

royal cider

Ask most people to list cider-producing counties and the chances are Berkshire won't be mentioned, but maker and writer **Roy Bailey** has been trying to change that since 1995

Photographs Charlie Best



Mention Berkshire cider and the reaction of most people is, "I didn't know they made it there!" Apart from a couple of vineyards which made it as a sideline for a while, they didn't – at least commercially – until I started the Lambourn Valley Cider Company in 1995. In 1970 giant producer Taunton planted 10 acres of cider apples at Upton, near Didcot, in the fruit-growing area of the Vale of the White Horse, but these were destined for its Somerset works to make Dry Blackthorn.

In 1983 the agreement was terminated by mutual consent and the orchard's owner, Stan Lynch, decided to start making his own so formed the Upton Cider Company. However, by that time county boundary changes meant Upton had been moved into Oxfordshire, so still no Berkshire cider.

But the area around Newbury is rich in gardens that were once orchards and must have supplied the markets of London. It is inconceivable the inhabitants did not press and ferment the surplus to make their lives more enjoyable. It was this rich pomological vein that I tapped into when I decided to start making cider, and the wide variety of cookers and eaters – Cox's, Bramleys, Egremont Russet, Lord Lambourne, Newton Pippin and Washington Strawberry, to name but a few – made a sharp, fairly acidic but very fruity drink in the eastern-counties style.

To anchor Lambourn Cider's product firmly in its native heath, I called it Royal County, after Berkshire's official title.

After 11 years, advancing age and lack of suitable premises made me decide to cease making cider and concentrate on perry, which I make from the fruit of two huge old wild pear trees. Immediately I was inundated with offers to either take over the cider company or purchase the equipment.

Three local enthusiasts seemed to offer the possibility of a partnership and we had a number of cider-fuelled meetings before it became obvious that we had different ideas on how to proceed and could not afford to rent premises.

The youngest one had already lost interest, but Nick Edwards – who was already operating – and Rick Wyatt – who was about to start – decided to carry on, and we formed an informal consortium called the West Berkshire Cider Makers. This would enable us to pool contacts, experience, equipment and marketing, while retaining our individual identities.

Nick Edwards lives in Kintbury, near the Kennet and Avon Canal. A financial services management consultant, he was brought up in the West Country and so acquired a taste for cider at an early age. After a couple of years experimenting ("I gathered a few apples and mashed them up with a pick axe handle!"), he started making it commercially in 2004, not only from local culinary fruit but also from some Yarlington Mill apples he acquired from Herefordshire, and fruit from his sister-in-law's orchard in Dorset. Apples from the

OPPOSITE: The West Berkshire Cider Makers from left to right, Tim Wale, Nick Edwards, Rick Wyatt and Lambourn Valley's Roy Bailey





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neighbouring village of Inkpen went to make Yellowleg; the nickname given to the former clay workers in the area. Despite his busy life, Nick made 300 gallons of Combe Raider in 2008.

Rick Wyatt, by far the youngest of the team, is a network engineer for Virgin Media. Following our abortive meetings, he started off in 2006 by making 100 gallons, using equipment borrowed from Nick and some purchased from me. His first effort was called Bertha Mae in honour of a great aunt whose inheritance paid for some of his equipment. Marriage in 2007 restricted his activities, but he made 230 gallons in 2008.

The newest member of WBCM is Tim Wale, who operates from the quirkily-named hamlet of Tutts Clump, near Bradfield. A motor engineer with his own business, he was born and brought up in the region, and remembers drinking cider made by a local dairy farmer more than 40 years ago. His first effort, of 25 gallons, was made by chopping apples in a bucket with an electric drill attachment. Last year was his first as a professional and he made 600 gallons between mid September and Christmas. "It was so cold I had to keep the mill in the kitchen, and it chucked pulp out the side which landed on the Rayburn," he said. "There's probably still some stuck there!" Does Bulmers have this problem, I wonder?

Another new kid on the block is Greg Davies, somewhat outside the West Berkshire orbit in Slough. His 100 gallons

of Salt Hill cider, made for the first time last autumn, was well received at the Reading Beer and Cider Festival in May.

The acquisition of raw materials by producers without their own orchards follows a common pattern. I advertised for fruit in the local CAMRA newsletter and received a good response. I passed on my list of contacts to Nick and Rick, and they supplemented them with their own searches. "I rode around on my push-bike eyeing up people's gardens and knocked on a few doors," said Rick. "I got some funny answers, but when people sussed that I wasn't casing their garden sheds or looking to knock off their property, they quite warmed to the idea!" He also took, from me, the fruit from half a dozen trees at Douai Abbey, where monks once made cider, beer and wine.

Tim followed the same "ask and ye shall be given" policy, and bought some Kingston Black juice from Barry Topp of New Forest Cider. "In 2008 there was so much fruit that local people were leaving apples on my doorstep," he said. Greg was slightly less fortunate. An advert in a Slough paper produced no response, but one in Maidenhead (where he works as a council facilities officer) was more successful, and he now collects from the town and as far west as Waltham St Lawrence. "It's hard work," he said, "but it's a labour of love."

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Nick Edwards in his garden shed – the centre of his cider-making empire; a bottle of Nick's Yarlington Mill cider; an apple crusher; the rack and cloth cider press



‘Greg has had to convert his garage and Rick uses one at his parents’ home in Bradfield. Tim is the most fortunate; he is converting his old paint spray shop into a cider barn’

In all cases ad hoc equipment started us off until demand for the product required something more professional. I took all my apples to Hartland’s in Gloucestershire for pressing, but later bought a Vigo mill and a huge old winemaker’s basket press from the Douai Abbey monks to produce the perry at home. All the others later acquired Czech Fruit Sharks for milling and either bought proper presses or, in Rick’s case, made their own. Containers of various types from six to 330 gallons – mostly ex-fruit juice or other food-grade plastic drums – are used for fermentation and storage. The ubiquitous five-gallon polybarrel is supplemented by bag-in-the-box and bottles for sales. Nick acquired most of his polybarrels by trawling eBay.

Because we operate from our homes the premises problem, which killed off our intended partnership, is one that affects us all. I was using an old outhouse that had been a shop, but it was very inconvenient. Greg has had to convert his garage and Rick uses one at his parents’ home in Bradfield. Nick has installed a smart new hut in his garden and takes over a part of that for his cider-making, while Tim is the most fortunate as he is converting his old paint spray shop into a cider barn.

All the ciders have a similar dry, fruity character with variations according to mix of fruit, location, technique etc, and they finish up between 6 and 7 per cent ABV. Some are

fermented with the natural yeasts in the fruit, others with a commercial yeast and there are those with a little sugar added to take the edge off the dryness. Greg boasts that nothing goes into Salt Hill cider but apple juice. All are becoming sought after, but the marketing strategies of the producers vary.

Having given up outside events, I now only sell my bottle-fermented perry to places like farm shops and licensed individuals. Greg is getting his new product into a number of local pubs and beer festivals. Nick relies on word of mouth and contacts from festivals. “I don’t market heavily,” he says. “I tend to wait for people to contact me.” Rick’s policy is similar, and he is keeping most of his 2008 product to mature until the autumn, although some of it sold well at his local May fair. Tim, on the other hand, has been busily marketing his cider since April; making it available both on draught and in attractive 500ml bottles. Consequently, Tutts Clump Cider is available over a wide area, even as far away as Weymouth, where he has a house. Around 30 gallons were sold at Reading Festival and it is even on the menu at the prestigious Newbury Racecourse!

All of us are committed to continuing to produce real artisanal cider and perry made from local fruit as long as possible without giving up our day jobs. We don’t want to take over the world – we just want to ensure that a quality product native to the Royal County enjoys the recognition it deserves.

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Cox’s apples growing in Nick’s garden; the ubiquitous plastic drums in Nick’s garden shed; the top of 50 gallons of fermenting Combe Raider; racks of bottled Combe Raider ready to drink