

# THE DEVON ORCHARDS BOOK

MICHAEL GEE

Think of Devon and you are likely to have an image as a county of orchards and cider.

But historically this was by no means always the case, and in truth Devon presented many challenges to the growing of fruit. This ground-breaking book explains how special circumstances enabled ale-drinking Devon to become a cider county in Tudor and Stuart times. So many orchards were planted that swathes became surplus to requirements and went into decline for the best part of two centuries.

There has been a remarkable revival over the last few decades. Autumn Apple Days have become big events, and new ciders and juices with local provenance have appeared. New orchards range from big volume growers contracted to the cider industry using new varieties and techniques to small-scale community and domestic situations with ancient varieties and traditional management techniques.

The expertly written and beautifully illustrated volume investigates this recent turn-round and offers a positive vision of the future, with practical suggestions on how lovers of Devon might ensure it remains a county of orchards.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

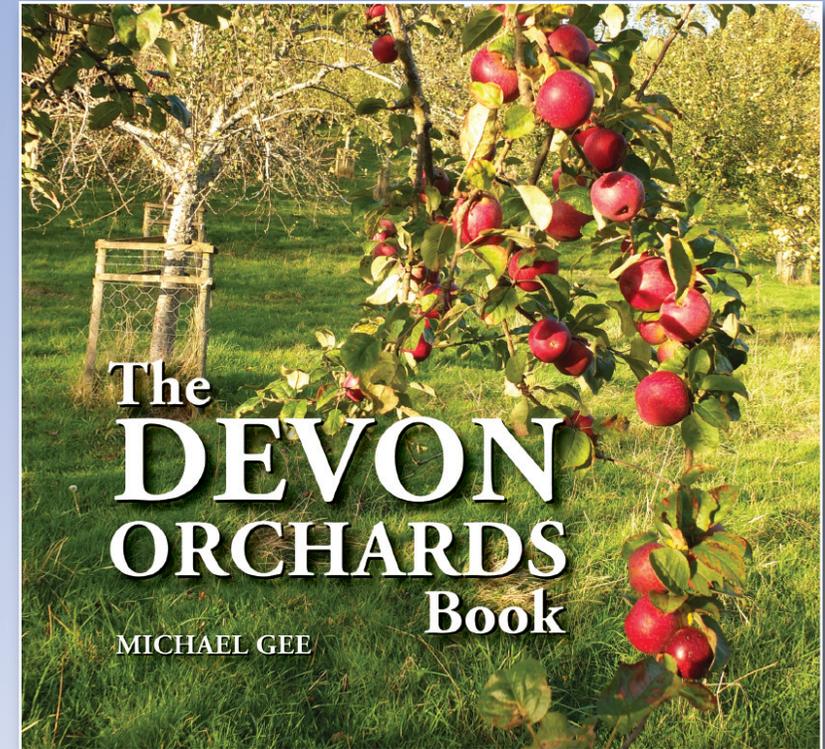
Michael Gee was born south of Manchester, and educated south of Liverpool at Birkenhead School. He has degrees in Geography (Oxford) and Town&Country Planning (Edinburgh). He worked as a chartered planner in local and central government, consultancy and the charitable sector before moving to Devon in 1987 as Director of the Dartington North Devon Trust.

In 1990 he inaugurated North Devon's 'Save our Orchards' Campaign; it became Orchards Live which he chaired. His particular interest was saving North Devon's own cherries, (mazzards), from extinction, and he helped establish the orchard on Landkey's Millennium Green. He was awarded a BEM for services to orchard conservation in 2013.

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Top left: Luscombe drinks promote an attractive orchard image. (P Rodd)

Above: Dittisham Plums.

Left: Mill at Fairlinch, Braunton. (Tim Potter)

Right: Courtney family collecting apples, Whimble.



Above: Misty autumn morning, Whimble.

Below: Wedding Marquee, Whitestone, East Cornworthy.



Fruitful standard orchard at harvest time, Efford, Shute (near Crediton).

## Ch 1 Introduction

*'The orchard walls are high and hard to climb'*  
(William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet)

A taciturn stranger observed that "if it were only for its cream and butter, Devonshire might be termed an earthly paradise"; we should add that its fruits equally entitle it to so proud a name (Rachel Evans, 1846).



Batsford Valley, near Salcombe. Kingsbridge Cookworthy Museum

Orchards became important to me in childhood when my father broke down the wall that separated our family garden from an abandoned neighbouring one; we clambered through the hole and entered our new orchard. It was part of a large Victorian garden that had become available after subdivision, - a few very old trees provided a secret world for tree-climbing, camping, bonfires and picking 'Beauty of Beth' apples in the holidays.

It was a long time later that I moved to Devon, (in 1987), and soon found myself inaugurating a Save our Orchards Campaign in North Devon which evolved into Orchards Live. I thank Common Ground for the inspiration.

I found that Rachel Evans's image of a country of orchards and fruit complementing the cows and cream was not matched by reality. Only a relatively lucky few Devonians eat fruit grown in the county or drink cider and juice from a local orchard, and who could name a Devon variety or locate their nearest orchard? So there's a disconnection and a paradox; there was support and enthusiasm for the Campaign based on very limited knowledge.

Devon has lost out to other counties in terms of cider making and orchards. In recent years the situation has been changing. The decline in orchards appears to have 'bottomed out'. There are some large modern orchards and new cider makers. There has been a growing awareness of the importance of orchards, with many individuals and some communities restoring them or planting new ones, sometimes with public help. Nurseriesmen are able to supply varieties of Devon fruit which had almost disappeared. 'Provenance' and 'craft' have become important in the sale of food and drink, and are encouraging local initiatives. This story of Devon orchards' origins, rise, fall and recent revival is interesting and needs telling.