

The sandwich that changed lunch forever

By Lucy McDonald (Daily Mail UK)
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Next time you peel back the opening on a box of Britain's best-selling High Street sandwiches, here are a few facts to think about - though they may take the edge off your appetite.

If you laid out every slice of bread used in this manufacturer's sandwiches each year, it would reach from Manchester to Bangkok. They also use 700 Olympic-size swimming pools of mayonnaise, two Jumbo jets filled with lettuce leaves, 390,000 tonnes of prawns and enough chickens to go twice around the M25.



British tradition: Marks & Spencer sold its first sandwich 30 years ago.

It's enough to give you indigestion. But then, as those seductive adverts for the store in question might say: 'These are not just any ordinary sandwiches. These are Marks & Spencer pre-packaged sandwiches.' More than that, they are the sarnies that changed the world - and, some would say, changed it for the worse.

It is now 30 years since M&S sold its first prepackaged sandwich and in doing so unwittingly launched a food revolution that would change the way that Britain eats. Since then, we've munched through about three billion M&S pre-packed sarnies.

Today, one in five sandwiches sold in the UK is bought from Marks and Sparks. They are part of our cultural heritage. Every supermarket has copied the formula. And they are the food that killed off lunch.

According to The Work Foundation - a group that promotes work/life balance - in the late Fifties, 70 per cent of men went home for lunch. Those who didn't mostly brought in a packed lunch, or ate hot food in staff canteens.

Even those workers who were willing to make do with a humble sarnie bought them fresh from local shops, which made them to order. Marks & Spencer changed all that.

As Jim Winship, of the British Sandwich Association, says: 'The pre-packaged sandwich has changed our lives. M&S started the revolution in the Eighties and now the market is worth £6 billion. That's a lot of sandwiches. They've also changed our working lives. Most people now stay at their desk - eating sandwiches.'

To understand just how significant their impact has been, we need to return to the early Eighties. Margaret Thatcher was just embarking on her economic reforms, beer cost 35p a pint - and sandwiches were something that you made at home, usually filled with cheese and pickle or, if you were feeling adventurous, perhaps a smear of tuna and sweetcorn.

The idea that you could walk into a shop and pick up a triangular plastic box containing two neatly-cut rectangles filled with crayfish tails, rocket and Marie Rose sauce would have seemed as fantastical as mobile phones the size of a cigarette packet and 3D television.



The production line at the Gunstones factory in Dronfield today where M&S sandwiches are made.

Like many world-changing inventions, the Eureka moment for the pre-packed sandwich happened by accident. An assistant in the Marble Arch M&S flagship store wrapped up some leftover sandwiches from the in-store cafe and put them up for sale instead of binning them. Today, any worker trying the same stunt would doubtless be sacked under Health and Safety guidelines.

But those were more innocent days. Within minutes, the first trial sandwiches had all been sold - and M&S realised they were on to something. They trialled readymade sandwiches in five other stores - and a nation that had begun to hunger for convenience snapped them up.

By 1987, M&S had 25 sandwich varieties on offer in all its stores, and rivals began to copy what had already become a multi-millionpound formula. From those humble origins stemmed an entire industry.

That first M&S sarnie is the ancestor of today's High Street sandwiches in all their various forms: the Pret A Manger baguettes, the Boots wraps, the shrink-wrapped supermarket bagels - even those sad, anaemic offerings for sale in motorway service.

Yet how often, as you trudge back to your desk with your supermarket BLT or chicken Caesar, do you pause to consider where your lunch has come from?

Not which store, but which actual kitchen? For that matter, who spread the mayo or sliced the tomato?

That's what intrigued me, as I ate my M&S sandwich one lunchtime. And that is how I found myself outside Gunstones Bakery near Chesterfield, Derbyshire. Gunstones (owned by the giant Northern Foods conglomerate) is one of the two official sandwich suppliers to M&S, churning out 18 million sandwiches a year.

The manager, Martin Husselbee, allowed me in to see how they do it. As one might expect, Martin is almost messianic about sarnies. 'Sandwich making is a serious business,' he says. 'You have to use the best quality ingredients. We cook our own bacon and chicken and try to source quality British ingredients wherever we can. It's all about continuity. People want their sandwiches to taste the same every day.'

Do they? Isn't the whole joy of homemade sandwiches that they *don't* always taste the same? I've spent many a happy lunchtime assembling odd creations by wedging last night's leftovers between two slices of bread.

But this is no time for amateurs or experiments. Martin and I are off to the heart of sandwich central - the factory floor. Before I am allowed anywhere near the food, I must be decontaminated.

I put on big white wellies, a white coat and no fewer than three hairnets (if there's one thing that can spoil a sandwich, it's a rogue ginger hair projecting from the prawn mayo). Once clad, I walk over a kind of cattle grid, where my boots are washed with hot soapy brushes to rid them of germs. Next comes a dollop of antibacterial hand gel.

Only then am I allowed in.

Inside, the factory looks (and sounds) much like any other. The radio is on loud, but barely audible over the busy clatter of the machines. People - all similarly clad in white - are pushing

around vast crates of bread, vats of butter and giant containers of sliced chicken, like oversized Oompah-Loompahs.



Finished product: Lucy McDonald pictured at the Gunstones factory with some of the sandwiches on offer.

When I visit, only seven of the 12 stainless-steel production lines are in use, but during busy times (Christmas and the peak of the summer picnic season) all of them are working at full throttle and extra staff are brought in.

It is an extraordinary process - about as far removed from making a sandwich at home as possible, yet relying on the same basic principles.

The first surprise is that all of the sandwiches are handmade. Indeed, they're made not just by one pair of hands, but ten of them.

Astonishingly, that is the number of people it takes to assemble the average M&S sandwich - enabling each production line to churn out almost 50 a minute. I am assigned to the 'chicken and salad' production line - one of M&S's perennial favourite varieties. Before I am allowed to get stuck in, I watch the experts at work.

At the top of each line, two workers stand opposite each other with the sole job of ripping open the bread packets that come from a local factory and then placing slices on the conveyor belt (The two end slices get thrown away, to be eaten by pigs).

The ones that make it in are then spread by machine with a tiny amount of butter. Only one to two grams are used per slice and you can barely see it, but it acts as a barrier to stop the ingredients turning the bread soggy.

Next come seven wiggly lines of rosemary-infused mayonnaise, which are piped automatically on both pieces of the malted brown bread. The slices move down the line on a conveyer belt to where two more workers are standing by, cucumber slices at the ready.

Each places two on each piece of bread, making four slices in total.

It is surreally choreographed - like some kind of synchronised sandwich ballet. The next pair of workers add a handful of sliced chicken (55g exactly, weighed out on nearby scales) which is then neatly spread out to all four corners of the bread by another couple down the line.



People in a Marks & Spencer food hall. The company considers itself a leading sandwich producer and keeps its recipes a secret.

Then come four slices of tomato and a handful of lettuce from another two workers, before both slices of the bread are tipped on top of each other - et voila! A sandwich. But hang on - it's not ready yet.

Next up are the 'sandwich tidiers'. This pair's job is to ensure that the sandwich looks pretty and that nothing is hanging out. Only once the sandwich has passed this test does it go through an automatic cutter that slices it into two triangles.

Just before slicing, the machine gently squeezes each sandwich to compress all the ingredients - much like you would press a sandwich down with your hand after making it at home. They are then automatically put into paper boxes (plastic was phased out in 2006) and sealed, before being stamped with a two- day sell-by date. They then go through a metal detector to ensure no one's wedding ring has slipped off into an egg mayonnaise sandwich. The sandwiches then disappear off the factory floor into trays ready to be dispatched around the country. And that's how it happens, sandwich after sandwich, hour after hour, day after day. I can't help but think it must be mindnumbingly tedious. I have a go at being a sandwich 'tidier' and am bored after a few minutes.

What can it be like for people such as Margaret Freer, 65, who has been making M&S sandwiches for 20 years? 'It does get a bit hectic,' is the closest she gets to moaning. For Margaret, making the nation's lunches is not a chore - it's a source of pride.

'I like making sandwiches. I like thinking of people eating something I've made. It is impossible to get bored as you swap jobs every 20 minutes. It's mind-boggling when you realise how much work goes into one sandwich.'

Even making more than a million sandwiches hasn't dimmed Margaret's appetite for them. 'I love them,' she says. 'I even buy them from the shops. The Club variety is my favourite.'

Gunstones currently employs 1,200 people - mostly local. At the heart of the factory is a tasting kitchen, where Jamie Bosworth, one of the five resident chefs, is busy experimenting with new flavours. 'We look everywhere for inspiration. Recipe books, the internet, restaurants,' he says. 'We even went to New York and San Francisco recently for ideas.'

'Mexican food is popular at the moment and people seem more interested in wraps and sushi, as well as traditional breads.' They are currently working on a World Cup range to be launched in May.

Exact recipes are kept secret. Competitors could sniff a chance to launch a similar variety first, and as Jamie puts it firmly: 'We are sandwich leaders, not sandwich followers.' Which is all very well, except that the first ever M&S sandwich sounds truly horrible.

Carlos Diaz, the M&S sandwich buyer, says: 'The first flavour we launched in 1980 was salmon and tomato. To be honest, it doesn't sound that appetising, but tastes were different then. In 1981, we introduced prawn mayonnaise and it's been our best seller ever since.'

And the next most popular varieties? In descending order: chicken and bacon, BLT, smoked ham and mustard, and then, at number five, the chicken salad combo that I've been working on. It's all very impressive. But I come away wondering whether all these sandwiches haven't made eating lunch a rather joyless experience.

These days, the average 'lunch hour' is just 20 minutes long and most likely to be spent at a desk. Although, as Stephen Bevan, of the Work Foundation, says: 'How much of that is because of changes to our work and how much is due to sandwiches is questionable.'

Certainly, not everyone is a fan. Food historian Tom Jaine says: "Readymade sandwiches have come a long way over the past 30 years, but that doesn't mean they taste any better. I think they're disgusting. The bread turns to slime in your mouth."

Mail columnist and lifelong foodie Jan Moir agrees: 'There's nothing quite as dispiriting as a sandwich sweating in one of those triangular coffins. Most taste of chilled nothing. The supposedly fancy ones are the worst. Elsewhere, the cheap ingredients are an insult.'

But their view is not shared by the dozens of hungry shoppers I find milling around my local M&S in Chiswick, West London. Among the sandwiches on offer are the ones I made the day before. I hover by the chicken and salad section, admiring the neat cucumber and the perfectly tidied chicken.

'I helped make that,' I say to a woman as she picks one off the shelf. She smiles at me, looks slightly worried and hurries on in silence. Later, I notice she has abandoned the sandwich by the avocado pears.