week in addition to money received from any benefit society. All employees were expected to join 'the Panel' as these societies were known. This utopian generosity must have caused an epidemic in Mistley for one year later the scheme was amended and the workers got nothing for the first three days! Edme did however sponsor the annual beano to the tune of £10. Economies were clearly going to people's heads when poor Mr Lovell was formally instructed to 'issue mops and buckets between 12 noon and 1pm on Saturdays and only then on production of the worn out articles'. Those were the good old days, we keep being told!

The Great War 1914-18

The minute books for the war years are hardly the best source of information about the human tragedy that occurred for the next four years. However, filled as they are with financial figures and decisions recorded, it is possible to read between the lines. It was going to be a tough time for Edme.

From late 1914 onwards, every Board meeting discussed costs and stocks at the Factory for as the war continued difficulties in obtaining barley and coal become major issues..

It was not until 1915 that the effects of the war became noticeable. In March the men at Mistley were allowed to buy coal from the Company's stock. On a more personal note Francis Henry Lehmkuhl, Director and past Chairman, found it necessary to change his surname to Carleton. In the extreme jingoism of the time a Germanic sounding name was not an asset. The Board felt it necessary to 'post a notice in the Factory, contradicting the reported statement of antipatriotism and stating that the Directors will do everything to assist their employees to enlist'.

By August 1915 serious decreases in extract sales were being recorded as well as difficulties in buying new drums. It was also proving impossible to get used drums returned. This situation became so bad that the salesmen were ordered to refuse to take orders unless the drums were returned. In October Free Rodwell, the Mistley maltsters, were contracted to malt barley at 5 shillings and 3 pence per quarter 'if war conditions permit'.

Wages were increased by one shilling per week due to the effect of the war on the cost of living. An extra 2 shillings per week and bonuses were paid in 1916 and the Company offered to make up the pay of men "called to the colours" to the amount they had hitherto been receiving. There are several votes of condolence as Edme people lost their loved ones.

Government restriction began to bite in 1917. Permits to Manufacture and Sell were introduced and the Food Controller's Department impounded 700 quarters of barley for other uses. Dowding did his best and used other starch sources such as potatoes. He patented 'Potatoex' in 1918; things were really getting desperate. The First World War saw the start of Edme's involvement with the manufacture of Cod Liver Oil and Malt. Whether this concoction improved the nation's health is a matter for conjecture. What is certain is the fact that it tasted revolting, as many that were children during the 1939-45 conflict can testify.

Strangely the Board meeting of 12 November 1918 does not record that at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the Armistice brought the slaughter to an end. It was only the day before! In fairness, the end of hostilities must have been on the Board's mind for they recorded a card from one A.E. Crisell thanking them for their help whilst he had been a prisoner of war. They also agreed, at that meeting, to contribute £100 to the erection of the Mistley war memorial. There were to be the names of 69 Mistley men on that memorial.

Rebuilding

There was much work to be done after the war. Raw materials and fuel were in short supply and men returning from active service had to be re-integrated into their old jobs. During 1919, Carleton took up the reins of Chairman again, allowing Dowding to become Managing Director and concentrate on rebuilding of trade with the brewers. F.J. Bearman was co-opted as a Director. So began an association which was to last for over 40 years and prove to be crucial to the development of the Company.

Down at Mistley, Mr H. Rose was given a pig, value £5, as a gift for only charging £2 for valuing the Factory buildings.

Kenya Breweries

In July 1922, a proposal was received to invest in the building of a brewery at Nairobi, Kenya. This was to use malt extract as the main raw material for making wort. It was decided that Dowding would go to Kenya to assist with the building and commissioning of the plant. In December 1922, Dowding left for Africa and was absent for the next six months.

If Henry Dowding thought, when he returned in June 1923, that he had seen the last of Nairobi, he was to be disappointed. By November he was being asked to go back and it was not until July 1925 that Kenya Breweries finally began to make a profit. Trade for the supply of malt extract continued for many more years.

Prosperous times

There is no doubt that the late 1920s and the 1930s were the most profitable times that Edme experienced. With Dowding's experience and contacts allied to Bearman's drive and enthusiasm, trade with the brewers flourished. The addition of diastatic (enzyme rich) extract to the mash tun was becoming the norm rather than the exception in many breweries. The barley being grown was mostly of poor quality for malting. The widespread use of artificial fertilizers was not practised, the resulting malts were often of low nitrogen content and thus of low enzyme activity. This gave brewers problems with fermentation, beer clarity and risk of bacterial infection. The high enzyme content of Edme extracts appeared to solve the problem. Trade continued steadily with the bakery industry and, possibly caused by its popularity in the First World War, the cod liver oil and malt sales flourished. In fact, the oil and malt business boomed to the extent that a new department was built in the mid 1930s.

In 1929 the Board required some new blood. C.H. Waterer retired after almost 30 years service and was replaced by two new directors. Frederick John Bearman (son of Frederick Jacob the Managing Director) and R.T. Newman joined the Board. Pountney was elected a full director at this time. Throughout this period there are references to various items of plant being purchased and buildings being erected. The factory was not being neglected. Premises were leased in Regent Street for the

Head Office. Edme was to have a London office in Regent Street until the late 1960s.

The great depression of the 1930s obviously had some effect on Edme, most notably on the brewing trade. Business was slower but was always reported as satisfactory. Other trade areas must have increased sales considerably for plans were drawn up for a new Packing Department to cope with the Oil and Malt production. The building stands to this day, albeit much modernized so that only the steel framework survives. It now serves as Edme's Milling Department.

During 1935 the question of Edme carrying out their own malting was given serious consideration. Free Rodwell's Manningtree malting was bought in September. One year later a lease was taken out on a malting at Sudbury also owned by Free Rodwell.

The workforce at Mistley was not ignored during this period of development. Workers houses were built in Lawford and Mistley and, due to trade union activity in the area, wages were increased to a minimum of 45 shillings for a 52-hour week. The 'good old days' were evident.

The Second World War

Whether it was the outbreak of hostilities in the autumn or the onset of ill health, Henry Dowding decided to retire in December 1939. Perhaps he could not face guiding Edme through another mighty conflict. He can truly claim to be the Father of the Company. A shareholder at the beginning in 1896 and a Director from 1899 he was Chairman from 1909. With a few gaps when in Kenya, he remained at the helm for 30 years seeing Edme grow in size and reputation. His retirement was to be short-lived for he died in August 1941.

With the outbreak of war and Dowding's retirement, some changes were made to the senior management of the Company. Frederick Jacob Bearman became Chairman and Managing Director and R.P. Pountney relinquished his role as Company Secretary to become Assistant Managing Director with responsibility for the London office. John Bearman recommended an allowance, for those called up, of 7 shillings and 6 pence

per week for single men and 12 shillings and 6 pence for those who were married.

The disruptions caused by the war are not documented in the minute books but they must have been considerable. Mistley was an industrial area and with a dock and a mine depot at Wrabness, the threat of bombing must have been ever present. The factory was never hit but air raids were not unknown. The air raid shelter, built in the basement of the Oil and Malt Department, exists to this day.

The supply of fuel and raw materials, obviously enough, were the biggest problems for the management at Mistley. In early 1942, John Bearman was reporting that 'we could sell more to the brewers than we can make'. They too must have been trying to bridge the raw materials gap with malt extract. It proved impossible to purchase new plant and equipment with engineering manufacturers on a war footing. The Oil and Malt Department must have boomed, as anyone who was a child during or just after the war will tell you. The very words Cod Liver Oil and Malt can still bring a shudder to people of a certain age.

Malt supply was uncertain and Edme were determined to be self-sufficient. The first of two significant moves was made in October 1941 when the No. 2 malting at Mistley was hired from Free Rodwell. This building was one of the many malthouses operated by that company and was practically part of the Edme site. In July 1943 the malting at Sudbury, previously leased, was bought from Free Rodwell. Edme was now malting on three sites Sudbury, Manningtree and Mistley, but only the latter could be said to be on-site.

In October 1945 Edme emerged from the Second World War in good shape. Like most businesses in need of repair and refurbishment, tired by the six years of conflict but with a solid base of good sales and an excellent reputation.

Post war rebuilding

Anyone who thought that a rapid rebuilding programme was going to be launched, was in for a rude awakening. Great Britain was almost bankrupt from six years of war, building materials were rigidly licensed and a

newly elected Labour government was committed to a policy of social change. The replacement of equipment worn out by the war years was urgently needed but, clearly, was not going to happen quickly.

In June 1948 a significant minute appears, recording a sharp decline in trade to brewers. This downturn continues to be reported over the next few years. Perhaps it was in response to this worrying situation that the Board appointed Mr Bob Pritchard as Brewing Trade Representative for the south of England, in October 1948. Bob Pritchard was a professional brewer and was to bring much needed technical expertise to Edme.

In July 1950 the Board initiated a project which was to lead to the construction of modern malting facilities on the Mistley site. The plant was to be situated behind Abbey House and the system chosen was, for its day, very modern. The new system with its conveyors, malting drums and pneumatics must have seemed a step in the right direction to those used to shovels and wheelbarrows.

Before the war, most brewers were trained by way of a system called 'pupilage'. This was similar to an apprenticeship, except that the trainee was unpaid. In fact the Head Brewer usually charged a fee to carry out the training. Most young brewers were "of the family" and often of private means. When trained they were excellent at the hands-on aspects of the job but perhaps less aware of the biochemistry. After the war things began to change. The two universities offering academic courses in brewing and malting science were turning out graduates with good technical training and they started to question why malt extract was needed. In 1952 John Bearman had to report that he was not buying barley and was delaying malt deliveries. The activities of Bob Pritchard and later Jim Maltman in keeping as much brewery business alive as possible cannot be overpraised. It is amusing to note that, in 1957, the Christmas present given to Head Brewers was a bone china morning tea set. Junior Brewers received a pair of pliers and a tool kit; a comment on their differing roles in the brewery scheme of things perhaps.

At the January A.G.M. of 1954 F.J. Bearman announced his retirement as Managing Director. He remained Chairman and was made a Consultant Advisor for life. He was 82 years old at the time! His resignation gave

old Mr. Bearman time to take up the chairmanship of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club. The boardroom at Whiteheart Lane must have seemed like an Edme office as John Bearman and W.R. Pountney were also directors of the club.

The 1960s and crisis

Sales of malt flour to the bakery industry had been an important part of the company's profits since its foundation but they could never make up for the loss of trade being experienced in the brewing sector. Had the Company realised it, in 1963 they were being thrown a significant lifeline. Reginald Maudling, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, removed the restrictions on home brewing. This opportunity is not mentioned in the minutes until 1965 and then it is only the report of a complaint.

The Board elected Phyllis Peskett, the company secretary, as a director in 1964 and seemed to be grasping the serious situation that was developing. In October 1964, plans were laid before the Board to double the sales to the bakery and food trades. Further impetus to develop new ideas was given urgent priority when Charringtons Brewery suddenly stopped using malt extract. The factory was now put on a four-day week as a result of the loss of this large customer and John Bearman, was warning that the Company should tool up or face the consequent costs. By this he meant that modernisation was vital to survival. It could be said that 1967 was the year when the profitability crisis hit home. In May the half-year figures showed a profit that would only just cover the preference share dividend and it was obvious that a price war was developing. A move to smaller premises for the London office was put in hand. By October the use of consultants was being suggested. The final accounts for the year to the end of September 1967 showed a small profit but it was not possible to pay a dividend on the ordinary shares. Consultants were appointed in January 1968.

Associated Industrial Consultants reported in March 1968. Their recommendations were an immediate move of the London office to Mistley, reductions in manning and overtime and that Pountney became sole Managing Director and also moved to Mistley. Longer term they suggested that barley syrup production should be

researched, greater emphasis put on new ideas and products in the food trade and home brew should be given more attention. They strongly recommended the appointment of a sales manager to have overall control of all selling efforts.

Some of the proposals were not popular. The London office staff had recently moved to smaller premises in Oxford Street, the prospect of a move to darkest rural Essex appalled some senior staff.

The 1960s ended with the London Head Office closed and rationalised at Mistley, some savings made and new ideas on the drawing board. Unfortunately, Edme was still making insufficient profits in an out of date plant.

The 1970s and merger

Bob Pritchard proposed that a complete home brewing kit be produced, based on hopped malt extract and with a sachet of yeast. However a flow of profit from the developments was longer term and Edme was now in a loss making position.

An Extraordinary General Meeting was called for July 1972 and John Bearman relinquished the chair to Mr J. Proctor who had been elected to the Board the previous year to represent the shareholders. Proctor announced that he would be recommending action to protect the shareholder's interests. One can only assume that he meant liquidation. He was spared this drastic step by an offer to purchase the shares of the company from the maltsters F. and G. Smith.

Under new management

F. and G. Smith, with their associated company Crisp Malting Ltd., moved quickly and by December 1972 John Crisp was in the chair at the first meeting of the Edme Management Committee. Dennis Merriweather, already installed as Joint Managing Director, was reporting several new projects. Crisp Malting had a barley syrup plant at their Great Ryburgh site. This venture had not been a total success, difficulties being experienced with the separation of sweet wort from the spent grains. Most of the equipment was to be moved to Mistley, including a modern evaporator and, perhaps

more important, some useful sales contracts. New oil tanks for the boilers, increasing steam raising capacity and the sale of the considerable property holdings were being negotiated. Throughout 1973, the minutes record capital projects in the factory and malting. Most of these were designed to utilise the existing equipment more efficiently and thus cut costs. This strategy bore fruit, for in April 1974, Merriweather was able to report that Edme was back in profit. On the sales front greater attention was being paid to both home brew and the general food trade. At last Edme seemed to have grasped the fact that trade to the brewing industry was dying, albeit slowly and that section of the business would have to be replaced by new products and new ideas.

In 1975 Allied Breweries, who had taken over the business of Free Rodwell, the largest of the Mistley maltsters, offered to sell their No. 2 malthouse. This was obviously of interest to Edme as it could be said to form part of the factory site. Initially the kiln house was refurbished and green malt conveyed across the main yard



Figure 2.

for drying, releasing more drums in the 'auto maltings' for germination. Much later the first flaking plant was to be installed and one of the oldest buildings on the site became the home of one of Edme's great success stories.

In early 1977, the need for more modern evaporation equipment was becoming critical. Most of the evaporation pans had seen many years of service; one had been in use since 1923. The purchase of a 'falling film' type evaporator was made in May of that year and it was in operation by October.

The acquisition of property was not over in May 1977 negotiations opened for the purchase of the Brooks feed mill which was situated immediately opposite the Edme site, on the other side of the High Street. Its usefulness to the company was obvious. Initially it could be used for warehousing and later, with some modification, for manufacture.

Change continues in the early 1980s

A new decade opened with further changes to the staff as both Bob Pritchard and Phyllis Peskett reached retirement age in 1980. Bob could, quite justifiably, be said to be the 'Mr. Edme' to the brewing trade. It was due to his efforts that that section of sales lasted as long as it did. He saw the importance of developing the home brew business as a new avenue for syrup sales, although his views were sometimes frustrated by more conservative elements within the company. Edme had been trading with the Sparklets Division of the British Oxygen Company for some time. This division manufactured soda syphons and had branched out into the home brewing market with a range of five gallon barrels, carbon dioxide injectors and beer taps. When they decided, for internal reasons, to rationalise their business, Edme were approached to purchase the home brew trade. This offer could not have come at a more appropriate moment. It took a lot of courage from both Dennis Merriweather and his managers to venture into unknown territory. After all, what do maltsters and brewers know about plastic injection moulding? Despite the steepness of the learning curve, by March 1981 Edme was assembling barrels and injectors by the thousand in a workshop converted from part of the Thorn Quay building.

For some time experiments with wheat malt manufacture had been undertaken and in 1980, the year of change, the decision was made to make malted wheat flakes. The developing bakery side of the business, for nearly 100 years under the shadow of malt extract, became a department in its own right. Experiments with the malted wheat flakes proved successful and a small production line was built in No. 2 Malting. Allied Mills started to buy these flakes and by August 1981 were taking ten tonnes per week.

The sales of home brewing kits were very buoyant and demand was far outstripping Edme's ability to supply. In late 1981 the decision was made to build a modernised canning line in what had been the old milling area. Despite replacing a 'jug and bottle' system with something a little more modern, cans of home brew syrup were still in short supply in the summer of 1982 when making beer at home hit its peak. The success of malted wheat flakes continued. The first production line began to work round the clock in 1983 and was soon followed by another line also being worked on shifts. Before long demand outstripped capacity again and in 1985 another line in Thorn Quay was needed. The malting was producing all of Edme's wheat malt and the Group was supplying the syrup factory needs for barley malt.

Tom Caxton

Edme had been supplying Reckitt and Coleman of Norwich with syrup for their Tom Caxton home brewing kits for some time. Due to a need for space on their site, they decided to sell the brand and Dennis Merriweather acted quickly to make the purchase. This acquisition more than doubled the sales of home brew cans.

The late 1980s

Dennis Merriweather's bold acquisition of Tom Caxton boosted sales of malt extract and barley syrup and bought time, for as the 1980s drew to a close it was obvious that history was repeating itself. In the 1960s, the decline in sales of malt extract to breweries and the company's failure to develop new markets lead to near disaster. By 1987, the national sales for home beer mak-

ing products were showing the first signs of decline. David Bevan, now installed as General Manager, put in hand experiments to produce high diastatic syrups and dark malt extracts using ultrafiltration as the means of concentration. Unlike the stagnation of the 1960s, the Edme management was determined not to allow lack of innovation to bring the Company to its knees.

On the food products side of the business, malted wheat flakes had become a flagship brand. Edme's wide range of flours, mixes and flakes were well positioned to benefit from changing tastes in the baked goods market. Malt extract sales were steady and being mostly to food trade customers, the threat of losing business such as happened when brewers discontinued its use was small. Dennis Merriweather had been running the affairs of the whole group of companies for some time and now passed the job of being Edme's Managing Director to David Bevan.

Redevelopment in the 1990s

To anyone taking stock of Edme's situation in 1990, one major threat to the business was obvious; the very fabric of the factory. For decades money was spent on modifications to reduce costs or meet demand shortfalls. The result was new and old, in some cases very old, equipment crammed into dilapidated buildings; the factory was not meeting the standards of hygiene required by the customers. Edme's customers were going to demand more and more say in every aspect of any activity that could affect the safety and quality of their products.

Mindful of his customer's expectations, David Bevan put plans in place for the first major rebuild in many years. There were three main areas of concern, the syrups factory, the mill building and the need for a modern warehouse. This did not complete Edme's wish list, for new legislation was about to make the discharge of effluent into the adjacent River Stour illegal. Since the factory first started up in 1881, both Edme and indeed all the other maltings in the area had discharged steep water and other effluent in this way. In fact, the flourishing population of mute swans was dependent on the grain particles washed into the tidal waters.

The rebuild of the malt extract plant was planned in three phases, the first of these being a new wort produc-

tion facility. When the brewers Bass decided to close their huge Preston Brook brewery, near Liverpool, it was a wonderful opportunity to buy some of their equipment and move it to Mistley. By late 1993 most of the wort production plant was in place although there was still much pipework and electrical cabling to be done.

Disaster in 1994

On the night of 24 January 1994 there was a catastrophic fire in the old part of the syrups factory. Within the space of a few hours Edme's ability to produce malt extract and other syrups was destroyed.

The management team made an initial assessment. The extract storage and blending facilities were relatively unscathed and were back in use quickly. Every effort was made to get parts of the damaged factory repaired as soon as possible. By March, two of the mash tuns and two of the evaporation pans were in operation. Ironically one of these pans was the original 1923 installation; you don't kill the 'old 'uns' off that quickly, not in Mistley! The Board of the parent company, Anglia Maltings, showed great faith in the time of crisis and sanctioned the continuation of the project. Thus by June 1994 the new wort production plant was supplying the pans in the old factory for evaporation. The building of Phase 2, the new evaporation and blending facility, was proceeding as quickly as possible but even with these emergency measures enough malt extract could not be produced. The repair of another of the old factory evaporators, installed in the new plant, boosted production. The old factory was converted for the manufacture of diastatic malt extract and speciality syrups such as Clarimalt, the ultrafiltered black malt extract.

1994 - not all doom and gloom

The crisis caused by the fire was not the only problem facing Edme Ltd during 1994. As has been mentioned, there was an urgent need to solve the effluent problem, the maltings was worn out and warehousing was both inadequate and unacceptable to customers.

The effluent problem was solved by a joint venture, known as Mistley Waterworks, between Edme and Carlsberg-Tetley Maltsters. The treatment plant was

built on Edme's land and processed the steep water and effluent from both factories. The new equipment was started up in December 1994.

A new warehouse was planned and built during 1994 and was handed over in February 1995. It was a considerable relief to be able to store flours, flakes and other bakery products in modern, custom designed premises. The Edme malting was built in the 1950s and had undergone much modification but little real refurbishment since its installation. Many of the malting drums were showing their age and a rebuild was the only answer. However there was spare capacity elsewhere in the Group and the decision was made to transfer malt production to Great Ryburgh.

The company received the best possible boost in the momentous year of 1994 when Edme received the Queen's Award for Export Achievement.

The late 1990s

A new picture emerged as the period of intense change experienced for the last two years ended. As in the 1960s the market for malt extract was falling. The trade with brewers was long gone and business in the food sector was highly competitive. Despite now having a much more efficient extract factory with extra capacity it was a case of too many malt extractors chasing too few customers. Many new product and different ideas were tried; it was only possible to retain market share but in a declining market. However, the sales of dry goods, Edme's flours, flakes and mixes were increasing every year. Clearly it was time for some hard decisions. This time there was to be none of the inaction, which had contributed to the near disaster of the late 1960s.

In 1999, David Amos, now promoted to Managing Director, decided that Edme Ltd. could remain in malt extract manufacture no longer. The business and brands were sold to Novartis plc and after 115 years Edme ceased the manufacture of malt extract.

2000 and beyond

From the earliest days, Edme supplied the bakery trade with malt flours. Reading the written records from the copperplate handwriting of 1896 to the word processor of 2000, it is surprising how little reference there is to this sector of the business. Despite winning medals and prizes the 'dry goods' always seemed to be the Cinderella of the product portfolio. Whilst the Company had been almost obsessed with brewery sales, flours, flakes and bakery mixes were quietly growing year on year. Now that the management team concentrated their efforts on one section of trade, the business came of age. Having halved the size of the business, in 1999, the opportunity came about in 2001 to double the size. A rival company, John Hare Corporation, was taken over and their business absorbed into the Mistley operation within 6 months. As a new century unfolds, Edme Ltd. can look back on almost 125 years of trading with some of the inevitable crises and problems along the way. There have been boom years and at times hard decisions have averted near disaster. One thing is certain the determination of all the Edme people to keep a proud business running. Edme was described as a 'going concern' in the prospectus of 1895; Edme is a going concern today and will be in the future.

Sources

The minute books and archives of Edme Ltd.