

Cutting the mustard

It might look brown and raggedy before it's harvested, but a crop of white mustard seeds in Cambridgeshire is about to be turned into one of our hottest and best-loved British condiments, as Harry Wallop reports

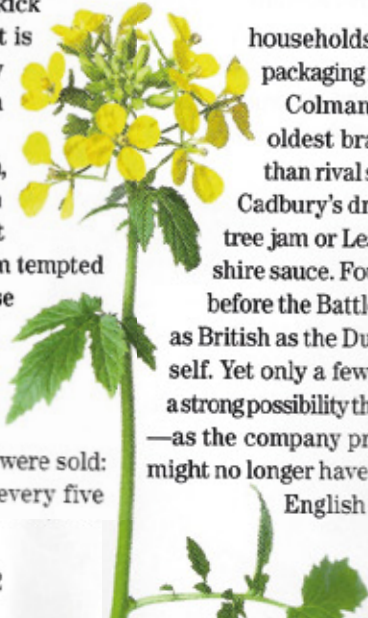
TO the uninitiated, the field in northern Cambridgeshire does not look very promising. I think, for a moment, it is full of weeds—3ft high, brown and raggedy. However, this plot in Thorney represents a minor miracle of British farming. The crop is *Sinapis alba* or white mustard and the 10 hectares (just under 25 acres) are in the process of being turned into about 25 tons of mustard seeds, which will be ground into a very fine powder before ending up in a pot of Colman's.

James Burgess, who has been driving the vast Claas 780 Lexion combine harvester down the field, is on a break. He pops open one of the inch-long dried seed pods and six tiny seeds roll into his hand. We try them: at first, you get no more than a mild pepperiness, but then, the distinctive kick hits the back of your tongue. It is unmistakably mustard and pretty much the only spice that Britain grows commercially.

Mr Burgess insists he is a fan. 'Oh, yes! I love it on a ham sandwich and if I'm having roast beef, it's got to be on the side of the plate.' I'm tempted to think his endorsement is because Colman's indirectly pays his wages, yet his fondness for the yellow stuff is reflected across the country. Last year, 9.7 million jars and 1.5 million tins of Colman's were sold: it is estimated that two out of every five



As pods (above) and flowers (below), mustard looks innocent, but the seeds hold a kick



households have the distinctive packaging in their pantry or fridge. Colman's is one of the very oldest brands in Britain, older than rival store-cupboard staples Cadbury's drinking chocolate, Tiptree jam or Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce. Founded in 1814, the year before the Battle of Waterloo, it seems as British as the Duke of Wellington himself. Yet only a few years ago, there was a strong possibility that Colman's of Norwich—as the company proudly brands itself—might no longer have been made using any English mustard seeds.

Two centuries ago, there were at least 300 farmers in East Anglia growing mustard—taking advantage of the dry weather and sunlight the crop loves. Long before, the Romans had introduced the spice to England. They crushed the seed in a mortar and then mixed it with grape juice or must, calling the resulting paste *Mustum ardens* (fiery must)—which is how mustard got its name. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was popular both as a spice and as medicine. Nonetheless, it was as a flavouring for roast meat that it really took hold. Guy Tullberg, the managing director of Tracklements, which makes eight different mustards, explains the appeal. 'I think it's



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point came in 2007. ‘It was another bad year on the back of several bad years. Some farmers decided they’d pack up.’

Yields had consistently fallen as the mustard crop became prone to pests and farmers gathered for a crunch meeting. ‘Were we going to join together to try and dig our way out of this? Or turn our backs and walk away? It was a fork in the road,’ recalls Mr Stuffins.

In total, 11 farmers banded together to form a cooperative: English Mustard Growers [EMG], helping each other with crop processing and, crucially, agreeing an annual price with Unilever—the Anglo-Dutch consumer-goods giant that took over Colman’s in 1995—giving them certainty over their income. Unilever, for its part, agreed to invest in seed development to stop the pests.

It has worked. Unilever won’t say what percentage of its mustard seeds are now home grown rather than imported, but it’s significantly higher than 15 years ago. ‘It’s quite →

Above: A bucolic poster of 1898, by prolific advertising artist John Hassall. *Top right:* Instantly recognisable: Colman’s yellow. *Above right:* A fiery handful of mustard seeds

bloody brilliant with fatty things and we have traditionally liked fatty meat in Britain.’

In the 17th century, it was discovered that grinding mustard into a very fine powder produced a more fiery condiment. It was this technique that Jeremiah Colman—a Norwich flour miller—adopted, soon discovering there was more money to be made from his mustard powder than bread flour. For most of its long history, Colman’s has sold mustard mostly as a dry product, leaving customers to mix it up for themselves at home. It wasn’t until 1963 that the company introduced the ready-mixed paste that is now its most popular product. Part of the challenge was that mustard loses its pungency very quickly once mixed with a liquid. Colman’s jars from the

supermarket only contain 21% mustard, the rest is water, sugar and salt—which help the paste keep its heat—together with wheat flour to give it a smooth texture. There is turmeric to give it a vibrancy; if you mix your own mustard, it is more of a parchment yellow.

Either way, Colman’s needs a lot of mustard seeds—both the milder white seeds and the more fiery brown ones. By the 21st century, the number of British growers had fallen heavily, with Colman’s increasingly relying on imported seed, especially brown ones, from Canada. ‘No mustard farmer was making any money,’ explains Martin Stuffins, a fourth-generation mustard farmer who is now the operations manager of Park Farm in Thorney, tasked with showing me around. The crunch



an honour to be part of such a small group of farmers,' enthuses Mr Burgess. 'To see how the crop has come on since 2007 is phenomenal.'

His combine can harvest four hectares (a little under 10 acres) in an hour. The huge 14m-wide (46ft) front cutter feeds the stalks into the machine, then a puff of air separates the chaff from the seeds; the seeds drop into a vast container, the chaff (or 'cosh') being blown out of the back. Each hectare produces about

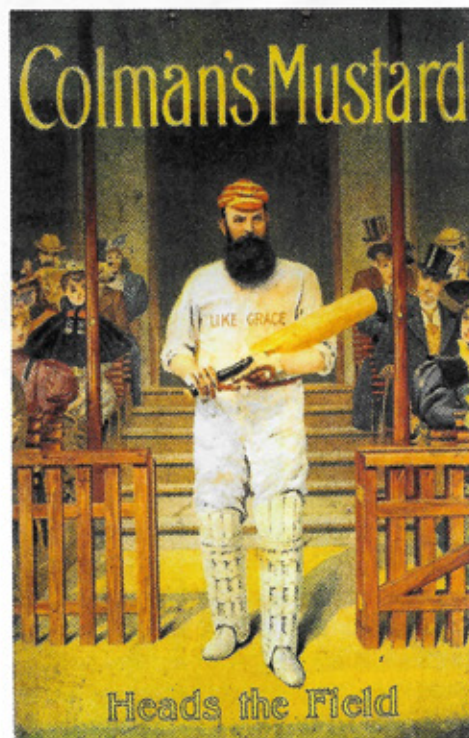
'He calls the revival of the sector "a hell of an achievement"'

2½ tons of seed—nowhere close to the yield oil-seed rape enjoys, but Mr Stuffins points out that more wheat farmers now want to grow mustard as a break crop, something to revitalise a field after seven years of cereal growing. 'Trying to improve your soil health is one of the main reasons we grow mustard,' he says. 'The soil is your factory. If you neglect the soil, it doesn't matter what crop you put in it, your factory is not going to produce.'

The seeds, once harvested, must be dressed—dried and cleaned of any rogue black seeds from weeds. This takes place in a large barn, where the seeds are blown through sieves that filter out dirt and seeds that are too small.

From the farm, the seeds travel 60 miles to Easton, outside Norwich, where they are milled by Condimentum, a company owned by EMG, but backed by Unilever. This stems from when the consumer firm closed its own milling business in the city in 2020, bringing the curtain down on 165 years of Norwich mustard-making. The seeds are ground between two vast rollers and sieved 208 times to produce the super fine powder, which is then packaged into the little yellow tins. For the ready-mixed mustard, there's one final leg of the journey: 177 miles to Burton-upon-Trent, where Unilever not only makes Marmite, but mixes the powder into ready-made mustard, too.

It's a long journey, but not as long as the one English mustard has been on over the past few years. Mr Stuffins calls the revival of the sector a 'hell of an achievement'. He's right. Somehow, a dab of mustard on British beef simply would not be the same if the main ingredient was longer from East Anglia. Visit www.colmans.co.uk



Top: The tractors may be bigger than in 1965, but the principles remain the same. Above: Pioneering batsman W. G. Grace lent his noble visage to Colman's in 1890