

## A Victorian dairymaid's letter home?

Summer 1862

Dear Mother and Father

I miss both of you and my brother and sisters very much. It has only been two weeks since I left you all to come to Home Farm as the junior dairymaid.

I am so tired! My shoulders ache from carrying the heavy yoke and buckets back from the fields after we have milked the cows. The yoke is wooden and has chains with hooks for the big milk pails. The buckets are very heavy when they are full of milk!

My fingers ache too, from milking the cows. The older girls milk a cow in just ten minutes, it takes me about twenty minutes, but I am getting faster.

First we wash the cow's udder to remove any dung or dirt. We then milk the cow into shiny metal pails. The modern ones that we use are hooded which helps to keep out dirt, rain and the cows hooves if they fidget about.

The cows have to be milked twice a day. We get up at 5.30 a.m. to milk them and when we have milked the cows in the field we go back to the dairy.

In the dairy we pour the milk through a fine muslin sieve to remove any bits of dirt or hair. As the milk is still warm from the cow, we have to cool it quickly so that it doesn't go sour. It is trickled over a fancy cooler made of metal which has cold water running through it. You may not have seen anything like it, it is very modern!

When the milk is cool we put it in the flat setting pan and leave it for 2 days so that the cream can float up to the top. It is very rich, thick cream at this time of year because the cows are out in the fields eating good grass. The cream forms a thick crust and then the older dairy maids use a fleeter to skim off the cream. They slide the fleeter under the cream and when they lift it up the skimmed milk drains through all the little holes, leaving the thick cream on the fleeter which we then put into the butter churn.

The skimmed milk is sent up to Cook in the Hall but we get to have some too. The senior dairy maid - Margaret- is ever so nice and gives the younger girls a glass of milk each. She says that we are growing girls and she needs us to be big and strong to carry the heavy buckets.

We use a churn to turn the cream into butter, it is an end-over churn. We have to turn the handle and the barrel goes over and over. The churn has a little glass window on one end, but it is really hard to see through, as it has cream all over it.



After about ten minutes of churning the noise coming from the churn changes from a splash, splash sound to a plopping sound as the big dollop of butter starts to form and flop around. We check inside the churn to make sure that the butter has come and then open a little tap at the bottom of the churn so that the buttermilk can flow out. Sometimes the buttermilk is sent up to the Hall to go into scones, sometimes the young pigs are given it to fatten them up.

Some of the girls like to wash their faces in buttermilk. They say it makes skin very soft and beautiful. I tried it once but it is a bit smelly!

Then we wash the butter in cold water until the water comes away clear. It takes ages, which is very boring, but Margaret says that it is very important because if you don't do it properly then the butter goes bad.

I think that with the skimmed milk and scraps of cream that I eat here I am growing more, my skirt feels a bit tight when I put it on in the morning. I may have to move the button soon.

We shape the butter and squeeze out the buttermilk with wooden butterpats or Scotch Hands. The first time I used the Scotch hands I dropped a bit of butter on the floor. I was terrified and I was sure that someone would be cross, but they were all very kind and told me about the times when they had done the same when they had just started work.

The butter is squeezed dry with the butter worker and then packed into earthenware crocks with salt to make it last longer and taste better. It is then sent up to the Hall basement where it is stored in a very cold room on a marble shelf. It can be kept like this for several months so that they always have butter.

Margaret says that sometimes the cream won't turn into butter. She gets frightened that it is bewitched and says that we must put 3 white hairs from the tail of the black and white farm cat into the cream to stop the witch. The younger girls laugh at her behind her back and say that she is very old fashioned and that witches don't exist any more. Margaret also hangs a branch from a rowan tree over the dairy door and has a little stone with a hole in it that she wears on her belt. She says that these are good for keeping away witches too. I don't know whether I believe in witches or not. Margaret seems very certain that there are some around but we haven't had any problems since I got here.

I am glad that I worked hard at school, so that now that I am living away from home I can write home to you. I am looking forward to seeing you all again next weekend when I have a day off.

With love from your affectionate daughter

Amelia