

In pursuit of the PINK-HEADED DUCK



When Charles Martell became the latest High Sheriff of Gloucestershire, he started discovering things about the county he never knew - not to mention things about himself too

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So first you swing up a hidden lane in Dymock. A lane meandering through the sort of greenery that tugs, unfashionably, at the heartstrings.

And then you come across a house (just beyond the 17th century distillery) (the oldest original working still-house in the British Isles, no less). A Georgian house – pretty as a child’s drawing; perfectly proportioned as a dolls’ house – with a three-hammer coat of arms above the porch.

The door to this house is half open; out of it peeps the solidity of a stone-slabbed floor and the welcome of a snug hall. There is an elegant understatement to the colour-scheme: calm, neutral. Which means your eye is automatically drawn to the splash of vividness in front of you.

These brighter colours belong to a man. A stern-looking man, shall we say. Possibly a man who has known both worldly triumph and unbearable loss. The triumph is in the rich clothes he wears; the loss is painted onto his dour, framed face.

“That’s my great grandfather, Woolmer White, High Sheriff of Norfolk in 1914,” Charles Martell nods, as his ancestor stares impassively back. (Sir Woolmer Rudolph Donati White, Bt,

I later discover, when I look him up.) “He was a very hard man – you can see that in the picture. Lost his son while he was High Sheriff. His father was a more genteel guy.”

When Hugh Tollemarche – a former High Sheriff of Gloucestershire himself – was visiting one day, he saw the picture and recognised the uniform old Woolmer was proudly sporting.

“I didn’t know what it was,” Charles shrugs. “Just thought it was how they dressed in those days.”

The portrait planted a seed in Hugh’s mind. Sometime later, he called back. “Charles, would you like to be High Sheriff?”

“And I said, ‘Yes... What is that?’ I hadn’t a clue. Hadn’t been on my radar.”

Maybe it should have been; for, as Charles went on to discover, his grandfather had also held that esteemed role, in Hampshire in 1935. And, more recently, his cousins, too.

“Must be a High Sheriff gene,” I suggest.

He points at Woolmer once again. For he has something more important to tell me; way more important than pomp and circumstance. “Now it was his father who married Emily Celestina Dymock. And that connects us here,” he finishes with satisfaction, an arm

sweeping across the land around him.

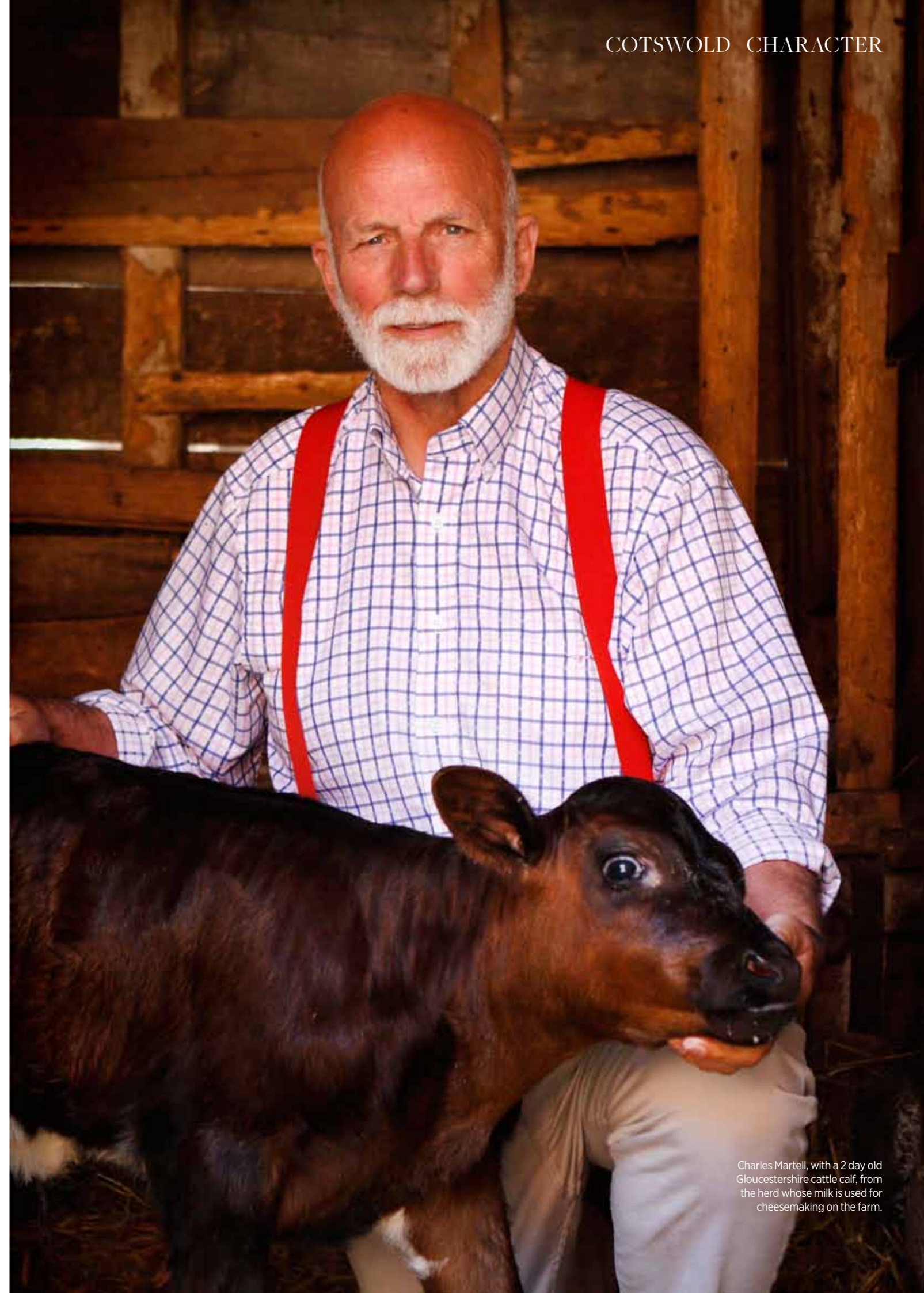
Yep. That’s the vital piece of information. Born a Sussex boy, Charles Martell adopted Gloucestershire when he came to work at Slimbridge, all those years ago. He deepened his roots when he bid on a rundown, patched up, crittall-windowed dower house in the Forest of Dean, along with 10 acres. He cemented it when he bought some Gloucester Cattle, pushing aside the cobwebs of the distillery to turn their milk into Single Gloucester cheese.

“It was 1972, when cheese wasn’t made in Gloucestershire. This was the time when you went into shops and all they had were blocks of cheddar.”

I’m guessing, I say to him, that discovering his great great grandmother was a Dymock must have felt like... I don’t know ... Coming home?

“Exactly. That’s so important to me. Some of these poor guys in business: they have to move every three years. They don’t belong anywhere and, to me, belonging is vital. I put down deep roots.”

He turns away from the house – that same house he bought some 40 years ago – and looks beyond the pond where the ducks hide in tall rushes. His face wears the same expression of pride with which Woolmer wears his regalia. ▶



Charles Martell, with a 2 day old Gloucestershire cattle calf, from the herd whose milk is used for cheesemaking on the farm.

“May Hill,” he says, pointing into the far, unrestricted distance. “I can lie in bed and look at May Hill.”

(I’m here to talk to Charles Martell about his being High Sheriff of Gloucestershire.

And I want to do that.

I’ve interviewed him more than once about other stuff. About how his Stinking Bishop cheese became a roaring success after Wallace and Gromit served it up in a film. (His cheeses are exported to more than 30 countries.) About how he resurrected the old distillery on his land, picked his traditional perry pear crop and turned it into Oowler, the purest and mellowest of spirits.

About his collection of Gloucestershire memorabilia – long ploughs, and farm wagons, and working-oxen paraphernalia: “Because they had been neglected and they belong here.”

I’ve spoken to him before about the old wheelwrights’ shop he found (a

veritable time-capsule) abandoned on his farm: “Including the pit, where they’d saw all the trees for making carts. An old boy in the village told us it was there, so we dug it out and restored it.

“That’s where you get the words ‘top dog’ and ‘underdog’. The guy on the top was the boss bloke; and the boy was in the pit: sweating, covered in sawdust. We’ve got the original saw.”

But what I’d really like to give you is a flavour of the conversation we have, that rises and falls like the contours of the land in front of us. A landscape of views combining age-old balance with a natural sense of rhythm.

Well, maybe. If I’ve time.)

He’s seen a lot, Charles Martell. He travelled aboard the HMS Tiger after leaving school – Shrewsbury – in 1964 for a six-month stint in the Falklands. He spent three months in the High Arctic, studying (a zoologist by profession) breeding wildlife; and worked on the Yukon Delta amongst

its indigenous people. An expedition to Tibet, too.

But it was 15 miles down the road in Gloucester; 25 miles away in Cheltenham, that he’s recently learned things he never knew before. His role as High Sheriff has propelled him into an unfamiliar urban environment.

Unfamiliar because he’d avoided it? “Yes. Don’t really get it. Towns.

“I went to the Rock [youth centre] in Cheltenham and I thought, ‘Gosh! Somebody’s going to thump me.’”

Thump?!? Lol. Why?

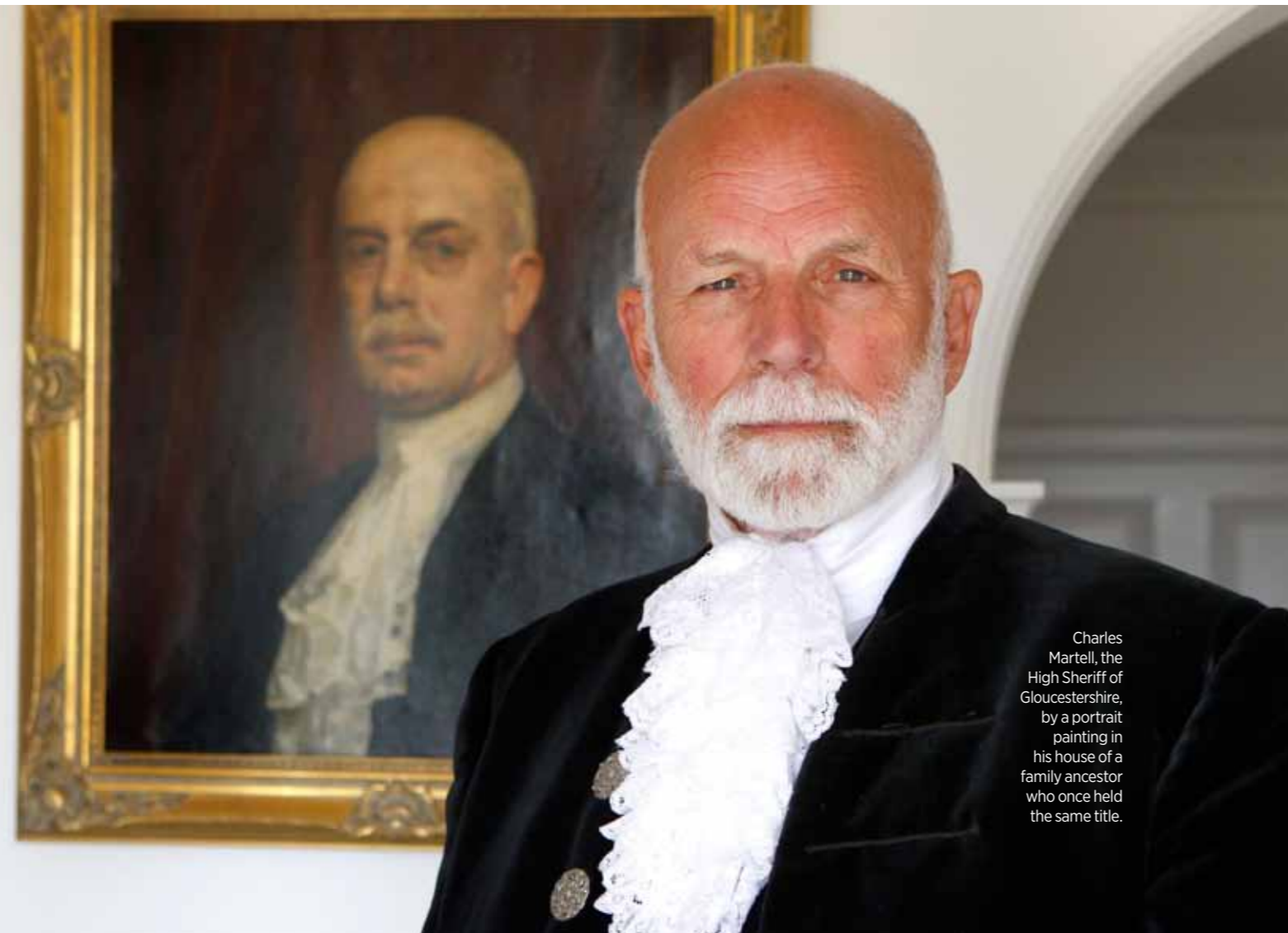
He laughs, too. “Because I’m a country boy and I don’t understand town people; they go round beating people up. But, in fact, no they don’t. You go there and everybody was calm. This is a ridiculous thing to say but they had their hair cut. The kids were being taught archery and they spoke beautifully.

“I said, ‘God it’s calm here. It’s wonderful.’

“And the bloke I was talking to said, ‘Well it’s not so calm here in the day when we have kids who are excluded [from school]’. But what a bloody good



Charles is a farmer, cheesemaker and distiller, renown for his perry, cider, single Gloucester cheese, and famously, Stinking Bishop cheese.



Charles Martell, the High Sheriff of Gloucestershire, by a portrait painting in his house of a family ancestor who once held the same title.

job they were doing, the people dealing with these youngsters. They weren’t screaming their leftiness at me; they were just doing a good thing. I suppose it reminded me of the masters we had at school. They were good role models.”

Teens in Crisis. That was another revelation: visiting a charity helping youngsters cope with anxiety.

“The woman who does it is bloody good, too. She’s really organised and positive. In fact, everywhere I go, it’s positive.”

What about the posh lunches he attends as High Sheriff, though? Surely he’s had some jolly good bean-feasts?

He looks at me as if I’m mad. The lunches are OK if something positive comes out of them, he says. And generally it does. But this isn’t about Charles Martell being wined and dined. It isn’t about Charles Martell at all.

He shakes his head.

“My grandfather’s coachman, Arthur Showell, became head coachman at the royal mews. He did a lot of good there – taught Prince Philip to drive. He’s in his 90s now and still remembered today.

“One day, he was driving the horses when the Queen was coming out of Buckingham Palace, in the interior courtyard. She was just about to get in

when she turned to Arthur and said, ‘We’re all actors upon a stage’. And I know exactly what she feels; it’s all about the position not the person. If I can do a bit of good with that jacket on...”

With that jacket on, he’s already seen things that have utterly inspired him. He’s seen things that have moved him, too.

On Armed Forces Day, an old soldier called him ‘Sir’.

“I said, ‘No, no, no!’ – it’s moving me now - ‘You’re sir, not me.’”

He pauses to reflect. “On the other hand, I am ‘sir’ because of the thing I’m wearing. It’s not me who’s sir; it’s the uniform.

“But that hits you, when dear old pensioners show you such respect. On this particular day, the police cadets were fainting in the heat – they were only 14-year-olds – so water was

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brought round. They offered it to the pensioners: ‘No, I’m on duty’. You don’t drink water on parade.”

No, it’s not the lunches that Charles Martell talks about. It’s the problems he’s seen since his year began, back in March. Broken families. Crowded cities. Concrete jungles.

So what can we do to solve these issues?

“The one big elephant in the room for me – not for the rest of the world, I’m sure – but for me, is population growth. Tonight, at midnight, there will be 200,000 more people on earth than the night before. It’s huge. Nobody talks about it.”

As we ruminate on this imponderable, there’s a sudden fracas in the air above us.

“Blimmin’ old jay. Look!” he points. “The blackbirds are seeing him off. They get a mob culture to drive him off ▶

‘It’s all about the position, not the person. If I can do a bit of good with that jacket on...’

because that jay is after their chicks.” Perhaps he’s worried about population growth.

“They’ve got equal balance, unlike us. There’s nobody knocking us on the head except each other and that’s not enough.”

He nods at the view again. At May Hill in the distance.

“I’m an idealist. That’s the view I’d like for everyone. They’re building 2,000 houses in Ledbury and every house has room for 2.5 cars.”

Nuts. I don’t mean the world – though that, too. Sorry to change the subject but I mean Gloucestershire nuts. I knew about local apples and plums and pears. But, until I researched Charles Martell again the other day, I never knew there were intrinsic Gloucestershire nuts.

I’ve told you about him being High Sheriff – and I’ve enjoyed it, don’t get me wrong. I haven’t yet mentioned his wife, Sasha, and their daughter - his youngest – Emily, who at 12 is turning out to be an out-of-the-box thinker, just like her dad.

But now it’s my turn. It’s my interview. And what I love talking to Charles Martell about are things peculiar to Gloucestershire.

“I never knew there were nuts,” I say.

“Two,” he clarifies.

One was Excelsior of Taynton – a walnut with a wonderful backstory. It was picked by Elsie Davies from a tree on her Taynton farm, for a competition held in 1929. She named it herself. “They called things ‘excelsior’ in those days.

“And it won the competition of 600 entries – best walnut in Britain. Very high oil content. And then what happened? We lost it. Typical Brits. You’ve got the best walnut so you lose it,” Charles Martell gently scoffs.

He wasn’t going to be beaten, though. He was on the phone one day to Nick Dunn of Frank P Matthews Fruit Trees of Tenbury Wells, talking about excelsiors lost. Nick had just been given a map from the 1930s. And there,



Charles Martell, in his distillery, a state of the art copper pot-still installed to distil fermented perry pears and cider and perry from the farm.

unbelievably, in Leigh Sinton – out in the Malverns – was marked a lost Excelsior of Taynton tree! “Nick went to find it – said it was like the South American rainforest in there – and he did find it. And propagated it. It’s a bloody good nut.”

They say walnuts are good for you. When Elsie died, aged 102 in 2014, Charles gave the eulogy at her funeral.

And the second nut?

“The contorted hazel. Instead of growing straight, it’s all contorted. And that was found in Frocester; I imagine the old boy was trimming the hedge in the winter, which they did by hand, and he saw a seedling hazelnut, which was all wiggly. So he dug it up and now you find it all over the world in gardens.”

To be honest, I’ve missed out most of our rolling conversation. Only through

necessity. But, come on. I’ve given you some good stories in there.

About things lost. And found.

About saw pits and pears and walnuts, among others.

Oh! And the pink-headed duck. Charles Martell is a sponsor of a wonderfully dotty expedition to rediscover a large diving duck last seen in India in 1949. Might be in Burma. Definitely not in Gloucestershire.

Why is it important to find these things, I ask Charles Martell?

For the second time in one day, he looks at me as if I’m the one who’s crazy.

“A pink-headed duck!” he exclaims. “Why would you not want to find it?” ♦

To find out more about the office of High Sheriff of Gloucestershire, visit highsheriffgloucestershire.org.uk