

## A Short History of the R.N. Coate Cider Works at Nailsea, 1925 - 1974

### Trevor Bowen

Redvers Norman Coates, Somerset born and bred, determined at the age of 22 to put the drink of his native county on the national cider makers' map. In 1924 the Devon cider makers Whiteways had taken the entire front page of the Daily Mail and advertised with considerable success, and Bulmers of Hereford retaliated soon after with a national campaign of their own. Somerset, however, produced more cider than any other English county, but the bulk of this was drunk locally for there was no large representative company to rival the sales of Whiteways and Bulmers.

Taking lunch one day with his future father-in-law, it was suggested that Redvers might usefully apply himself to the art of cider making, since he had a degree but no job. This casual remark appealed to the young man who, in later life, recalled, *'I had the ridiculous idea that I would like to build up and run the biggest cider making business in the country'*. How was he to obtain the experience and the capital necessary to realise this wild ambition? He approached Professor Barker of the National Fruit & Cider Institute at Bristol - later the Long Ashton Research Station - and persuaded him to teach him the rudiments of cider making for a year, unpaid. In 1925, Redvers Coate invited relatives and friends to invest in a new cider company and he was joined in this venture by his brother W.O. Coate -who later formed his own successful enterprise at Bridgwater, Coates Fencing- and co-partner A.V. Lister. Modest premises were acquired between Nailsea and Wraxall and five employees taken on. For the fermenting of the apple juice, Redvers Coate installed three glass-lined concrete vats, each holding 10,000 gallons. These were Swiss-made and reputedly the first to be installed in Britain.

Competition was strong since Whiteways and Bulmers both had well-established outlets in Bristol. Taunton Cider was active, as were Gloucester Cider at Wickwar and, locally, Williams Brothers at Backwell and throughout the area farm cider presses were selling off their surplus production. His contention that good cider would sell itself was not borne out in practice. But it was good cider none the less and this was recognised by the National Cider Competition, held at the Brewer's Exhibition in London, to which some early samples from the Nailsea works were sent for adjudication:

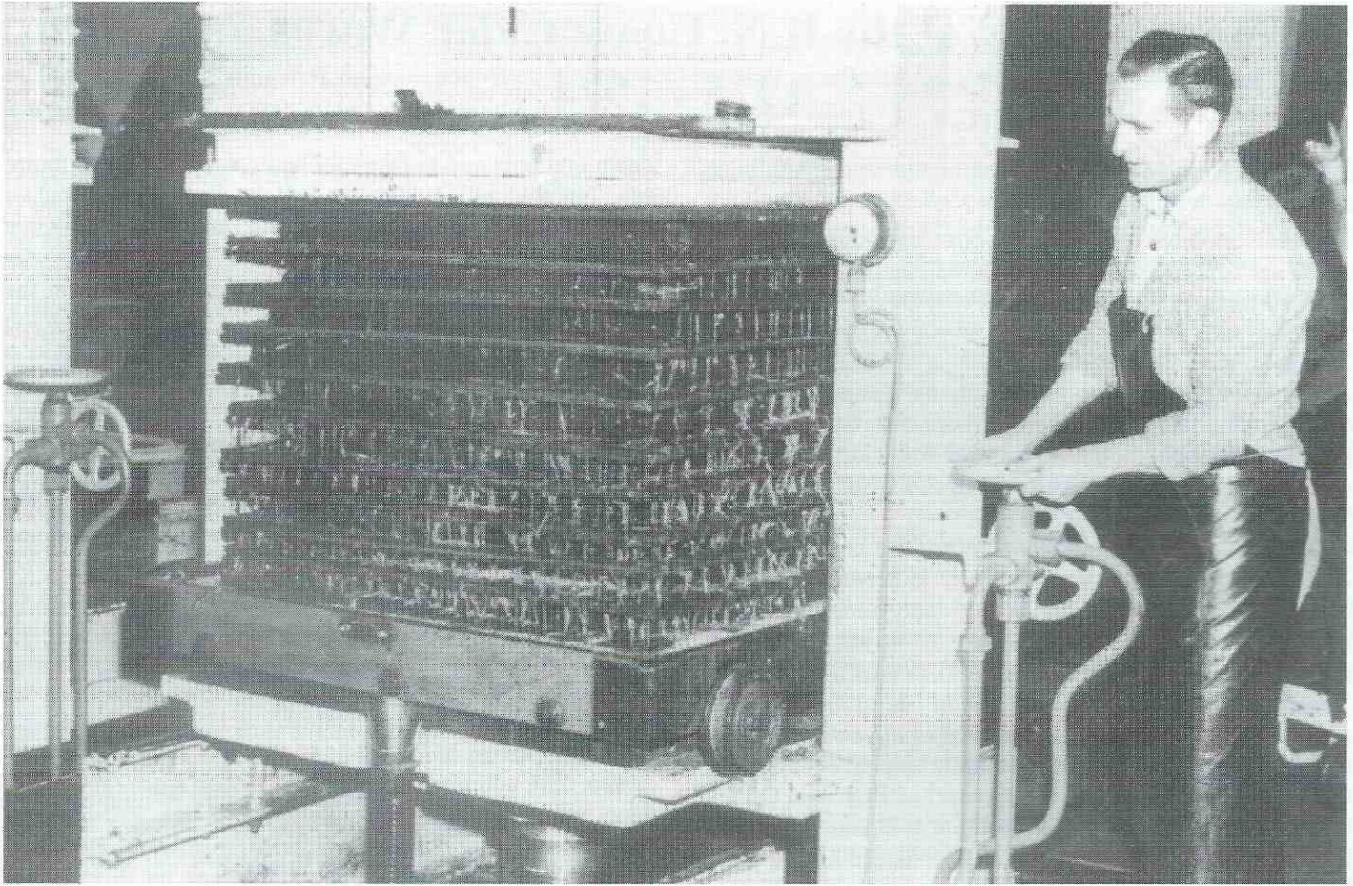
*being very inexperienced all I did was just to draw a sample from each of our three tanks. We got first prize in all three, a most extraordinary thing.*

Redvers Coate insisted that only Somerset apples be used at Nailsea and popular varieties included 'Sheeps Nose', 'Fox Whelp', 'Cap of Liberty', 'John Brown' and 'Slack Ma Girdle'. He personally visited farmers to persuade them to sell their surplus crop to the new works to ensure a continuous input of apples during the September to December milling season. They had also to be encouraged to revitalise the run

down orchards and to invest in new trees for Coates' future use. Together with his brother Bill, he canvassed the public houses throughout Somerset for more trade since in the late 1920s pubs were tied for beer but not usually for wine, spirits or cider. Expansion was painfully slow for all too soon the breweries started making their own cider or arranging for the larger cider makers to supply their houses on payment of a royalty. R.N. Coate sales slumped in the 1930s as did Britain itself. Several times the company almost went out of business but gradually over the years it clawed its way back into profitability. An associate company was formed, Bristol Wine Shippers, which specialised in British and Empire wines, and a small joint sales force of agents and representatives built up.

The outbreak of war in 1939 proved to be the salvation of R.N. Coate & Co. The government introduced zoning which not only took freight off the road and onto the rail network, but also meant that cider companies, like others, were restricted in their areas of operation. Bulmers at Hereford fared well with ready access to the midlands and north; Whiteways in Devon were additionally allocated London since they had a depot there; and Coates were allotted Somerset, Wiltshire and South Gloucestershire, which included Bristol and Bath. They were well satisfied with these restrictions on their larger competitors and, with the rationing of beer in the middle years of the war coupled with an influx of American troops locally, Coates became firmly established. Apart from losing most of his male staff through conscription, Redvers Coate had the added pressure of running the business virtually single handed. There was no production after dark due to the blackout and workers took their turn to fire-watch on the premises. Redvers himself was both head warden for the district and an army welfare officer wrestling with the domestic problems of locally based troops. Spare parts for machinery were often made by hand. Sales representatives were required to perform many functions, including assisting with production since supply could not match demand and Italian prisoners of war were brought in each day from Bristol to work alongside evacuees. Most serviceable vehicles in the area had been requisitioned, so deliveries by rail were collected by the GWR using an antiquated 1920s lorry lacking not only a battery but also its cab.

After the war Richard Bywater was appointed works director. During the hostilities he had worked for the Ministry of Supply on armament production and earned the distinction of gaining both the George Cross and George Medal. A brilliant man possessing a keen scientific mind, he was charged with developing the works to meet the anticipated demand. This proved an unenviable task with post-war shortages, and one of his many second hand acquisitions were 25 oak vats from the Guinness Brewery at Park Royal, London, ranging in size from 25,000 to 48,000 gallons capacity. Charlie Toogood, Coates' head cooper, was responsible for dismantling these stave-by-numbered-stave and reassembling in Nailsea, a process which took 11 years to complete. Six similar vats, already



Cheeses in the mill house



Barrel making in the 1960s

100 years old, were purchased from Georges Brewery in Bristol, so that the total number of new and second hand vats grew to 110. Each was identified by a name, such as 'Gog' and 'Magog' (each 9,000 gallons), 'Churchill', 'Spitfire', 'Time and Tide' (32,000 and 20,000), 'Cleopatra' and 'Caesar' (each 10,000), and in later years from the world of entertainment, 'Acker Bilk' and 'Adge Cutler' (each 25,000). Some of the larger vats had staves 28 ft long, 18 in wide and 2¼ in thick. Coates' coopers were mainly engaged on 'remakes', repairing their own casks from bought out staves, or fashioning new from French Oak (favoured for a grain that could be worked in all directions) or failing that, Russian or Scottish. Their real expertise, however, lay in the maintenance of the oak vats. These were susceptible to draughts from open doors, causing shrinkage of the timber even when full, with consequent leakage.

Bywater was joined by ex-office and sales staff returning after demobilisation and a depot was established in London by Redvers' co-director A.V. Lister. He had close connections with the London brewery Mann, Crossman & Paulin which enabled Coates to expand into their tied houses. Arrangements were also made with Flowers, Ansells and Whitbreads, and outlets developed in the midlands and the north as well as exports to many parts of Africa, South America, New Zealand, the West Indies and Scandinavia. The NAAFI contract was also won by Coates.

By 1950 the national annual output of cider exceeded 18,000,000 gallons compared with 13,000,000 some 20 years earlier. This figure was to remain constant throughout the decade before rising sharply in the early 1960s. Bulmers was the largest producer with perhaps two-fifths of the market, with Whiteways and Coates in second and third positions, although accurate figures for comparison are not available. But if production did not increase significantly in the 1950s, competition did and not just among the leading cider makers. Smaller companies introduced sales gimmicks, such as Ridler & Evans of Hereford who offered a free champagne glass with every six dozen of their new 'baby' bottles of cider.

In 1952 Bywater left the Company and was replaced as works manager by Squadron Leader Stewart Allcott, a brewer by profession, who had worked with Barnes Wallis in developing the 'bouncing bomb'. A year later Freddie Pring became sales manager and the new team set about the competition.

However, a major development was about to take place. Showerings at Shepton Mallet began to achieve success with 'Babycham'. Their point of sale advertising which projected the image of a young woman in a lounge or cocktail bar sipping a glass of 'Babycham', with a cherry on a stick, did wonders in the public house traditionally catering for the male. In 1954 and again a year later, Coates agreed to assist Showerings with the milling of pears. So it came about that in 1956 Showerings took a controlling interest in the Nailsea works with the intention of transferring their own cider production there, thus enabling Shepton Mallet to concentrate on 'Babycham'. R.N. Coate became the first acquisition of the future Showering 'empire'. Then, shortly after Vine Products

took over Britvic and laid off most of the latter's sales force, these men eagerly joined Showerings. Merged with the Coates sales staff to sell both 'Babycham' and cider, and backed by a powerful advertising campaign which now included cinema and television, they doubled cider production at Nailsea within two years. They had achieved in that time what had taken Redvers Coate 30 years! Slogans introduced in that campaign, such as '*Coates Comes Up From Somerset*', still trip off the tongue even today.

Showerings made a large investment in Nailsea by way of plant and buildings - a modern mill house and additional semi-automated bottling lines - together with glass lined vats and modern delivery vehicles. Coates themselves introduced an orcharding service to rejuvenate the run-down Somerset orchards. This not only guaranteed the crop price but also provided farmers with suitable trees and assistance with maintaining these for the initial three years.

In 1961 Coates introduced the half-gallon pitcher which was a radical departure from the traditional flagon bottle. Success was immediate with sales in excess of 1,000,000 within a year. Two years later the 'Quartet' was added to the range, an emerald green bottle of distinctive bulbous body and long tapering neck. This contained 'Triple Vintage', a strong cider first produced in 1951 along with 'Festival Vat' to celebrate the Festival of Britain. The pick of each season's apples was set aside for producing these top grade ciders. However, Coates 'Sweet Somerset' the ever popular sparkling cider still accounted for possibly two thirds of the total output at Nailsea.

The soil and climate of the west country produce ideal conditions for the growing of cider apples, but the expertise of Coates' staff played a major part in developing the clean full-flavoured ciders for which the company was noted. An important element in the production at Nailsea was the tasting session held at 12:30pm each day. Here the executives made a serious assessment of the latest batch of cider, since at Coates all blending was done on the basis of taste alone. At the same session suitably disguised competitors' samples were similarly sampled for flavour and quality.

In 1966 Redvers Coate retired as managing director after 41 years during which time his fledgling company had become the second largest cider producer in Britain and Somerset well and truly on the cider makers' map. He retained a directorship for a further ten years as well as an association with the Long Ashton Research Station. In its later years the company employed 200-250 local people, depending upon seasonal activity, and many still have fond memories of Mr Coate who was immensely popular in a company which always enjoyed good labour relations.

He is remembered as a 'perfect gentleman', a keen follower of cricket - especially Somerset County - and as a champion of his drivers with whom he had a special working relationship, regarding them as his ambassadors as they travelled around the country. He retired with his wife Mary - they had reputedly been secretly engaged at the age of 13 - to live at Abbots

Leigh on the outskirts of Bristol. Here in 1951 he had purchased 23 acres of land on which to plant 300 cider apple trees, ordered four years previously from a nurseryman and promptly forgotten until ready for delivery. Redvers Coate died in 1985 and until recently the trees he lovingly tendered until his death still provided apples for the production of cider at Shepton Mallet. Following his retirement, Stewart Allcott and Freddie Pring took over as joint managing directors.

Showrerings were expansionist-minded and now set their sights on competitors in the cider industry and in the wine trade also. Vine Products, Harveys, Whiteways, Gaymers of Norfolk - all were acquired so that the group now had three cider factories. Since Bulmers and Taunton Cider were single units with the advantages of centralisation of production and administration, Showerings had to rationalise to remain competitive. With the financial investment made in Nailsea, it was felt certain that cider production would be centralised there and Stewart Allcott accordingly prepared to implement this. A new automatic Swiss press had been installed in 1971, described as *'the most revolutionary development in the history of cider'*, for it not only produced more liquid per ton of apples (180 gallons) at the rate of five tons per hour but also did the work which previously occupied 25 men on the traditional 'cheese' presses. By now the works was processing up to 200 tons of apples a day during the autumn milling season.

In 1972 the decision was announced that Nailsea was to be run down and closed within two years. Alternative employment was offered at Shepton Mallet and the small number of staff who made the move generally settled in well. However, for most Nailsea employees the thoughts of transfer were too upsetting and most found alternative work locally in the course of time. For Nailsea the R.N. Coate works had been the largest employer since the closure of the glassworks in 1873 when 200 men and boys were put out of work.

By far the most impressive feature of the Nailsea works were the vats, 110 in total housed in six buildings, and brought, over the years, from many parts of Britain - Guinness in London, Schweppes at Chapel Allerton, Whiteways at Staverton and Georges in Bristol. With the exception of the latter which were cut up with a chain saw, most of the vats found new homes when the works finally closed in 1974. Over 20 of the massive Guinness vats, which had started life in Dublin before being moved to London, are still in use today for the maturing of Cockburns port at Quinta do Santa Maria in Portugal. The remaining vats went to west country cider makers, including Sheppys at Wellington, Riches at Highbridge and Inches at Winkleigh near Crediton. Inches bought 21 and, incidentally, claim to be the fourth largest cider makers in Britain today. Here can be seen the vats 'Adam' and 'Eve', whilst 'Adge Cutler' of Wurzels fame will be found at Riches.

The problems of moving a large vat are considerable and in 1973 the cost of dismantling, transporting and reassembling was in the region of £1,000. Consideration had to be given to foundations, walls on which the underbearers stood, and some form of draught free building to surround it. Few men today

have the necessary skills to maintain such vessels. However, one such is Trevor Thomas, time-served at Coates, who currently works at the Cheddar Cheese Factory as a demonstration cooper making miniature casks for the tourist - one of only a dozen or so coopers still at work in England and Wales.

Two local men who had an early association with Coates and made it to the top were Alan John Cutler, son of a Nailsea cycle dealer, and Robert Hobbs a road haulier. After leaving Coates employ as a warehouseman 'Adge' Cutler had a four year spell as road manager for jazz musician Acker Bilk before forming his own group in 1966. This was The Wurzels. Their first two albums were recorded by EMI live on the upper floor of the *Royal Oak* in Nailsea. The smokey atmosphere of a packed room where Coates cider flowed both freely and free resembled an eighteenth century revelry. Memories of the later part of the evening are somewhat vague according to those who recall the event, but the success of songs like 'Drink up Thy Zider' was immediate. Like his former boss, Adge Cutler aimed to put his native county on the map by composing songs for Somerset people to sing in Somerset pubs. Some eight years later, then on the verge of international recognition, Adge was killed late one night when his soft-topped sports car overturned near the Severn Bridge. His ashes were brought back and scattered in the 'Holy City' as he called his beloved Nailsea.

Robert Hobbs was a contemporary of Redvers Coate. As a teenager he worked for Thatchers brewery in Nailsea as a lorry boy, and earned extra cash by washing bottles in his spare time. With £20 of his savings he bought an old 'Model T' Ford and converted it to carry barrels of beer for the brewery on a commission basis. He also persuaded Redvers to allow him to deliver cider throughout the summer, cider apples to the works in the autumn and, in the winter cattle food to farms - the residue of the cider presses. Robert Hobbs always maintained that to get ahead one had to think ahead. So he seized the opportunity presented by the government programme of road building in the mid 1930s, appreciating the need for heavy lorries. His first vehicle hire contract was with Somerset C.C. and Long Ashton R.D.C., transporting men and stone. In 1938 he purchased his first quarry at Backwell and soon after others at Olveston, Ashburton and Pyle. The Olveston quarry was particularly well sited for the construction of the Severn Bridge which he had foreseen; also the 'Brabazon' runway at Filton where much of the Nailsea glassworks lies buried as hardcore. In 1950 he set up ready-mixed concrete plants in South Wales and the West Country, to be followed by a contract to supply limestone for steel making in South Wales, and another for the removal of slag from Llanwern to be used in road construction. In 1982 the Hobbs Group operated 16 quarries, ten ready-mixed concrete and four pre-cast concrete plants. He was joined by his three sons in the business, but following his death in 1982 part was sold to Wimpeys and now operates out of Nailsea as Wimpey Hobbs Ltd, whilst Hobbs Holdings Ltd is based at nearby Flax Bourton.

To return to the story of RN. Coate & Company, little remains of the works apart from the vat houses erected by Showerings,

but reminders appear from time to time in antique shops. Most common are the buff coloured half and one pint mugs, barrel shaped with a single handle and bearing a transfer of the three jolly cider drinkers - Coates trade mark - and the words 'Sweet Somerset'. Less frequently found are the uniquely shaped emerald green 'Quartet' bottles which contained 'Triple Vintage', Redvers' favourite cider blend. These were often converted into table lamp bases. The author has been shown two 'freebies' of unknown date; a head and shoulders plaster representation of a Coates jolly cider drinker in the form of a brooch; and a plastic table cloth printed with six illustrated verses extolling the virtues and origins of cider. The first two verses read:

When time began and early man  
Thought apples were just for eating,  
A man in a hat, no more than that  
Decided drinking went well with feasting.

To achieve his ends, along with two friends  
A dog and a problem to grapple,  
The thought struck all, as the crop did fall  
Was how on earth to drink apple.

#### Sources

Enquiries made with Showerings, Vine Products and Whiteways Ltd., and Coates Gaymers Ltd in 1976 indicated that little archive material remained of R.N.Coate & Co Ltd. Representative photographs still exist, salvaged from rubbish bins at the time of its closure in 1974, but ciné film held by Showerings and viewed by the author in 1977 was subsequently lost. This short account of the works is therefore based on interviews with ex-employees and items that appeared in Showerings Group newsletter.

#### Recorded interviews

Redvers Coate (1977)  
Stewart Allcott (1977)  
Mary Coate (1991)  
Trevor Thomas (1991)

#### Published material

*Grapevine* Showerings Group newsletter, (1966-68)  
Tavemer, H., *Our Roots and Branches*,  
*Choice*, Allied-Lyons magazine, (Sept - Oct 1990)

Copies of the above are held by the author and Nailsea & District Local History Society.



Bottling hall showing half pints being crowned