

THE CIDER INDUSTRY IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Although cider has been made in various parts of England, for a very long time, possibly as far back as the Roman occupation, the quantity was small and only sufficient to supply the small localised communities. Pears and apples only a little better than the wild crab-apples that we find in woods and hedge-rows were introduced by the Romans and grown with some degree of cultivation. These conditions continued during the Saxon period, but even until the early part of the fourteenth century, cider had not made any great impact on the drinking habits of the people in any part of the country.

In the grain growing areas the main drink was ale, brewed from malt, but not with hops which helped to preserve it. The West of England had a climate favourable to the cultivation of the vine, and where this was possible wine was made and drunk, Gloucestershire producing more wine than any other county in England.

However during the period between 1250 and 1350 there was a great advance in gardening and a certain amount of selection of the better varieties of pears that had hitherto been of a somewhat wild nature, had taken place.⁽¹⁾ Varietal names were used, which indicates that the art of layering or propagation by cuttings was known, but only two varieties of apples were known at this time, the Costard and the Pearmain.

With the development of these better varieties of pears and apples, it was possible to produce a more palatable drink, than that made from the wild crab-apples - which was known as 'verjuice'; and the term 'Cider' is used to differentiate it from verjuice.

Larger quantities of cider were made and Walter of Henley states

that ten quarters of apples and pears will yield about seven tuns of cider.⁽²⁾ This implies that more orchards were being planted and that the trade of cooper was developing in order to supply the casks in which to store such large quantities, a tun measure being 250 gallons.

From the mid-14th century more varieties of apples and pears were available to the orchardist. Chaucer in 1380 mentions the new "perjenete" pear, and Lydgate of about the same period lists the new varieties of apples - The Pomewater, Richardon, Blaundrelle, Queening and Bittersweet. Primarily these varieties would have been used for table purposes and any surplus to this requirement used in the production of cider. Notice was being taken of the varying qualities of the cider made from these different varieties and it is significant that the last named in this list, the Bittersweet, must be the original from which stemmed the "Bittersweet" varieties, that are so important in the production of high quality cider of this day.

There is no doubt that by the 16th century a great deal of work was being done on the improvement of varieties of fruit, to increase their quality and yield and also in the storage of fruit, for John Holder⁽³⁾ of Churcham in Gloucestershire in 1538 bequeathed a fruit house to his son, and a rudge of orchard land to his daughter. The medicinal properties of fruit liquor were appreciated during this period, both for man and beast. Tusser, in his famous poem "Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry", writes:

"Be sure of vergis (a gallon at least)
So good for the Kitchin, so needfull for beast:
It helpeth thy cattle, so feeble and faint
If timely such cattle with it though acquaint."⁽⁴⁾

As to the method of extracting the juice of crab-apples, a medieval recipe is most helpful:

"Verjuice. Gather crabbes as soon as the kernels turn black, and lay them in a heap to sweat and take them into troughs and crush with beetles. Make a bagge of coarse hair-clothe and fill with crabbes and press and run the liquor into hogsheads". The mention of troughs and beetles (large wooden mallets) would suggest that the horse operated stone mill had not been introduced at this time. It would have been both laborious and tedious to crush large quantities of fruit by this means, but the mention of hogsheads (100 to 120 gallon casks) indicates that it must have been so.

Cider and perry were reported to be common in Kent, Sussex and the West, and taking Gloucestershire as a typical West Country fruit liquor producing county (it was only exceeded by Herefordshire), a closer study of orcharding and the development of the cider industry can be made. The cultivation of fruit orchards had become by the early seventeenth century an art and a serious study by the wealthier land owners. Several books were written extolling the advantages of careful cultivation and planting distances of trees.

Lawson in 1618 propagated his trees by what would now be described as "air layering", but instead of using sphagnum moss and peat, held tightly in place by polythene, he used "a good rank mould and manure, covered with clay and bound round" to encourage rooting from branches so treated.⁽⁵⁾ These branches were then removed from the parent tree to be planted in their permanent positions. He also proposed planting

trees at least 20 yards apart to allow for expansion, that would take place in the first 40 to 50 years of their life. Three hundred years was considered by him a normal period to bring a tree to its prime. Humbler folk planted their trees as many feet apart and often had a "Little nurcery" in which to raise new trees from pips of apples and pears. From these seedling trees, selection of better varieties was made and these were then increased by vegetative means.

Spring frost, then as now, was one of the greatest hazards to profitable fruit growing, and Gabriel Plattes in 1639 used a "quaint little device for guarding his fruit trees from harmful spring frosts: an earthen pot "like a little still" was filled with half a peck of small coal (at the cost of $\frac{1}{2}$ d.) lighted and covered with a tile, with wet hay laid on it, and one of these was hung by a cord in each fruit tree, to "give an aire all night".⁽⁶⁾

Orchards and cider were beginning to play a greater part in the broader economy of land use. George Wyrall of English Bicknor leased various parcels of land in 1636 to people living in the vicinity for periods of 21 years. Each tenant in addition to paying a fixed cash rent had to plant and graft a set number of crab stocks on the ingoing, or to plant and graft a given number in each year of tenancy.⁽⁷⁾

(Seeing that it would take about 20 years for these trees to become profitable, George Wyrall stood to gain considerably from this deal, if the tenancy was terminated at the end of the 21 year period). The Church had not been slow to appreciate the value of fruit and cider, and it is recorded that the vicar of Hasfield in 1627 claimed fruit

as tythe.⁽⁸⁾ Lord Scudamore a seventeenth century land owner of Holme Lacy in Herefordshire was appointed ambassador to the Court of Louis XIII in Paris in 1635, While in France he began to collect the Norman varieties of apples then available and on his return to England, used them to improve the English varieties. These improved varieties were soon dispensed over the West Country cider growing areas, and it was due to his work that the cider industry took a great step forward. The variety Red Streak or "red strake" was the apple that made Hereford cider unequalled in Britain.

In Gloucestershire other fruit growers were selecting and improving varieties. The White Styre was the boast of the Forest district, producing a cider so rich and strong that it was often valued equally with foreign wine. The Hagloe or Etloe crab from the hamlet near Awre produced a powerful and highly flavoured liquor. Cider and perry were by now becoming so important to the economy of Gloucestershire with large quantities being shipped down the Severn to Bristol for transport by sea to London that the method of crushing the fruit with trough and beetle, prior to pressing, proved inadequate for the task. It must have been somewhere about the mid-seventeenth century that the first stone crushing mill was produced, for John Holder (II) of Taynton in 1656 bequeathed his cider mill to his son Robert.⁽⁹⁾

Orchards at this time were of only a few acres, planted around the farmstead in order that the fruit should be close at hand for crushing. Fruit growers were beginning to develop a scientific approach to fruit growing - selecting the more suitable soils and planting on

south and south-eastern slopes to gain some protection from the north winds. The volume of cider produced in Gloucestershire alone each year ran into many thousands of gallons and the agricultural economics of the western part of the county was closely centred on cider and perry production.

To produce such vast quantities of liquor, the horse operated mill was made in great numbers. Hard wearing stone, resistant to the action of fruit acid, was found close at hand in the Forest of Dean in the conglomerate mass. The round mill trough and its runner stone were fashioned in the quarry, and it was at this point that the purchaser would become the owner. He then had to transport it to the farm and have it set up by a mill-right before it could be put into use. The price paid was based on the number of gallons that the trough held or, as was more general, a guinea per foot diameter. Mills varied in size from four feet diameter which could be operated by hand up to 12 feet in diameter and worked by two and sometimes three horses. The more general size was eight feet and operated by one horse. Owing to the difficulty of finding a single piece of stone to make large mills in one piece, plus the difficulty of transporting such a heavy and unwieldy object, the mill trough was made in two, three or four sections then matched up and fitted by the mill-right on the farm.

From the County Records Office there is ample evidence, during the eighteenth century of new orchards being planted, new mills installed and the many trials and tribulations of the cidarist taking

place. In 1700 John Holder (III) of Taynton built a cider house and mill, and the mill and uprights of the press can still be seen at Taynton House. A great tempest blew down 200 trees belonging to him in 1703, a tempest that ravaged the whole of Northern Europe.⁽¹⁰⁾ In an Arlingham terrier of 1727 there is mention of the vicar having a tythe of apples and cider.⁽¹¹⁾ This only applied to cultivated apples or pears and the liquor made from them. Cider made from 'musch' apples, (those growing in the hedgerows or woods) did not attract this tythe unless sold, the maker of any cider from this source paying only 2d. per hogshead or 1d. per barrel to the vicar.

The Treasury, being short of money after the Seven Years War, looked about for means of replenishing the coffers. Lord Bute seeing that a good source of revenue could be obtained from cider and perry, imposed a tax on cider in 1763. This was assessed at source no matter whether the producers intended to sell or not. Cottagers or farmers were visited by the excise men and every cask barrel and hogshead 'gauged'. Public feeling was strongly against such a tax and was expressed in many ways. In Cheltenham, a youth dressed in mourning read the official document giving notice of the 'Tax' while the church bells tolled as though for a funeral. One grower was so incensed that he dug up his apple trees, rather than have the excise men visit him. In the Forest of Dean, the miners threatened to take all "Gaugers" that they set eyes on to the lower regions of the mines until the tax was repealed, and the Bristol Journal in July of 1763 refers to at least one man being detained in this manner. This

abomination was repealed in 1766, when the West Countrymen celebrated the occasion with carnivals and great bonfires. Lord Bute was committed to the flames under the effigy of a jack-boot - a rural allusion to his name.

Samuel Rudder produced his New History of Gloucestershire in 1779 and comments on the merits of the Gloucestershire cider and the vast quantities of apples produced. He states that in 1763 (the year of the Cider Tax) that crops of apples were so plentiful that great quantities were suffered to rot, for want of casks to put the cider in. The question may well be asked "Was it the want of casks, or the reluctance of growers to make cider and pay the tax?". Even so the price for styre-cider was high - 15 guineas the hogshead and later advancing to 20 guineas. In commenting on the parishes which produced cider or perry he covers the whole of the Vale of Berkeley, from Olveston to Hempsted and from Gloucester westwards to Dymock and Preston on the Herefordshire border. The Herefordshire system of planting orchards with widely spaced trees was adopted in Gloucestershire, and the stirring of the soil about the roots, in the fallow season was a system of cultivation which appealed to Rudder.

William Marshall, writing ten years later in his Rural Economy of Gloucestershire states that with the extension of canals and other waterways for transport, the production of liquor for sale began to increase. He however deplored the fact that all the old fruits which raised the fame of the liquors of this county were either

lost or so much on the decline that they were irrecoverable. The stire apple and the Hagloe crab made the best vintage cider at this time, with sixty guineas per hogshead (110 gallons) being offered to a Mr. Bellamy of Ross-on-Wye. This appears to be the hey-day of cider-making in Gloucestershire; whether it was due to the decline in the cider-varieties or to the more rapid, mechanical means of crushing apples, farm house cider never again held the acclaim for quality as it did in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Rudge in 1807 has a number of interesting things to say about cider.⁽¹²⁾ On the longevity of fruit trees - apples will be at the point of perfection at 50 years producing ten to fifteen bushels of apples and will continue to bear to 100 years or more. A pear tree will live much longer, and one at Minsterworth was reputed to be 300 years old, which in one particular year produced 340 gallons of perry. In the low lying Severn Vale, late spring frost was a hazard to fruit growing. On the night of 25th May, 1802, Rudge remarks on a frost which cut off a most promising blossom. The line of devastation was precisely marked to an elevation of 35 feet. Above this line no blossom was touched.

In order to speed up the process of crushing the fruit, the hand mill was introduced about 1800. This consisted of two wooden rollers into which short iron spikes were inserted an inch or two apart over the whole surface. As the rollers were rotated by a hand wheel and gearing, the fruit was fed from above, and passing between

the rotating cylinders became roughly pulped by the action of the iron spikes. This pulp then passed between two close set stone rollers and fell into a trough in a finely ground state, from this it was passed to the press. By this means two or three hogsheads could be made per day instead of the one to one and a half by the older horse mill. Mechanical mills were produced in Somerset, Devon and Gloucestershire, many of "Workmans" mills made at Slimbridge being still in use. At one time a number were converted from hand operation to a gear system, operated by a horse, and later still by oil or petrol engine.

A number of orchards were replanted during or soon after the Napoleonic wars, and remnants of perry orchards planted at this time can still be seen in Gloucestershire. For various reasons the interest in cider fruit production declined towards the end of the 19th century, and it was not until Long Ashton Fruit Research Station created a fresh interest in the industry that further planting of cider orchards took place in the years following the First World War. A number of Gloucestershire farmers planted orchards in the 1920s and installed power operated mills and presses, in the hope that there would be an increase in cider sales through public houses.

These conditions applied, with satisfactory benefits to the farmers until after the Second World War, when more and more public houses, hitherto in the hands of small brewing concerns were taken over by the large brewing companies. These large companies preferred

to obtain their supplies of cider from the large commercial cider companies, who imported much of their fruit from France, with the consequent result that the small farm producers were put out of business. Many of these orchards, planted in the 1920s which should now be reaching their prime are being neglected, or in some cases being grubbed to grow more economic crops. The three or four leading commercial cider companies are attempting to get growers interested once more in the production of cider fruit, but it is a question of keen economics whether they are successful or not. As we drink our glass of richly coloured, fizzy substitute which is poured from bottles decorated with rosy red apples, brilliant woodpeckers or besmoked yokels, we can muse on what the rich, vintages of years ago must have been like.

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1. G. Henslow, Uses of British Plants, pp. 62-4
2. E. Lamond ed., Walter of Henley's Book of Husbandry (Royal Historical Society), p. 79.
3. Glos. R.O., D.1371
4. T. Tusser, Five Hundred Good Points of Husbandry, (1557)
5. W. Lawson, The Husbandman's Fruitful Orchard, (1618)
6. G. Plattes, Discovery of Infinite Treasure, (1639).
7. Glos. R.O., D33/207 - 10.
8. Victoria County History of Gloucestershire, Vol. VIII, p. 288.
9. Glos. R.O., D1371
10. Glos. R.O., D1371
11. Glos. R.O., D18/618 - 20
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