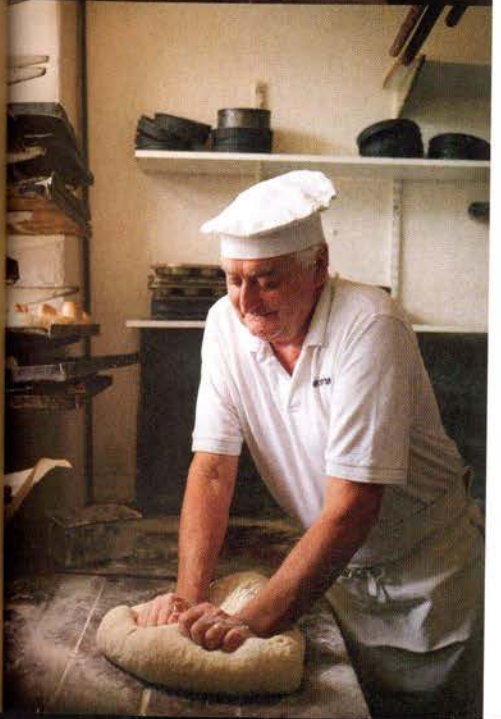
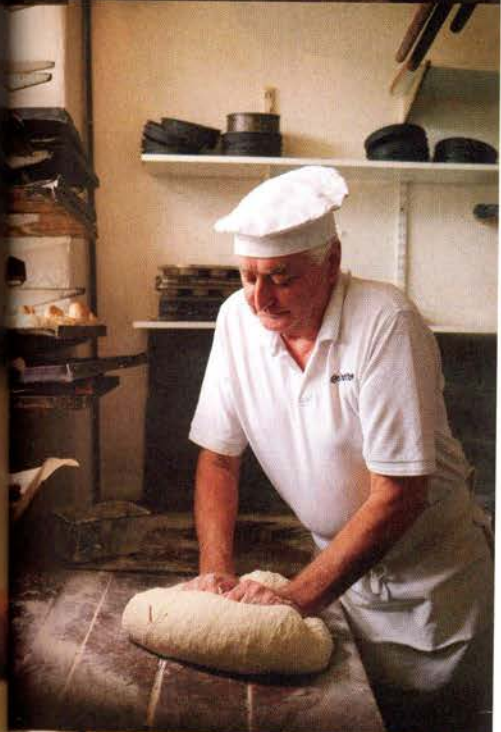


For 50 years, Roger Oxford has risen at 2am six days a week to bake fresh batches of crusty bread – and still enjoys it



# BORN & BREAD

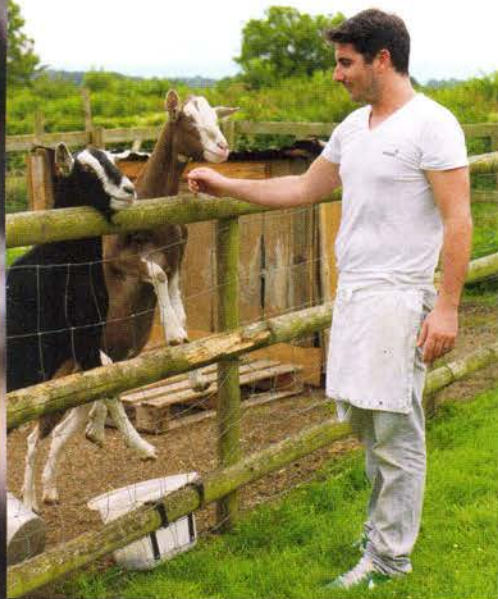
Keeping it in the family means more to the Oxfords than most. Celebrating the centenary of their bakery this year, the father-and-son team maintain an enduring passion for their craft

WORDS BY REBECCA ATKINSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRISTIAN BARNETT

**T**he hands of Roger Oxford have produced more than five million loaves of bread in the 50 years he has been baking. "My earliest memory is of the noise and clatter of loaves being knocked out of tins," Roger says. "We lived upstairs and, as a boy in bed at night, I would hear my father and grandfather baking below." Set amid the hills of Dorset, in the pretty village of Alwston near Sherborne, the same flint-and-brick farmhouse has housed four generations of the same family, working the same oven for a century.

"My grandfather, Frank Oxford, came to the area to do an apprenticeship with the Co-op bakery," explains Roger, weighing off hunks of stretchy dough into a row of tins. "He then worked for a bakery called Hodges on this same site. In 1911 he bought Hodges, and that was the start of Oxfords Bakery." After Frank, his son Ron took over, baking daily until his own retirement in 1987.

Today, Oxfords is still very much a family business with breads, cakes and biscuits baked by Roger and his youngest son, Steve. The storeroom upstairs from where flour was once sent down polished wooden shutters into the mixers below is where Roger's wife Sue manages the bakery accounts. In Canford Cliffs, Poole, daughter-in-law Gemma runs one of Oxfords' four shops in the region, and Roger's two older children, Dave and Emma, help out with events and farmers' markets. When Frank Oxford began ▷



The warmth and homely wafts of baking bread are among many things that have remained resolutely unchanged

the oven was wood-fired, the dough mixers were powered by hand or steam, and bread was delivered door-to-door by hand or horse-drawn cart. "We still have the original wooden delivery hand cart and Victorian drum mixer," Roger says.

Powered by a stationary steam engine and in full working order, the Victorian mixer is thought to be the last remaining one in Britain. Since 1945, the bakery has used electric mixers, but the original is exhibited and put into action for breadmaking demonstrations at steam shows and country fairs.

Oxfords' oven stands in the same spot it has always been, and the warmth and homely wafts of baking bread are among many things that have remained resolutely unchanged. "We have been trading with the same millers for 100 years," says Roger, pouring flour from a dusty paper sack into a giant mixing bowl. Stoate & Son at Cann Mills in Shaftesbury use a water mill to grind their flour, meaning that when Roger and Steve bake using Stoates' flour and their steam mixer at the shows and fairs, they can boast probably the only electricity-free bakers' loaf in the country.

Undeniably, so much of Oxfords' charm lies in the upholding of its traditions, but like many small businesses, it hasn't always

been plain sailing, and the family has had to diversify to keep up with changing demands. "I joined Oxfords when I was 14, in 1961, with the quiet ambition of keeping it going until it reached its 100th year," says Roger as he closes the cast-iron door after loading the oven with a fresh batch of sandwich loaves. "At the time the business was under threat because the nearby Co-op had started delivering sliced loaves door-to-door. Machine slicing was a new innovation back then." Now the father-and-son baking team say their biggest threat comes from supermarkets and factory bakeries: "There used to be ten independent bakeries in the area, now there are just two of us."

Sixty years ago, Oxfords baked just three types of bread – a square sandwich, a split loaf and a cottage loaf. "People shop differently now," Steve says. "We have to give them something special." So today they hand bake more than 30 types of bread, including customer favourites the Danish cob, a long-fermented malted wheat loaf, and the Dorset Blue Vinny loaf, made with an unpasteurised blue cheese produced two miles away.

With Roger set to retire next year, the job of steering Oxfords into its second centenary will soon be passed once more from father ▷

**ABOVE** While maintaining family traditions, Steve also brings fresh and inspiring ideas to the business – Oxfords now bakes more than 30 varieties of bread, and customers can visit the bakery and attend classes to learn how to make bread themselves



## BREAD BASICS

- 80% of all UK bread is produced by just a handful of factories.
- The number of independent bakeries nationally has dwindled from 15,000, 20 years ago, to just 3,000 today.
- Bread consumption per person has declined by half since 1960.
- £50 million worth of loaves bought each year are thrown away untouched.
- Visit [realbreadcampaign.org](http://realbreadcampaign.org) for more information. Read *The Rise of Real Bread* (CL April 2010) and find recipes and more artisan bakers at [countryliving.co.uk](http://countryliving.co.uk)



to son; Steve is a moderniser buzzing with ideas and passionate about keeping the family craft of real breadmaking alive.


"Mass-produced food is seldom touched by human hand," says an impassioned Steve, sugaring a tray of deliciously rustic looking shortbread and raisin biscuits. "These are rolled and stamped by hand. Each one is different and made with genuine care."

It is this attention to detail and the unique family history that have contributed to Oxfords' enduring success. "Our customers, some of whom are in their 90s, can remember us from their childhood. They like to recount tales of my grandfather, and how they remembered collecting warm bread straight from the bakery," Steve says. "Our first shop, in Sherborne, wasn't opened until 1969," Roger explains. "Until then people came to the bakery to buy their bread or had it delivered."

With the recent closure of the Alwinston village shop, Oxfords has returned to its roots of selling bread fresh from the baker's oven once more. Under the innovative direction of Steve, a fourth shop has been opened on the site of the Alwinston bakery, selling milk, eggs and, of course, a range of fresh bread. Locals who have never visited before are popping in to buy supplies and visit

the resident pet rabbits, goats and chickens. And now with the introduction of breadmaking courses for both adults and children, local people are using the oven, too. Steve's floury hands start to gesticulate with enthusiasm as he talks: "People love to come and see where the bread is made and get involved with baking themselves."

Roger will be entering retirement with no regrets. "My aim was to keep the bakery going to the 100th year. I've done it," he says. "I've been up at 2am six days a week for 50 years but I can honestly say that I have enjoyed every day."

"I am so proud of my dad," says Steve, looking around the history-steeped walls of the bakery. "By rights, Oxfords shouldn't be here. It's only through Dad's sheer hard work and dedication that there is anything left for my generation to take over at all."   
*Oxfords Bakery, Alwinston, near Sherborne, Dorset (01963 23214; [oxfordsbakery.co.uk](http://oxfordsbakery.co.uk)). Oxfords' breadmaking classes start from £50 for a half-day adult's class (children's workshops from £4.50). CL readers are offered a ten per cent discount on classes until the end of the year. You can also sample Oxfords' baking with a mail-order box of its speciality breads.*

**Three generations of the Oxford family have run the bakery, which continues to produce freshly baked traditional breads and cakes on a daily basis, and has successfully overcome the rise of mass-produced loaves from large factory bakeries**