

Account of Purley on Thames

A Conversation with Bernard Theobald

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The following is an extract from a taped interview with Bernard Theobald who farmed at Westbury for many years.

I originated from the other side of the river, a little area called Tokers Green, and I lived there with my parents until the end of the war when I joined the Royal Navy. And during the war I got married, I'm still married to the same woman, damned nearly fifty years, and at the end of the war we came here to Westbury, which is just 42 years ago, and I've been farming here ever since. We took over this good old fashioned mixed farm. We had a bit of everything. Two men milked

40 cows and thought they were going to be employed when I stopped milking, and I planted the vines over 20 years ago now. When I stopped, one girl and myself were milking 120 cows. In the early days apart from the cows we had a bit of everything. A small breeding herd of sows, laying hens, cockerels, turkeys, ducks, geese, guinea fowl. We grew wheat, barley, oats, maize, kale, mangles, potatoes, linseed, tobacco - you name it we grew it, - a good old fashioned mixed farm.

I made lovely tobacco and I used to smoke it in my pipe. We dried the tobacco on wires hung across the backs of the cows in the cowshed. When we only had forty cows they were tied up by the neck in the cowshed and we dried the tobacco beautifully in there. We can grow good tobacco in this country.

My vineyard is the first in Europe to be planned on the Geneva Double method - something of which I am very proud. I said to the English growers 'Why aren't you growing red?' And they gave a shudder of horror and said 'You can't do it in England'. The stupid clots hadn't tried.

That's the first thing I've got against them. And secondly they hadn't used their brains! A second thought would have told them that every country in the world where wine is grown, red and white are grown together.

And there is nothing in the physiology of the vine itself or in wine making, which says that red wine requires any conditions different from, or different to the conditions required for making quality white wine. And I believe in the power of reason, and when I put down the vineyard out there I put one third down to black grapes for red wine, and in 1976 I became the first English vineyard to sell red wine commercially, and I'm still the only one with red wine in commercial quantities, and the only one with a high quality red.

How come you got hooked on this wine growing thing?

This is where we came in. Milking was becoming more and more difficult and growing wine is much more interesting.

Do you tread the grapes?

This year, in fact, we did it literally. The crusher broke down, the spare part I couldn't get for a couple of days, so we disinfected our Wellington boots and climbed into a tank and crushed them by foot. It worked very well, in fact it didn't take any longer than the crusher and made a better job of it.

It was very hard work.

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