



# Bottled up secrets

There are many Grade I-listed estates in the country, but few featuring unusual social enterprises, as is the case at Enfield's Forty Hall. **James Wood** takes a trip to London's first commercial-scale, organic vineyard

As wearied but eager volunteers tend to a four-hectare vineyard on a vast swathe of farmland, the only reminder of their proximity to the city is the skyline beyond.

This is neither the Catalan region of Spain nor a shady spot along France's Côte du Rhone, but a vineyard on Forty Hall Farm in the London Borough of Enfield – a place known better for its high-yielding industrial estates, the busy North Circular Road and the M25 than for producing fine wines.

Some on the continent are sceptical about this country's wine production, but according to the United Kingdom Vineyard Association, England and Wales now have more than 2,000ha under vine, with 500 commercial vineyards and more than 130 companies producing sparkling, white, rosé and red wines. In the last 16 years, English sparkling wines have collected 15 trophies in global taste testing competitions.

From Yorkshire to Surrey, grapes are stomped and turned into wine, but in 2010, Enfield's Forty Hall Vineyard became the first commercial-scale facility to harvest grapes in London since the middle ages.

Inspired by urban vineyards in other cities such as Paris, Sarah Vaughan-Roberts set up the community-led vineyard in Enfield as a not-for-profit organisation. Supported by the nearby horticultural school, Capel Manor College, which provides land on its organic farm at Forty Hall, the first acre of vineyard was planted in 2009.

The project received funding from the National Lottery's Local Food programme in 2010 and the vineyard now has 10 acres (4.04ha) under vine on a south-facing plot, with views of Canary Wharf and the City in the distance. When it reaches full capacity, the goal is to produce around 15,000 bottles a year.

The vineyard currently makes two still white wines – a Bacchus and an Ortega – both of which were selected by leading wine critic Matthew Jukes in his 2016 compendium of the best English wines. A London Sparkling Brut made at Forty Hall is naturally fermented in the bottle in the same way as champagne. It is made from Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay grapes and is believed to be London's only sparkling wine.

"The London climate is ideal for making great quality sparkling wine," explains Vaughan-Roberts. "We are looking forward to launching our 2015 vintage sparkling wine for sale on the open market for the first time this autumn."

Immediately after the grapes are picked, they are taken to Davenport Vineyards in East Sussex, where they are pressed and turned into wine by multiple award-winning producer, Will Davenport.

"Will is widely recognised as one of the UK's most successful and enthusiastic organic winemakers," says Vaughan-Roberts. "He is known for the outstanding quality, his low-intervention winemaking and his long-standing commitment to organic and sustainable production values."

Volunteers run Forty Hall Vineyard, helping out with

Left A successful business model at Forty Hall Vineyard brings volunteers together to tend the vines and produce the wine.

everything from planting and harvesting to maintenance on the farm. Vaughan-Roberts feels that her initial ambition for the project to offer significant benefits for those in the local community has been surpassed.

"It has become something which Enfield residents can be proud of," she says.

"We all hear stories about how many people in the city are isolated and lonely; the vineyard enables people to come together in the outdoors, to work towards producing something meaningful and enjoyable. This really fosters a sense of community and helps bring people together for a common purpose.

"The fact that we operate as a social enterprise really makes us stand out from other vineyards in the country. It is our goal to become an award-winning wine producer and to ensure that we continue to deliver health benefits for local people."

The vineyard refers to the health and wellbeing of its volunteers as "ecotherapy", in line with a report produced by the mental health charity, Mind. This showed how engaging in outdoor activities such as gardening and exercise can help motivation and self-esteem, while contact with others can reduce loneliness.

The impact has been entirely positive, says Vaughan-Roberts: "Our volunteers consistently report feeling more positive, physically fitter, more self-confident and better connected socially."

Those who work at the site range from young people to retirees, as well as those with learning difficulties and conditions such as depression and other mental health issues.

One volunteer has been working at the vineyard for five years and has been diagnosed as schizophrenic. Having run the Forty Hall stall at the Real Wine Fair in 2014, the benefits have been clear. Discussing how his work has helped him, the volunteer explained: "Living with schizophrenia, I have found working at the vineyard has been an important part of my journey back to health. Green therapy worked for me and I have seen improvements in others. Coming to the vineyard gives structure to my week and gets me out of the house and into the fresh air. I enjoy working and socialising with the other volunteers – it's good for the body and soul."

Skilled workers from abroad have also contributed towards the success of the vineyard. A volunteer from Russia who was struggling to find work was employed and



became a key member of the team. Having later worked for Enfield's parks department, she won an award for her outstanding work.

The vineyard's head gardener and vineyard manager once struggled with anorexia before leaving her job as a lawyer to work at the vineyard. She attributes the change in job as being crucial to improvements in her health and wellbeing.

It is clear that working at the vineyard has helped people with a wide range of challenges. Typical days at the site are also open to corporate teams, who engage in activities such as mulching, bud rubbing, pruning and planting. Up to 25 volunteers can be accommodated, with the benefit of working together outside the office.

And the vineyard is only part of the attractions at Forty Hall. Classes in activities such as drawing and tai chi take place at the estate throughout the year, as well as events and exhibitions about art, ecology and heritage.

The Livestock Music Festival has also been held at Forty Hall's Black Barn for five years. In summer 2016, 20 bands played, covering musical genres from rock to reggae and from folk to swing. Tribute nights to the likes of The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen and Battle of the Bands competitions also took place in 2016.

The estate itself is a Grade I-listed Jacobean manor house, which was originally owned by Sir Nicholas Rainton. A permanent exhibition about his life as a successful textile merchant features guided, audio and video tours and a gift shop.

**"The vineyard enables people to come together in the outdoors, to work towards producing something meaningful"**



Above There are more than four hectares of vines at Forty Hall, where the English climate benefits the production of good quality sparkling wine.



Forty Hall farm on the site is run by Capel Manor College. It features a variety of animals, many of which are rare breeds, as well as an orchard with more than 400 trees, planted in 2011.

In April 2013, a market garden was established on the farm, dedicated to organic fruit and vegetable production and also run by volunteers.

Its produce is sold at the nearby Budgens supermarket and at the local village wholefood shop and used by cooks at the Nice Green Cafe in Forty Hall. Events such as the summer beer and blues festival have also been held at the site and have proved popular.

But the vineyard is perhaps the most unexpected feature of Forty Hall estate and its wines are starting to receive attention from industry professionals. Experts at the Real Wine Fair in London's Tobacco Dock reportedly reviewed the Ortega and Bacchus to great acclaim in summer 2016.

Londoners have been heard to sing the praises of wines from Sussex, Surrey, Kent and beyond, with some even available in supermarkets. But as word of this Enfield plot begins to spread, those who have sampled the produce of Forty Hall Vineyard continue to flock to the farm shop to pick up a bottle of north London's finest. ■

Above Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay grapes are used to produce Enfield's very own sparkling wine.

## In an English garden

From renditions of Ella Fitzgerald songs on the lawn to summer performances of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there are many reasons why people come to visit Enfield's Myddleton House Gardens.

Built under the reign of George III in 1812, the venue was restored in 2011 following a two-year project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which saw the installation of a new visitor centre, telling the story of a man considered to be among the greatest gardeners of the 20th century.

Edward Augustus Bowles was the youngest of five children, born to Henry Carrington Bowles Treacher, who built Myddleton House. It was named after a successful engineer who created the 38 mile-long New River, which brought water from Ware in Hertfordshire down to Clerkenwell in central London.

The horticultural tradition has lived on at the estate. Many people from all over the country came to visit the site in the 19th century to witness the green-fingered endeavours of Edward Bowles.

The admiration of one of Britain's most famous gardens lives on at the site today, focused on the newly created Victorian Glasshouse Range, which is open to the public. A collection of tender plants was transferred from the 1950s London School of Pharmacy glasshouses, which were subsequently demolished.

Bowles spent almost 90 years in Myddleton House, from 1865 until 1954 and dedicated most of his life to finding exotic plants to transform the gardens.

Today, visitors are invited to wander around a carp lake, a Victorian conservatory and a number of historical artefacts collected by EA Bowles. These include pieces from the original St Paul's Cathedral and the Enfield Market Cross. The wisteria is a notable feature of the gardens, which has been growing for more than 110 years ago and turns a "brilliant blue" in the spring.