

## PEPPERMINT AND LAVENDER GROWING IN WESTCOTT

The Huguenots introduced large-scale farming of peppermint for its medicinal properties and lavender for its fragrance. The industry flourished in the valley of the Wandle, especially around Mitcham whence it spread to Westcott. Production reached its peak at the beginning of the 20th century up to the outbreak of the First World War, when the acreages under herbal crops had to be ploughed up and food crops put in their place. The Westcott farms consisted of Milton Farm, Westcott Hill Farm, Florence Farm and Squire's Farm. They were leased from the Bury Hill Estate by Henry Chalke and his partner James Kent.

### Cultivation

The lavender and peppermint fields had to be kept very clean with frequent hoeing and generous manuring before the young lavender and peppermint plants were bedded out with a 'dibber'.



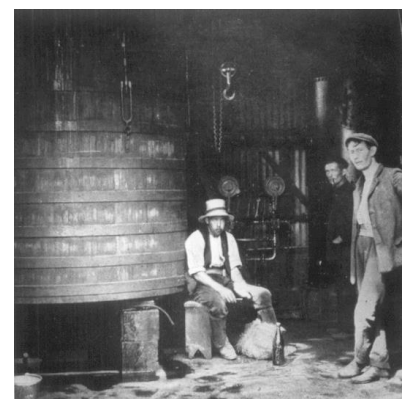
Peppermint awaiting transport to the distillery

### Harvesting

Harvesting was also by hand using a small sickle known as a 'mint-hook'. Each handful of cut mint was carefully laid on the ground and turned in the sun to dry for a few days, the time depending upon the weather, and was finally tied up in rush mats to be carted to the distillery. All the available labour in the district was recruited and supplemented by women, the elder children in school holidays as well as tramps and gypsies. The harvest commenced about the end of July and lasted through August; sometimes, in a good year, it went on into September.

### Distilling

Initially the crop was taken to Mitcham but by 1898 a distillery had been established at Westcott, housed in a corrugated iron building in what was known as the 'Osier Plantation' where a tributary to the Milton Brook was dammed to provide a water supply. The mint was laid in mats on grids suspended in the still – a wooden vat measuring 8ft 6ins high and 6ft 6ins in diameter- which was filled with water and boiled, using steam pumped from a boiler. This produced a mix of peppermint vapour and steam to pass through a condensing coil a which was immersed in cold water in an adjacent vat that had previously seen service at Messrs Barclay & Perkins Brewery and was reputed to hold ten thousand gallons. The resultant mixture of oil and water drained into the separator where the oil, being lighter, was skimmed off the surface. After filtration the oil was bottled in Winchester quart bottles ready for sale. The distillation of each batch took 6 hours, after which the spent mint was carted away for use as manure. The process was not without its problems. The residual waste was a hot black liquid which initially was allowed to drain into the stream which not only turned the Milton Brook black, but also the Pipp Brook, with similar effects downstream to the great annoyance of the Thames Conservators! Thereafter the waste was pumped into a pit. The distillation process went on for 24 hours a day for 5 or 6 weeks.



Henry Chalke in the Distillery

### Distribution

With an introduction from Dorking chemist, F.W.Doubleday, Chalke and Kent's 'Mitcham quality' peppermint oil was sold to Allen & Hanbury Ltd.

**Note** Sydney Chalke of Milton Farm recorded his memories of the local peppermint and lavender industry in an article which appeared in the Dorking Advertiser in 1935. **Westcott Local History Group 2010**