



Crunch time for George

Paul Barnes describes how the call of an apple orchard lured City lawyer George Hodgkinson into a new outdoor career

Four or five years before he retired, George Hodgkinson began to cultivate a dream. He was going to have an orchard. When he asked the advice of an apple man in Suffolk, a grower for supermarkets, he learnt that big buyers were dictating the size and shape of apples, and even the shades of red they should be. Think small, think niche, was the man's advice. "This idea immediately sparked me," says George, "because I'd been in a niche business myself, and filling a niche appealed to me."

The niche business that occupied and stimulated George as a City lawyer was shipping finance: buying, selling and mortgaging ships all over the world. But in 2002 the firm he worked for went through a merger. The firm's changed culture and the constant commuting finally convinced him that retirement at 60 was an attractive option.

The new niche he thought he might fill was the cultivation of neglected Suffolk varieties of dessert apple, such as St Edmund's Pippin, which first appeared in 1873. When really ripe it can be "ambrosial, like pear-flavoured vanilla ice cream" according to *The New Book of Apples*, the apple growers' bible.



St Edmund's Pippin, from *The New Book of Apples*, by Joan Morgan and Alison Richards, Ebury Press, £35. Save money with Saga Books – see page 212

George was 'sort of brought up with apples' – and now he makes a living as a grower

George agrees absolutely. "It has a lovely flavour but tends to go a bit soft, so you've got to pick it quite early and eat it quickly. From the point of view of a commercial grower those properties are not ideal."

The other Suffolk apple on his list is the Sturmer Pippin, dating from 1831. George describes it in his brochure as having "a strong aromatic flavour, juicy and crisp, best ripened with plenty of autumn sunshine".

George says he was was "sort of brought up with apples". He spent school summer holidays harvesting his mother's orchard on the small family farm at Little Waldingfield, filling bushel boxes with the fruit. His father wondered if he might



eventually take to farming but George was off to Oxford to read jurisprudence. "But of course, if you're brought up in a farming environment," he says, "there's something in your genes."

Before his retirement, as a trial run, he planted a handful of apple trees in a dell in his garden in the shadow of the church at Monks Eleigh. There were plum trees too, bearing another old Suffolk variety: Coe's Golden Drop, a relative of the greengage.

Now he needed space for his orchard proper, and there it was, right next door. A neighbour had a couple of fields to sell, four and a half acres on a south-facing slope. Perfect. George bought them. As chairman of the local history group, George knew from the old maps that it was likely there had been an orchard here in the 18th century. And an Orchard House still stands nearby.

The present orchard now consists of 1,100 trees. He and his wife Sarah, their family and friends, harvest the

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fruit into the traditional bushel boxes of his childhood, selling to farm shops, and at farmers' markets.

"It was very satisfying when Sarah and I had our first stall," he says, "to be selling old varieties, something I'd created in a sense, and people were actually wanting to buy what I'd grown." Potential customers are invited to taste before buying. "One of the challenges of marketing old varieties is that because they aren't in the supermarket you've got to re-educate people."

Some of his City colleagues saw early retirement as little more than an opportunity to play golf four times a week instead of two – but George says he has a fairly strong work ethic. "I'm very lucky; I'm just enjoying my second career."

The daily four-hour commute has become a four-minute walk from his back door to his beloved orchard. City stress is behind him now. And there are no backward glances.