

Andrew Ewing and the Buttercup Dairy Company

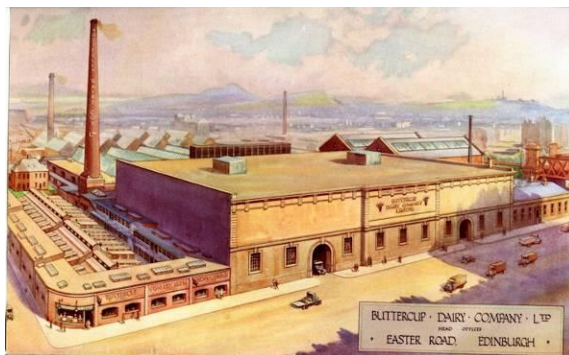
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During the early part of the twentieth century, in towns and villages across Scotland and the north of England, a chain of distinctive shops grew up that specialised in the sale of fresh dairy products. Decorated with ornate tiles and with eye-catching window displays, these were the shops of the Buttercup Dairy Company, which was founded in 1904 by the young entrepreneur Andrew Ewing.

Born in the small village of Stoneykirk, near Stranraer, Scotland, in 1869, Andrew Ewing later moved to Dundee, where he opened his first grocer's shop in 1894. Ten years later he founded the Buttercup Dairy Company, which by the late 1920s had 250 branches in Scotland and northern England, making it one of the leading grocery chains of the time. By 1928 the Buttercup also had its own ultra-modern poultry farm in Edinburgh – one of the largest in the world and known locally as 'Hen City'.

However, the story of the Buttercup is much more than that of a successful business and equally important were the unique attributes of its founder, who managed to combine the spirit of enterprise with a charity born of strong Christian principles. From the very beginning, Andrew Ewing donated ten percent of his income to the Church and good causes and when the Buttercup Poultry Farm was established, all eggs laid on a Sunday were given to charity. A modest and private man, his generosity was also practised without fanfare, and he had no interest in personal recognition or praise.

I was born and brought up on the poultry farm in the 1950s and, although I was too young to remember it in its heyday, I still have a clear recollection of the farm, the shops, and my trips to the company's head office in a Buttercup van. I can also recall my regular encounters with 'Mr. Ewing', who would always give me half a crown (around 35 cents), whenever our paths crossed on the farm.



Buttercup Head Office and Depot circa 1930



Buttercup Poultry Farm circa 1930

(Both Watercolours by Tom Curr)

I had assumed that there would be a great deal of information about the Buttercup in local libraries and on the Internet. It was only when I began to research my family history that I discovered this was not the case and that there were, in fact, very few details available about the Buttercup or its founder. Given the significance of the company in early twentieth century Scotland, this came as a great surprise, as did the realisation that the name of Andrew Ewing had largely been forgotten. I also realised that time was running out to resurrect the story and that unless something was done very quickly, it might be lost forever. So I decided to write a book.

My book is now complete and will be published in June 2011.¹ Titled *The Buttercup – The Remarkable Story of Andrew Ewing and the Buttercup Dairy Company*, it is written in the style of a biography, and tells the story of the company – and its founder – from its roots in the nineteenth century through to the modern day. The book also draws on the memories of former Buttercup employees and members of the Ewing family, to bring together a remarkable story. In addition there are around a hundred previously 'lost' photographs, most of which have come from the private collections of former Buttercup employees and relatives of Andrew Ewing.

The first three chapters of the book deal with Andrew's early life and business ventures, including his development of the Buttercup Dairy Company and Poultry Farm. The following is an abridged extract from Chapter 4, telling the story of Andrew's life at Clermiston Mains – his home for over thirty years, on the western outskirts of Edinburgh.

Clermiston Mains

At the heart of the Buttercup Poultry Farm was the mansion of Clermiston Mains, which from 1922 was the home of Andrew Ewing. Also known as 'the Big House', it was an imposing whitewashed building that lay at the eastern end of the farm and was approached by a tree-lined avenue. When the property was purchased by the Buttercup Dairy Company it was little more than a large farmhouse. However, Andrew intended to turn it into something much better and, over the next three years, drew up plans for substantial alterations in collaboration with his favoured architect, James Davidson Cairns.

The alterations would take the best part of a year to complete. During this period Andrew decided to make use of that time by taking his wife Nellie² on a grand tour of the United States and Canada. Over the previous twenty-five years he had devoted most of his energies to work and to building his business, so a holiday was well overdue. However, it was not all leisure, since Andrew also wanted to visit the manufacturers of large-scale poultry farm equipment, who were all located in America. It would also be an opportunity to look at some of the big poultry farms in the U.S.

Andrew and Nellie set sail from Greenock on 12 September 1925, en route to Quebec, aboard the White Star liner, *Regina*. Their precise travel itinerary is unknown, except that it was organised by the 'high end' Guild Travel Bureau, which specialised in tours of the United States and Canada. Their

¹ *The Buttercup – The Remarkable Story of Andrew Ewing and the Buttercup Dairy Company* will be published in June 2011 by Leghorn Books Ltd. It will be available to order online from www.LeghornBooks.co.uk. Further details may be found at www.ButtercupDairyCompany.co.uk.

² Andrew Ewing was born in Stoneykirk, near Stranraer, Scotland, in 1869. He passed away on 9 August 1956 in Edinburgh. He married twice. His first wife, Nellie Munro, was born in Ireland in 1872 and passed away on 17 March 1931 in Edinburgh. His second wife, Ruth Henderson, was born in Perth, Scotland, in 1878 and passed away on 12 June 1957 in Edinburgh. Andrew Ewing had no children.

advertised holidays at the time included tours of the Pacific Northwest, California, Salt Lake City, Colorado and the Canadian Rockies. However, they also catered for independent itineraries and, over a period of twelve months, it is likely that Andrew and Nellie travelled all over the U.S. and Canada. During this period it is also certain that Andrew learned much about large-scale poultry farming, and placed a £40,000 order for incubators and brooders with the Buckeye Incubator Company of Springfield, Ohio.

... The return trip to the U.K. took place on 16 September 1926, when they set out for Liverpool from Boston aboard the Cunard liner, *Scythia*. By this time the alterations to Clermiston Mains were complete. There was also a new electricity sub-station at the farm entrance, which would bring electricity to the house as well as to the recently expanded poultry farm.



Clermiston Mains
circa 1930



Andrew Ewing
circa 1940

The house itself had changed out of all recognition and was now a magnificent luxury dwelling. During the alterations, the entire top half of the original building had been removed and the roof replaced with three stepped gables in the Scottish Baronial style. The height had also been lifted considerably, giving the whole thing a much grander appearance. Much work had also been carried out inside the house, which was now split into two parts, and comprised a main house, separated from the servants' quarters by a swing door.

... It was around this time that evidence began to emerge about Andrew's activities in helping others. As a devout Christian and as part of his Baptist faith, he had pledged to help those less fortunate than himself. According to Ian Balfour, a fellow member of Charlotte Chapel, Andrew was shy of publicity but was a good friend to many needy people. During the Depression years of 1929-33, and again during the years of rationing and shortage of the Second World War, many a person found a small packet slipped into their pocket, containing half a pound of butter or some rashers of bacon. In the days of rationing this was appreciated much more than words can describe.

The church Scouts also had reason to be grateful to Andrew when they had their annual summer camp, at Canty Bay, in the 1920s. After travelling to North Berwick on a Buttercup lorry, they discovered an

extra item in their camp gear: a large case of butter, tea, margarine, eggs and condensed milk put there on Andrew's instructions. Painted on the case in colour was a drawing of a very large, fat Scout with a caption underneath, which read: "Buttercup marge and Buttercup eggs make a Scout large and strong in the legs."

Over time, stories about Andrew's generosity and kindness became the stuff of folk legend and former Buttercup employee, John Davidson, recalled the time when Andrew was on his way to Glasgow with his chauffeur. Apparently they picked up some drunken football fans who wanted a lift to Glasgow for an 'Old Firm' match between *Rangers* and *Celtic*. Once they reached their destination, Andrew gave them £5 and told them, "Go and enjoy yourselves." This prompted the reply, "Thanks very much, mister. I hope we meet you again, next week!"

Tradesmen were also the beneficiaries of Andrew's remarkably generous nature, and Ian Thomson recalled working at the farm as a young apprentice plumber. On Saturday mornings, after a week's work, Andrew would make his rounds, giving each tradesman £1 and the apprentices ten shillings – about a third of their weekly wage. Needless to say, they were all peeping around corners awaiting his arrival!

Although Clermiston Mains was Andrew's home, it was also often used as an alternative 'head office' for board meetings and other Buttercup business. In this connection, senior managers would often be seen driving down the avenue to see the boss. The regular sight of Andrew coming and going was also a feature of life at Clermiston Mains, as was the inevitable comment from those living in the cottages: "Mr. Ewing's just gone past!"

... It seems as if everyone with a connection to Clermiston Mains during this period developed a great affection for it. Andrew's great-niece, Sandie Longmuir, said that it was always exciting to arrive and explore the house and garden. She also thought the house had a distinct welcoming benevolence – like an old friend.

Bill Scott was born and brought up on the Buttercup Poultry Farm in the 1950s and knew Andrew Ewing when he was a boy. His grandparents worked for the Buttercup for thirty years and during his childhood he was regaled with tales of Mr. Ewing and The Buttercup. Bill decided to write his book on the Buttercup when he discovered that the company and Andrew Ewing had been virtually forgotten by history. He started researching the book in 2008, but it was an uphill struggle, since there was so little publicly available information. However, with his own memories and records, and tremendous help from former employees and the Ewing family, he began to uncover the unique story of the company and the man who built it.