

The History of Oatfield Confectionery

The McKinney Family have been trading in Letterkenny for close to 100 years. The business first started as a wholesale and retail outlet on the Port Road. The premises are now occupied by Mr. Patrick Tinney as a clothing and outfitters shop.

In 1927, the late Mr. Ira and Mr. Haddon McKinney decided to make their own sweets and in August of that year the first sweets were made on the open coke fire in a shed at the back of the shop. The land on which the factory now stands was purchased in November 1929; the first sod was cut in February 1930. Six people were employed at the time.

The trade name of the company at that time was "Mayfield Confectionery" but this was changed when it was discovered that another confectionery firm in Manchester, North of England had the same name. The land on which the factory is built was known as "Oatfield" so the "May" was dropped and "Oat" substituted and hence the name "Oatfield" was arrived at.

The first sweets were unwrapped boilings, boiled on an open coke fire and packed in 4lb. jars and 7lb. cans, 1/2d. and 1d rocks and Peggys Legs a count line still make toddy, but not by Oatfield. The weekly production was about 3 tons compare that with production today where we produce something like 65 tons a week.

In 1930 sugar was purchased from Tate and Lyle and this was delivered by ship and rail via Derry to Letterkenny railway station. We now use Irish sugar. Glucose came from Manchester, the same route as the sugar and sometime later glucose was purchased direct from Holland and shipped to the port at Letterkenny. Today, the glucose is Irish and comes from Co. Cork. Butter has always been Irish Creamery Butter. Other ingredients come as far away as the West Indies and Malaya.

Up until the year 1960 Oatfield still continued with the wholesale side of the business until it was decided that we would stop marketing packed sweets made by Cadburys, Rowntree, Urneys Chocolates, Bassetts Licorice Allsorts, Jacobs Biscuits, William and Wood, Ritchies Mints and Milroy Confectionery and would concentrate entirely on selling Oatfield sweets. This decision was a major turning point for the company and was a tremendous success.

We launched our export side of the business in 1964. The first sweets were exported to Northern Ireland and our first overseas customers was a gentleman from Malta. He is still one of our most valued customers and he has visited the factory many times. The sweets are exported on a world-wide scale which includes countries as far away as U.S.A., Canada, Iceland, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Nigeria, Kuwait, Bahrain, Cyprus, Greece, Sweden, France, Holland, Germany, Denmark and Norway, just to mention a few.

Distribution in 1930 was by means of a one-ton van, which serviced Donegal and surrounding areas, and the balance was transported by rail from Letterkenny railway station to Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan and the south. Today we employ outside transport to distribute to all the 32 counties in Ireland. Orders, which are being exported, are loaded on to hired containers at the factory and then transported to the docks, their distribution could be up to any of the 90 countries we export to throughout the world.

Today, the factory employs approx 95 people and we produce up to 65 tonnes of sugar and chocolate confectionery each week. Our main production lines are Emerald, Toffees, Eclairs, Boiled sweets. Emerald continues to be our biggest seller, followed by Colleen Assortment and Orange Chocolate. Roll pack sweets are a major part of our business today. We manufacture 12 varieties of Rolls.

The factory experiences a constant demand for our products with increased seasonal demand at Christmas. This requires us to recruit additional staff to cope with the demand for our popular Christmas range of products.

In 1994, the company was accredited with ISO 9002, a registered and approved Quality System, together with the Irish Quality Association's approved Quality System. They ensure that all our products are produced to the highest quality standards in a consistent manner by our experienced staff. Three years later in 1997, a HACCP Food Safety System was developed and implemented in the factory, which ensures the safe manufacture of our confectionery products to an increasingly discerning customer.

The History of Oatfield Confectionery (cont'd)

A challenging future lies ahead for all employees in the new millennium. Like many manufacturing companies our success will be determined by our ability to change with new technologies, invest in employee development, adapt to changing consumer tastes and constant review of our packaging and presentation.

Oatfield Confectionery has seen many changes over the past 70 years. We now look forward to continuing success in our home and export markets serving confectionery enthusiasts throughout the world. We are all constantly aware that we are selling not just a high quality product but also an image of Letterkenny and Donegal in markets as diverse as Bahrain, Hong Kong and Canada.

Since 1999 Oatfield sweets is owned by Donegal Creameries PLC who are now funding substantial investment to modernise the factory for the future.

Oatfield the Sweet Stuff

Artist Names:

- » Photographer in Residence: Abigail O'Brien (exhibition due Summer 2009)
- » Artist in Schools: Angela Tillges and David Beaupre of The Redmoon Company, Chicago, USA
<http://www.redmoon.org>
- » Museum Project: *Oatfield: A Short But Sweet History*, Donegal County Museum, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, Dec 5 2008 – Jan 31 2009

Title: Oatfield: The Sweet Stuff

Year of Installation: Dec 2008 – Jan 2009 & Summer 2009 tbc

Details of Commissions:

This project is being funded by the Per Cent for Art arising from the construction of the N56 Mountain Top to Illistrin Road Realignment Project.

Location: Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, Ireland with supporting funding from Regional Cultural Centre, Donegal County Museum and Zed Candy.

Description: Donegal County Council's Cultural Services Public Art Program, Regional Cultural Centre and Donegal County Museum are developing a major public art project in three parts based in and about Oatfield Sweet Factory, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal.

About the Project

1. Abigail O'Brien commissioned as Photographer in Residence in the Oatfield Sweet Factory from October to December 2007 (exhibition at Regional Cultural Centre and catalogue due Summer 2009)
2. The Sweet Fantastic at Regional Cultural Centre, Letterkenny, Dec 5 2008 – Jan 31 2009. American artists Angela Tillges and David Beaupre of The Redmoon Company, Chicago, USA worked in the Letterkenny Primary Schools on the theme of childhood and sweets.
3. Oatfield: A Short But Sweet History at Donegal County Museum: historical exhibition on Oatfield Sweet Factory.

Biography of Artists: <http://www.redmoon.org>