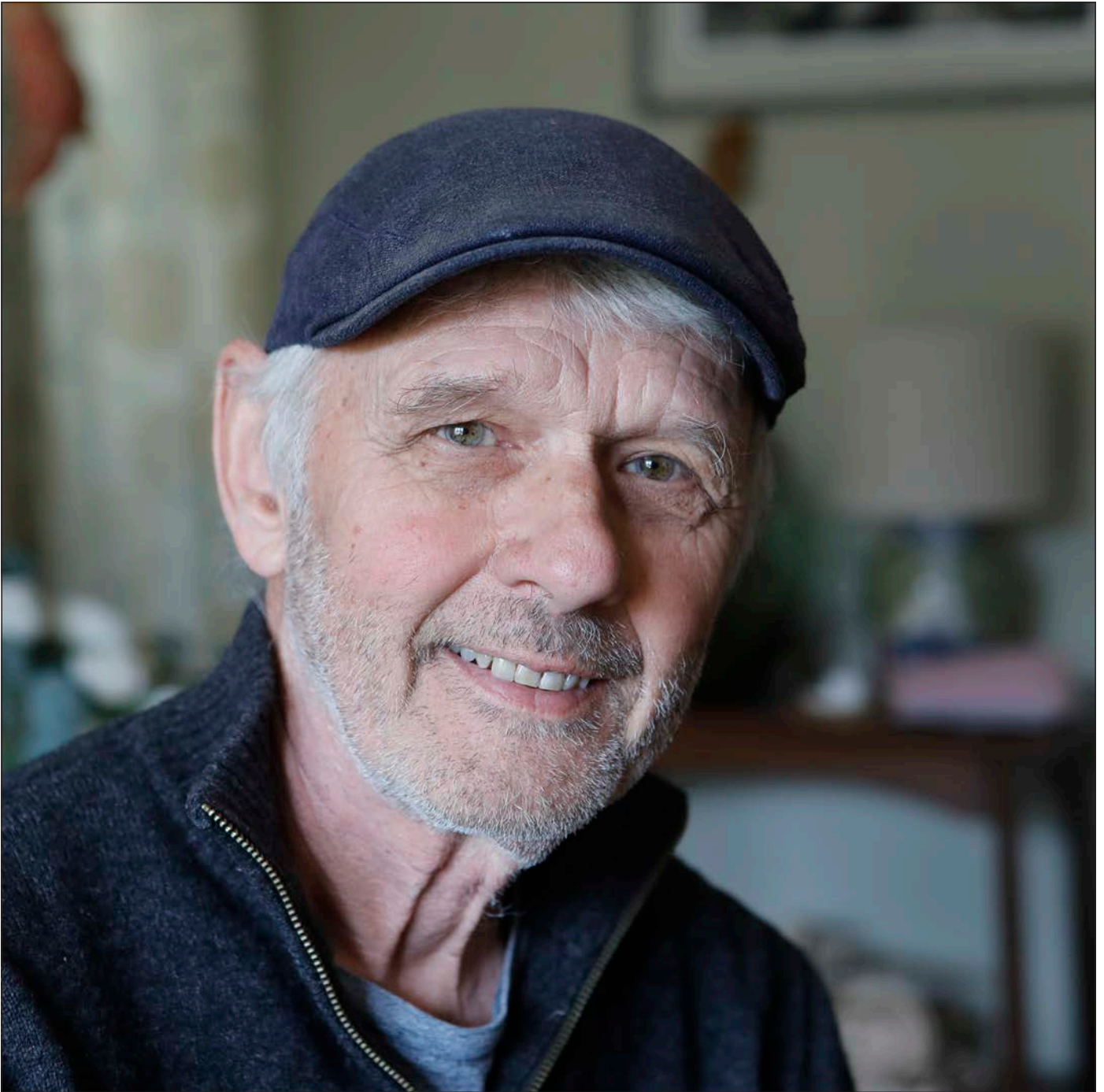


Robin Mills met Nick Poole in West Milton, Dorset

*Nick Poole © Photograph by Robin Mills*

Growing up at Kings Farm on the side of Eggardon Hill in the late '50s I can remember us not having electric. Father had to prime all the Tilley lamps before going out milking in the winter, but when I was about four he bought a 4 KW generator to power the milking machine; if you boiled a kettle the lights would all dim.

The bad winter of '63 pretty much wiped him out financially, which meant employing staff was out of the question, so us kids had to help more and more with the work of a herd of around 40 cows. My brother was keener than me on the farmwork. We had two deep litter houses, so he and I had to collect eggs every morning from the 1600-odd chickens, then help clean them, and at weekends there were always jobs to do around the farm. All that work meant little time for meeting friends, but at least growing up on a farm teaches you how to graft.

I was working at the Marquis of Lorne from the age of 13 whilst still at Colfox school. I had no idea of a plan for my life, but someone suggested catering, which I did enjoy, so after O levels I enrolled on a brilliant OND course at Weymouth College. I could get the train from Powerstock station to Maiden Newton, and then to Weymouth. I finished in '75, which was when the railway line closed, but I had a motorbike by then.

Nick Poole

I spent the next four years working in hotels in middle management. Part of the college catering course was classic French cuisine, and that skill has stayed with me for life. I still cook and still love it. But after about four years in the hotel trade, I decided it wasn't the life for me, came home, and fairly quickly walked on to a building site in Bridport. I got a job as a labourer earning half as much again as I had been for a lot less hours. However, the skills I learned in hotel management, dealing with people and book-keeping, came in useful in later life when I set up my own building firm.

Around that time, I met Dawn, my wife. We spent the best part of a year travelling in France, then a back-packing tour of Asia, all quite an adventure in pre-internet days, using Lonely Planet guides and only finding places to stay on arrival. Back home, I had done a carpentry course and carried on with the building work. I had realised quite early on I'm a practical person. I like working with my hands and solving problems practically, and I would watch closely how skilled tradespeople worked; noting a bricklayer's hand movements in loading the trowel with muck then placing it with precision where it's needed, over time I learned the skills for myself, and I loved that process. However, I do have quite a low boredom threshold, so although I could do brick and block-laying, I enjoyed carpentry rather more. In the early 1980s there were TOPS schemes to help people retrain, and I did a 6-month carpentry and joinery course at Gloucester which enabled me to join the carpentry gang of the building firm I worked for.

Three years later I started on my own, as a jobbing carpenter. As the jobs got bigger I employed other tradespeople plus a lot of subcontractors. I particularly loved renovating some of the older properties round here, where you would discover their history in the process, sometimes finding items hidden away for centuries. And it's a lovely thing to make an old property into a nice place to live, without losing its character, but we built many extensions and new houses as well.

In 2000 I took up cider making. We were renting some fields here in the village which included an orchard, and Dawn said we can't just leave the apples on the ground because there were horses grazing. We were told they were cider apples but had no idea what variety. I took out books from the library on cider making, then got together with a few people in the village to form a cider club which is still going today. Cider making opened up a whole new world to me, and although I was still running the building firm, it was a fascinating universe of new and interesting things which completely absorbed me.

Although West Dorset has a long history of cider making, it never really got off the ground commercially like Somerset or Herefordshire. Dorset had 10,000 acres of cider apples in the 1790s orchard survey, about half that of Somerset, but sales were mostly over the farm gate. In 1886 the Truck Act stopped the payment in kind of cider in lieu of wages,

etc., before which almost every farm would have made cider. But by the end of the 19thC the quality of the product in the West Country had become very poor, which was why the government-funded Long Ashton research centre, also called The Cider Institute, was set up in 1905.

Over 20 years ago Liz Copas, a pomologist working at Long Ashton, and I set out to find and identify old cider apple trees locally. Initially we researched trees in old orchards and hedgerows to try and identify the varieties, make cider with them and, after tasting, decide which were worth propagating for new orchards. Some of the best historic orchards we researched were here in West Milton, where we found good quality varieties like Dabinetts, Chisel Jerseys, and Yarlinton Mill. So, somebody in West Milton about 100 years previously must have been keen to produce higher quality cider. In 2012 Liz and I published our first booklet called the *DATA Project*, then followed it up in more detail in 2022 with a book, called *The Lost Orchards*.

The success of a cider tasting we ran in our cider shed led me to run another event at the Powerstock Hut, which we put on as a food festival thinking that cider alone might not attract enough interest. The first night there was a lengthy queue, and they weren't much interested in the food. Five years later, I was getting up to 30 cider makers from all over the country taking part in the Powerstock Cider Festival, mostly small-scale craft makers. It was popular because you could meet and talk to the producers while sampling the cider, but we ended up having to limit numbers because it began to get a bit out of hand. It also was just at the time, around 2005, when cider sales generally were beginning to take off. Along with the slow food movement, people were interested in local provenance and distinctiveness. In about 10 years we went from no cidemakers in Dorset to about 20, and the Festival won an Achievement Award at the Bath and West Show.

I had been making bottle-conditioned cider similar to the Normandy tradition, and in 2009 I won a competition in Normandy with my cidre bouché, which was a huge shock both to me and my French hosts. By then I had my own premises and was selling my cider part-time, but by 2014 I was getting a bit jaded with the building business, so I decided to retire from that and go full time into cider making. Dawn and I spent 10 years wholesaling and selling at shows, regularly producing about 25,000 litres. I planted my own orchard, but much of my apple supply came from Rupert Best at Melplash, a great enthusiast who ran 55 acres of cider apples started by his father in the 1920s.

In recent years we've scaled right back, but this year I've made 10 single varieties in small barrels, some of which will go into the Bath and West competition, the biggest in the country. In 2017 we won Supreme Champion with our cidre bouché, Lancombe Rising. Everything about cider making has been such an enjoyable process. ;