

**“CAN I RECOMMEND AN INSOLENT LITTLE PHOENIX, FRESH FROM OUR OWN VINES?”
– THE VITICULTURAL HOTELS OF BRITAIN**

Have you ever wondered where the most northerly vineyard in England is? I went to visit it once in a walled garden in Spennymoor, County Durham, previously owned by ‘Bonnie Bobbie Shafto’. The song

*‘Bobby Shafto’s gone to sea
Silver buckles on his knee
He’ll come back and marry me
Bonny Bobby Shafto’*

was well known in Britain.

The 1980s owners produced 2 wines under the Whitworth Hall label; both made by Three Choirs in Gloucestershire. The Whitworth Hall Hotel, which has replaced the Bobbie Shafto Experience, site still invites guests to ‘Explore the **Victorian Walled Garden**, with features including **Britain’s most northerly vineyard**’. Currently, no wine is produced- such a wasted opportunity! However the combination of Hotel and Wine is gathering strength elsewhere.

A number of variations exist already or are being developed. Some vineyards have accommodation of various types. **Three Choirs Vineyard** for example has developed a small hotel in its grounds. The Culinary Guide comments that *‘You don’t have to be a wine buff to enjoy a stay at the Three Choirs Vineyard; it’s just an added bonus if you are’*. Several other vineyards, such as **Llanerch, Brightwell (Oxfordshire) and Camel Valley (Cornwall)**, have cottages for rent amongst the vines. Stately homes too have had a long history of viticulture, mainly in glasshouses, where the grapes were for the table. In recent years, **Ickworth** in Suffolk and **Croft Castle Hotel** in Herefordshire have developed wine-producing vineyards. **Treago Castle** in Herefordshire has gone one step further and has both accommodation and wine production in converted stable block as tourist attractions at the magnificent 15th century castle. Sir Richard Mynors produces his own red, white and sparkling wines, which are mainly sold to the guests.

While several vineyards have diversified into accommodation, several hotels are approaching the Vine/Hotel combination from the other direction. Near to Ross-on-Wye, the **Pengelley Manor Hotel** first planted vines in a walled garden in 1993. These plantings were expanded in 1995 and 1999, and there are now 700 vines made up of Reichensteiner, Seyval Blanc and Phoenix. All of the 1,000 bottles of still and sparkling wine produced annually are sold through the hotel. To quote their Web site (<http://www.pengelleymanor.co.uk/vineyard.htm>) *“For us, growing vines and producing a good wine is not only a hobby but a source of endless fun, enjoyment and satisfaction. But that said, we try not to take ourselves too seriously and no where is this more amply demonstrated than in our labels, which feature caricatures of various members of our staff and management team. Nevertheless, and despite not taking ourselves too seriously, various experts on English wine have been kind to us over the years.”*

Across the Bristol Channel, three other hotels are involved in viticulture. **The Pear Tree at Purton**, (<http://peartreepurton.co.uk>), a luxury country house hotel near Swindon, planted an acre of vines in its extensive grounds in Spring 2006. Proprietor Francis Young has a radio show on wine tasting for Radio Swindon and writes for *Pride of Britain* magazine. Plantings consist of 300 Bacchus, 250 Seyval and 22 Pinot Noir so far. The plan is to produce sparkling from the Seyval and Pinot Noir and a still wine from the Bacchus. They have taken advice from Three Choirs and the plan

is for them to bottle the end product. The hotel currently sells both sparkling and still wines from the nearby Bow in the Cloud Vineyard.

The **Leigh Park Hotel**, at the top end of the ancient town of Bradford-on-Avon first planted vines about 15 years ago. It has a diverse history. The Earl of Leicester originally gifted the house to Elizabeth I in 1571. Since then, it has been owned by local philanthropist Lord Fitzmaurice as a private dwelling, then used as a hospital, before becoming an hotel in the 1970s. The vineyard was planted on the medium loam soils in 1990 and is producing a 'house white' with its Reichensteiner grapes. Mumfords Winery at Bath carries out vinification. It is still going strong, and 2009 produced a record crop.

The **Thornbury Castle** near Bristol has had a vineyard for 500 years. The current planting of about half an acre (0.2 hectare) of Muller Thurgau vines growing within the castle walls, was done about 30 years ago and they also lease St Augustine's vineyard near Bristol. Wine is sold mainly to the guests. The castle walls provide protection from damaging winds and create a unique microclimate that aids the growth and ripening of the grapes. Their wine is produced by Three Choirs Vineyard in Newent, Gloucestershire and is sold in Thornbury Castle's restaurant. It is a medium-dry, white wine and is very popular with guests. Because their current vines are past their optimum age for grape production, they are replanting with the less disease-prone Phoenix.

THORNBURY CASTLE VINEYARD

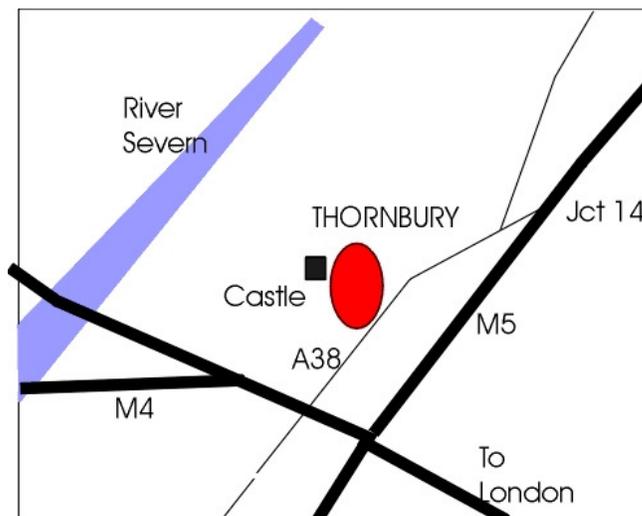


Thornbury was believed to have been founded in the reign of Athelstan (AD 925-940) who was grandson of King Alfred the Great. It was seized by William the Conqueror and granted by William I to Robert Fitzhamon. It then passed through 28 generations to William Howard, Earl of Stafford, who sold it to his cousin Thomas Howard, 8th Duke of Norfolk, in 1727 and in whose family it remained (on and off!) until 1959.

It was restored by the Howards in 1850 and became a family home. It

passed through a number of private hands before being bought by the Von Essens, who made it into the high-class country house hotel that it is today.

The vineyard was planted in about 1976, at a time when the early amateur gentlemen of the industry had convinced others that vines were a serious proposition in Britain. 0.2 hectares of Muller Thurgau were planted, and the wines (made by Three Choirs) served in the restaurant. The estate also manages the late Mike



Taylor's nearby St Augustine's vineyard at Aust, which is planted with Madeleine Angevine, Muller Thurgau, Kerner and Reichensteiner. The manager, **Ingrid Bates** kindly provided the following answers and photographs manages the estate vineyard.

What persuaded the management to plant vines 30 years ago (in 1976 they would have been amongst the relatively early pioneers)? The castle has always had a big focus on food and wine in the restaurant so I imagine the idea stemmed from a previous owner's passion for these things - the rows have been planted very close together in an old-fashioned French style.

What soil do you have? Has this affected rootstock chosen? We have a good loamy soil at the castle but it is very rocky - when planting the new Phoenix I hit rock after about 25cm.. I had to break this up using a metal bar just to plant the new



plants. They are doing fantastically despite this - they have grown a lot more in their first year than equivalent planted elsewhere in non-rocky soil (so Mike Garfield of Three Choirs tells me). The new Phoenix is on SO4 rootstock I believe.

What areas of new vines are planned? Will the Muller Thurgau be then grubbed up? The entire existing area (0.2 ha) is gradually being replaced over the next 3 years

- I have already grubbed up about 6 rows of the double Guyot-Muller and replaced with GDC phoenix (the rows are more widely spaced than on the Guyot system). I am thinking we might end up with a mixture of Phoenix and Bacchus. Crops from the Muller were getting less and less over recent years (before my time!). This year is actually looking like the old vines are suddenly producing a lot of fruit again. This is thanks to my using a good spray regime suggested by Mike Garfield.

I was interested that your website says that you are using GDC training. What do you see as the advantages of this- apart from keeping small animals from eating the grapes? General management i.e. trimming/pruning is easier with everything at eye height - picking is also a lot easier & I think the airflow is better through this system. Something keeps nibbling at the ripe grapes at the castle - not sure what it is (badger or rabbit) but it won't be able to reach when they are in the GDC system). Some of the photos on the website are of the other vineyard that Thornbury Castle



manages at the moment (St. Augustine's) - this vineyard is GDC whereas the one at the castle is Double Guyot, apart from the bits I am gradually replacing.

Does the hotel see a vineyard as a factor in attracting particular types of guests?

I still get guests passing the vineyard who are unaware what it is. I think it appeals to a wide range of people - women like the growing/plant aspect of it and men seem to like the technical sides of management and winemaking. We occasionally have guided tours and always get a lot of interest from local people as well as the guests that stay in the castle. The hotel has a fantastic restaurant so the vineyard adds another aspect to people who love food and wine. We get a lot of American guests who always seem interested.

How does it promote its wine to the guests?

I believe the restaurant staff tell people about it when guests are ordering and ask if they would like to try some - it goes down very well. There is a bit of info on the wine on the website and in the brochure as well

Near to Wells in Somerset lies **Coxley Vineyard**. The author Stephen Skelton noted it as a 4-acre site planted in 1981 with Reichensteiner, Schonburger and Seyval. A restaurant and rooms were also part of the set-up. This vineyard was apparently closed in the early 1990s, but has now reopened as a conference centre, restaurant and small hotel. The web-site says that the vines are now Reichensteiner, Seyval and Reisling, from which 6-800 bottles are produced. A local vineyard, probably Bagborough, carries out pressing. The site photograph shows that the vines are netted and fairly low-trellised.

One of the oldest hotel vineyards is in Ireland - probably the only surviving Irish vineyard - at Longueville House. The O'Callaghan family has long owned it. The house is an elegant Georgian mansion dating from 1720, (with wings added in 1800 and the lovely Turner conservatory - which has been completely renovated - in 1862), that overlooks the ruins of the O'Callaghan's original home at Dromineen Castle, and the Blackwater River. Very much a family enterprise, Longueville is now run by William O'Callaghan, who is the chef, and his wife Aisling, who manages front of house. The

river, farm and garden supply fresh salmon in season, the famous Longueville lamb, and all



the fruit and vegetables. In years when the weather is kind, the estate's crowning glory is their own house wine, a light refreshing white, "Coisreal Longueville" - wine has always been Michael O'Callaghan's great love. He is also using their abundant apple supply to make apple brandy too.

Vineyards appear to have a useful place in the marketing plans of both viticulturalists and hoteliers. However, what exactly this place is differs from site to site. Three Choirs and the Pear Tree at Purton are approaching it from completely opposite directions. On one hand, there is a vineyard expanding its range of activities into hotels, and in the other, an established hotel seeing the marketing potential of owning a vineyard. While there are, as yet, few British examples on which to work,

the latter is currently the more popular model. However, it will be interesting to see what the next 10 years produces. There are many large country house hotels where a vineyard could be developed, and where the captive market – especially tourists from America would be charmed by the attraction of a house wine produced ‘in house’. This has proved very popular at the Thornbury Castle. There are also several vineyards in tourist areas, including Chapel Down, Denbies and Llanerch; where easy communications and other nearby attractions make an ideal place for short stay hotel accommodation for those who do not want to cater for themselves. The potential is there. If it fits with your marketing plan, then it is merely a matter of time, planning, capital, space, demand and staffing.