

Taking Stock - The OXO Story

By Gary Pharo



Charles Gunther

We have all watched with amazement as chefs such as Heston Blumenthal create dishes that fuse together an incredible knowledge of cuisine and science....but the combination of food and science is not new.

Over 150 years before snail porridge and nitrogen chilled egg & bacon ice-cream, when Gordon, Gary & Heston were mere glints in their great, great grandparents eyes, in the majestic surrounds of the Tongswood Estate in Hawkhurst, Kent a much lower profile gentleman was cooking up something that many of us take for granted and use in our everyday cooking.

The story starts in the 1840's – the 'hungry forties' as they were known, when a chemist, Justus von Liebig determined to bring the goodness of beef to everyone, not just the well-to-do. The combination of Liebig's scientific knowledge, George Giebert's engineering skills and a brilliant marketer in the form of Charles Gunther formed one of the most recognised and well loved brands in the UK – Oxo.

Liebig was one of the really great men of the 19th century, a scientist who thought about a new method of teaching chemistry; like many altruistic figures he worked fundamentally for the people. His studies included the chemistry of the human body, the chemistry of food and nutrition and the chemistry of agriculture; but the most important of them was the *Extracum Carnis* – or as it is more commonly known the concentrated essence of beef.

However, having laid down the principle and method for the extract, producing it was another thing. Beef was very expensive in Europe and it took a lot of beef to produce a little extract. Liebig learned that in South America, cattle were slaughtered in their thousands for the sake of hides and fat....the meat he needed for his extract was left to rot. So he announced that the details of his methods would be freely available to anyone who could produce the extract to his specification.

Enter the engineer George Giebert who convinced Liebig that he was the man to produce the extract. Giebert needed funds to buy the land and plant, and in Antwerp he secured them from a group of traders; Corneille David and the brothers Otto & George Gunther.

In 1861 Giebert returned to Uruguay to set up his factory in the town of Fray Bentos, a name that later became synonymous with beef products. When you consider that there was no building materials or workforce locally, a cholera outbreak killed 42 of the workers brought over from England and that one of the ships took 8 months to arrive after being disabled in a storm, it's incredible to know that the plant was operational in 12 months!

The company quickly grew and in order to raise the funds for further growth, a new company was formed and floated in what was the financial centre of the world – London. Liebig's Extract of Meat Company Ltd was registered in 1865.

Liebig's extract was extolled in the Lancet and other medical journals, prescribed by family doctors & championed by Florence Nightingale as well as the second Duke of Wellington and accompanied Stanley on his historic 1865 expedition to find Dr Livingstone (exactly 100 years before the author of this piece and coincidentally, the great, great nephew of Dr Livingstone was born!)

As well as producing the beef extract, a huge variety of other by-products were made, from tallow to bonemeal, fertilizer to smoked ox tongue...but the introduction of Fray Bentos corned beef as a standalone product really called for a man with the vision to market the company and keep it ahead of its growing, aggressive competition.

In England, there was a man ready and able to cope with this stage of the company's growth. Charles Gunther had worked at Liebig's for just 5 years (albeit undergoing intensive commercial training in London and practical training in Fray Bentos) when at the tender age of 25 he was appointed a Director of the company. In 1895, still just 32, he was Chairman and very actively directing the affairs of the company.

In short succession, Gunther purchased an additional 80,000 acres in Argentina and built an additional factory, before expanding into Paraguay and later Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

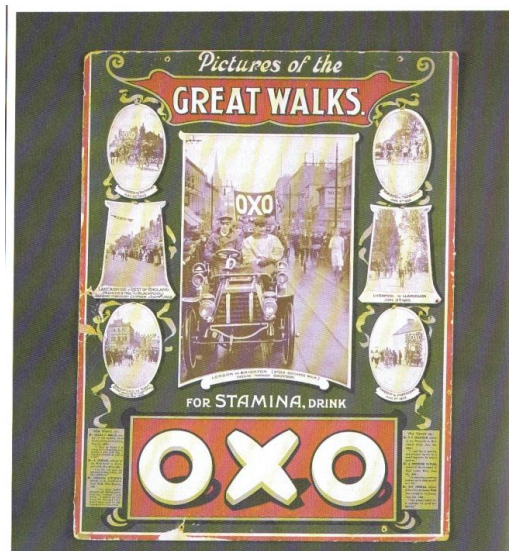
There were now a number of companies producing beef extract and it was this threat of competition that focused Gunther's attention. He was determined to launch an affordable, superior alternative. It took 2 years before he was satisfied that the product was ready for market. Introduced quietly as a sideline to the original Liebig Extract; OXO was born. Orders were soon flooding in for this original version which was in the liquid form.

Thus far, Gunther's achievements are a logical development of a growing business, but it was his extraordinary vision that allowed OXO to meet its competition head on and succeed. Until now, that competition had been relatively small, but now the company faced a competitor with a good product that was gaining market share.

Gunther embarked on an aggressive marketing strategy – and whilst the means at his disposal look simple and unsophisticated by modern standards, at the time the approach was quite revolutionary. OXO distributed leaflets through their trade outlets, gifts were exchanged for labels from OXO bottles but above all they advertised in the press and hoardings on an enormous scale.



Original Liquid Oxo



In 1902, the first OXO promotional gift was a baby's rattle. In 1903, the name OXO was beamed from an electric sign in the Strand. Another innovative promotion was sponsorship. OXO made itself synonymous with health, strength and endurance by the brilliantly simple device of sponsoring the London to Brighton walk. OXO was official caterer to the 1908 London Olympics, supplying the runners in the marathon with fortifying drinks of OXO to sustain them and the entire British team endorsed the product.

A competition was run for lucky winners to win a trip of a lifetime to visit the cattle ranches in South America – all expenses paid. Entry was simple: you wrote in...and the condition for entry – you must be able to travel for 8 weeks; this was long before air travel so the trip comprised of 6 weeks sailing, 2 weeks on the ranches.

“Get the children interested and the rest will be easy” was one of Gunther's instructions, so OXO set about giving away free gifts; a strategy that continued for most of the rest of the company's history through and after its merger with Brook Bond. Many readers will recall fondly the huge variety of card collections, which neatly combined education with good old fashioned fun.

Cookery books were produced, the German equivalent of Mrs. Beeton promoting it in all her recipes, the growing number of women's magazines carried adverts and recipes, kitchenalia from recipe cards to utensils were produced and even silk bookmarks given away to leading chemists and hospitals. The style and charm of much of this marketing material inevitably led to it becoming iconic memorabilia.

Gunther's revolutionary ideas didn't stop with marketing. In 1902, the company decided to employ female labour – an idea virtually unheard of at the time. But for the sake of decorum, lest unseemly liaisons might take place over the bottling plants, the ladies were located in a separate department with a different entrance to the men.

In 1902, Gunther bought the Tongswood Estate in Hawkhurst Kent, (now the home of St Ronan's School). Away from his commercial activities, Gunther's altruistic side proved a great boon to the pre-dole local economy in Hawkhurst. Appalled by the sight of men standing idle under the iconic Colonnade in



the village, Gunther employed an army of gardeners, maintenance staff, farm hands and foresters who kept the estate in immaculate order. He also embarked on a series of building improvements to the main house, alongside building numerous farm buildings.

The OXO Challenge Trophy presented annually for the best Sussex Bull at The Royal Agricultural Society



St Ronan's - note the black O X O bricks

Gunther also used the land to breed pedigree cattle which were shipped to Argentina to improve the quality of the cattle. He was one of the best known cattle breeders in the country and started the famous Tongswood herd of pedigree Shorthorn cattle, of which he was a very successful exhibitor winning the Royal Championship and numerous 1st prizes at leading shows.



Shorthorn Bull with Cabanero

The brickwork of the imposing Tongswood mansion had an unusual design – quite clearly the letters O X O are depicted above the entrance in darker brick. This gives rise to speculation over how OXO came to be named. The OXO trademark was registered worldwide in 1899 (1900 in the UK) and it is believed that like many products at the time, the letter O was added to the main component i.e. Ox. However, the romantic side of the writer wonders if Gunther had seen the house before naming the company, or perhaps seeing the name emblazoned on the house sealed the sale?

The origins of the name remain unclear, but far clearer was Gunther's vision and drive as he began planning what was to be possibly the biggest leap in the success story of OXO.

Fluid OXO was a huge success, but Gunther wasn't satisfied. Although he was now reaching a bigger market, he wanted to achieve the same original aim of Liebig; a product of high quality available to everyone. The smallest practical size for OXO was a 2oz bottle – which cost more than the families who needed it most could afford. He knew what he wanted – something he could sell for a penny!

It seems extraordinary that a company founded by a chemist had not since employed one. So Gunther retained the services of an eminent chemist and gave him absolute control to pursue a penny product. This was not easily achieved; fluid OXO in a gelatine capsule was tried but proved too expensive to manufacture. OXO in a tablet form was tried, but deteriorated with keeping. The secret of just how it was produced must remain just that, but beef extract and beef fibrin were fed into a Swiss cube-making machine and finally in 1910, after many efforts, the OXO cube had evolved.

Sadly tragedy struck – in the same year that Gunther's drive and vision had created the OXO cube, his wife Leonie died. (Gunther remarried in 1912 to an heiress Helen Bell.)



The penny cube was an immediate success, but before the difficulties of production had been fully solved, came August 1914, war and the German occupation of Belgium. With devastating suddenness, all contact with the main manufacturing centre was lost. Supplies from South America had to be brought direct to England and manufacturing was swiftly organised. Practically the whole of the output of Fray Bentos corned beef & OXO was earmarked for the troops, but the civilian population had to be fed, so the company devised new products – emergency substitutes which were quickly dropped once the war was over.

This war caused consternation for Liebig's and Gunther – both names were obviously of German extraction and so to quell the anti-German feeling, Liebig's became OXO Ltd in England; Gunther stepped down from being a director (although he attended all board meetings in an 'advisory' capacity) and Lord Hawke, chairman of the MCC, one of the great cricketers of his day and something of a national hero was appointed as Chairman. This was a master stroke, Hawke added

British aristocratic associations, physical prowess and athletic achievement to cement OXO's reputation as a symbol of all that was best in traditional British life.



The war also bought personal conflict to Gunther – he had 2 sons; Norman and Charles, of fighting age from his first marriage and there was a real question as to the side on which their sons should fight. The boys made their own decision. Charles returned from Argentina to join the Life Guards and Norman went straight from Eton into the Royal East Kent Yeomanry.

Again, tragedy struck and both Norman and Charles were killed in northern France (Norman aged 19 died on July 12th 1917 and Charles aged 26 in the push at St Quentin in September 1918 which saw the first full breach of the Hindenburg Line and ultimately the end of the war). Even in the face of

such adversity, it says much about his character that Gunther chose to commission building a fire station (currently the Hawkhurst library) for the village in memory of his sons.

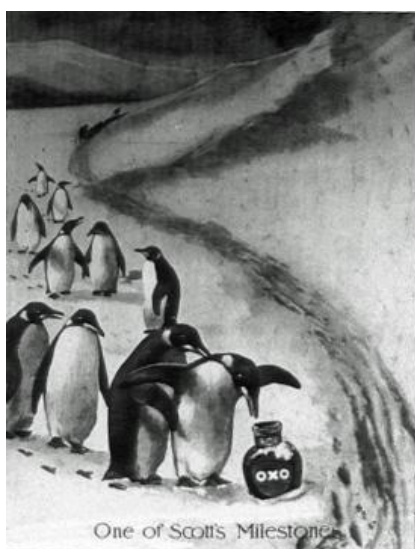
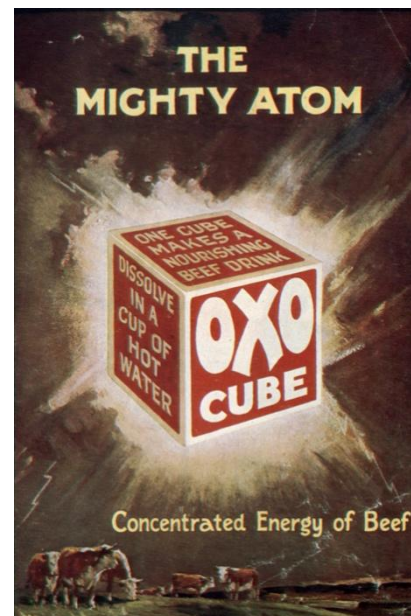
Throughout the war of 1914-18, OXO had concentrated on satisfying the enormous demand for its products. The company had every right to be proud of their effort during this war, supplying 100,000,000 OXO cubes and 200,000,000 tins of Fray Bentos corned beef to the Services.



Wartime Oxo Advertisements

After 1918, the company returned to normal business and set about the dream of producing high quality products at prices that made them available to everybody. Only large-scale production combined with large-scale selling would enable this.

OXO became one of the pioneers of really massive marketing and there was no escaping the impact of OXO publicity in the press and on hoardings, first with the theme of 'OXO – the Mighty Atom', later with punning catch phrases ("Willie B. Hardy?" "Yes, if he takes Oxo") – a style that has since been much copied and parodied.



The next line of publicity was to make OXO available at all major sporting events and whenever an occasion called for endurance in difficult circumstances – Alcock & Browns epoch-making flight across the Atlantic or an expedition to the Arctic or Africa, OXO provided high food value in a very compact form. OXO figured in the diets of winning teams and champions and in 1921 an OXO sports ground was opened in Bromley.

Gift schemes were again used extensively to promote sales. In 1923 some 50,000 Christmas stockings were offered in exchange for 120 cube wrappers. Other give-aways included dolls, cricket bats & footballs. A red OXO van scaled down to Dinky Toy size was sold for 3d (these now fetch more at auction than the real vans cost when first put on the road). More cookery books along with kitchen utensils and paraphernalia of all descriptions were produced....but eventually enthusiasm outran discretion and the response to an offer for free insurance caused such an administrative nightmare that the scheme had to be abandoned.

Production didn't stand still either. Until now, the cubes were, quite incredibly, hand wrapped. Machine wrapping needed to be developed and eventually the factory's head engineer devised a method for the complicated mechanics required. Now the most serious barrier to still higher production had been solved.

Many new products were devised, pastes, soups, beverages, meats packed in glass and canned foods - but none of them became anything more than a supplement for the 2 main lines; OXO cubes and Fray Bentos corned beef.

OXO also branched out into medical preparations. Meat extract is the basis of most culture media used for the growth of bacteria sent for examination and identification and a special form of Liebig extract had been available for many years for this purpose. When the use of glandular extracts was developed, Liebig's could provide almost unlimited supplies of glands; and with the discovery of insulin for the treatment of diabetes, it was decided to set up a special medical department. Some years later, the brand Oxoid was launched to provide pure hormones.

The iconic OXO Tower on the south bank of the River Thames was purchased toward the end of the 1920's. This building which was originally constructed as a power station for the post office was largely rebuilt to an Art Deco design by company architect Albert Moore between 1928 and 1929. The original design incorporated large illuminated signs to advertise the company's products. Permission for the signs was refused, so in a typically defiant and brilliant manner, the tower was built with vertically aligned windows which, coincidentally, were in the shape of a circle, a cross and a circle – or OXO!

Away from the commercial aspect of his life, as a result of his standing and work for the community, Gunther had been made High Sheriff of Kent in 1921.



Charles Gunther died of a heart attack in 1931 whilst lunching with his family at Paper Mill House in Benenden; the shooting lodge of his beloved Tongswood home. He was 68. According to newspaper reports at the time 'the event cast a profound gloom over the whole parish'. He is buried in the family vault at St Lawrence Church in Hawkhurst and his funeral was attended by hundreds of mourners including many dignitaries from public bodies and business concerns.

Over his relatively short life (by today's standards) Charles Gunther had achieved much both locally and internationally. Having been educated at Dulwich College, Cologne and the University of Liege,

he became chairman and managing director of Liebig's Extract of Meat; chairman of Liebig's (South-West Africa) Ltd, South American Cattle Farms Ltd, and Thameside Property Ltd; director of Oxo Ltd, Oxo (South Africa) & Oxo (Irish Free State), the Anglo South American Real Property Company, the Anglo South American Bank, the Forestal Land, Timber & Railways Company, and the Buenos Ayres and Pacific Railway Company Ltd.

Aside from his donation of the fire engine and fire station, Gunther gave generously through the church and built an extension and operating theatre for Hawkhurst Cottage Hospital. He also found time to be the president of Hawkhurst Football Club and the Hawkhurst Football Charity Cup competition

His second wife Helen continued to work tirelessly in Hawkhurst, responding to every charitable cause and normally in attendance behind a stall at local fetes and bazaars until her passing in 1961.



OXO continued to excel and grow after Gunther's passing, eventually becoming part of the fabric of English life. The company continued to innovate with its advertising, now exploiting the latest available medium - TV. In the 1950's even Sooty was cooking with Oxo on TV— of course his magic wand was required before Harry Corbett declared the drink to be “deliciously meaty”.



OXO pioneered the first advertising soap opera. The 'Katie' series was launched in October 1958, with the actress Mary Holland playing wife Katie to husband Philip (Richard Clarke, followed by Peter Moynihan). Katie declared “OXO gives a meal man appeal”. Viewers took the family to heart; when Philip spoke to Katie sharply on one occasion, girls in an electronics factory came out on strike. And there was uproar when Katie arrived home with her shopping basket and started making gravy without washing her hands. This series of ads ran until 1976.



The message of Oxo helping busy mums was further enhanced in the 1983 when Lynda Bellingham and Michael Redfern were introduced as the new Oxo family. Bellingham was the busy mum who could always rely on Oxo to help her out in the kitchen. After 16 years, in September 1999 the family made one last ad together - dubbed The Last Supper - which was aired before Coronation Street. It attracted millions and the 30-second advert has gone down in history as one of the great advertising traditions.

At the end of 2009, OXO re-launched the cubes, reshaping them in an X shape to aid crumbling and ran a competition to find a new OXO family, but this time not actors, rather a real family that reflects modern times. The winning family's advert was run during the X factor final – it was certainly better than Jedwood!

OXO today is available in various forms: cubes in Beef, Chicken, Lamb or Vegetable flavours; concentrated liquid for in Beef, Chicken or Vegetable flavours and low salt stock granules in Beef, Chicken or Vegetable flavours

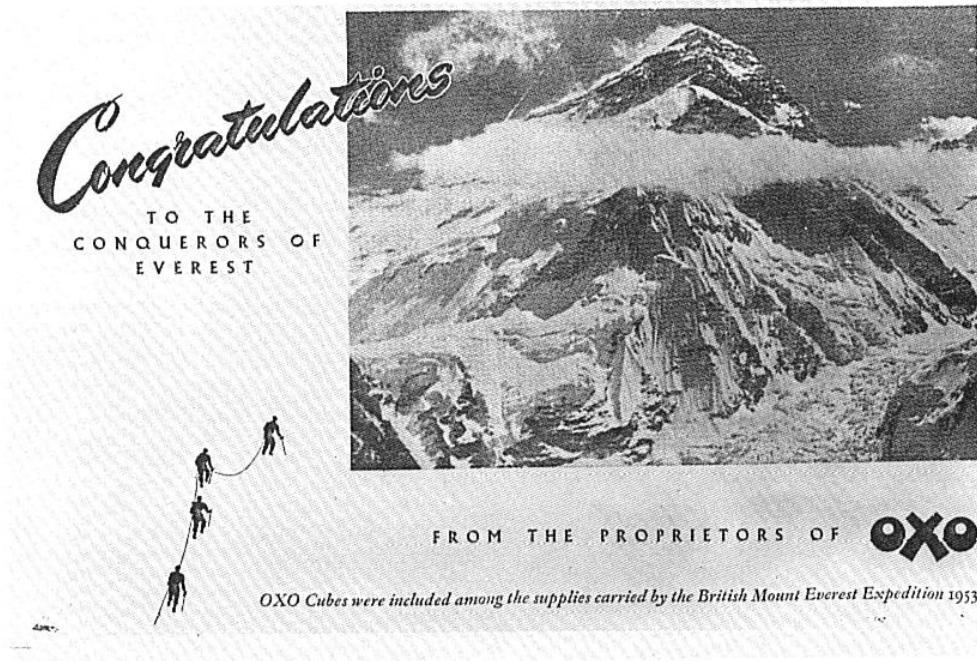
Looking back, it's clear that many great men & women made Victorian Britain a world leader; the likes of Charles Darwin, Captain Scott, David Livingstone, Florence Nightingale, Mrs Beeton Charles Dickens & Mary Evans (George Eliot!) are immortalised forever by their works and achievements.

Quietly, and without so much acclaim, an incredible man with vision, drive, desire and passion living in Hawkhurst on the leafy borders of Kent and Sussex set about leaving a legacy some would argue is just as important.



Above, a selection of OXO promotional items and advertisements; below, the only gift for your loved ones in the trenches, along with 3 of the groundbreaking Oxo punning ads.





Above, Oxo congratulates Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953, while below some interesting ways to enjoy OXO

