

# **THE ORIGIN OF THE SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY IN NORFOLK**

**Presented by Steve Cash**

to Brundall Local History Group, Brundall Memorial Hall  
Saturday 6th January 2024

## **Introduction**

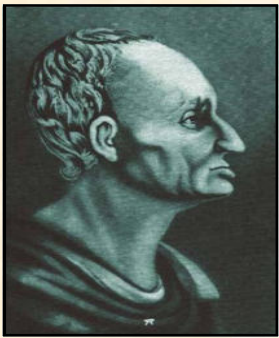
Steve Cash joined British Sugar, or the British Sugar Corporation as it was then known, in the 1970s and worked for them for over 40 years. He started as a casual, hired for the production season, or 'campaign', working as a casual twice before being retained as a permanent employee. The badge of office as permanent was a faded, much worn, boiler suit and a cap. This was at Bardney factory near Lincoln and Steve worked at several British Sugar sites before landing up at Cantley in the 1980s, which is the oldest factory.

This talk illustrates how a combination of the events of warfare and commercial enterprise gave rise to the development of the Home Grown Beet Sugar industry in Norfolk and to the building of the first successful UK sugar factory at Cantley. Steve has chosen to cover the more social and commercial aspects of this story and the characters involved using contemporary reports, rather than the technical aspects, of which he feels others are better qualified to speak. This presentation concentrates on the decision to bring the industry to Norfolk and on the early days of production prior to the second world war.

## A Brief History of Sugar

Sugar cane was known as a pleasant energy source from ancient times. Apparently Alexander the Great used it as a pick-me-up before going on to conquer the known world!

Crystal sugar was initially produced from sugar cane in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, firstly in the Mediterranean region, then in the West Indies where the hot sun, rich soil and plentiful rain produced a large crop. However, the climate and soil conditions of Northern Europe prevented this particular crop from being a viable proposition. The imported sugar crystals were initially very expensive and could only be afforded by the rich. The poor had to do with the molasses found in the bottoms of the imported barrels of sugar hence the expression "*scraping the barrel*".



Sugar crystals were first obtained from the plant *beta maritima* (sea beet) by a German chemist **Andreas Marggraf** in 1747 but commercial development came much later.

In 1801 **Franz Karl Achard**, a pupil of Marggraf, revived the discovery that beet contained sugar, and devised a process to produce crystal sugar from them. Beginning in 1789, he planted various sugar-bearing plants on his manor at Kaulsdorf near Berlin. He soon preferred sugar beet to other plants because of their high sugar content. In the following year he studied different varieties of beet and the influence of fertilizers.



The research was interrupted when Kaulsdorf manor burnt down and had to be sold. It was also a feature of many early sugar factories that they ended in flames due to the potentially explosive nature of sugar air mixtures – not something that is likely to occur in your kitchen! English sugar merchants offered Achard 200,000 taler to declare his experiments a failure but he refused. Apparently the Taler was a silver coin worth about four Euros but the value varied enormously over time. With Achard's discovery, sugar was no longer a luxury product as he made his research commonly available. Achard described the sugar beet as, "*one of the most bountiful gifts which the divine munificence had awarded to man on earth.*"





In 1799 the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote home from Germany:

*“Sugar from beet, oh! all Germany is mad about it. I have seen the sugar sent to Blumenbach from Achard the great chemist, and it is good enough. They say that an hundred pounds weight of beet will make twelve pounds of sugar, and that there is no expense in the preparation. It is the Beta altissima, belongs to the Beta vulgaris, and in Germany is called Runkelriibe. Its leaves resemble those of the common red beet. It is in shape like a clumsy nine pin and about the size of a middling turnip. The flesh is white but has rings of a reddish cast. I will bring over a quantity of the seed.”*

Apparently Coleridge forgot to bring home the seed, his mind obviously on other matters!

Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, sugar had become an important element in the European diet and large amounts were being imported from the West Indies. During the Napoleonic wars the British Navy effectively stopped imports into France by blockading their ports.



**Lord Horatio Nelson, Viscount Nelson 1799**

*by L F Abbot*

© Government Art Collection

**Napoleon at the Battle of Wagram 1809**

(detail) by Joseph Charbord

© Museo Napoleonica, Rome



Napoleon's response in 1811 was to order the immediate investment in the process of producing sugar from beet. He decreed that 32,000 hectares of beet should be planted and provided assistance to get the factories established. Napoleon encouraged new research with sugar beets and, by 1815, over 79,000 acres were put into production with more than 300 small factories being built in France.

Encouraged by state assistance this had become a major source of the product in mainland Europe by the end of the Napoleonic wars.

By 1880 beet had replaced cane as the principle source of sugar in mainland Europe.

Curiously the industry was stimulated in Prussia as Napoleon embargoed the import of sugar into that state.

Because of the traditional links with her colonies,

Britain did not immediately follow the European example.

There had been attempts to establish sugar production from beet in the past but these had failed, mainly because of insufficient produce from the British farms.

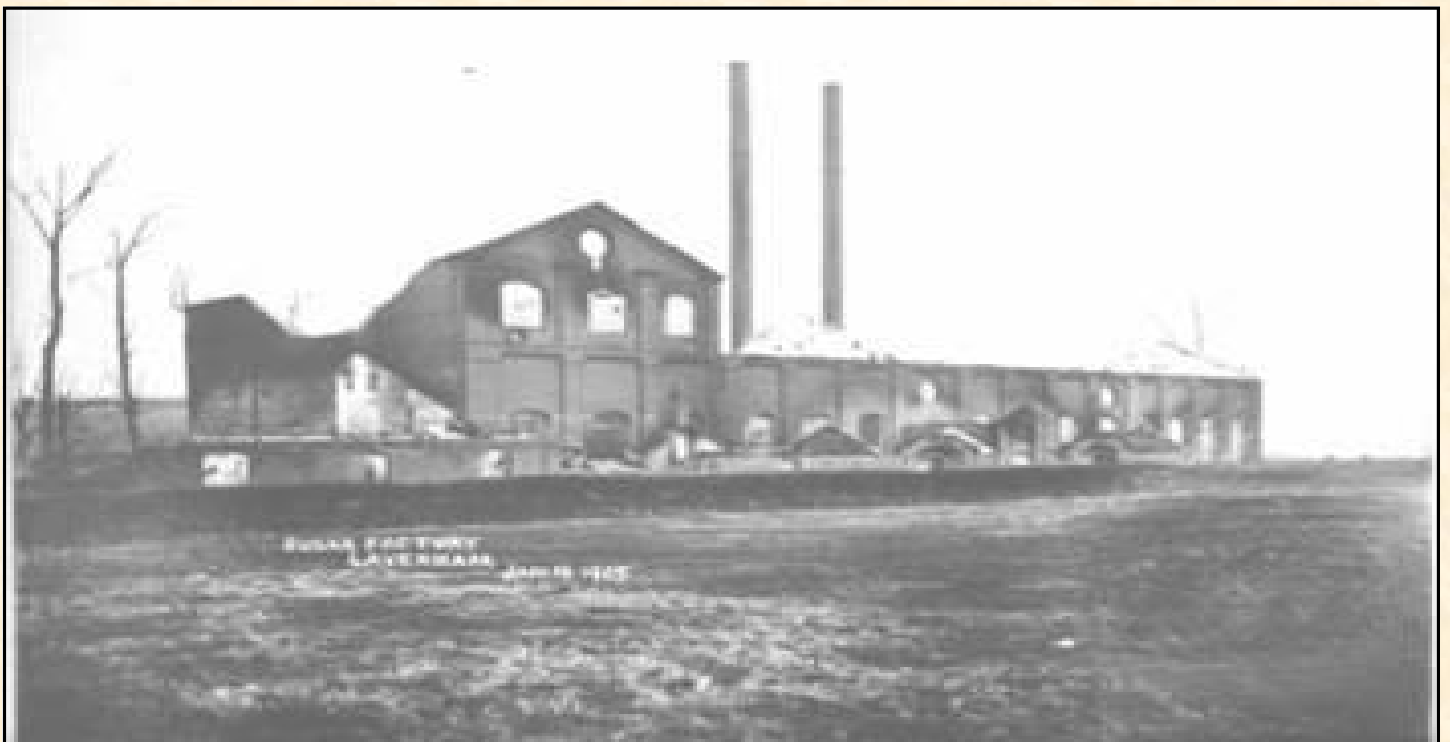


Factories built in 1832 near Maldon in Essex and in 1886 at Lavenham in Suffolk both failed for this reason despite an optimistic write up by the *East Suffolk Gazette & Beccles & Bungay Weekly News* on 26 January 1869:

*“The sugar factory at Lavenham commenced work on Wednesday last. The first indigenous sugar ever produced in England was made there by Mr Duncan that day. The beet roots were grown by Mr T P Hitchcock of Lavenham. The pulp is already high in the estimation as cattle food by the farmers in the district who are anxious to secure some of it.*

*By the kind permission of Mr Duncan the public are admitted on application at the works to see the process.”*

Sugar from the West Indies and continental Europe was also cheap, no more than 2d per pound up to the First World War. However due to the success of the industry in France and Germany and strategic considerations, there was continued interest in developing a home-grown sugar industry, particularly in East Anglia. Attention was also given to the benefit to the soil of introducing beet into crop rotation. There are many accounts of meetings to discuss this possibility in the local press of 1910-11. The *Norwich Mercury* also published a detailed account written by local literary luminary and farmer, Henry Rider Haggard (author of *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She*) following his visit to an intensive beet growing area in Denmark. He observed that the labourers in the fields, who pulled the beet out of the ground and cut the tops off, were highly skilled and comprised mainly young Polish female workers who migrated to Denmark on a seasonal basis.



**Photo: The Lavenham Sugar Factory**  
© British Sugar PLC

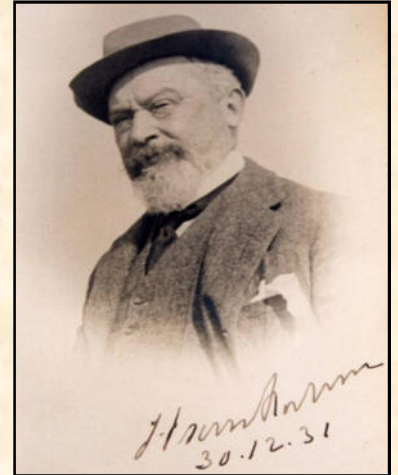


Interestingly the use of imported labour for the production seasons was also practised in England and a number of factories used Irish labour for many years. There are detailed instructions in the “*Labour and Welfare Handbook*” on how these workers were to be collected from and returned to Liverpool.

The main promotion of the industry in Britain came from Holland, mainly by **Joannes Petrus van Rossum** of the Asmij Company.

Van Rossum’s family were very involved with the production of sugar in the Netherlands and saw a commercial opportunity in bringing the industry to Britain.

Instead of initially building a factory then seeking to attract supplies of beet, van Rossum and his colleague E B Ali Cohen chose to establish beet cultivation first. Then, having established the practice of beet growing and assessed the quality of the material grown (i.e. the sugar content), a suitable site would be selected for the factory to be built on and capital raised to for this purpose. Norfolk was selected as offering the nearest soil quality and climatic conditions to those found in Holland. Despite the trials bringing favourable results in terms of tonnage per acre and sugar content of about 16%, there remained a great deal of doubt especially around the potential cost of labour.



© British Sugar PLC

Following a fundraising campaign by Cantley people to build a village hall, in 1926 J P van Rossum contracted to purchase a plot of land on which the proposed hall could be built and later presented it as a gift to the village.



Photo: Dutch agricultural workers  
© British Sugar PLC

Skilled Dutch labour was brought over to help grow and harvest the crop (at 20 shillings per ton) on land purchased by the company and the crops themselves were sent to Holland for processing. In 1910 plans were drawn up for the factory and the company was founded by van Rossum as Managing Director and titled the “**Anglo Netherlands Sugar Corporation**”.

Van Rossum was joined by **Ferdinand Hombach** as Agricultural Advisor. It is an example of the long history of the association of the Low Countries and Norfolk going back to the ‘Strangers’ coming to Norwich in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.



*Photo: Dutch labourers using wheeled hoes to weed between rows of beet*

© British Sugar PLC



*Photos: Anglo Netherlands Sugar Corporation plaques on the gateposts at Cantley.*

The first “Fieldsman” **Walter George** was recruited by the company to persuade Norfolk farmers to grow beet - the corporation provided the labour, seed fertiliser and management of the crop. To manage the crop Mr George recruited local labour and had up to 450 men working for him. He was also responsible for their pay and had to cycle up to 60 miles a day carrying the pay packets in his saddlebag, often containing gold sovereigns, fortunately we are an honest lot in Norfolk!



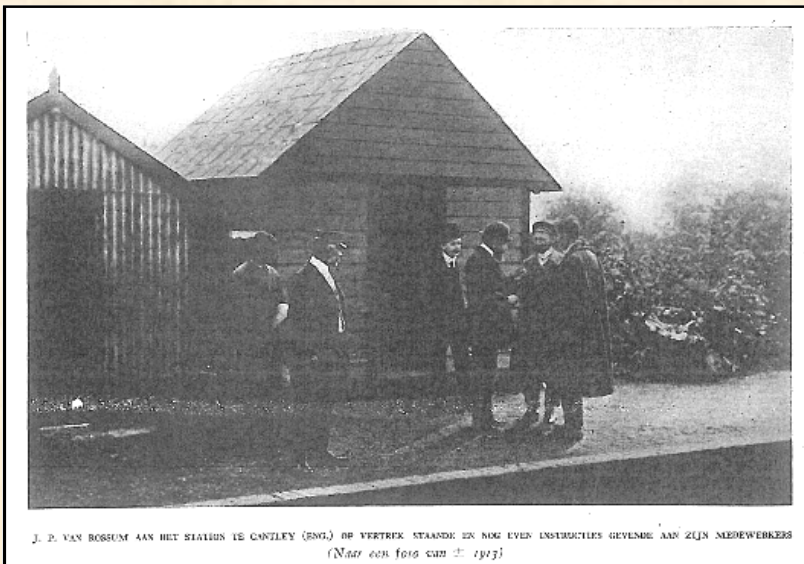
*Photo: Walter George in a beet field*

© British Sugar PLC



By the end of 1911 van Rossum and his colleagues were confident that beet could be supplied in sufficient quantities locally to go ahead with the construction of a factory. Processing sugar from beet in industrial quantities is a considerable engineering enterprise. As well as a large building, the process requires a supply of high pressure steam from boilers, in those days coal fired. Very large vessels are required for the evaporation and crystallisation processes as well as the large scale conveying equipment for handling hundreds of tonnes of beet. A suitable site would also provide large areas for the storage of beet and the by product and supplies of coal, limestone and other materials. Van Rossum would also acquire a number of local farms to ensure supply.

Cantley was chosen as providing these requirements plus it had the advantage of its own railway station, with good access to Norwich, Yarmouth and Lowestoft and the main sources of supply, and to a navigable river – the Yare. Road access was deemed adequate as supplies by road usually came by horse and cart or small vehicles.



**Photo: van Rossum at Cantley Station instructing employees of the Anglo Netherlands Corporation**

© British Sugar PLC

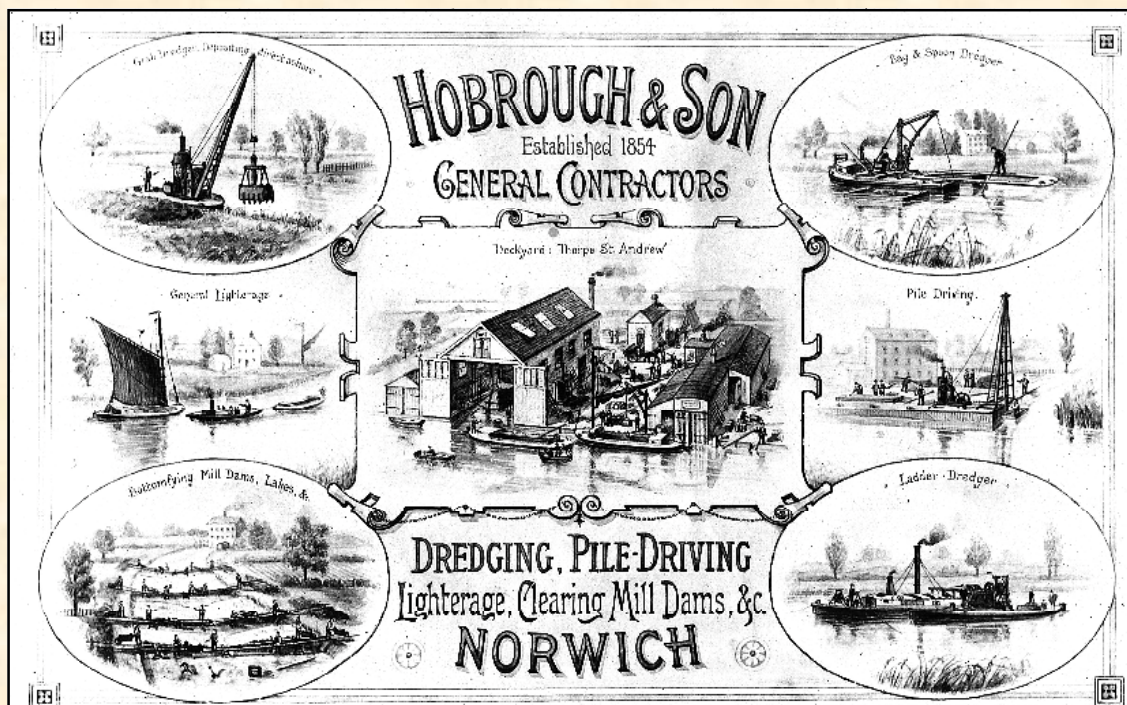


**Photo: Loading beet for delivery to one of the factories**

© British Sugar PLC

Most of the equipment actually came from a redundant factory in Holland at Dordrecht. There is a story that the workers there were on strike in 1909 and, rather than give in to them, van Rossum had the factory taken to pieces and shipped to Norfolk. Although there is no corroboration for this interpretation, it does fit with van Rossum's management philosophy, as we shall see later. However, the more likely explanation is that van Rossum's Asmij sugar company bought the already closed Dordrecht Sugar Factory so that it could use the production quota which had been assigned to the factory by the Dutch Sugar cartel in the other factories owned by the company. Quotas for sugar production have been a common feature of the industry in Europe including the UK. Whatever the reason, in 1912 the machinery of Dordrecht Sugar Factory was shipped to the United Kingdom and used as part of the Cantley beet sugar factory.

£170,000 was raised by the company plus £565,000 invested in Dutch companies as extra security, without which early losses could not have been sustained, and construction of the factory started in mid-March 1912. Steel erection was carried out by the Norwich firm of Hobrough and Son who specialised in harbour works and had a dockside premises at Thorpe St Andrew. James Samuel Hobrough, who had taken up photography in 1893, made a photographic record of the construction. His original glass plate negatives are preserved at British Sugar PLC, Cantley. (Another set is also held at Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service (The Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell) - see page 23).



**Photo: Hobrough & Son trade card**  
 © British Sugar PLC, Cantley



The workers on this project with experience of constructing this type of plant were mostly German or Dutch but also from many other parts of Europe. They lived together in an encampment on the site and this proved to be a very volatile mix on occasions.

The *Eastern Daily Press* in August 1912 recorded one incident headlined:

**CANTLEY AFFRAY: THE DISTURBANCE AT THE SUGAR FACTORY: FOREIGNERS AND ENGLISH BEER**

*“Rumours of a serious riot among foreign workmen at the Sugar Beet Factory at Cantley circulated...on Monday...there had been an affray between Germans and Austrians...That there was a disturbance at Cantley admits of no doubt...even though some injuries resulted, there was no loss of life.*

*The extraordinary storm of Monday was, curiously enough, really at the bottom of it all. The English workmen had for the most part remained at home, knowing full well that there was not much chance of doing any serious work in such terrible weather. A few journeyed to Cantley, but even these immediately returned soon after reaching the factory. The foreign employees live at Cantley. These comprise men of many nationalities, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Russians etc. Many of them were approached by the ganger to work on Monday morning after breakfast but flatly refused because of the unfavourable climatic conditions. Some of them were apparently in a querulous mood because, ...their breakfast fare was hardly to their liking. The men breakfasted as usual in a tent where all their meals were served. It was subsequently ascertained that a party of three Austrians and one German spent the whole of Monday morning – between the breakfast and dinner hours in drinking, by way of chasing away their discontent. ‘And the Austrian beer’ remarked Mr. Max Maarten the managing director of the factory, ‘is unlike the English beverage. It is so light that a native may consume any number of glasses of it without getting intoxicated. But the English Ale that is another matter’. All of which meant that the Austrians treated with impunity a strong brew that incommoded them. One of the party when he asked for more was refused by the barman. He became angry and demanded to be served. He was again refused and there was a disturbance. The Austrian was in a destructive mood. He seized on half a dozen beer mugs and apparently shied them at the head of the gentleman who declined to accommodate him and they broke into fragments. The latter promptly ejected his assailant. The two other Austrians and the German interfered to protect their comrade and the barman, fearing injury, took to his heels and made a flying dash for the cookhouse across the road. That the others followed him in hot chase has been established and it is asserted that as they hopped over the canteen tables they flourished knives, but no confirmation of this was forthcoming. Cheated of their quarry they attacked the local restaurant. One of them smashed a window with his fist, cut his wrist so badly that he had to be removed on an ambulance to Cantley station and taken to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. The others also injured themselves in the same process, though not nearly so badly. Not content with this they picked up lumps of coal and other things and flung them through the windows smashing a quantity of plates and crockery in the process. It is alleged by the foreigners that when they broke the windows with their fists an attempt was made on the other side to cut their hands with knives. A crowd gathered around and it was on this ugly and menacing scene that the managing director arrived. Mr. Max Maarten has his own way of quelling a riot. He has had eight years experience of his men. Finding the disturbance was not subsiding he made a communication to the fighting four that they readily appreciated. A certain weapon was also flourished ominously though there was no need for calling upon it for serious service. Superintendent Fuller of Acle...hastened to the scene, with his sergeant and several constables. When, after encountering great difficulties on the way on account of the flooded roads, when they arrived in the afternoon at Cantley they found everything more or less tranquil... Mr. Max Maarten intended to make an example of the men who created this wanton disorder, and communicated with the police. Immediately after his arrival the canteen and clubhouse were closed down...During the afternoon the mess tent was blown down by the wind and looked a very sorry spectacle yesterday morning. Crockery and plants, tables and chairs lay about in the greatest confusion while a piano was damaged seemingly beyond repair.”*

The account mentions the flood of 1912 during which the Yare overflowed, inundating the railway between Reedham and Norwich and severely affecting factory construction, as can be seen from the following pictures. Nevertheless construction continued at what today would be an amazing pace and the factory was completed by November of that year. It was claimed as a new world record for constructing a sugar factory. These are the major stages of construction.

*Photos right and below:*  
**The effects of the flood**  
© British Sugar PLC, Cantley



*Photo right :*  
**Digging the footings**  
© British Sugar PLC, Cantley



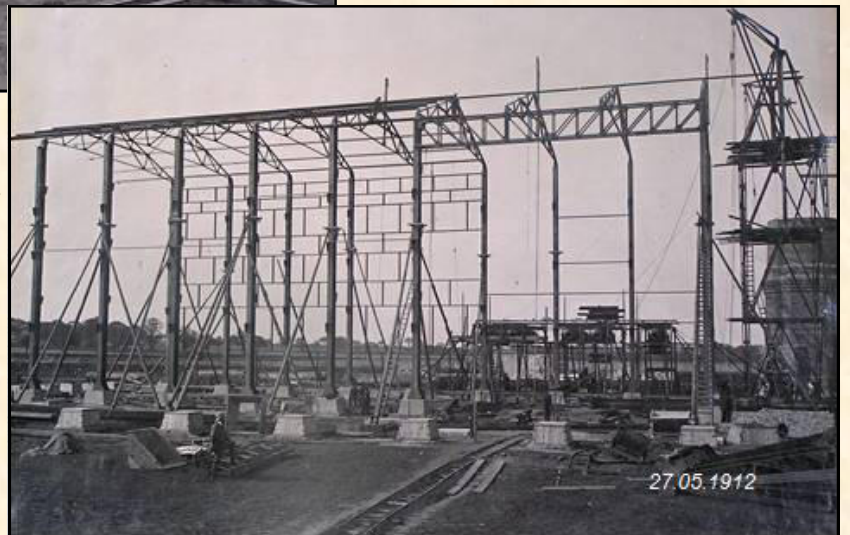




*Photos above and right:*  
**Deliveries of materials for building the factory 1912**  
© British Sugar PLC, Cantley



*Photos above and right:*  
**Lifting crane and start of framework 1912**  
© British Sugar PLC, Cantley



**Eastern Daily Press, Saturday 11th May 1912:**

*“It is plain to everybody taking the railway past Cantley that the erection of the sugar beet factory and its appurtenances is making considerable progress. A system of sidings is being laid down and, over at a temporary sidings, a delivery is being made of the vast quantities of material required by the contractors. At a quay heading lies a vessel direct from Holland with stores of various kinds which it has been found necessary to import. At a point not far from the permanent line of the railway stands the first 20 feet or so of a chimney stack which has a 12 foot base and will run to a height of 175 feet. The general plan of the factory so far is a little difficult to discern amidst all this maze of material and structural beginnings, but it is easy to make out the concrete piers, which form the foundations of the boiler house, are now completed and that the house which will contain the pulp drying apparatus is well in hand. Indeed the latter structure has so far progressed that, in about a fortnights time the contractors will be getting the pulp drying machinery into position. There are now about 100 men at work on the factory site as a whole, exclusive of those employed at the farm and the prospect is that by another month this number will be increased to about 400. For the accommodation of so great a colony in such a desolate marshland country special provision must of course be made. A Norwich contractor is shortly to set up a big commissariat department and it is understood of course that sooner or later there will be a good deal of building which will have to be taken in hand in order to accommodate the permanent labour that will centre on the factory. The operations as a whole are under the general supervision of Herr Maximillian Maartens who has been engaged as manager of the factory, He is an interesting cosmopolite who speaks four or five languages and who brings to Cantley a practical knowledge of sugar beet technology that began with his boyhood – nay further back than then for he comes of a sugar beet family and has all the advantages that may arise from the influence of heredity. He is a Hungarian as he is careful to explain, oh no not a German but a Hungarian of old Magyar stock – and his father was and his brothers, cousins and uncles are all engaged in the immense sugar industry. His family were growing sugar beet as far back as 60 years ago. When he was 17 years of age his father died and young Maartens was sent abroad for experience by his eldest brother who had succeeded to the headship of the family. In order to obtain some knowledge of cane sugar he went for 5 years to Australia. Then he returned to Hungary and served a sort of apprenticeship in a great sugar factory where as much as three hundred thousand tons of beet was being dealt with every year. Next for 12 years he kept service with the famous sugar beet firm of Ignatz Deutsch and Bohn. By them he was sent to take charge for several years at Bucharest where he remained for 8 years, from there he moved to Kaaden in Bohemia and it was there that the Anglo-Netherlands corporation engaged him and induced him to come to Cantley. At least twice before it has fallen to his lot to supervise the building of a factory. So far as practical experience goes there can be no doubt about the qualifications of Herr Maartens. As to the composition of his staff he revealed that his intentions are not as yet settled. But it will include seven or eight Bohemians – not German he again careful to explain ‘For the German sugar beet factories are not at all what you would call up to date as they are in my country. My Bohemians will be good men who know the processes thoroughly and have had the best experience in the world.’ When the present writer visited the site a day or two ago there had been little or no rain for a long time. That was a mixed blessing for Cantley. The staff on the farm would have liked rain and plenty of it, but the contractor’s men on the factory site had every reason to be glad of what for that time of year has been a most phenomenal dryness. The land lies low and a soaking at the present stage would hinder them considerably.”*



The remarkable speed of construction was reported  
in the *Eastern Daily Press* 28th September 1912:

### Mr. Van Rossum and Mr. Hombach: FACTORY NEARLY READY

*“Mr. Van Rossum and Mr. Smits the managing directors of the sugar beet factory now rapidly nearing completion at Cantley, have arrived at Cantley Manor House as the guests of Mr. Hernand Hombach, the Dutch agricultural advisor to the Board of the Anglo Netherlands Sugar Corporation. The next few weeks are going to be a peculiarly busy and responsible time for them.*

*Said Mr. Hombach, in a few minutes conversation with our representative at Thorpe Station, ‘We have every reason to be proud of this Cantley Factory. It embodies the very latest machinery and appliances known in the sugar industry, and we have no misgivings, neither as to the working of the factory nor as to the quality of the crop. Because of the rains the work of the contractors has been a little delayed but all the plant ought to be ready for starting by the latter part of October which is quite soon enough. We hope to have boilers under steam by next Saturday and we shall, of course, run them for a week or more to see that everything is all right. In Cantley we have a very good crop. The effect of the rains were to swell the tops rapidly. Now the rains have passed over with a few more days of such sunshine as we have been having lately, the roots will have done well. Cold nights and warm days are what we want now.’*

*Asked when the factory would be ready to begin working, Mr. Hombach said he thought sometime towards the end of October would be soon enough. “To build and equip such a complicated thing as a sugar factory is a very big undertaking. This one we shall have built between the end of April and the beginning of October. That is a world record and we are proud of it.”*

*Mr. Van Rossum had an important announcement to make in regard to the quality of the beet. That very day in London the first analysis of sample roots grown in Norfolk had been made and it was found that the yield of sugar was all that had been expected and in fact quite up to the average yield of roots grown in Holland. Mr. Van Rossum was anxious to make this point quite clear.*

*‘Your representative’ he said ‘who recently reported that the floods had washed 5% of sugar out of the beet must have misunderstood his informant which might very well have happened because of his difficulty with the English language. As a matter of fact none of our sugar beet has been flooded. To speak of a 5% loss in this connection is quite erroneous, and is calculated to convey a most unfortunate impression.’ “*



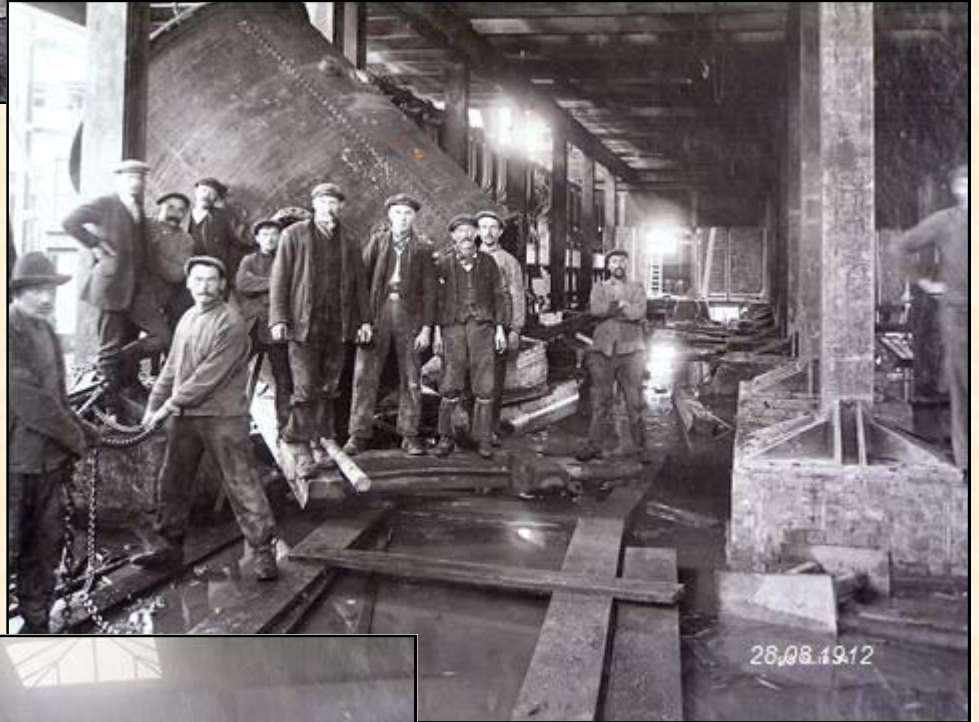
*Photos left and below:  
Framework almost complete  
and boiler chimney built 1912  
© British Sugar PLC, Cantley*



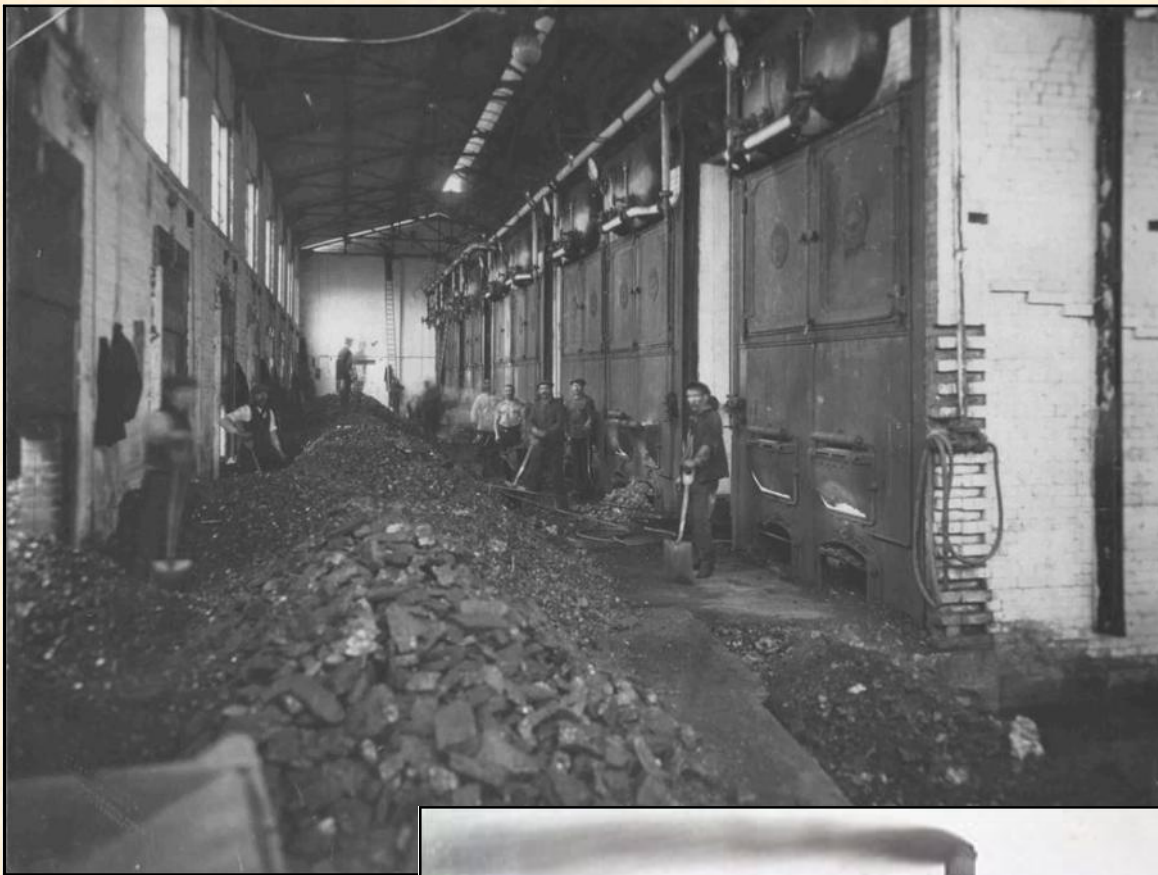


*Photos top to bottom:*

- 1. Cladding and roofing 1912**
  - 2. Plant installation during the flood 1912**
  - 3. Filtration Station 1912**
  - 4. Vacuum pumps and evaporators 1912**
- © British Sugar PLC, Cantley







*Photos top and above:*

**1. Boiler House**

**2. Deliveries of beet to operational factory  
11th December 1912**

© British Sugar PLC, Cantley

The factory started slicing beet on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1912, a remarkable achievement (and a world record which may well still stand). Such speed of construction was not achieved without a human cost. There were many injuries but surprisingly no fatalities; broken bones and contusions were the usual outcome of accidents.



Smith Robert R. Moulton near Acle.

Age 20. Single - Prudential  
Accdt. happened 12 midnight Sunday 10 Nov

Ins. boy advised 18<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1912  
Factory Inspector advised 18/10/12.

Surgeon " "  
Was oiling machinery - when a man  
called to him to attend to machine,  
and on turning round caught  
his wrist between the piston & the gland.  
Crushed wrist.

Average earnings 30/- Compensation 1/6 weekly  
Man resumed work - 2nd Dec. 1912  
2/12/12 + paid three weeks compensation } = £2.5-0.  
due to 1st Dec.

Insur. Co. advised receipt sent. 2-12-12  
30/1/13 - Insur. Co. repaired.

James John Elijah Lovett. 32 Cottwood Rd. Neth.  
Age -

Accident happened about 8 a.m. October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1912  
Insurance Co. advised October 19<sup>th</sup> 1912.

Factory Inspector advised October 10/12.  
Injury to thigh and wrist through slipping  
off scaffolding which was removed by fitters  
to pull up machinery and not replaced.  
Fall about 16 ft.

D. Dohel certifies as to incapacity for work  
Medical certificate sent Insurance Co. 10/10/12.

Witness - W. Buntrow.

Hill & Perks, Solicitors, Norwich - claim - 1/6 per  
week - 9.10.12.

Sent to and copy our reply - 10/10/12.

3/1/13 - gave receipt

Anglo-Netherland Sugar Corporation.  
Limited.

HEAD OFFICE & FACTORY  
CANTLEY, NORFOLK.

TELEGRAMS: "SUGAR, NORWICH"  
TELEPHONE: NO. 12, BRUNDALL.

Cantley,  
Norfolk.

January 8th. 1915.

Mr A. Ames,  
9, Cross Street,  
Sussex Street,  
Norwich.

Dear Sir,

We are in receipt of your letter addressed to Mr  
Mitchell. We would be glad if you would answer the following  
questions, when your claim for compensation will have our attention:-

Age... 42.....

Married?... Yes.....

How many Children... 5.....

Name of approved Society... Amicable Lodge No 2905  
M. G.  
Norwich District

Yours faithfully,

For the ANGLO-NETHERLAND SUGAR CORPORATION, LTD

P.S. A stamped addressed envelope is enclosed herewith for your  
reply, which please let us have by return of post.

Please also send further Doctor's certificate.

The accident record book of the time has survived together with some of the claims for compensation. Workers were privately insured and had to get authentication of the accident from the ANSC to progress their claim. Injuries from crushing and falls were most common.

© Images British Sugar PLC



The factory closed down during the First World War, probably due to the lack of skilled labour. The Anglo Netherlands company was wound up and the factory did not reopen until 1920 under the title "The English Beet Sugar Corporation" and did not operate until the 1922-1923 campaign.

Van Rossum maintained his connection with the factory and five others which were later constructed under his auspices at Ely, Ipswich, Colwick and Kelham in Nottinghamshire and Kings Lynn, known as the Anglo-Netherlands group. The Kelham factory started in 1923 with management from Cantley.

Not until 1922 did the Cantley factory become profitable; the investments made at the start of the enterprise in the Dutch refineries saw them through this difficult phase.

Prior to the initial start up in 1912 local people had been employed to help run the factory and some were sent to the Dutch factories to learn the technology. The factory continued to employ managers from the Netherlands until the 1930s. The last Dutch shift manager **Mr Franz Korsmit**, who came to the factory in 1922, lived in Brundall and died in 1984 aged 91 years.

**The English Beet Sugar Corporation, Ltd., Cantley**  
**NORFOLK.**  
**CAMPAIGN 1925.**

**CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT.**

1. Services of Employees terminate on the expiration of one hour's notice on either side, and the Management reserves the right to stand men "down" for one or more shifts in the event of a breakdown or in the absence of supplies.
2. Employees are liable to instant dismissal for any of the following causes:
  - (a) Asleep while on duty.
  - (b) Throwing refuse of any description about the Factory or through windows.
  - (c) Having beer or other alcoholic beverage on the premises.
  - (d) Reading books or papers while on duty.
  - (e) Not reporting at earliest opportunity the cause of unavoidable absence.
  - (f) Not obeying any Factory Notice.
  - (g) Leaving his Station before being relieved.
3. Employees must immediately report to the Laboratory the nature and cause of any accident incurred while at work.
4. Employees must present their Unemployment & Health Insurance Cards, before being entered on the Corporation's books.
5. As cleanliness is most essential to the production of good saleable sugar, everybody must keep their own station clean.

**CONDITIONS OF PAY.**

6. General Labourers, will be paid 10d. (ten pence) per hour for a 48 hour week, plus overtime.
7. Foremen or Charge Hands on the following Stations will be paid as follows, per hour for 48-hour week, plus overtime:
 

Flumes 1/-.	Centrifugals—White, 1/-.	Scum Presses 11/2d.
All other Charge Hands 10/2d. (ten pence half-penny).		
8. General labourers working on the following Stations to be paid at a flat rate of 1/2 (One Shilling and twopence) per week in addition to their rate of 10d. per hour.
 

Scum Presses.	Centrifugals—White.	Firemen.
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9. A BONUS as per list below to be paid weekly to the manufacturing staff (except where engaged on special terms) on the weekly output of saleable sugar, bagged and delivered to the warehouse. (Two 1-cwt. bags to equal one 2-cwt. bag).

WEEKLY OUTPUT OF OVER BAGS (2 cwt.)	WEEKLY OUTPUT OF OVER BAGS (2 cwt.)	WEEKLY OUTPUT OF OVER BAGS (2 cwt.)	WEEKLY OUTPUT OF OVER BAGS (2 cwt.)
6,400 1d.	7,600 1/6	8,800 3/8	10,000 6/8
6,500 2d	7,700 1/8	8,900 3/11	10,100 6/11
6,600 3d.	7,800 1/10	9,000 4/2	10,200 7/2
6,700 4d.	7,900 2/-	9,100 4/5	10,300 7/5
6,800 5d.	8,000 2/2	9,200 4/8	10,400 7/8
6,900 6d.	8,100 2/4	9,300 4/11	10,500 8/-
7,000 7d.	8,200 2/6	9,400 5/2	10,600 8/4
7,100 8d.	8,300 2/8	9,500 5/5	10,700 8/8
7,200 10d.	8,400 2/10	9,600 5/8	10,800 9/-
7,300 1/-	8,500 3/-	9,700 5/11	10,900 9/4
7,400 1/2	8,600 3/2	9,800 6/2	11,000 9/8
7,500 1/4	8,700 3/5	9,900 6/5	11,100 10/-

This Bonus Scale remains the same as last year; but is subject to alteration, provided there is a revision of the rates of pay.

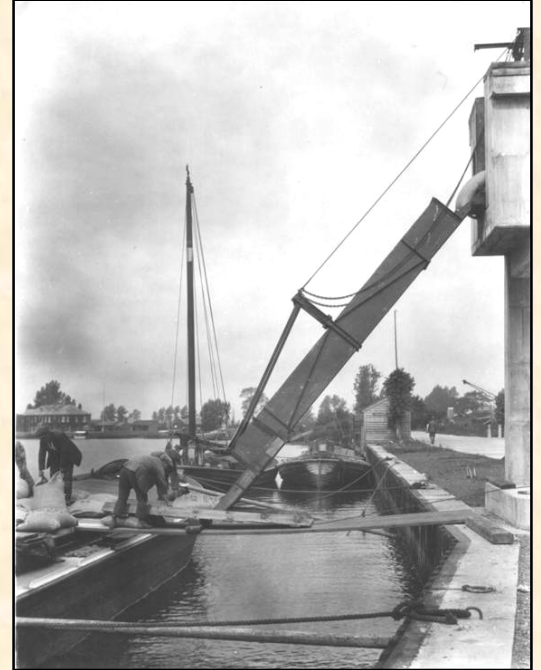
It's worth looking at what the company paid their workers:  
 10d per hour for factory workers in 1925,  
 2d more for foremen.



As previously mentioned, the proximity of the river Yare was important in deciding the factory location. A long association between the factory and the Norfolk wherries began before the factory was built, transporting building supplies and equipment to the site then providing an important means of transporting beet to the factory. We have a record of all beet delivered by wherry from 1934 to 1953, although they continued to carry beet until the 1960s. Some sugar was also despatched by river .



The unloading was by a crane with a grab bucket. It is said that an insufficient tip to the operator could leave the wherryman with a hole in the bottom of his boat!



Wherries were loaded to the maximum to ensure maximum profit, sometimes beyond the maximum. On the right is a picture of the wherry *Sir Robert* being retrieved from the Yare at Berney Arms, the cargo unloaded before she could be refloated. The beet would have been well washed!



- Photos top to bottom:
1. Loading wherry *Virtue* at Horning
  2. Loading sugar on to a wherry
  3. Refloating sunken wherry *Sir Robert*
  4. Loading wherry with beet 1960

© British Sugar PLC, Cantley



The British Sugar PLC Archive at Cantley has some film footage, taken on board a Norfolk wherry in 1928 and narrated by the wherryman. Here are his actual words, transcribed from the film:

***"I remember in 1928 when I was first married, I'd only been married a couple of years. I was all alone on a wherry carting sugar beet up at Horsey Staithe and Redmill Dyke on Barton Broad, Catfield Dyke and Dilham, just below Dilham Lock, just through Tonnage Bridge ... I had a very hard winter that one. I used to get 25s 3d a freight carted. I used to have to load it by hand, I used to get tuppence a ton for loading them, and we started with them sometimes 30 or 40 feet over to the river to get them on board. Total money I got was 25s 3d a freight to Cantley. I used to do two a week and my average hours for 1928, I got records of it somewhere, I was working 7 days a week, 18 hours a day on average and I think my money was about fourpence or something an hour piecework. Every time we went up there we had to take the keel off because we drew too much water then, when we got below Ludham Bridge, we used to hang on the bank and fiddle about getting the keel on again. Sometimes it used to take us hours. It would take me hours to get it on. My hands got bloomin' numb!"***



**Photo: Wherry Sir Robert under sail**  
© British Sugar PLC, Cantley

Deliveries to sugar factories also took place by rail and road.



© British Sugar PLC



The early days of production and beet supply were very modest, the factory slicing an average of 400 tons per day; this could be done in an hour by the modern factory. Even more dramatic were the increases in acreage and yields as the seed quality and growing techniques improved.

Manning levels were also very high compared with today. In 1912 there were probably 600 employees at Cantley. Steve Cash personally recalls a seasoned lorry driver who helped him with some training saying that Cantley was far less efficient than it used to be as it had provided a good living for twice as many people in the past. Today a modern factory is fully automated with the whole process managed from a central control room.

Until the 1980s each stage of production had its own team of operatives often working in very hot and humid conditions or outside bringing in the beet to the factory in the freezing cold of winter. Until relatively recently, many extra staff were recruited for the 'campaign' together with a large number of permanent operatives.



Daily Analysis from 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec to 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec 1912.

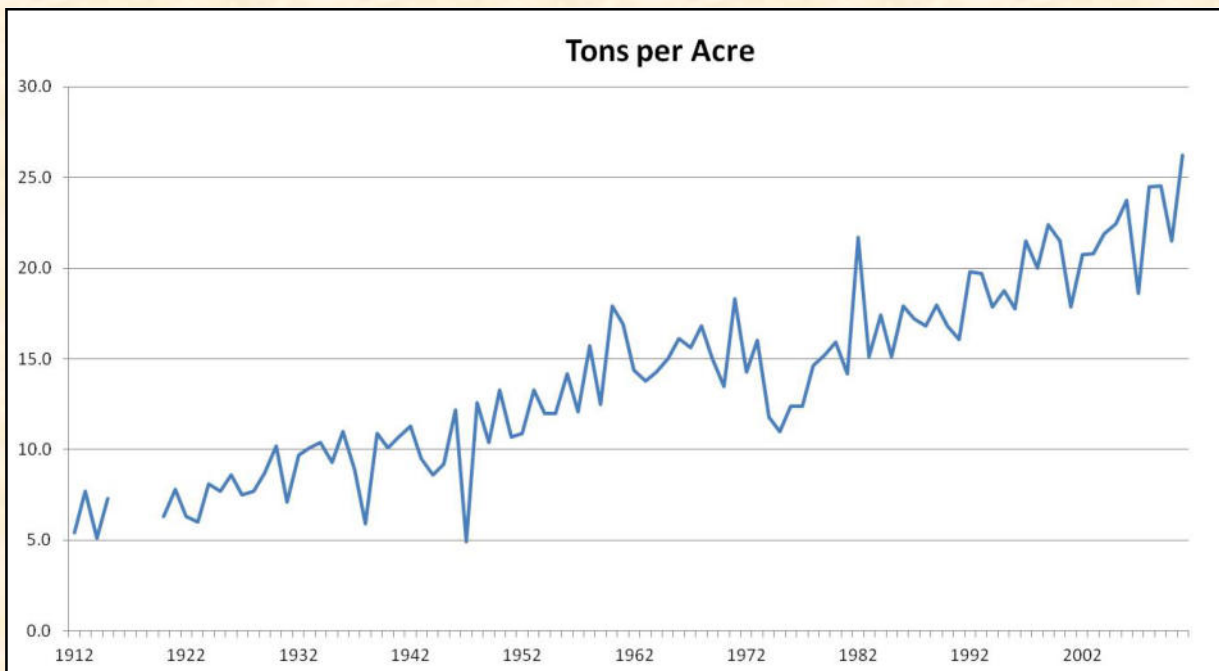
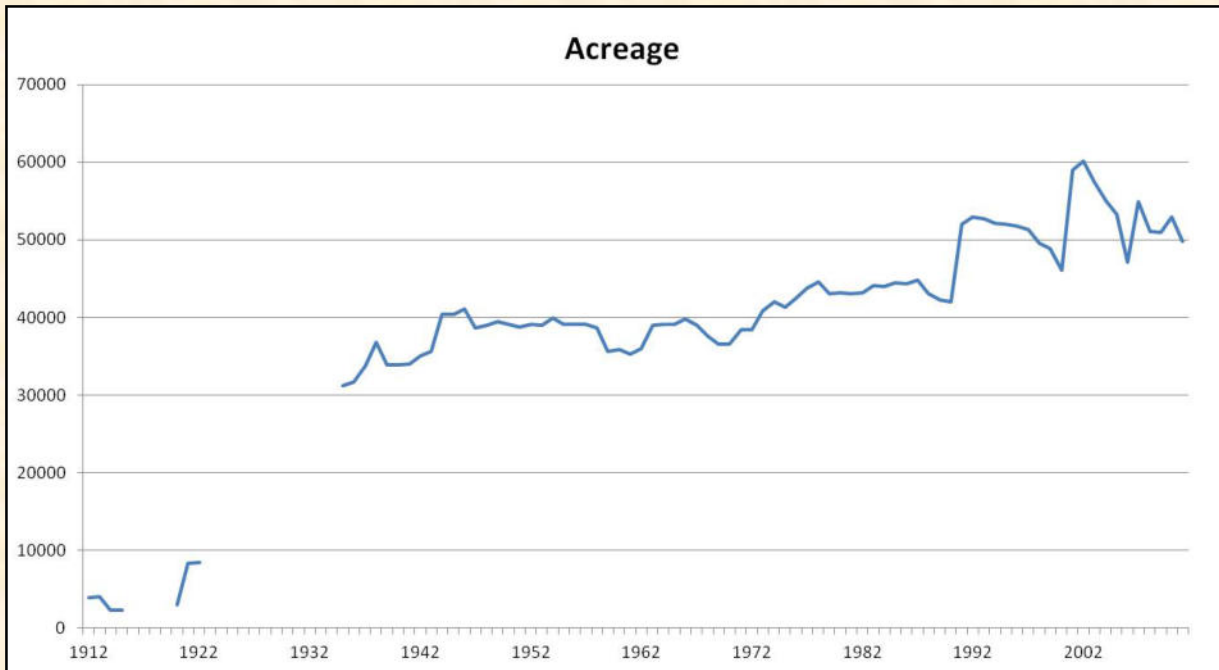
EXTRACTED JUICE	SECT.	RAW JUICE				THIN JUICE				THICK JUICE				PULP				WASTE	
		Quantity	Dens.	Sugar	Acid	Quantity	Dens.	Sugar	Acid	Quantity	Dens.	Sugar	Acid	Quantity	Dens.	Sugar	Acid	Quantity	Dens.
		1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs	1000 lbs
	Average	12.7	13.45	89.66		12.6	11.61	92.9	6.07	5.6	52.4								
	High																		
	Low																		
	Average	12.7	13.45	89.66		12.6	11.61	92.9	6.07	5.6	52.4								

Matter	1st Casting		2nd Casting		3rd Casting		4th Casting		1st Syrup			2nd Syrup			3rd Syrup			Molasses after Clarification			White Sugar	
	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar	Dens.	Sugar
Density	88		88		88		88															
Mat. for app.	83.5		83.5		83.5		83.5															
Sugar																						
Acid																						
Organic Residue																						
Water applied																						
Cast. Soln.			65.5																			
Cast. app.																						
Purity app.	95		86.5		99																	
Alt. % p.																						
Alt. at 100° F.																						

Alcal. at each	and each	Ox.	Worked Beets		H.L. of Juice of Average Density		H.L. of Juice of H.G. Beets		Number of Pans 1.
			H.L. Raw Juice	Molasses entering	H.L. Juice of Average Density	H.L. Juice of H.G. Beets			
8.02	8.41	8.8	115.415	112.5	106.133	115.4	115.4		



The first world war impressed on the government the cost and fragility of sugar imports and gave rise to the British Sugar Subsidy Act of 1925. This effectively subsidised the construction of sugar factories – much to the disgust of van Rossum. As a result, by 1928 there were 18 sugar factories in the UK, from Cupar in Scotland down to Felsted in Essex.

The strategic nature of the industry was further recognised by the Sugar Act of 1938 which amalgamated all the factories into the **British Sugar Corporation** and allowed the continued subsidy of the factories indefinitely against the very low world sugar prices at the time.

Van Rossum himself was unhappy with the actions of the British Government and this may have influenced his decision, during WWII, to undertake a project on behalf of the German State. This involved moving a number of factories from the invaded Belgium to areas of eastern Europe conquered by the Nazis, Ukraine being the main destination.

The war came to an end before the project could be undertaken.

Today only four of these factories remain: Cantley, Bury St Edmunds, Wissington and Newark but with more than the production capacity of the original eighteen.

The significant expansion of the industry between the wars after the British Sugar Subsidy Act of 1925, are well summed up in the words of Alfred Wood, who chaired the 1931 report on the industry:

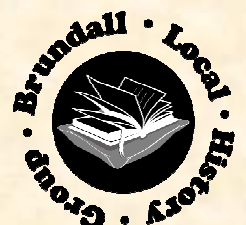
*“The following facts will suffice to illustrate the development of the industry since the passing of the Subsidy Act...Whereas 16,000 acres of sugar beet were grown in 1923, 349,000 acres were grown in 1930 by no less than 40,400 growers. While only two factories were in existence in 1923, eighteen factories were operating in 1930. The production of sugar increased from 13,000 tons in 1923 to 420,000 tons in 1930...The number of workers in the factories has increased from 1159 in 1923 to 9900 in 1930.*

*It is estimated that about 30,000 casual workers found employment in 1930 in the sugar beet fields”.*

**Presentation research and text © Steve Cash**

For more information about the Cantley factory, past and present, visit:

**[www.britishsugar.co.uk/about-us/our-history](http://www.britishsugar.co.uk/about-us/our-history)**





## The Sugar Beet Industry in Norfolk: Sources and References

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Museum of English Rural Life (University of Reading)	Sir Alfred Wood: Correspondence with J P van Rossum (Ref: MS 1087/55/1)
Norfolk Record Office, Norwich <a href="https://nrocatalogue.norfolk.gov.uk/">https://nrocatalogue.norfolk.gov.uk/</a>	Various relevant papers here including letters between J P van Rossum and Edward Neve, his agent, re. purchase of farms 1924-1925 (Ref: MC 147/1: 622 x 7)
The Wise Archive <a href="http://www.wisearchive.co.uk">www.wisearchive.co.uk</a>	Preserves stories of working lives, mainly in Norfolk, through recorded interviews and transcriptions.