

THE FIELD STALK CLIPPER

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It is generally agreed that good tea is made in the field although manufactured in the factory, in other words, good, short leaf as opposed to lengthy stalky leaf produces better quality teas. This can be established by comparing tea manufactured from 7 day plucking rounds with 14 day rounds.

In Uva some 50% of the annual crop is harvested during March to June and even with a balanced labour force of $1\frac{1}{2}$ labourers per acre, plucking rounds often average over 14 days resulting in excessive stalk and fibre in the made tea. It is apparent that stalk contains little or no value and tends to cause uneven withering, rolling and firing apart from a poor appearance.

To endeavour to eradicate stalk in the course of manufacture is only to rectify a fault in the field. Careful observation will show that during the course of plucking and manufacture, the only time that all the stalks are end for end in the plucker's hand is just before he or she throws the green leaf into the plucking basket; this would, therefore, appear the most opportune time to eliminate stalk.

The fullest advantage of this fleeting, but important, moment can be taken if the plucker is equipped with a device for clipping off the stalk before she throws the leaf into the basket, provided, of course, that sufficient freedom of movement is ensured so as to make the action swift and easy. The stalk clipper is designed to provide the plucker with such a device.

Suspended from the waist by a chain, it can be brought into use by a simple action. The plucker, after collecting two small handfuls of leaf transfers the leaf in her right hand to the left, and with her now free right hand takes up the clipper and trims off the stalk from the handful of leaf held in her left hand before throwing the leaf over her shoulder.

This implement has been in use on Brookside from January to April 1953, and my findings over that period are summarised below:—

Plucking

The plucker soon gets accustomed to using the clipper and trims off the green stalk as required. It is practically unbreakable and seldom requires sharpening. It can be put to good use in the kitchen which is another reason for its popularity with the plucker.

The dry weight of the stalk so picked off is not likely to exceed the weight of the reds normally picked out in the factory.

The time taken in clipping off the stalk may easily be set off against the normal picking over time at weighings, amounting to approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours per day, since clipped leaf will not require this attention.

Manufacture

Grading.—The improved standard of green leaf as the result of clipper plucking, caused a less quantity of low grades as may be seen from the following table giving the results of a test carried out in March 1953 :—

<i>Process</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>B.O.P</i> %	<i>B.O.P.F.</i> %	<i>B.P.</i> %	<i>Other grades</i> %	<i>Total</i>
Normal Plucking	March 1952	59.95	12.27	7.14	20.64	100
Clipper Plucking	March 1952	73.78	11.82	2.71	11.69	100
Difference		13.83	-0.45	-4.43	-8.95	

Red leaf picking.—During March 1953 one division was clipper plucked and the other divisions normally plucked. As the table below shows the former tea cost 54% less to pick out.

<i>Process</i>	<i>No of red leaf pickers</i>	<i>Cost of red leaf pickers</i>	<i>Weight of reds in pounds</i>	<i>Tea manufactured pounds</i>	<i>Cost per lb. (cts.)</i>
Normal Plucking	363	Rs. 726/-	343	92,419	0.79
Clipper Plucking	59	Rs. 118/-	55	32,363	0.36
Total	422	Rs. 844/-	398	124,782	0.68

Prices

The first invoice of all clipper plucked leaf arrived in London in late March 1953 and was reported on as follows :—

Dry leaf.—Leaf is blacker, more even in make and contains distinctly less stalk than last invoice.

Liquor.—Liquor is not as strong as the last invoice, but shows an improvement in quality, pungency and brightness and has preferable flavour in the cup.

Infused tea.—Brighter.

It would thus appear to be more beneficial from all points of view if stalk were eliminated in the field rather than in the factory and the possibility of improving quality should weigh strongly with producers faced with the highly competitive world market conditions today.