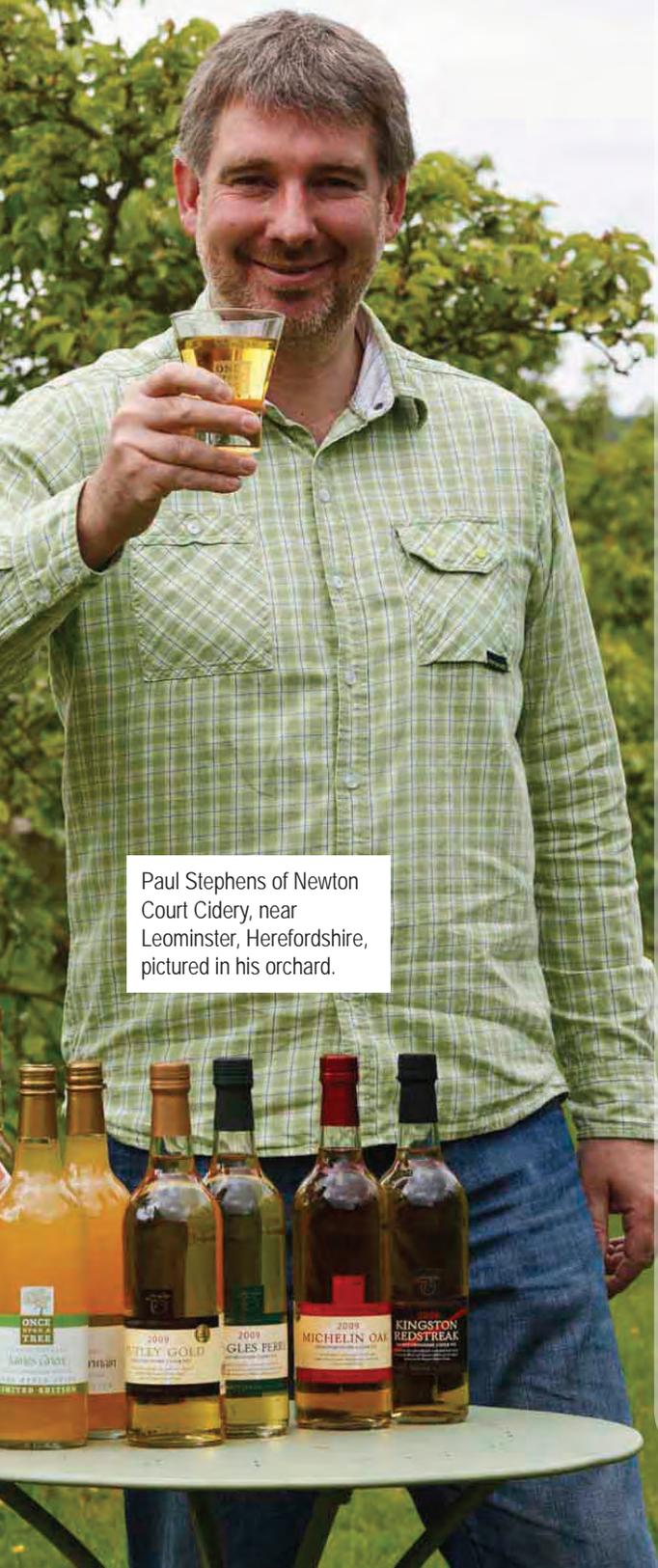


# ‘Get some **cider** inside yer!’

Herefordshire calls itself the ‘Cider Capital of Britain’. Helen Werin visits ‘Big Apple’ country.

Pictures by Robin Weaver



Paul Stephens of Newton Court Cidery, near Leominster, Herefordshire, pictured in his orchard.

We're sitting around the table in a bright and cosy Herefordshire farm kitchen. Our daughter Sophie's on the apple juice from the Dragon Orchard which surrounds us. We're on the cider; bottles of it are lined up for our delectation. The bottles are tall, slender and elegant, displaying the winemaking background of their creator Simon Day. Simon modestly tells us that he wanted to use his skills to "see what he could do" with cider. In his first year he took three first prizes with his Once Upon A Tree products. He claims that there are no great secrets to winning: "We just happen to have one of the very best orchards providing us with the best quality fruit," he says.

I confess to having drunk a lot of cider during my lifetime, but the experiences and the taste were never like this. In that literary classic, *Cider With Rosie*, Laurie Lee describes that first long secret drink far better than I ever can. He called this amber nectar 'golden fire'. We don't dare take more than a few sips from each bottle because we're on the road all day, and the next, following the Cider Trail. Once Upon A Tree is just one of more than a dozen other producers along the route. But those first all-too-short moments of tastebuds tingling leave us thirsty for plenty more. Thank goodness we come away with a bottle or two.

It's a very relaxing meandering this, around Britain's 'Big Apple' country. This area, with its 9,500 acres – and growing – of orchards, churns out over 63 million gallons of cider every year. That's more than half the UK's production.

Our search for cideries is taking us from the foothills of the Malvern Hills, to just below the Marcle Ridge, almost into Wales and to Hereford itself. Here, the cathedral even has a cider bible among the books in its magnificent chained library. The ciders have delicious names such as Roaring Meg, Making Hay, Autumn Harvest and Putley Gold. Most producers offer orchard walks. Some are ever so slightly more commercial than others and sell local crafts and produce as well as what we've really come for.

The most interesting tastings are those from the small producers such as former agricultural engineer Paul Stephens, of Newton Court Cidery. We tootle down a country lane, the only other traffic being a few horse-riders and turn in to the farmyard. In one of the barns is his shop, with shelves of bottles, flagons and huge five gallon barrels. The bar, which sells draught cider, perry and scrumpy, is what you might call 'basic', with hay strewn about the floor. But we have only to look at the walls to appreciate we're somewhere special; they're adorned with certificates and rosettes proclaiming first prize for this cider, gold award for that. We wander in to Paul's 15-acre orchard where cows and sheep graze, amazed that he seems to do an awful lot of the work himself – picking, milling, fermenting and bottling. And it's not even the peak season for cider-making.

The Market House,  
Ledbury, Herefordshire.



Some of the other producers on our cider route map ask that we ring first to make sure they can be around when we arrive. It's all very informal and friendly. By the end of the day our boot is rattling with bottles. We can't wait to pitch up at our campsite, get the barbecue going and sample a few of our purchases along with our dinner. Many of our fellow campers at Hereford Camping and Caravanning

Club site at Tarrington have come to fish on the lake here, so we have to follow the chinking of real glasses – not plastic, like ours – to find a fellow explorer on the cider trail. He urges us to visit Westons at Much Marcle to get the other side of the cider story. This is an altogether different crate of apples; a vast, commercial operation turning out 10,000 bottles per hour. Unusually for these days, it's very self-contained,

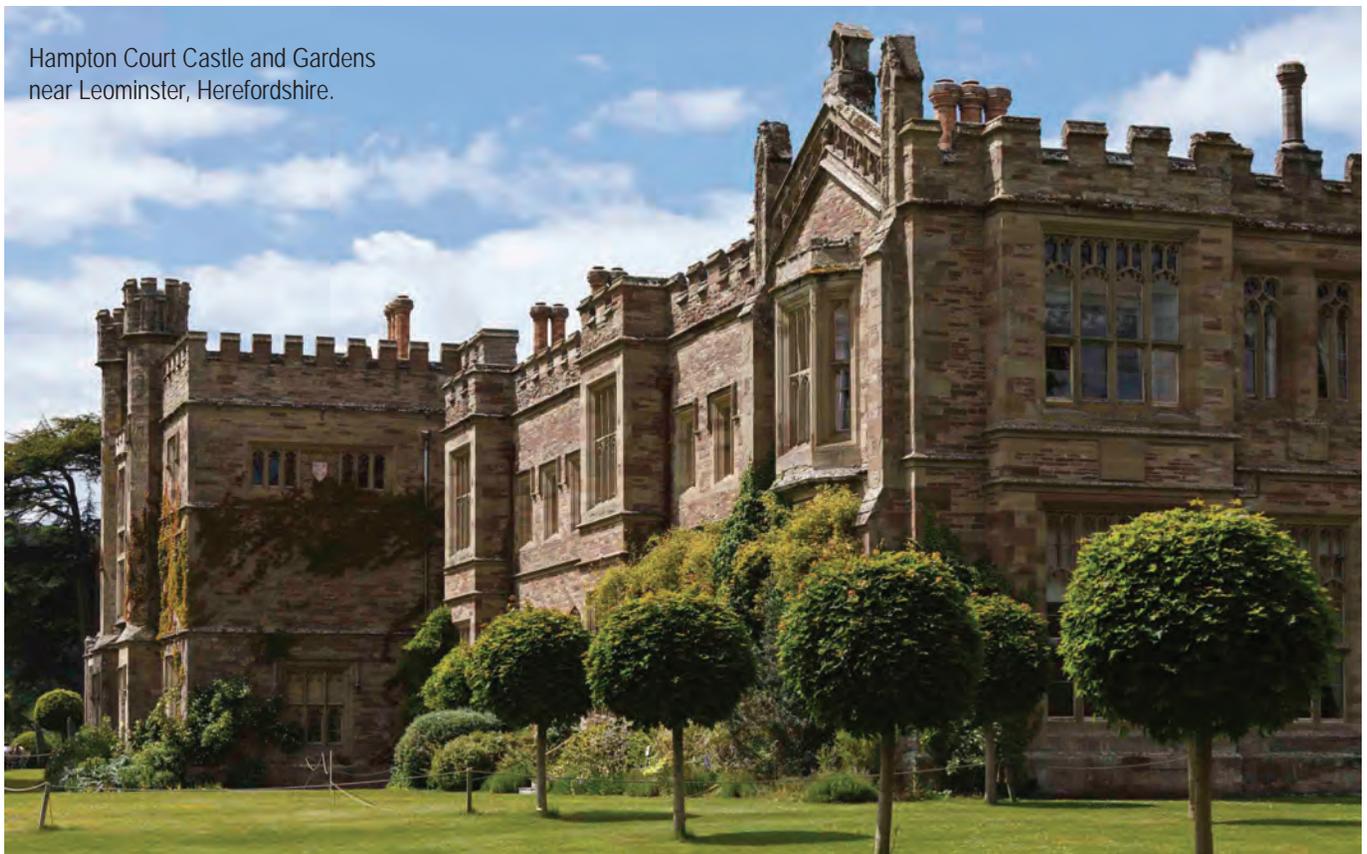
with its own bottling plant, delivery force and mechanics. Employees each have at least three different roles. In the middle is a 400-year-old farmhouse, surrounded by apple and perry pear orchards, where the founder's great grandson lives. He goes by the wonderful title of orchard director. It's still very much a family business, even after nearly 200 years. Workers are no longer paid a third of their wages in cider though. That was made illegal in 1887, but we're told that on other farms it continued well after that date.

Westons is a real eye opener because everything is so big, right down to an enormous pit into which the apples are tipped at harvest time. I'm suspicious that a fellow visitor has already had too many of the free samples on offer when he says that he thought the pit was the staff swimming pool.

Someone else asks if we can eat the cider apples. The guide laughs: "If you bite into one, believe me, you will spit it right out."

We go in to the vat house where the ciders are matured, some in enormous oak vessels nearly 200 years old. The

Hampton Court Castle and Gardens  
near Leominster, Herefordshire.



largest are called Pip and Squeak. There's also Darby and Joan, Faith, Hope and Charity, even Donald Duck. Newer vats are named after characters in the Wallace and Gromit films. I'm seriously wondering if I'm seeing things, perhaps a little bit intoxicated by the cider fumes.

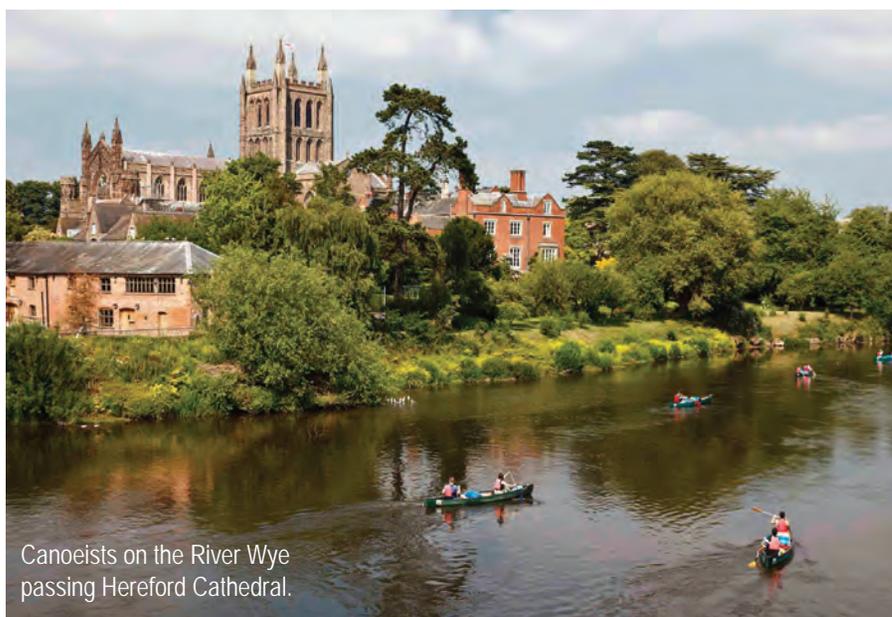
So it's a breath of fresh air to go to The Cider Museum in Hereford. This is the old Bulmer's factory. With hindsight, we should have started our journey here because we get a real feel for how the whole cider-making process has evolved over 350 years. We walk through chilly cellars, past coopers' workshops, vat houses and a bottling plant. There are films and photographs showing people lopping the apples off the trees with a 'panking' pole. What's amazing is that no one seems to be getting knocked senseless as the fruit rains down on them. I recall Paul Stephens telling me how his grandfather would have probably taken a day to pick a ton of fruit by hand. Paul's newfangled machine with its rubber flippers can pick 50 tons in a day.



Horse-drawn circular cider mill at the Cider Museum, Hereford.



Simon Day, of Once Upon a Tree, near Ledbury, Herefordshire, raises a glass in the Dragon Orchard.



Canoeists on the River Wye passing Hereford Cathedral.

Obviously this was all very thirsty work as there are reports that some labourers drank nine litres of cider each day during busy times.

On a more sober note we visit the cathedral, eager to see the Mappi Mundi, the largest surviving medieval map of the world. The display is dim and cool to protect the fragile

coloured inks with which it is painted. It's an incredible sight, this piece of calfskin on to which is drawn the 13th century view of the world, with Jerusalem at its centre, Asia at the top and Africa and Europe at the bottom.

Though we have to peer closely through glass, the detail is amazing. The map teems with animals and people, mythological creatures and biblical events. In what is probably Norway there's a skier sporting what looks like a bobble hat. In Africa, there are scary human-like creatures with four large eyes. Around the edge are dog-headed and horse-footed men.

We climb more than 200 steps to the cathedral's tower. Our panorama takes in Wales, the distinctive Malvern Hills and the Marcle Ridge. I imagine Paul and Simon and the other cider makers dotted around the lanes and valleys of Herefordshire getting ready for the run-up to the autumn harvest and all the hard work and excitement that entails.

The trail's publicity had told us that we could not have come to a better place to find out about cider. I'll certainly drink to that.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

[www.visitherefordshire.co.uk](http://www.visitherefordshire.co.uk)

[www.cideroute.co.uk](http://www.cideroute.co.uk)

[www.herefordcathedral.org](http://www.herefordcathedral.org)

The Cider Museum  
21 Ryelands Street, Hereford.  
HR4 0LW.

01432 354207

[www.cidermuseum.co.uk](http://www.cidermuseum.co.uk)

Westons Cider,  
The Bounds, Much Marcle,  
Ledbury, HR8 2NQ.

01531 660108

[www.westons-cider.co.uk](http://www.westons-cider.co.uk)

Hereford Camping and Caravanning  
Club Site, The Millpond, Little Tarrington,  
Hereford, HR1 4JA.

01432 890243.

[www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk](http://www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

Non-members welcome.