

## Transcript

### The Curious Geography of Weetabix: A Cereal Tale for Our Times

#### JOHN ALLEN:

On the side of every box of Weetabix, set against a sunny backdrop of swaying fields of golden wheat, the cereal company proudly tells you that all the wheat that goes into Weetabix is grown within 50 miles of its Northamptonshire mills.

The second largest cereal brand in the UK still has its headquarters and its main manufacturing site close to those Northamptonshire flour mills at Burton Latimer where it all began in the 1930s.

Weetabix and its adjacent fields speak to something more than just plain, hard-headed commerce. They speak to sustainability and food security, but, above all, to a prized localness.

Or so it would seem. Weetabix has been in the news recently because, as with some other popular consumer brands, it faces a price hike that has been caused by the fall in the value of the pound since the referendum vote to leave the European Union, which, you would have thought, is odd really, given that Weetabix wheat is grown in the UK countryside.

It turns out that the local Northamptonshire wheat is an imported commodity, a globally traded product sold in US dollars on the world market. Even though the wheat is harvested within 50 miles of the original Burton Latimer mill, because it's priced in dollars, it now takes more pounds to buy it in the UK.

It could have been worse. If it were not for the fact that wheat prices on the global market, benchmarked on Chicago wheat futures, had not fallen in recent years, the price rise would have been even greater. Now the company HQ and the lush wheat fields may be local, but the market for wheat is truly global.

Well, that's not strictly the case. In 2012, Weetabix was taken over by the Chinese state-owned group, Bright Food, a Shanghai-based entity. They bought a 60% stake in the company from Lion Capital, a London-based private equity firm whose acquisitions have included Jimmy Choo and Wagamama.

Now Lion Capital sold its remaining 40% shares in 2015. And Weetabix is now jointly owned by the Bright Food Group and Baring Private Equity Asia, whose offices are spread across metropolitan Asia.

Lion Capital bought Weetabix back in 2004 from a Texan private equity firm, the Dallas-based HM Capital. And their acquisition of the cereal company ended decades of ownership by the founding family. Since 2003, in a decade and a half, Weetabix has gone from US, and then British ownership, to Chinese and Asian control.

For the current owners, however, things have not turned out quite as anticipated. The initial attraction of Weetabix for the Bright Food Group was that it represented a potential vehicle for transforming Chinese breakfast habits. Breakfast cereals are not part of the customary diet in China. And the aim was to shift the market towards more Western norms. But it seems that consumers prefer hot, savory breakfasts over their cold cereal equivalent.

The upshot is that, once again, Weetabix is up for sale. Suitors like Associated British Foods, they're the owners of Primark, and the Turkish group, Pladis who bought United Biscuits two years ago, are said to be in the frame. So the 85-year-old company, Weetabix, does not look set anytime soon to return to its local roots.

But in truth, as far as its local family-owned roots are concerned, they're not quite as local as at first they appear. The breakfast biscuit is not, after all, a Northamptonshire or even a British food product, but an Australian one.

Originally invented and branded as Weet-Bix in the 1920s, the biscuit's travels tell a tale of British dominions and their imperial connections. Weet-Bix is still marketed in Australia and New Zealand through the Sanitarium Health and Well-Being Company. And they attain the right to do so when the original owners sold up and left for South Africa in the 1930s, where they founded the British and African Cereal Company, as was actually rather common during the Empire.

The company subsequently expanded to the UK, buying a disused Northamptonshire mill at Burton Latimer to market its product, which put down what was to become the company's local roots. In 1936, the company changed the product name to Weetabix to distinguish it from its Antipodean counterpart. And likewise, changed the company name to Weetabix Limited.

So for Weetabix Limited, its prized localness today is not all that it would seem. It would be a mistake, though, instead to simply label its past and present geography as a tale of local and global links. A past geography, as DD205 points out, is something that can be folded into the present, spliced together in such a way that much of what happened in between gets erased.

The local wheat fields around Burton Latimer are a case in point. Both the company's roots in the British dominions and its present Asian geography are not on show. And the geography of the present gives us a state-run Chinese Weetabix, one that, as DD205 also teaches, has made it possible for the far off to be made proximate, and that physical distance that separates Northampton from Shanghai to be compressed.

Now the number of miles or kilometres between the two places don't really convey the economic and political relationships that now bind the respective fortunes of Weetabix and Bright Food. We'll probably have to wait for the next installment of a cereal tale, which, it turns out, was not a long wait.

In mid-April of this year, Weetabix was returned to US ownership, sold to the Missouri-based Post Holdings, a cereal conglomerate bent on European market expansion. No return to local roots then, but a pledge to continue harvesting the local wheat around Northampton.

These days, it seems that you can have localness without actually being local.