

A Neat Specimen

IF THIS ADVERTISEMENT for H.M. Smee, cheesemonger and provisioner, in Stoke Newington, England, did not have the year 1880 printed on it, what would reveal its antiquity? At a glance, its subjects and tone are familiar: ham, butter, cheese, eggs, and bacon are still favorite Anglo-Saxon foods. “American Cheese” is well known, even if it now brings to mind plastic-wrapped Kraft Singles, and the hype and lure of exclamation marks and price reductions are common tactics of contemporary advertisers. Mr. Smee’s salesmanship and products do not seem so different from ours, nor does his means of advertising through circulars. Printed ephemera such as this ad—small, throwaway items—are so unselfconsciously of their time that they do not need to explain themselves.

Ephemera usually have obvious, simple functions and must communicate without fuss or delay. This pressing need to work quickly ages all ephemera—including modern scraps such as ATM receipts and movie tickets—because these items are inextricably tied to the moment of their creation. When ephemera use archaic language, refer to long-gone events, places, and things, or when their design is not to contemporary taste (as in this case), their age is especially obvious.

The piece of ephemera shown here dates itself primarily through some of the foods it advertises. What, for example, are “grass butter” and the Dr. Seussian “green ham”? Perhaps the ad’s English origin explains its seeming quaintness. British food terms such as “bangers and mash” that didn’t enter American usage come to mind, but even Anglophiles have probably never heard of “grass butter.” “Grass butter” and “green ham” are no longer the common terms they were in 1880, when they could be casually printed in a circular ad. The ad’s use of now-obscure language separates it from the present and signals the span of time that has passed since Mr. Smee advertised his provisions.

Like most ephemera, Mr. Smee’s ad is associated with consistent, perennial human needs and desires, such as food, employment, transportation, and entertainment. For

us (admittedly not the hoped-for readers), the ad hovers between past and present, intriguing us with its skewed familiarity, especially since most of Mr. Smee’s products are still staples of the Western diet. Butter? In 1997 the amount of butter consumed per capita in the United States was 4.2 pounds. Eggs? Each American eats about 230 eggs a year. Despite the myriad developments in food processing since 1880, we maintain connections to farms for sustenance.

However, our connections to the land today are often quite tenuous. Despite our general recognition of Mr. Smee’s products, some elements in the ad are unfamiliar because twentieth-century consumers know less about the origins of their food than nineteenth-century consumers did. For instance, the ad’s description of butter quality—“grass” and “fresh”—would have conveyed information to consumers familiar with the effects that feed quality, cow breed, churning method, and storage could have on the flavor and color of butter. The term “grass” butter signaled that the butter had an appealing yellow color. Nineteenth-century consumers knew that butter made from the milk of cows grazing in the summer on green grass was a sunny yellow, and the English, Irish, and Welsh preferred the yellow butter associated with Channel Island breeds of cows. Twenty-first-century consumers are more likely than their forebears to know that the beta-carotene in green grass is responsible for the yellow color of butter, but we probably do not associate the color of butter with a particular season. In like manner, “Ham Season” obviously held meaning for Smee’s readers. It is unclear now whether this referred to the holiday time in winter when hams appeared on the table or to a specific time when the hams of 1880 were ready for sale, after the pigs had been slaughtered and the hams cured and smoked.

Butter substitutes have also taken us one more step away from knowledge of agricultural cycles. Today, the health-conscious avoid milk fat, and Americans eat more margarine than butter. Consumer preference has shifted to butter-like spreads, and the language used to advertise them

→ † BUTTER! † BUTTER!! † ←

Important Notice.

Great Reduction in Price of Butter.

Very Fine Grass Butter ...	1/4
Very Good ditto	1/2
Best Fresh ditto ...	1/6
Very Good ...	1/4

ALL
† BUTTERS †
 Warranted
 OF THE BEST
 QUALITY.

H. M. SMITH, Dealer,
Cheesenonger and Provision Dealer,
 56, NEVILLE ROAD, STOKES NEWINGTON.

Fine
 Large Country
EGGS
 AND
 MILD BREAKFAST BACON.

Fine Sugar-Cured } per lb.
→ † HAMS † ← } **7d.**

Smoked & Green Hams
 at Low Prices.

American, Cheddar, & other Cheese
 From the Finest Dairies.

→ † BUTTER! † BUTTER!! † ←

HAM † SEASON, † 1880. †

HAM † SEASON, † 1880. †

NORRIS, Ye "Caxton" Presse, 56, Stoke Newington Road, N.

describes their similarities to real butter rather than a direct relationship to cows, feed, or freshness. When “I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter” replaces “grass” and “best fresh” butter, the connection between farms and food becomes even more remote. Yet because we have unknowingly inherited a preference for yellow butter, coloring is now added to margarine in imitation of the interaction of grass, cow, and churn. Margarine’s nondairy nature was once more obvious, because it was sold in its uncolored state with a packet of yellow dye that had to be mixed into the white lardlike substance. Although margarine can technically be any color—grass green, perhaps?—it is sold as yellow for reasons that are now lost on most consumers.

Perusing Mr. Smee’s ad reveals more terminological dissonance between England and her former colonies. The reference to “green ham” is one clue to the notice’s origins. This ad is not referring to the contemporary genetic manipulation in Taiwan that has created fluorescent green pigs! Green ham is any fresh or cured ham that is not smoked, and Bradenham ham and Cumberland ham were but two varieties. Another signal of the ad’s Englishness is its description of cheese as “American.” Mr. Smee’s “American” cheese was simply cheese imported from Britain’s former colonies. By 1866 there were one thousand cheese factories in the United States, far more than in England, and American cheeses, though perhaps not as flavorful as the English farmhouse varieties, were of consistent quality and available year-round. Refrigerated shipping was just beginning to allow England to import perishable foods (the first cargo of frozen Australian meat arrived in 1880, the year of this ad).

Many of Mr. Smee’s customers, who probably were not far removed from agrarian life and only on the cusp of the wide use of mechanical refrigeration, would have known of the cycles of harvest and slaughter and the corresponding associations of specific foods with certain seasons. One hundred and twenty-seven years ago, the gulf between rural and urban life in England was growing, but some of Mr. Smee’s town customers, especially those of the lower classes, would have had experience with, or connections to, tenant farming. Mr. Smee was probably a kind of commission merchant who bought provisions from farmers and arranged for their transport into town for sale to buyers who often would have remembered farm life and who knew how to judge and buy his goods. Even without farm experience, urban

dwellers back then would have found it more important to understand the variables that affected the food they bought, since there were fewer guarantees of quality, and food had a shorter shelf life than it does today. Mr. Smee may have had a good reputation for making wise purchases from “the finest dairies,” but consumers did not have the luxury of relying on brand names and the continuity in quality that comes from corporate vigilance.

Anachronisms in the ad’s design are perhaps not as obvious as the terms “grass butter” and “green ham.” Food sellers and grocery stores are great producers of ephemera, many of them dense with attention-grabbing typefaces and so familiar that they are barely noticed. If Mr. Smee’s ad contained images, it would have been easier to place in time. Still, what dates the ad is the sum of details—the mix of typefaces, awkward spacings, choice of ornaments, and stiff framing with lines that don’t quite meet. These details could be reproduced today, but never in quite the same combination.

Despite its lack of showiness, this ad survived because of its design. A Mr. Norris of Ye Caxton Presse, who designed and printed the ad, ambitiously submitted reprints to the first Printers’ International Specimen Exchange. The Specimen Exchange was an organization based in London that set out to improve letterpress printing by collecting samples of the best, most “artistic” designs from around the world, binding them into volumes and returning the volumes to subscribers. Mr. Norris may have embellished a simpler one-color or two-color ad for submission to the exchange. Although the exchange judges found the ad to be well printed in good colors, they thought “a brighter red would have been an improvement. The rules [i.e., frame lines] too in a few places are not well joined.” Nevertheless, Mr. Norris’s work was judged a “neat specimen.”¹

Ephemera are the opposite of so-called timeless design. They are...timely? timeful? No single English word captures how the design and text of an ad like Mr. Smee’s must be a part of a specific moment in culture, how indisputably sincere it is, and how blithely it ignores posterity. Few objects like this ad survive past their limited usefulness. Luckily, a printer’s pride in his work caused the ad to be bound into a book, a time capsule that captured and preserved its fleeting evidence of nineteenth-century foods. ◉

NOTES

1. *The Printers’ International Specimen Exchange/With an Introduction by the Author of The Paper and Printing Trades Journal*, vol. 1 (London: Office of The Paper and Printing Trades Journal [Field and Tuer: “Ye Leadenhall Presse,” E.C.], 1880), 16.

Left: *Great Reduction in Price of Butter*, Printer’s International Specimen Exchange, Vol. 1, 1880.

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