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Windmill tilting in the valley of the Holme

At *The Leisure Review* we admire people prepared to put a dream before the mundane pursuit of Mammon. In the Yorkshire Pennines Mick Owen found a right pair.

The War of the Roses may take up little more than a double history lesson in the lives of modern young people but like all cross-border rivalries the Lancashire versus Yorkshire antagonism is steeped in age-old bitternesses. From a distance, as Nancy Griffiths may have sung, the two northern counties look like identical twins squabbling over who is the better looking but, closer to, some notable differences are discernible. The beer brewed in Yorkshire is better and they have the edge when it comes to packaging tea but nobody sings the praises of their cheese. In the sporting field Lancashire's football teams are currently higher ranked, although "Dirty Leeds" have had their place in the sun, but working out which county is pre-eminent at cricket would take a knowledge of that game's multiple competition structure far beyond this correspondent's expertise. Lancashire has Eccles cakes but Yorkshire has rhubarb; Bumble hails from west of the Pennines, Michael Vaughan from the east. Two counties separated by common flat vowel sounds or is there more to it?

Drive the M62 from Manchester to Leeds and gloomy landscape gives way to gloomy landscape, while city matches city for industrial past and regenerated future. Take the same journey along more traditional routes, however, and differences are discernible. The A628 when it leaves the blighted village of Hollingworth and starts to climb eastwards soon becomes known as the Woodhead Pass. The blight is caused by the road itself which successive politicians, putting their own jobs before the environment and their constituents behind the haulage industry, have allowed to become a nose-to-tail procession of heavy goods vehicles. Nature does its best to slow down the thundering behemoths with landslips and snow storms but still the wagons roll and the beautiful Pennine moors are subjected to their stench and din.

Even in the watery autumnal sunshine of early October the glory of the hills which form England's backbone is extraordinary with the stepped reservoirs of the Longdendale Valley reflecting the hillsides' yellowing woodland, purpled moors and emerald-rich pastures. A painter who successfully captured the myriad gradations of the valley's colours on the drizzly Monday *The Leisure Review* chose to investigate a small corner of Yorkshire's leisure industry would stand accused of illustrative hyperbole such is the variety and depth of nature's colour scheme. But turn off the Woodhead and climb towards the summit of Holme Moss up a narrowing road which has challenged the world's grimpeurs (cyclists who specialise in climbing hills) and the colour leaches from the landscape.

One advantage the west of Yorkshire does has over its cross-Pennine neighbour will be familiar to anyone with an O Level in Geography. When warm, wet air is forced to climb over a mountain range the increase in height causes a drop in temperature which makes the moisture in that air coalesce and become precipitation. Or rain. The clouds, forced upwards, do what clouds do best and precipitate copiously on the upward slopes of, in this case, the Lancashire Pennines. Which means they are empty by the time they get to Yorkshire, where the weather is consequently that bit nicer. Drop down the Yorkshire side of Holme Moss on any normal day and the sky is bluer, the grass is greener, the sheep are that little bit fatter and the hills do fold into themselves with just a tad more sumptuous complacency.

On this Monday, however, the road tumbling down the eastward slope still twists and turns past picture-book weavers' cottages, an impossibly twee village cricket ground and the northern cliché that is the Holme Silver Band Room but it does so slicked by rain and bounded by what Mrs Goggins (of Postman Pat fame) would doubtless describe as "wet everything".

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With the low cloud vying with the valley bottom fog to see which can be the more perniciously damp it is a not a day for visitor attractions involving farmers' fields, especially muddy ones on steeping hillsides but, since the commission is to explore the Holmfirth Vineyard and its products, that is exactly what is on the agenda.

Vines are not normally found in Yorkshire, although the claim is that the Romans grew them when they were here. Most of the local acreage is given over to sheep and the seven acres currently playing host to six varieties of grape used to be employed for just that purpose. The story of how and why Ian and Rebecca Sheveling came to the valley, bought a derelict farmhouse, planted 7,000 vines and built a sleek modern winery forms the first part of the two-hour tour, along with a slippery stroll through the vines and an explanation of the planting, cultivation and choice of grape variety. For the thirty bedraggled souls who had been tempted to Holmbridge by an internet group discount deal one unanswered question remained as they climbed back up through the field toward the chrome and plate-glass restaurant that fronts the newly built winery: "Why would you?"

Trying to find one word to describe a man's, or in this case, and a woman's, obsession is never going to be easy but for the Shevelings the only fitting adjective is 'quixotic'. The windmills they are tilting at include a slope which faces south west not south, a location some five degrees north of all recommended limits for successful viticulture and a business plan owing more to serendipity than is sensible. Everything about the venture seems based on a cavalier approach to accepted norms of behaviour, a refusal to learn from other people's mistakes and a propensity to make decisions when drinking. The farmhouse is in a lovely spot, the new building is beautiful, with an interior designed to within an inch of its life, and the idea of raising a family on a vineyard, albeit in the Yorkshire Pennines, is idyllic but the spirit of one of Compo's wheezes is clearly haunting this whole adventure.

Once inside the winery, the final few nails are driven into the coffin of common sense. Yes, the Shevelings have invested in high-quality equipment and the services of Martin Fowkes – "one of the top wine-makers in the country" – and they are making wine for other vineyards while they wait for their own crop to be ready but the tasting session which traditionally completes such a tour though educational is not very pleasant. We are warned that the red is very young and very acidic. It is. We are persuaded that it will lose some of its acidity in time but our host is then honest to a fault in admitting that the lack of sun locally probably means they will never produce a truly rounded red wine.

The other wine we tasted was a rosé. Rosé wine is created by following the process used to make red for part of the journey through the maze of vats and pipes and then changing horses in mid-stream and making a white. Rosé wine is light, frivolous and pink; usually. Holmfirth Vineyard's rosé is red, and really quite forthright. To get across the virility of the wine the working title of "Rosé for Men" has survived on to the label and even an uncultured palette can discern an anomalous hint of fortified wine on first taste.

It can not be a good thing that a wine priced in double figures made with a white grape, that looks like a red and is sold as a rosé should taste like port but absolutely in character for a vineyard built by a former Formula 1 designer and a man who sold "boys toys" on the internet before buying a derelict farm during a drinking session and turning it over to a crop which cannot be expected to thrive. The pirate in us all would love the vineyard to flourish and for Ian and Rebecca to prove the cynics wrong. Indeed, The Leisure Review will doubtless return when there is a chance to sit in the sun but it will be to enjoy the view and a cream tea, not to fill the boot with the local vintage.

Mick Owen is the managing editor of *The Leisure Review*.

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