



## Apple-growing in Sussex

*By Bill Youdale*

Since working at wartime Harvest camps in Dorset in school holidays in 1941 and 1942, the pull of life in the countryside had become ever stronger, so when I was demobbed after the war, I embarked hopefully on my ambition to become an apple grower.

After a year as a labourer on a fruit farm at Horsmonden in Kent learning the job, I eventually managed to find 25 acres of land in Sussex in Fontridge Lane in the Parish of Etchingham where I could start to realise my ambition. More recent arrivals in the village will not be aware that between the fifties and nineties there were about 75 acres of orchards bordering on Fontridge Lane, known as Athena Farm.

Over the years, one of the happy side effects of fruit-growing in Etchingham was to make me the temporary employer of quite a few members of the village community, as from the middle fifties we recruited about twenty-five women from the village for around six weeks every Autumn to help harvest the apple crop. In those days the wives of the farm labourers and building workers who comprised the bulk of the village population had no family car or means of transport, and effectively no job opportunities of any sort to augment the meagre wages of one of the most deprived sections of the working population, and bringing up a family and coping with the budget was a full time job in itself.

This did not deter any of them from taking up the challenge enthusiastically, and they became the most hardworking, skilled, intelligent and loyal workforce any employer could hope for. Apple picking was no 'Walk in the park', but very hard work indeed. You had a canvas bag strung over your shoulder which you were filling repeatedly with up to twenty pounds of apples, you had an eight foot heavy aluminium step ladder to cope with, and the autumn weather was mostly less than idyllic. Picking ended at three as many of the women had to go and collect children from school, and then start the job of getting their husband's meal ready.

Conditions were, of course, pretty chaotic. We had to pick everyone up from the village in our old van, with only apple boxes for seats. Safety belts were unheard of, but happily there were no accidents, so Health and Safety never got to hear of our loads of loose women.

We soon had a collection of old prams stored in the farm buildings, to be brought out each day for the duration of the picking, and it was a great relief to all when the kids went back to school at the beginning of September and we no longer had to worry about them falling under tractors, nor endure

the general mayhem a bunch of youngsters let loose in an outdoor playground all day will inevitably create.

The women greatly appreciated the social side of working together as a bunch, which they did with an amazing lack of friction, and it was an education for me to be introduced to the astonishing frankness, intelligence and humour with which these women discussed marriage, children, sex, politics and life in general.

Another factor which became evident over the years was that the division of work to give everyone a reasonably equal share of earnings, which were piecework, was better organised by the leaders of the women who were thrown up naturally by the pecking order which developed, and the result was also more readily accepted as fair by all concerned, so we left them to get on with it.

On average we harvested about three hundred tons of apples each season, mainly Cox's, and had refrigerated storage on the farm for two hundred tons to be sold later in the winter.

Most of the women chose to save up their wages till the end of picking, and it was an enormous pleasure for me to go round and hand over a very well earned sum of money, larger than most of them had ever had at their own disposal during the whole of their lives. Most of it went on a new winter coat for a child, or new shoes or school uniform, but hopefully, something was spent on themselves, though certainly, in those days, not very much.

The final pleasure was our Harvest supper held each year in the Kipling room of the Bear in Burwash, when all our geese turned into swans, and we joined in together to celebrate the success of our common endeavours. An evening of warmth, fun and friendship.

I have never regretted the path I chose, nor where I chose to live.

*Bill Youdale, October 2015.*

