

Cider Growing and Making in East Devon

We know from a letter written by Daniel Defoe in the 1720s (which can be read via the visionofbritain.org.uk website under 'travel writing': see his Letter 4, Part 1) that East Devon, from Topsham to Axminster, used at that time to send between 10,000 and 20,000 hogsheads of cider a year to London. A hogshead was not an entirely standard measure of volume, but was often used to refer to a barrel holding 50 gallons (making the range cited above between half a million and one million gallons). This may well have represented the high water mark of cider production in Devon, and all subsequent commentators refer to cider production as being in decline compared to former times.

Some 30 years later the rector of Axminster, John Pester, noted the existence of "... *many orchards throughout the Parish, chiefly planted with such apple trees as make good cyder, rather sweet yet rough*" in answer to a survey of Devon parishes organised by the Church.

Then by the early 1800s Charles Vancouver (author of an influential 1808 report on farming in Devon) observed that the orchards of East Devon were no longer as productive as before, and that "... *from the frequency of planting young trees where the old ones have failed, a barrenness in many of the orchards has ensued. It is usual in the marly parts of this country to appropriate for orchards the large excavations formerly made in digging marl: here the apple trees are protected from most winds, and continue to flourish and bear longer than in less secure situations; but here again the fruit is more exposed in the spring and early part of summer to the frosts that occur at that season, than it possibly could be in higher situations.*

"*The crop of apples generally through the valley of the Otter is very good, although it certainly does not produce a liquor equally rich as that grown upon stiffer land. Upon the high plains of Dunkerswell and Church Staunton, no material deficiency was noticed or heard of in point of quantity; and the quality of the cider is there contended to be equal to that of the South Hams, and much superior to the produce of the apple orchards in the sandy district below.*"

He considered that the way that apple trees were managed, and cider made, was similar to the rest of Devon. "*The great uncertainty of these crops, renders it a matter of much difficulty to state anything like an average produce through the county. The mean however, of several statements given in upon a period [of] seven years, varying from two and a half to five hogsheads per acre, will equal that of three hogsheads and two-fifths per acre through the county ...*" (equivalent to 1,360 pints of cider per acre). He reported that the average price of cider sold at the farm gate was 50s per hogshead (i.e. 1s per gallon). He also commented in passing that he had found no evidence of mistletoe in Devon cider orchards.

In 1838, when the tithe apportionment process was carried out, about 3% of the titheable land in Axminster parish was accounted for by orchards, a few as large as 5 acres, but most around an acre and a quarter.

In 1850 White's directory described cider orchards as "... *another source of income to the Devonshire farmer, the value of which has decreased nearly a half within the last twenty years*". Cider was also an important part of the 'benefits in kind' provided by farmers to their farm labourers, and to the casual workers who helped at busy times such as haymaking and harvest.

It was not until relatively late in the day that commercial cider making got going. The only very local commercial cider-makers for whom records have been found so far are Thomas Stone, who by 1906 was described as a cider manufacturer, as well as a wine and spirits merchant in Axminster, and Henry Coles of Fordwater Farm, All Saints (just north of Axminster), who made cider commercially during the 1920s and 1930s.