

BRITISH INDUSTRIES AND THE MEN WHO MADE THEM WHAT THEY ARE.

No. XII: The DISTILLATION of ENGLISH ESSENTIAL OILS.

Messrs. J. & G. Miller, Mitcham, Surrey.

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Mitcham in Surrey, with the land areas in its more or less immediate neighbourhood, has always been the home of the industry that forms the subject of this article, that subject being the distillation of essential oils from peppermint, lavender, pennyroyal, rosemary, chamomile, etc.—a process in which peppermint occupies by far the most important place. The once flourishing business in lavender has been practically killed, primarily because of a foreign competition against which existing conditions make it hopeless to contend.

In obtaining an interview with Messrs. J. & G. Miller, we had the privilege of meeting the largest growers of white peppermint in Great Britain, and the proprietors of the oldest and largest peppermint stills, the firm being also growers and distillery of the other herbs we have enumerated. Growing operations were conducted on an extensive scale by the founder of the enterprise between thirty and forty years ago, and the distillery was established by his sons and successors, Mr. James Miller and Mr. George Miller.

MR. G. MILLER.

Our second illustration represents one of the firm's many fields of peppermint in growth. August marks the beginning of the harvest, from whence through September and into October the work of distillation goes on without intermission day and night (Sundays, of course, excepted). In the case of this establishment, the stills—large in size and four in number—are pot stills of the old fashion, for the proprietors



deprecate the use of the new stills of the “patent” type. It was the old pot still that won the Mitcham products their reputation as the best in the world, and what made that reputation should assuredly be retained in order to keep it.

At the time of our visit (last month) the works were of course idle, but an idea of their *modus operandi* can be gathered from the following brief description. The ground floor resembles in appearance an ordinary engine room, but besides the furnaces immense condensing vats are conspicuous, with oil receivers at their base, and a copper pan capable of holding 16 cwts. of dried herbs, and the necessary quantity of water for distilling, its rim projecting about 6 feet

into the floor above, a large part of which is occupied in the season by “mats” of peppermint and lavender. These mats are thrown down towards the mouth of the copper, into which the contents are flung and trodden down. The water is increased to within two or three feet of the top, and in about half an hour the distillate begins to come over, when the fires are damped down, and the collection of the distillate is continued for six hours, at the end of which the charge of steaming herb is cleared. For this the men strip to the waist, the work being effected by a combination) of mechanism and manual labour. Messrs, Miller's premises having been specially built and equipped for the purposes they serve present various features of structural and implemental interest of—necessarily—a purely technical character.

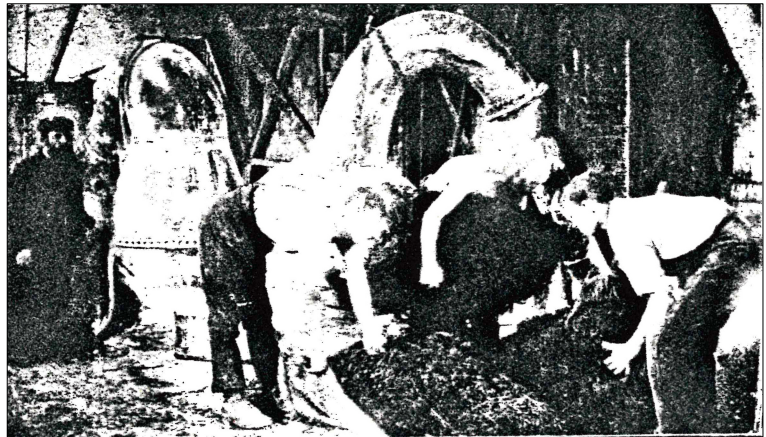


A PEPPERMINT CROP.

As regards the yield of their big stills it is not possible to give precise statistics, much depending on the state of the herbs, but according to our analysis of certain figures with which we were furnished, between eight and nine pounds of essential oil of peppermint would be a fair average distillation from 16 cwts. of the dried herbs a corresponding bulk of lavender yielding, perhaps eleven or twelve pounds of essential oil. In such highly concentrated form, it does not take very many bottles to hold a thousand pounds' worth. In the sale of their manufactures, Messrs. J & G. Miller come into contact neither with the public nor the retail trade, their buyers being the wholesale factors who supply the latter.

INTERIOR OF DISTILLERY.

The immense superiority of the Mitcham essential oils over any that call be imported from any foreign source of supply is indisputable, and is represented by their inevitably much higher prices. This superiority on one hand and this higher price on the other, have tempted certain dealers in foreign peppermint oil to offer



as English-distilled oil what is in reality nothing better than a rectified cheap American oil with possibly a little English oil added. The description of “English-distilled” is covered by the subterfuge that the stuff has been *re*-distilled here. Specious analytical certificates are offered with some of these low-priced adulterated oils, but organoleptic tests would break down their pretensions and reveal their real nature. In view of the fact that essential oil of peppermint enters into the preparation of so many medical specifics, this question is of public as well as trade interest, and we have no apology to offer for drawing public attention to the fact that for years past the firm of J. A G. Miller have profusely advertised an undertaking to pay £1000 on production of any proof that they have ever had any dealings, however indirect,

in any foreign peppermint oil, or in any other than pure oils, distilled from plants actually grown in the Mitcham and surrounding district. The significance of this challenge is self-evident; equally obvious is the significance of the fact that the thousand pounds remain unclaimed. All that is claimed (and more) for the products to which this challenge applies has been verified over and over again by the severest analytical tests that science can bring to bear.

It will be remembered that Mr. George Miller, the present senior partner, was an expert witness before Mr. Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform Committee at Whitehall, his evidence being published in full in the Official Report. In all that he had to say in support of tariff reform he spoke as one having authority, as a recognised specialist in his own industry, as a man controlling 1200 acres and paying nearly £10,000 per year in wages, and as essentially a scientific agriculturist.

The views of such a man command respect, and we have no hesitation in saying that we were more impressed by his arguments in proof of the necessity of some measure of protection than we have been by anything else we have either read or heard. There was a fact or a figure in his every sentence, and we were not surprised to learn that Mr. Miller was a protectionist years before the current controversy, for he had already unconsciously revealed himself as an original thinker, not a spokesman of the views of others; a leader rather than a follower; a man not only capable of diagnosing an evil, but of propounding and organizing a remedy.

The operations of his firm, of which we have written, are supplemented by market gardening and fruit culture on an extensive scale.

EXTERIOR OF DISTILLERY

