Apple orchards and cider making are an intrinsic part of Jersey history, having transformed the landscape, culture and economy of the island at one time. A cider fair held at Hamptonne country life museum in October celebrates the crop which Julia Coutanche explains was once the Island’s most famous product.
DURING THE EARLY 19TH century no Jersey table was considered complete without a bottle of cider, and apple orchards filled the countryside. Cider was the island’s biggest export and the “national crop” well before the arrival of the Jersey Royal. At the height of popularity, the quality of both Jersey apples and the cider was held in high esteem in France and the UK but having remained popular for about 200 years, the crop quickly went into decline and only a handful of orchards remain.

The first recorded evidence of cider in Jersey dates from the 15th century but it was probably made here long before that for local consumption. In mid 17th century Britain, when existing agriculture went into a decline, cider was seen as an alternative source of revenue. Orchards were planted and cider soon became the champagne of Britain and the national drink - the wealthy drinking vintage and the rest of society drinking farmhouse cider. In Jersey the planting of orchards and cider making grew rapidly once the potential for profit making was realised and it developed into a thriving local industry.

Up until World War I, cider was an integral part of day-to-day life in Jersey and the most common meal-time beverage, particularly on farms.

In 1682 Jean Poingdestre wrote in his Caesarea: “There is hardly a house in the island, except in St Helier, that did not have an orchard of from one to two vergées sufficient to produce an average of 20 hogsheads a year” (one hogshead was the equivalent of 54 gallons). In his History of Jersey of 1692 Falle comments “I do not think there is a country in the World that, in the same extent of ground, produces so much cider as Jersey does, not even Normandy itself... Nor is there better, larger and more generous fruit than what grows in this Island.”

The extent of orchard growing and cider making had a dramatic effect on Jersey’s landscape, evident in the field structure and patterns that exist today. These were developed from the need to provide shelter to crops from prevailing winds. Previously, cereal had grown in large unenclosed fields but each field used for growing apples was enclosed, usually with a solid earth bank covered by a hedge on either side. Lanes reached into the small fields and began to look as they do now. Hence Jersey’s field pattern is similar to that of the Pays de Caux cider-producing region in France.

The extent of orchards in Jersey is graphically illustrated by the Richmond map of 1795. About 16 percent of the total land area was orchards, mostly apples. The number of orchards varied from parish to parish, with fewer in the west than in the east, the smallest amount in St Ouen (4.5 percent of land) and the largest in St Saviour (36 percent of land).
Historian Joan Stevens explains that the number of orchards also transformed the economy, which had relied on subsistence farms for centuries and suddenly discovered the value of exports, mainly through the cider industry. By the late 17th century, corn growing had almost completely been replaced by apple cultivation and so the island was no longer self-sufficient in grain. Locally produced cider was being exported to England and importation of cider and cider apples from Normandy was prohibited. In 1673 the States of Jersey prohibited new orchards because they were causing a reduction in the King’s revenues due to falling tithes and the cost of importing grain. Only trees that replaced existing ones could be planted.

By 1790 Reverend Francis Le Couteur, founder of the first Jersey Agricultural Society and cider expert, estimated that 30,000 to 35,000 barrels of cider were being produced annually – 20,000 for local consumption and the rest for export. By 1815 cider produced in Jersey is recorded by Thomas Quayle as “in great esteem” and “a leading article among its exports”. The Cider apple most generally favoured was a native species called Romeril from a family of that name in the Island, by whom it was first grafted from the wild stock. It was hailed as “an abundant and certain bearer”. Other varieties of apple also recommended included L’Ameret au Gentilhomme, Redstreak, Lucas and Lomey. In 1859 more of the apples commonly grown for cider were recorded - Noir Binet, Petit Jean, Limon, Pepin Jacob, Carré, Bretagne and de France.

Apple yields tend to fluctuate – with a good year usually followed by a bad one – so cider making is an uncertain activity. In 1680 there were so many apples that there were insufficient barrels in the Island to hold the cider that could be made. As a result many apples rotted. Some farms installed stills used for producing an eau de vie in years of apple glut. In contrast, 1827 and 1831 are recorded as years of complete failure when even table fruit had to be imported from England. The quantities exported varied from year to year but apple and cider exports continued to increase steadily in the first half of the 19th century, as did the product’s quality and esteem.

However, by the mid 1850s the importance of cider was already in decline. In 1854 St Helier’s Pomme d’Or Hotel had replaced cider with beer - because of high prices, forced up by the market in England. In spite of the product’s excellent reputation this decline in local cider production was as rapid as the increase had been 200 years before.

Records show that for the years 1852 to 1855 cider exports averaged 150,000 gallons (though this was only about one tenth of annual production, with the rest consumed locally!) This dropped to 35,000 gallons ten years later and by 1875 this had reduced to below 3,000 gallons of export. This was the last year in which cider export was recorded. Around this time, many orchards were felled to make way for growing potatoes, a crop with a more consistent yield. Records show that exports of potatoes were rising steadily, from 4,000 tons in 1866 to 28,000 tons in 1875.

For a long time French seasonal workers on farms were paid partly with locally produced cider and, as in England, large quantities were drunk during the working day, especially at harvest time. Stoneware jugs of cider would be filled from the barrel and carried to the fields. In the 20th century the increasing mechanisation of agriculture made drinking at work dangerous and illegal, but farmers still supplied cider for the French workers who came to pick potatoes until at least the 1940s. Fewer Norman and Breton seasonal farm workers came to Jersey in the second half of the 20th century, and by the 1980s they had been replaced by workers from Madeira and Portugal and most recently from Poland - nationalities that are not known for their cider drinking.

The 20th century saw a major decline in British orchards - due to changes in agricultural practice and development for housing, industry and roads. Around 150,000 acres of orchard in Britain have been destroyed since 1960. In Jersey the decline that began with the popularity of growing...
Farmworkers with one of the metal single screw cider presses, which were common in the Island by the 19th century. (Société Jersiaise)
the profitable Jersey Royal, after a slight revival in growing apples and making cider during the Occupation, accelerated after the Liberation when land became more valuable. Land that had been used for orchards for the previous 50 years was very fertile and more orchards turned over to the potato. Then the storm of 1947 uprooted many of the remaining apple trees. Freight costs of exporting apples and cider prevented farmers being able to compete with increased production in west counties of England. So from 1938 when there were 1,200 vergées of orchard in Jersey and cider apple orchards could be seen near every farmhouse, in just 30 years this had gone down to just 173 vergées of orchard in Jersey.

Traditional orchards are valuable habitats for wildlife, so their loss has a negative impact on nature conservation. Although there are 2,300 apple varieties in the National Fruit Collection, only 30 are grown commercially and about five apple varieties now dominate UK orchards. Britain imports 60% of apples consumed, from its French neighbours and from as far away as New Zealand, South Africa and Chile - countries that tend to prioritise quantity over quality.

The trade group British Apples and Pears reports a decline from 1,500 registered growers in 1987 to just 500 today; and while Somerset still successfully produces apples and sells its cider, Jersey cider is a rarity and there are just a handful of orchards remaining...

However, the popularity and appreciation of diversity is in ascendance and apples have regained some of their former glory. In 1989 Environmental and Arts Charity Common Ground launched the Save Our Orchards campaign resulting in old orchards being replanted and restored all over Britain. It was at about this time in Jersey that there emerged an active appreciation of local cider apple varieties and a fear for their impending loss - accentuated by damage done in the great storm of October 1987.

This resulted in the forming of The Jersey Cider Apple Trust whose mainstays are the two apple experts, horticulturist Rosemary Bett and retired apple grower Brian Phillipps - representing the National Trust and the Société Jersiaise. They instigated research into old varieties and the planting of an orchard to preserve them at Howard Davis Farm in Trinity. This was followed by the planting of a small orchard at Hamptonne - the National Trust property in St Lawrence which is cared for by the Jersey Heritage Trust and which opened to the public in May 1993. In November 2003 a third orchard was planted at the National Trust headquarters in St Mary, the Elms.

Thanks to Common Ground, a national celebration of apples and orchards and the diversity of landscape and culture linked to them takes place annually on Apple Day - 21st October. Apple Days are marked with tastings, guided orchard walks and talks, cookery and pruning demonstrations, cider-making and apple bobbing, photographic exhibitions and recipe exchanges. Through these celebrations there has resulted a rediscovery of old varieties.

In the 21st century cider continues to be drunk across Britain, although it is nowhere near as popular as lager and other beers. Ironically considering her history, the cider that is available in most Jersey pubs is the type that is mass-produced in England using apple concentrate imported from China, its flavour enhanced with added sugars and preservatives, rather than the totally natural product of yesteryear. As well as mass-produced cider from England, bottled cider imported from Normandy is offered for sale in some of Jersey’s supermarkets. APPLE is an official group within CAMRA - the Campaign for Real Ale - that actively supports the revival of traditional cider making; and specialist cider-makers are coming into their own.

In the 1980s eight people in Jersey were known to be making cider, which was sampled by the Jersey Society in London. Very few of today’s farmers and growers make their own cider, and when they do it is not on a commercial scale and the small amounts of apples are more likely crushed by man rather than horsepower. One completely organic orchard currently at Sion is run by Andrew Averty, who sells his apples and makes juice and cider just...
on a small scale for the consumption of family and friends only.

Both The Young Farmers and l’Assemblée Jerriais have continued to make the local speciality apple sweetmeat Black Butter, so-called because of its colour and the fact that it is most often eaten spread on bread. Associated with the cider-making season, it is very laborious and time-consuming to produce, involving constant stirring of the ingredients. The night on which it is made is known as “La Sethée D’Nier Buerre” and this year, thanks to the National Trust, viewing the 24-hour stirring will be accessible to the general public from Friday 22nd to Saturday 23rd October. Originally developed as a way of preserving apples, Black Butter is now a delicacy. Along with ciders and an apple brandy, Black Butter is also produced and sold at La Mare Vineyards in St Mary, promoted as Genuine Jersey produce and featured as an ingredient on the sweet menus of some high class local restaurants.

Jersey’s apple heritage will be actively promoted at Hamptonne during the last weekend in October, at the annual La Fais’sie d’Cidre - a cider festival that includes traditional cider making. This has been extended to an island-wide, week-long event with an assortment of apple-themed activities and visiting guest apple experts. Throughout the year, the Jersey Heritage Trust is organising apple-themed workshops. A painting workshop at blossom time, with local artist David Henley, previously attracted more than 20 adults to the orchard at Hamptonne in mid-May 2004 and Brian Phillipps has shared his expertise through practical demonstrations of grafting techniques. This year three local schools and several adults have participated in creative writing with James Crowden, Common Ground’s poet laureate, author, cider maker and apple expert. Last year’s inaugural apple-themed poetry competition Pomme Poème had an overwhelming 327 entries, mostly from school children.

All the events associated with the cider festival are designed to bring the local apple the attention it deserves and recognition for the reputation it has earned over the centuries. Ultimately the aim is to ensure that this aspect of Jersey heritage remains protected and preserved for future generations.

La Fais’sie d’Cidre takes place at Hamptonne on 22 and 23 October 2005.

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