



# HUSH HEATH ESTATE

based on an interview with Richard Balfour-Lynn  
by Dr Gerry Prout & adapted by Sian Liwicki



Hush Heath Estate, owned by Richard Balfour-Lynn, planted its first vineyard in 2002, a year after Balfour-Lynn bought 160 ha of orchards, farmland and woodland which surrounded his beautiful Elizabethan manor house. Further vineyards have been planted, with the most recent in May this year.

When not farming, Balfour-Lynn runs a diverse group of companies including MWB Group Plc, a fully listed public company, which owns Malmaison Hotels, Hotel du Vin and serviced office provider MWB Business Exchange. His private interests include De Vere Group, one of the UK's largest independent hotel companies, which encompasses brands such as De Vere Hotels, De Vere Venues, De Vere Village Hotels, Greens Health and Fitness clubs, and distiller G & J Greenall.

From the outset Balfour-Lynn had a vision of producing a top-quality bottle-fermented sparkling rosé, based upon the three classic Champagne grape varieties. Viticultural consultant Stephen Skelton MW was brought in to advise, help plan, plant and establish the vineyards. The initial 1.68 ha, planted in 2002 and 2003, were laid out on a gentle south-east facing slope in a field which had once been a Bramley orchard. Since then, the area under vines has been expanded and today, including 4 ha grown under contract at nearby Sandhurst Vineyards, the total vineyard area is 11.44 ha (28.26 acres) with an

encepage<sup>m</sup>ent of 46% Chardonnay, 41% Pinot Noir and 13% Pinot Meunier. Most of the clones planted are sparkling wine clones, with recent plantings including a few red wine Burgundian clones. There are also small plantings of the varieties Pinot Blanc, Arbane and Petit Meslier, the other three permitted Champagne varieties, although today rarely found in Champagne.

Vintages 2003 to 2009 were made at nearby Chapel Down (where Balfour-Lynn is also a shareholder) by award-winning winemaker Owen Elias. In 2010 a new 750m<sup>2</sup> winery, based upon the steel frame of an existing barn, was built and commissioned in time for the 2010 harvest. This took place under the watchful eye of Owen Elias, who has since left Chapel Down and is an independent consultant, and assistant winemaker Victoria Ash. The winery is fully equipped with a 4-tonne Magnum press, temperature controlled stainless steel tanks, red wine fermenters, a GAI bottling line, TDD disgorging and Mecamarc labeler. The capacity is for 100,000 bottles.

The first small harvest was taken in the vineyard's second year, the extremely warm 2003, and although not commercially released, gave a good idea of quality to come. The first commercial harvest was in 2004 and, since then, the initial plantings have given exceptionally good yields and quality.

Awards for the Balfour Brut Rosé to date include:

#### 2004 Vintage

Silver Medal in the UKVA Wine of the Year Competition 2006  
Silver Medal in the 2007 International Wine & Spirit Competition  
Gold Medal and English Wine Trophy in the 2008 International Wine Challenge  
Bronze Medal in the 2008 Decanter World Wine Awards

#### 2005 Vintage

Gold Medal & Wine of the Year Trophy in 2008 South East Vineyard Association's Competition  
Silver Medal in the 2008 *Effervescent du Monde* Competition  
Bronze Medal in the 2008 UKVA Wine of the Year Competition  
Gold Medal and English Wine Trophy in the 2009 Decanter World Wine Awards

#### 2006 Vintage

Silver Medal in the 2009 Decanter World Wine Awards  
Bronze Medal in the 2009 UKVA Wine of the Year Competition  
Silver Medal in the 2010 Decanter World Wine Awards  
Silver Medal in the 2010 UKVA Wine of the Year Competition  
Silver Medal in the 2011 Decanter World Wine Awards





**Q What inspired you to plant a vineyard at Hush Heath?**

**A** I have always been interested in wine and wine making. I had hoped to produce wine in France, but in 2001 bought 400 acres in the middle of the Garden of England. It was my wife, Leslie, who suggested planting a vineyard as part of the estate. The challenge excited me and I knew that we had geographic and climatic similarities with the Champagne region.

I decided to be uncompromising and produce a sparkling rosé to 'knock the socks off' those from Champagne. In 2003, we made 1,000 bottles and some were opened at Christmas 2004. This wine had no dosage and I was delighted that my family declared it to be excellent! Despite its youth, subsequent 'field tests' with sparkling wine experts and retailers seemed to bear this out and the Balfour brand was launched. I named it after my family using an old Champagne tradition.

**Q How do you manage to fit in the vineyard operations with all your other business activities?**

**A** I have always surrounded myself with likeminded, passionate people who are also driven by a desire to create the best. I follow the same philosophy in the winery and vineyards. I am working with two great winemakers who spend many hours with myself and Stephen Skelton determining the blend, dosage and taste in order to produce a really high quality sparkling rosé. Stefan Turner and his team run the vineyards, meticulously pruning by hand each vine, considering future years' growth as well as ensuring the vineyards are kept immaculately. Without great grapes one cannot make a high quality wine. Every little detail is thought about and debated. To achieve our aims our approach has to be without commercial constraint. We are a small boutique house with big ideas.

**Q How has the winery progressed? When do you expect to be in full production?**

**A** We originally had our wine made under contract at Chapel Down, with Owen Elias as the winemaker. 2010 was the first year that wine was made on the Hush Heath estate, in our state-of-the-art winery, a 750m<sup>2</sup> converted barn. Owen Elias remains at the helm as a consultant working with talented assistant winemaker, Victoria Ash. By 2014 we expect to be making about 100,000 bottles of Balfour per annum and approximately 10,000 bottles of a still rosé named after my daughter – Nannette's English Rose.

**Q Which has been the most satisfying award that Balfour Brut Rosé has won? How do you view wine competitions?**

**A** For me wine competitions are an important indicator of how my wine is perceived externally. They provide an independent indicator of where we sit in comparison with our competitors.

Without doubt the most satisfying award was won by our first real vintage – 2004 – which was released in October 2006 having had a mere 18 months on its lees. It won a Gold Medal and the English Trophy at the International Wine Challenge in 2008. This wine was sold out, to critical acclaim, in a matter of months. This was followed by the 2005, released in May 2008, which won a Gold Medal and the SEVA Wine of the Year Trophy, as well as going on to win a Gold Medal and the English Wine Trophy in the Decanter World Wine Awards the following year.

These awards really put the Balfour on the map and on many top restaurant wine lists.

**Q What plans do you have for the future?**

**A** The winery is designed to produce 100,000 bottles of sparkling rosé a year and our current plantings of just over 11.5 ha (28 acres) will get us close to this total. There is additional land on the estate that could be planted, and this is being considered. In 2009 we produced our first still wine – Nannette's English Rose – and this has been repeated in 2010. A small trial batch of 'Blanc de Blancs' has also been produced. The plan is to maintain the current price structure and build on brand quality – the wine currently sells at £34.99 per bottle in Waitrose and other retailers.

Our overall plan remains the same: to take on Billecart-Salmon Rosé and Laurent Perrier Rosé.

**Q The low grape yields in 2007 must have been quite a blow. How have you responded to this challenge?**

**A** 2007 was a difficult year. As in most of the UK, there was a lot of rain at the wrong time and sunlight was at a premium. Hush Heath was also caught out by mildew as we sprayed about 48 hours late. To avoid this reoccurring in the future we have installed a complete weather station in the vineyards, connected to all relevant vineyard operators' computers, to monitor weather conditions continuously and help forecast disease so that spraying can be better targeted.

We have also planted natural shelter which helps build warmth, gives better ripening and greater yield. On the other hand, these very same shelters can result in more disease in damp, warm years and we are developing a solution that fits our site. All vineyards now have foliage spreaders, which help keep the canes and fruit apart and allow for better light and air penetration and we de-leaf twice in the season, a light one shortly after *veraison* and another 3-4 weeks before harvest.

**Q Where and how do you market your wine? You currently sell through Waitrose. Do you consider some independents may be a good place to be?**

**A** We already sell through Waitrose, Harrods, Harvey Nichols and Bibendum, the wholesaler and specialist wine merchant, as well as other smaller specialist retailers. However, the majority of our wine is sold through top end bars, restaurants and the hotel industry. There is a real interest in English wine at present, spurred on by the Royal Wedding and the Olympics.





Most restaurants that sell Balfour Brut Rosé are well briefed to encourage customers to try 'something new'. They often sell by the glass which helps overcome resistance.

I am conscious of the considerable risk to pricing by selling too much through the retail trade. There is always considerable pressure on margins and pricing, combined with the need for offering special discounts at various times of the year, and regular contributions to retailers' marketing budgets.

Balfour Brut Rosé is always quoted as being the 'most expensive English sparkling rosé'. Our brand positioning is to price in comparison to the top French Champagne rosés.

Our marketing includes carrying out many tutored tastings, visits to the estate, giving our top customers handmade, engraved, Balfour solid copper ice buckets, participating in international tasting events in many parts of the world and general PR for the brand. We also have a first class, recently rebuilt website ([www.hushheath.com](http://www.hushheath.com)) which gives extensive information on the brand and its production covering all our harvests, as well as regular news updates. This is supplemented by the use of social media, such as twitter (@Balfour\_Rose) and Facebook. Additionally we send out a quarterly e-newsletter that is received by all our existing and prospective customers.

Anyone in the trade who helps sell Balfour Brut Rosé is invited to visit the vineyard during harvest to help pick grapes. This engenders a greater appreciation of provenance and the passion that goes into our wine, thus generating real loyalty. All the grapes are hand-picked and the picking gang will often include sommeliers from top restaurants, hotel staff, CEOs from some of my hotels and other related businesses, plus journalists and wine-writers. After picking we have a great party.

General public awareness has also grown as a result of our being selected for a number of prestigious events. Recently we were selected for the Naming Ceremony and Launch of P&O's latest cruise ship the Adonia. 800 people celebrated by drinking the Balfour on a hot sunny day, whilst a specially made magnum of Balfour was smashed in to the side of the ship by Dame Shirley Bassey, the ship's Godmother.

We were also delighted for the Balfour to be selected by British Airways, to be served on all their Worldwide flights in First Class and in their First Class lounge at Heathrow Terminal 5. This is the first time an English sparkling wine has been chosen for their First Class cabin service, and reinforces the message that we can compete with the top French Champagne houses.

**Q Are there any specific viticultural problems at Hush Heath?  
Are you moving to a sustainable culture?**

**A** In the last two years (2010 and 2011) spring frost has been a problem in some of the more frost-prone sections of the vineyards and we are considering ways to try and minimise the damage this causes. As for other problems, there is nothing that you wouldn't expect to see on vines in the UK's relatively cool, damp climate, and in order to harvest good yields of 100% sound grapes, we need to keep the vines sprayed regularly. The entire 400 acres is run on an environmentally friendly basis and we are always looking for better ways to manage the vineyards that reduce the impact upon the environment.

**Q What do you see as the challenges and potential for the UK wine industry?  
How do you see competition between English sparkling wine and Champagne developing?**

**A** It would be very useful to have an organisation like CIVC which could protect, encourage and provide advice for the English sparkling wine brand. The industry is splintered at the moment, but I see that this will change to protect the status of English sparkling wine and we will come together to promote greater recognition of the brand 'UK'.

English wine is now being taken seriously and there is, currently, a great deal of investment in vineyards and wineries. The UK wine industry must resist becoming a 'bulk' wine producer. Some vineyards that sell grapes are getting £2,000 per tonne for them and these are very good prices. However, as the more recently planted vineyards start cropping and national yields get bigger, these prices are bound to reduce. At the same time there is a risk that the quality of the grapes may suffer as more vineyards are planted, with many new entrants being attracted by the sudden revival of English wines.

Supermarkets have not helped Champagne with their continual downward pressure on prices and discounted promotions. The Champagne brand is being de-valued by poor quality and pricing. 20 years ago Champagne was something for special occasions, now it is considered an everyday drink by consumers and much of the Champagne caché has been lost.

This provides the opportunity for the English wine industry to compete with world class sparkling wines following exactly in the footsteps of the Champagne method. However, in order to achieve this there needs to be considerable investment in producing quality grapes, top class wineries and winemaking skills, as well as an uncompromising attitude to product quality, combined with strong brand marketing.

An organisation like the UKVA/EWP would need a strong leader to bring everyone on board and provide a united voice. Mike Roberts of RidgeView Wine Estate is doing a fantastic job as Chairman of English Wine Producers (EWP), but the industry as a whole needs to be even more ambitious for the future and, dare I say it, look to succession.

Southern England is ideally suited to challenge many of the mid-range Champagne houses. Generally English sparkling wine is drunk much too soon and needs longer maturation. For example, Hush Heath sparkling takes typically 2-3 years from picking to point-of-sale. However, we have carried out taste tests having kept the wines for over 5 years, and there is a significant improvement in the taste, complexity and length. I would like to move towards later releases, but this does have a significant inventory cost."

**Q** Is the vineyard making a profit? How long do you expect the period for return on investment to be? Have the VAT rises affected your pricing or sales?

**A** My approach is one of no-compromise and is passion driven, which is not really related to financial investment. The whole objective is to create a brand that people come back to because they like and trust it. Over the next five to ten years I would expect to make a small return on investment but, undoubtedly, the brand will have grown in value, although this is an intangible asset.

Most people accepted that taxes had to rise. I have not yet seen the VAT rise affect the sparkling wine industry in the UK, but we have had the Royal Wedding, and this has undoubtedly lifted sales over recent months. Hopefully this will continue into next year when the Olympics come to London.

Interest rate movements, however, may be crucial. If interest rates stay low consumers will continue to spend, but if interest rates increase, particularly over the rate of inflation, the trend will be to save.



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