



Neat rows of young apple trees stand in a peaceful orchard close to Hereford. Carefully staked and protected by wire fencing, they guide the eye towards spectacular views of Hay Bluff and the Black Mountains. This is Tidnor Wood, Henry May's piece of paradise, where for 14 years he worked, worried and enjoyed many moments of pleasure – picking apples as they hung heavy on the boughs, sharing barbecues with workers at the end of a hard day.

Henry, however, is no ordinary grower and this is no ordinary orchard. It has now become a gene pool, regenerating Britain with hundreds of rare cider-apple varieties that would otherwise have been lost to the nation. Over years, the former Customs & Excise officer, now 71, built up a unique collection. Slack-Ma-Girdle, Bloody Turk and Greasy Butcher are just some of the 400 varieties growing here, with names evoking long-vanished days when every West Country farmhouse had a few apple trees and workers were part-paid in cider. Yet the orchard came about almost by accident.

In his mid-50s, Henry was living in Northampton, had made money on property and wanted an unusual project. He had once been based in Hereford, where he checked the excise-duty records of cider companies and had enjoyed being involved with their work – including drinking the fruits of production! Since the Fifties, 90% of traditional orchards had vanished, lost to housing, other crops or intensive, commercial growing practices. Henry decided to do something to halt the precipitous decline of a centuries-old

GAP



THE MAN WHO SAVED BRITAIN'S CIDER APPLES

Henry May had just been looking for a quirky project to occupy his time. He ended up making an enormous contribution to our horticultural history

Words **Susannah Hickling**
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6 HERITAGE APPLES YOU CAN GROW AT HOME



◁ English-landscape icon. ‘Carried away on a bow wave of generosity’, he decided to preserve a bit of horticultural history by buying five-acre Tidnor Wood in 2002.

Henry brought his partner Anna to see his new investment. Sunshine cast leaf-dappled shadows on the orchard floor and wasps buzzed around fallen fruit. The air was heavy with the scent of over-ripe apples. Anna was enthralled, but practical, too: ‘So, now you’ve got it, what are you going to do with it?’ How could he sustain it? This was a commercial orchard with unremarkable, closely planted trees, many nearing the end of their useful life. If Tidnor were to thrive, he would need to give endless time to planting, pruning and harvesting, and they would soon be moving to Argyll to look after Henry’s elderly mother.

‘I knew that unless I sold it on – and that would have been total defeat – I had to find an answer,’ he says.

That answer lay in Henry’s passion for collecting things. ‘I used to be a trainspotter,’ he says.

‘There was something in me that liked underlining numbers in a book.’ He did some research and discovered that, although many ancient cider-apple varieties were dying out, no one had ever collected them all in one place. Excited by wonderfully named varieties such as Pig’s Snout, Sops in Wine and Cider Lady’s Finger, Henry realised he could play a big role in preserving cider-apple diversity. He would find and plant as many different types as possible, creating a gene bank. Meanwhile, by going organic, he would create a habitat for some of the nearly 1,700 wildlife species that live in orchards – from the rare mistletoe marble moth to fungi and lichens.

Henry spent months scouring the internet, contacting nurseries and cider-makers – many of whom had their own orchards – and numerous cider experts and fruit-conservation societies. Some had all-but-forgotten fruit trees, cultivated only in a small local area. Other varieties were harder to pin down, sometimes



because they no longer existed or had several names, perhaps based on their grower, place of origin and appearance – Devon variety Crimson King, for example, is also known as the Bewley Down Pippin or John Toucher’s. But Henry persevered. He appointed an orchardsman, who had worked at cider-making giant Bulmer’s, to help identify heritage varieties in Bulmer’s own collection of apple trees – enabling Henry to buy the first 30 varieties to replant the orchard.

Once Henry had identified a variety he wanted, he would usually have to order a tiny cutting from an existing tree that then had to be grafted onto a rootstock – a process that ▷

1 SHEEP’S NOSE

Named after its unusual shape, this large variety can be used for cooking or cider-making.

2 DOWNTON PIPPIN

From Downton Castle in Herefordshire.

A favourite Victorian eating apple.

3 ASHMEAD’S KERNEL

Reputedly developed around 1700 by a Dr Ashmead in Gloucester. Traditionally a dessert apple, it also makes good cider and is a good cooker.

4 TOM PUTT

Another cooking and cider apple. Thought to have been raised in the late 18th century by a Somerset rector of that name.

5 TEN

COMMANDMENTS

Named after the ten red spots seen around the core when cut in half, this Herefordshire apple is suitable for cider or eating.

6 YARLINGTON MILL

Found growing in a wall by a Somerset water wheel in the early 1900s and replanted at the mill.

can take up to two years before a healthy new plant is established.

He was acutely aware of being in a race against time. When families sold their cider-making business and property, their orchards usually disappeared. One was about to be sold to a Russian buyer and destroyed. It was home to about half a dozen varieties Henry didn't have. He requested some graft wood, receiving the twigs in the post, wrapped in cotton wool.

Over the next two years, the plantation grew from five to 26 acres as he bought neighbouring orchards. Five acres were given over to the heritage apples, with the rest growing other varieties that he sold to local cider producers. Henry was travelling 400 miles from Scotland to Hereford once or twice a month to oversee work at Tidnor, where he employed contractors to do the planting and maintenance. Anna cared for his mother while Henry spent lonely nights in a mobile home in a pitch-black orchard.

'You could scream the place down and nobody would hear you,' he says. Then Tidnor received National Collection status from Plant Heritage. Henry also invested, on a whim, in an orchard in Normandy after buying a personalised number plate that read C1DRE.

In 2008, he was diagnosed with bladder cancer and, though his orchard manager kept Tidnor ticking over, its long-term future was suddenly cast into doubt. 'Cancer concentrates the mind,' Henry says. 'And if you've put all your energy into a worthwhile project, it's a shame to let it disappear.'

Henry's children had no interest in taking over, dismissing it as 'another one of Dad's stupid ideas'. So he tried turning it into a non-profit Community Interest Company to benefit local people; if he could find committed directors, this would ensure his living archive's continued existence. But candidates remained elusive. He offered the orchard free to the county council, to other landowners and to charities. There were no takers.

If the UK didn't want his cider apples, Henry reasoned, he would take them to France, where he had more support. He asked his nurseryman to start making a graft of every variety. Then in March 2014, Steve Oram, the orchard biodiversity officer for the People's Trust for Endangered Species, contacted Henry about Tidnor as part of a nationwide



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orchard survey. 'The National Cider Apple Collection will soon be emigrating to France,' Henry told him.

Appalled, Steve offered to help and suggested approaching the National Trust, knowing how strict the NT was about the authentic heritage value of everything it brought into its properties. He suggested dividing Tidnor's collection county-by-county so that the NT could replant trees at appropriate locations. He set to work on Henry's list, classifying apples into local varieties and verifying spellings.

A deal was struck. The NT would take graft wood from the 350 varieties it didn't already have and plant 'an internationally important collection of cider apples' at Killerton, Devon; Brockhampton, Herefordshire; Westbury Court Garden, Gloucestershire; Golden Cap, Dorset; Tyntesfield, near Bristol. Saplings now share an ancient orchard at Montacute with gnarled apple trees and there are plans to produce cider from Tidnor apples at Barrington Court, both in Somerset.

His job done, Henry is now selling Tidnor, but he is immensely proud of his achievement in repopulating Britain's apple orchards. 'I was full of self-doubt and had no great vision in the beginning, but I've done much more with my collection than I ever expected. When I wake up in the night and want to cheer myself up, I think, "I did that right"'

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For advice on how to grow your own apples, visit saga.co.uk/oct-mag

The People's Trust for Endangered Species has a list of heritage-apple suppliers: go to ptes.org and search for 'fruit finder'. The University of Reading now holds the Plant Heritage National Collection of Cider Apples as part of the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale in Kent (brogdalecollections.org)