

# Historical Facts



## A Rich Culinary Heritage

The vital ingredient for growing watercress is, of course, water – pure, mineral-rich spring water, from which this peppery little super-food derives its power house of nutrients.

Brimming with more than 15 essential vitamins and minerals, its health giving properties have been known since ancient times. Around 400 BC on the Island of Kos, Hippocrates, the father of medicine, is said to have located his first hospital beside a stream so that he could grow a plentiful supply of watercress to help treat his patients, the Greek general Xenophon made his soldiers eat it to increase their vigour before going into battle and Roman emperors said it enabled them to make “bold decisions”.

Gram for gram, watercress contains more vitamin C than oranges, more calcium than milk, more iron than spinach and more folate than bananas.

But people love it for its flavour too. The peppery heat comes from the plant’s mustard oils, which are released when chewed (and act as a stimulant to the digestion and the taste buds), while the stalks are succulent and cool (from the water in which it is grown). The Romans called it “nasturtium” which means “twisted nose”.

The first attempts at commercial cultivation are reported to have been made by a Nicholas Meissner in the 16th century at Erfurt in Germany. It was seen there by Cardon, an officer of Napoleon’s army and introduced by him into France, where it was eaten at almost every meal. Napoleon himself was a huge enthusiast. The first British watercress farm was opened in 1808 by William Bradbury at Springhead in Northfleet, near Gravesend in Kent.

The plant’s heyday was during the Victorian period when the development of the railway allowed tons of the plant, which was packed into wicker “flats” at the farm, to be transported up to Covent Garden Market. Street sellers would buy it and form it into bunches, which were eaten in the hand, like an ice cream cone – the first “on the go food”. It was often eaten in sandwiches at breakfast time, though in poorer homes it was eaten on its own, which earned it the nickname “poor man’s bread”.

Henry Mayhew in 1861 in *London Labour and the London Poor* noted: “*The first coster cry heard of a morning in the London streets is of ‘Fresh wo-orter-creases’ . Those that sell them have to be on their rounds in time for the mechanic’s breakfast, or the day’s gains are lost*”.

Richard Rowe in 1881 in *Life in the London Streets*, reported: “*In fine weather, in spite of the general squalor of the street-retailers, it is rather a pretty sight to see them flocking out of the great watercress market with their verdant basketfuls and armfuls, freshening their purchases under the sun-gilt water of the pump, splitting them up into bunches, and beautifying the same to the best of their ability to tempt purchasers. The fresh green, and even the litter of picked-off wilted leaves, pleasantly remind one of the country, in the midst of our dusty, dingy drab wilderness of brick and mortar; and there is something bird-like in the cress-sellers’ cry as one after another raises it*”.

One watercress seller who made good was Eliza James, who as a child of five hawked wild bunches of watercress around factories in Birmingham, but who later earned the nickname of “The Watercress Queen” because of her near monopoly on the London watercress restaurant and hotel trade. She was reputed to be the biggest owner of watercress farms anywhere in the world, creating vast watercress beds at Mitcham and Beddington in Surrey and at Warnford, Overton and Hurstbourne Priors in Hampshire. But despite her wealth, she still turned up every morning to work her stall at Covent Garden Market which she had been running for over 50 years, arriving every day on a watercress cart. Reporting on her death in 1927, the Daily Mirror described her life as “*one of the most wonderful romances of business London has ever known*”.

The watercress industry continued to thrive during both World Wars when the country had to rely on home grown produce and watercress sandwiches at “high tea” became almost a national institution. Watercress was a staple ingredient in school dinners; indeed several experiments conducted by the Ministry of Health in the 1930s concluded that watercress was excellent for promoting children’s growth.

The lifting of import restrictions together with the introduction of exotic varieties of salad leaves and the subsequent closure of many branch railways in the 1960s, applied pressure on the watercress industry to maintain its existing levels of sales. In the 1940s more than 1,000 acres of watercress were under cultivation but by the end of the 20th century that figure had shrunk to 150 acres. Gradually, despite its noble history, watercress gained a reputation as being just a garnish, served up at steak houses and posh hotels.

In 2003 British watercress farmers joined forces to once again raise the profile of this great British ingredient. A promotional campaign, “Not Just a Bit on the Side”, was launched, which has resulted in the industry enjoying a renaissance, with watercress once again being recognised as ***the original*** superfood.