The mystery of the Mars family

From the sweeties.net wiki

Most of us have eaten something made by the Mars family this week. Mars bars, Snickers, Twix, Bounty, M&M's, Maltesers, Skittles and Galaxy all come from Mars Inc., and so do Pedigree and Whiskas pet food. The company is one of the largest private businesses in America. The family that owns it is one of the richest, and one of the quietest.

A company that does not talk

The tone was set by Forrest Mars Sr, who built the business from the 1930s and ran it until 1973. He kept it strictly private. Staff were banned from talking to the press and the company did not publish financial accounts. He avoided publicity and photographs, and in his whole life he agreed to just one interview, in 1966, with a trade magazine for sweet makers. He has been described as having a disagreeable personality and a very sharp business brain.

His children carried on in the same way. Jacqueline Mars is described as living frugally and avoiding the public eye, like her brothers. In the Forbes rich lists from 2010 to 2014, John Franklyn Mars was the highest ranked person on the list whose photograph the magazine did not have.

A father and son feud

The business was started by Forrest's father, Frank Mars, in 1911 in Tacoma, Washington. It failed there, and Frank started again in Minneapolis in 1920, where the Milky Way bar made the family's name in 1923. Forrest later said the Milky Way was his idea, dreamed up after drinking a malted milkshake.

Father and son did not get on. Frank and Forrest's mother divorced when Forrest was small, and he was raised by his grandparents in Saskatchewan, Canada, rarely seeing his father. When Forrest joined the firm he wanted to expand abroad, and his father did not. After a quarrel, Forrest was pushed out with a $50,000 payment and the foreign rights to the Milky Way.

Made in Slough

In 1932 Forrest moved to England and set up his own company in Slough, with a staff of twelve. There he created the Mars bar, a version of his father's Milky Way adjusted for European tastes, and at first advertised as using Cadbury's chocolate. In 1936 he created Maltesers, first sold in 1937 as energy balls aimed at slimming women. The Mars bar that the world knows today began in Berkshire, not America. Read the full story in Forrest Mars and the Mars bar.

Taking back the family firm

Frank Mars died in 1934. Forrest, meanwhile, built his own empire, including M&M's, launched in the United States in 1941 with a partner, Bruce Murrie, possibly modelled on Smarties. Peanut M&M's arrived in 1954, developed with Forrest's help even though he was allergic to peanuts. In 1964 he finally won control of his late father's company and merged it with his own. He handed the business to his three children in 1973, then, bored in retirement, started a chocolate company named after his mother, Ethel M. He was still ringing his children to complain about how the business was run well into the 1990s. He died in 1999, aged 95, worth an estimated $4bn.

The fortune

In 1988 Fortune magazine ranked the Mars family as the richest in the United States. By April 2020 the family's combined fortune was estimated at around $126bn. A 2006 report named the Mars family among 18 billionaire families who had lobbied the US Congress since the 1990s to abolish estate tax, the American version of inheritance tax.

The controversies

A company this size does not escape criticism. In 2007 Mars changed the recipes of UK bars so they were no longer suitable for vegetarians, then backed down within days: see the Mars rennet U turn. Mars has been named, along with other big chocolate makers, in American lawsuits over child labour on cocoa farms in West Africa; the 2015 cases were dismissed in 2016, and a further case was brought in 2021. More in child labour and the cocoa trade. In Britain, the regular Mars bar has shrunk several times, from 62.5 g to 58 g in 2008, to 51 g in 2013 and to 40 g in 2026.

The family has had private tragedy in public, too. In 2013 Jacqueline Mars was involved in a car crash in Virginia in which a passenger in the other vehicle died; she pleaded guilty to reckless driving.

The Mars family today

Mars is now far more than chocolate. It bought the chewing gum maker Wrigley in 2008 for $23bn with Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, bought the British chocolate shop chain Hotel Chocolat in 2023 for £534m, and completed the $36bn purchase of Kellanova, the former Kellogg's snacks business, in December 2025. Its pet care side runs huge chains of vets. John Franklyn Mars, the company chairman, was given an honorary knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II in 2015. Forrest Mars Jr died in 2016, and his four daughters inherited his share.

The family is still private, still enormously rich, and still, compared with its fame, remarkably quiet.