

2019

AGRICULTURE & RURAL AFFAIRS

The Parliamentary Review

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The Rt Hon Theresa May MP

The Rt Hon Claire Perry MP

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Camstar Herbs



Growing in scale year-on-year



Managing Director Edward Starke

Since the 1890s, CEO Edward Starke's family have been in the essential oils business. His great-grandfather, Augustus Bruce Starke, became an established supplier of essential oils and food ingredients in 1899. He purchased Chestnuts Farm in 1925 for his son Ronald to set up a growing and distilling operation concentrating on culinary and botanical herbs and flowers. Successive generations of the Starke family continued in this tradition – one that continues to this day in the form of Camstar Herbs Ltd.

Since our origins, the growing principles have remained the same, although a great deal has changed in regard to mechanisation and the scale of the operation. Our ethos of sustainability has also fundamentally changed in order to satisfy the requirements of multinational blue-chip clients, as well as meeting our responsibility to the environment by working with our growers. By adopting a strict seven-year rotation, we are able to sustainably grow the required acreage without the issue of soil-borne diseases typical of poor rotation such as root rot.

Generally, our growers will rotate into cereal crops such as wheat and barley as well as oil seed rape and sugar beet. Within our production, the unwanted stalk element of the herb is discarded and taken by bulker truck to be fermented to produce gases that are burnt and used to generate electricity, thus reducing our carbon footprint.

Drawing from the past, looking to the future

Our production today draws from a cultivation of over 3,000 acres (1,200 hectares) of culinary herbs including parsley, coriander, fenugreek, dill, camomile, tarragon and chervil, of which Camstar controls the process, from seed supply to agronomy,

FACTS ABOUT CAMSTAR HERBS

- » Managing Director: Edward Starke
- » Established in 1979
- » Based in Suffolk
- » Services: Production of dried herbs, spices, vegetables, fruit and essential oils
- » No. of employees: 80
- » Great-great grandfather established the family business in 1899; every generation since has been involved in the industry
- » www.camstar.co.uk
- » www.camstaringredients.co.uk

“Our ethos of sustainability has also fundamentally changed in order to satisfy the requirements of multinational blue-chip clients”

harvesting and processing. This level of control enables Camstar to make many guarantees in relation to freedom from gluten and any other allergens such as celery, mustard and dairy, which is becoming essential in our industry.

My father, Richard Starke, ran the business from 1963 to 2008 and contributed hugely to the unique technologies of manufacture that we use today and that enable sterilisation of the product within the processing system, resulting in a product suitable for use in ready-to-eat products without requiring further treatment.

Since 2008 we have gone on to invest in foreign body removal technologies such as insect removal and optical sorting/air jet removal. We believe we offer the cleanest and safest dehydrated culinary herbs in the industry, a claim that we feel is validated by the increasing supply to clients such as Unilever, Nestle and McCormick worldwide.

The oldest remaining part of our business is the distillation side, which has been operating in a very similar manner since 1925. In that time there have been highs and lows in the market, one of which was during the Second World War, when the market for our camomile oil collapsed and left us with over 100 acres of mature

flowers that we had to find a market for quickly. My great grandfather secured a contract with Boots, the chemist, for packs of dried camomile flowers, which required more than 100 people to hand pick and machine dry on our first very small dryer.

Today, this side of the business has seen somewhat of a resurgence due to increased demand for truly pure essential oil from the aromatherapy industry; more than 80 per cent of our essential oil crop is exported overseas, with around 40 per cent of our dehydrated herbs being exported to the USA and Asia, creating around £6 million worth of export income for the UK.

With the current loss of actives for weed control in herb crops, especially field-grown parsley, economic production is very challenging. Linuron has been the mainstay of weed control in many herb crops and umbellifer root crops such as parsley, coriander, carrots and parsnips. The loss of linuron will cause many problems going forward with no suitable replacement available.

While it may appear on the surface that we have a good toolbox of actives available to herb growers (due to the way EAMUs are generated in the UK) it's not as extensive as it seems. In general, we can split the UK herb

High-specification equipment for our needs



crops into umbelliferous species such as parsley, coriander and dill, and labiate perennial crops such as sage, oregano and mint. The UK approvals are then set for a generic herb list, which includes both umbellifers and labiate herbs. Unfortunately, some actives, such as Bentazone, are approved for use across all herbs for a range of weeds including mayweed and volunteer oil seed rape. It is in fact phytotoxic to umbellifers such as parsley and coriander and will kill them. Moreover, Clopyralid, useful for controlling groundsel, mayweeds and thistles, is also phytotoxic to umbellifers. In fact, we use both actives to control umbellifer weeds in crops like onions.

Another huge challenge in using some of the remaining actives that are approved is being able to manage the MRLs, many of which are set at limit of detection or LOD. As we know, MRLs are not set at a level at which human health is affected, but are more of a trading standard issue, to ensure we use actives within the terms of the approval. However, this makes some completely unusable, even when used according to the approval and when engaged in good agricultural practise, which further restricts our tool box – examples are chlorpropham and prosulfocarb.

Another challenge is the increasing amount of groundsel we are having to deal with. Groundsel is ubiquitous across our soils, especially light soil, which is favoured for herb production. As well as being a physical contaminant, groundsel produces pyrrolizidine alkaloids, which are liver poisons and a danger to human health according to a recent EFSA report. This means that we have to operate a zero tolerance for groundsel, and with very few actives available to effectively control these prolific weeds, they have to be physically removed either by inter-row hoes, by hand or both.



Our latest new plant

Several countries in the EU have instigated an emergency use of Assulam for groundsel control in herbs; this has not been the case in the UK. All these different factors mean economic production of herbs in the UK is becoming increasingly challenging.

A strong product means a strong future

Whatever happens, we have a unique product with a strong model. Our sterilisation techniques have won the confidence of many large companies and will continue to do so. Indeed, the techniques are strong enough that they match the food standards of most jurisdictions in the world, which is particularly attractive to blue-chip companies that ship globally. This is in contrast to California or some parts of Asia, whose methods of sterilising are often incompatible with EU regulations. This, combined with our excellent product, puts us in good stead for the future, whatever difficulties come our way. By committing ourselves to excellence in this way, we are projecting that we will expand between 50 per cent and 60 per cent over the next couple of years or so.

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