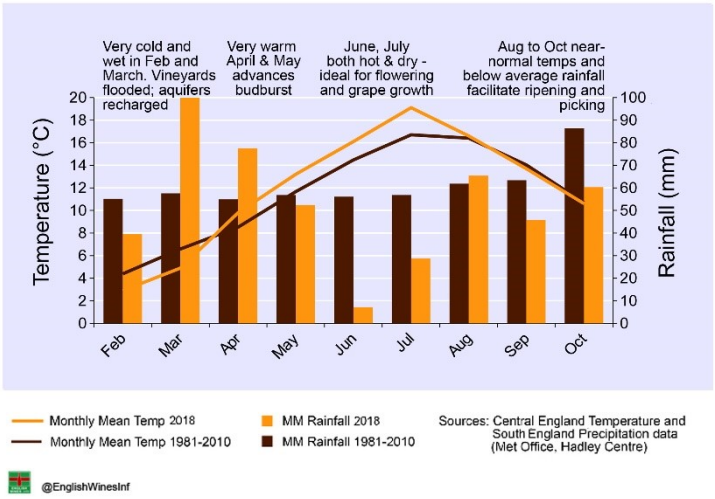
Harvest Report - 2018

There are two schools of thought about UK vintage 2018. The first is that it was a portend of things to come; a harbinger of early, ripe, large harvests that we will be seeing many more of in the post-Brexit future. The other view (and the one I am more inclined towards) is that it was a climatic abnormality, a year when the stars aligned and four perfect weeks of weather, centered on flowering, managed to produce a massive harvest (around three times the hitherto average yield) with bunch weights off the scale, and sugar levels to match and that we will be unlikely to see its like for years to come. Of course, UK viticulture has seen large years before: 1983, 1992, 2006, 2014 – all years with well-above average yields – but nothing on the scale of 2018. Peter Hayes considers that the good weather in late spring and early summer 2017 (which enabled many growers to produce good crops even after having been frosted) was propitious for fruit formation in the growing canes which played a significant part in the size of the 2018 harvest.

2018: Temperature & Rainfall Overview

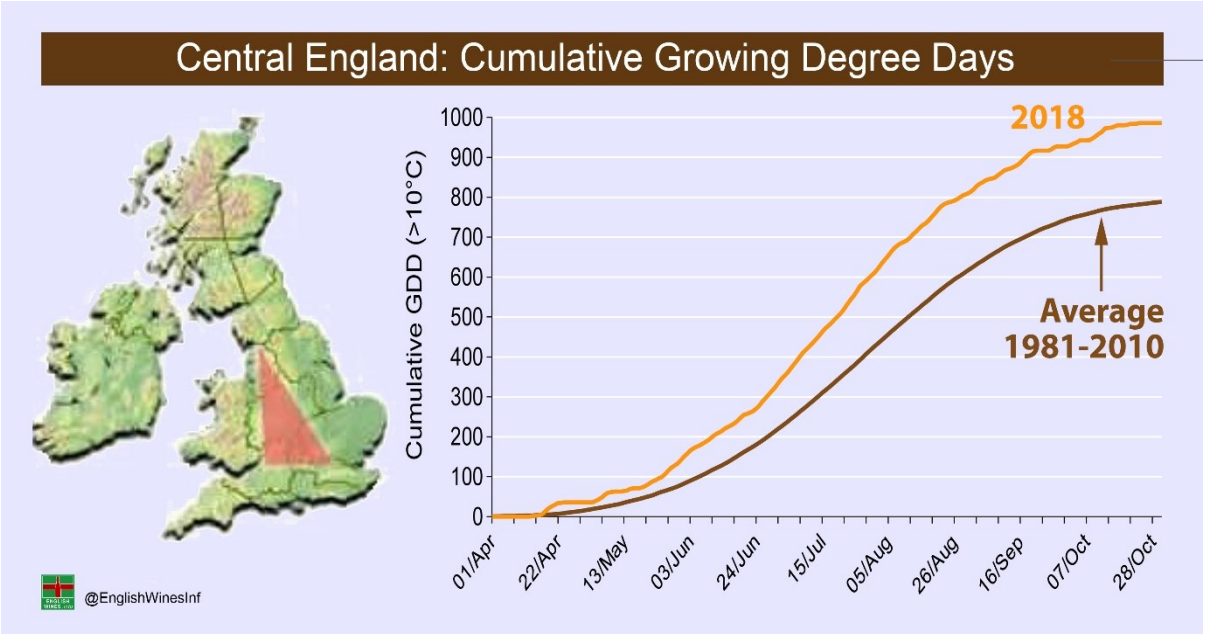


The start of 2018 was nothing special and was dominated by what journalists nick-named 'the Beast from the East' which, starting on 22 February, brought rain, snow and icy weather to much of the country for the next four weeks. Consequently, February and March temperatures were lower than the LTA[1] although rainfall was higher and by the end of March, aquifers were well topped up. The beginning of April was still cold, although some vineyards reported buds bursting on the 14 April, and by the middle of April things were not looking too good. Many growers thought we were in for another difficult year. Heavy rains meant that some new vineyard sites were too wet to work and, in some cases, planting of new vines was delayed. However, as April turned into May, things changed. The last few days of April were unseasonably warm, 25°C was recorded in some vineyards, but the beginning of May saw frost in some parts of the country – Hampshire seemed to be the worst affected county – but most vineyards in the South-East and East Anglia escaped any significant damage. The rest of May was warmer than usual and the month as a whole was almost 2°C over the LTA. Between mid-May and mid-June, the season went from being two to three weeks late to two to three weeks early, a turnaround that I would never have believed possible and have not witnessed before. Temperatures during the early part of June were unseasonably high, and flowering started in some Chardonnay vineyards on 9 June which must be the earliest date ever. The last 3 weeks of June saw perfect flowering weather in most well-sited vineyards including three consecutive days with

[1] LTA - long-term average 1981-2010

temperatures of 30˚C or more, a very rare occurrence in the UK for this month. This amazing weather allowed a high percentage of flowers to set, and, more importantly, helped the 'rachis' (the actual structure of the bunch) to expand and grow, thus making space for all those grapes. This was the principal reason bunch weights were in many cases two to three times their normal size, a factor which helped many growers pick two to three times their normal harvest (it is reliably reported that one bunch of Cabernet Cortis was just over 500 grammes).

The summer was good, with July being the second-warmest on record with temperatures significantly over the LTA. The Met Office reported that the period 1 June – 31 August (their 'summer') was the warmest since their records began in 1910. *Véraison* was earlier than normal, starting in some varieties in mid-July, although the Champagne varieties mostly turned at the start of August. Some useful rain came at the end of August (the August Bank Holiday weekend was a wash-out) and the beginning of September, a factor which helped swell yields in many vineyards. One grower with decades of experience of UK viticulture said that this rain alone accounted for the much higher yields in his vineyard. Harvesting started in some vineyards at the end of August (Ortega at Biddenden on 28th) and by mid-September a lot of growers were picking. A combination of a very heavy crop in many vineyards, plus warm dry weather for much of September and October meant that growers had the luxury of allowing their grapes to hang and ripen fully and taken as a whole, there were grapes being harvested somewhere in the UK for over two months.



2018 was undoubtedly a remarkable year for the UK. GDD[2] almost touched 1,000, a 25 per cent increase over the LTA of 800, a factor which went a long way to explaining the very high sugar levels. Some growers had Chardonnay at 12.5-13.5% abv and yields in some vineyards got up towards 25 t-ha (10 t-acre) for this variety. Several large producers reported average yields over all their vineyards of between 12 and 15 tonnes-ha (4.86 – 6.00 t-acre),

[2] GDD – Growing Degree Days April-October 10˚C and above.

The total UK yield according to the Wine Standards Branch (WSB) was 98,289-hl (13.11 million 75 cl bottles), well over twice as large as the previous largest harvest (2014 – 48,267 hl). Average yield per hectare is not known at this stage (as the WSB appears not to have the figures to hand) but an educated guess puts the yield per hectare at around 45 hl-ha, almost double the previous 5-year (2013-17) average of 24.32 hl-ha, although only 20 percent higher than the previous highest yield per hectare which was 27 vintages ago in 1992 when it was 37.7 hl-ha. The current 5-year average (2014-18) yield is now 28.47 hl-ha which is still only around 4 tonnes-ha or 1.65 tonnes-acre.

Results from 2016, 2017 and 2018.

Yields Tonnes-ha	2016	2017	2018	Average 2016-18	Av. 2016-18 t-acre
Reichensteiner	8.36	4.37	16.60	9.78	3.96
Seyval blanc	6.40	11.24	9.38	9.01	3.64
Regent	No data	5.70	11.09	8.40	3.40
Rondo	No data	9.24	7.30	8.27	3.35
Meunier	5.88	5.24	9.53	6.88	2.79
Pinot Blanc	No data	4.86	7.85	6.36	2.57
Chardonnay	5.58	4.42	8.67	6.22	2.52
Madeleine x Angevine 7672	6.05	5.64	6.70	6.13	2.48
Pinot noir	3.00	4.31	7.93	5.08	2.06
Bacchus	3.07	4.21	5.48	4.25	1.72
Pinot Noir Précoce	1.81	3.50	6.62	3.98	1.61
Other varieties*	4.26	3.68	4.10	4.01	1.62
Average all varieties listed	**4.93**	**5.53**	**8.44**	**6.53**	**2.64**

The table above gives the yield data from the major UK varieties for 2016, 2017 and 2018. Only Reichensteiner, Seyval blanc, Regent and Rondo break the 8 t-ha (3.25 t-acre) mark, with the Champagne varieties nicely grouped around the 6-7 t-ha (2.43-2.83 t-acre) mark. Of course, when you take into account the commercial value of the different varieties, then a different picture would emerge. Bacchus is showing quite a low yield which I do not believe is really representative of the variety.

Yields Tonnes-ha	2016	2017	2018	Average 2016-18	Av. 2016-18 t-acre
Top 25% of vineyards - all varieties	8.84	9.57	10.52	9.64	3.90
Middle 50% of vineyards - all varieties	4.41	4.12	6.16	4.90	1.98
Bottom 25% of vineyards - all varieties	1.36	1.31	1.63	1.43	0.58
All Champagne varieties	4.49	4.55	8.71	5.92	2.39
All non-Champagne varieties	4.57	4.82	8.35	5.91	2.39
All varieties	**4.54**	**4.68**	**7.12**	**5.45**	2.20

As ever, the top quartile of growers by yield managed much better results that the other 75 per cent, with yields almost double those of the middle 50 per cent. Champagne varieties

were remarkable consistent over the three years which, considering the frosts in 29017, says something about the varieties.

Yields Tonnes-ha	2016	2017	2018	Average 2016-18
East Anglia	6.89	4.35	6.92	6.05
South East	4.31	4.61	9.90	6.27
South West	3.95	5.82	5.52	5.10
Thames and Chilterns	2.59	5.62		4.11
Wessex	2.08	3.44	9.93	5.15

Regional performance shows England's two driest regions, East Anglia and the South East pretty even in terms of yield, with the wetter and windier parts of the country trailing behind.

Stephen Skelton MW
August 2019