



# CORAL RAG 6

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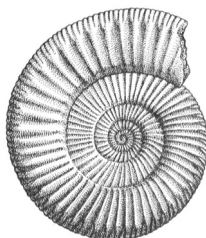
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## GRAPES AT FRILFORD HEATH: BOTHY VINEYARD

*Richard and Sian Linicki*

Bothy Vineyard was founded by Roger and Dorothy Fisher in the late 1970s and currently contains some of Oxfordshire's oldest vines. It was established during the second wave of modern vineyards at a time when proper viticulture in England was still highly experimental; Bothy was notably one of the few vineyards at this time for which the site was deliberately chosen. Twenty-eight years on, the consistent high quality of Bothy wine bears testimony to the Fishers' foresight. The authors took over the vineyard in 2002.

Bothy Vineyard occupies part of what used to be the grounds of Oakley House at Frilford Heath, just to the west of Abingdon and six miles from Oxford over Boar's Hill. It is named after the old bothy which used to be the gardener's shelter when it was still a grand estate in Victorian times.

The site for Bothy Vineyard was chosen after a long and detailed study of geological maps and soil surveys in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Hampshire. The best localities for vine growing were limited to a small band of Greensand outcrop, which is the basis of the excellent fruit growing area near Harwell Village, and this small patch of 'Frilford Sands' to the west of Abingdon. In mediaeval times this area belonged to Abingdon Abbey, and once supported extensive farms, and possibly even vineyards.

The sands in the vineyard are some 20ft deep, providing excellent drainage which promotes deep rooting and early flowering. The dry surface conditions mean that humidity is low and the air temperature warms up quickly in the sun. The soils are not over fertile, and this plays a useful role in limiting the vines' vigour, thereby stopping them from producing leaves rather than fruit! However, this also means that the soil has to be analysed regularly



*The old bothy*

to ensure that the correct balance of micronutrients is added from time to time. The vineyard area is also ringed on all sides by a high and established hedge which protects it from wind damage. Finally Frilford Heath is in a rain shadow, protected by the Downs, Chilterns and Cotswolds. On average, Frilford receives less rain than all the surrounding areas.

For those interested in natural history, the vineyard and its surrounding lands are blessed with an extremely rich diversity of plants. This community has developed because of the soil type and because there has not been a long history of soil enrichment. While some weed control is required to sustain the vines, early flowering plants such as mousetail, bladder campion and red campion, common, prickly and rough poppies, speedwells, forget-me-nots and field pansies thrive in the vineyard, providing a spotted blue and magenta carpet of flowers in May. This is followed by mulleins, musk thistles, viper's bugloss, bugloss, meadow cranesbill, several vetches and trefoils as well as a rich insect population, notably solitary bees and butterflies. The site is also home to adders, glow worms, badgers, foxes and a very diverse bird population.



To establish the vineyard the Fishers planted six varieties of vine they brought from Germany during 1977 and 1978. They are all German ‘new cultivars’ produced by leading viticultural institutes and were obtained by crossing the classic varieties and then selecting those seedling plants which produce the best wine. All the vines planted have been grafted onto phylloxera-resistant rootstocks which were chosen to be suitable for the dry soils found in the vineyard. Phylloxera, a disease also known as vine louse, is an infestation of aphids which live on the roots and leaves of vines. If uncontrolled, it will lead to the death of the vines. It largely destroyed the vineyards of France in the 1800s.



*Optima (left) and Ortega (right) grapes,  
two of the original six types planted.*

All in all 4000 vines were planted 28 years ago. In 2004 we planted another 2000 vines which included five different varieties. These were chosen to complement the existing plantings. It is important for the rootstocks of all the vines not to be too vigorous, otherwise the vines produce more leaves than fruit, which is a tendency in the wet English climate.

The original vineyard was based on the traditional but labour intensive training system developed by Guyot. Two one-year-old arms are each allowed to produce upward growing fruiting canes.

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## THE CONTRIBUTORS

CLAIRE BOLTON has been researching, writing and publishing books on local history and other topics for over 25 years. She is currently working for a PhD studying fifteenth-century printing methods.

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SHEILA DUNFORD has been interested in plants since early childhood. She has worked both for the Nature Conservancy (now English Nature) and the Weed Research Organisation.

RICHARD AND SIAN LIWICKI both started their professional lives as scientists. Richard currently works three days a week at Oxford University negotiating contracts between the University and industry for research collaboration. Sian is active in nature conservation in Oxfordshire.

ELIZABETH WHITEHOUSE is the Marcham Society archivist. She is currently working on the records of the local Stone families and their role in the commercial production of malt in the village where they owned one or more malhouses from the 1760s to the 1890s.