

# Stories of Worcestershire Orchards

Celebrating old orchards in Worcestershire and the people who care for them



*Worcestershire*  
*Biological*  
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Hope Cottage Seedling, raised in 1900 at Rochford, Tenbury Wells.  
Photo © Wade Muggleton

Worcestershire is a county rich in orchard history and heritage. With soils and climate well suited to fruit growing, the expansion of the railway and canal systems during the 19<sup>th</sup> century offered a revolution in the bulk transportation of fresh produce to new and more distant markets. This spurred the planting of orchards on a large scale and fruit came to play a dominant role within the local economy for many decades.

There was a steady increase in the amount of orchard planted across Great Britain from the 1870s through to the domestic fruit industry's heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, interrupted only by the First World War. In 1951 Government agricultural censuses showed a total of 113,000ha of orchard across Britain: by 1995 this had declined to just 28,000ha.

As the British fruit industry was out-competed by produce from abroad our older orchards became too unprofitable and labour intensive to maintain and were generally removed and the land converted to other uses. Those that were forgotten, neglected, or kept purely for nostalgias sake were no longer managed for commercial production. The skills to maintain these large, traditional standard orchards and knowledge of the local varieties of fruit growing in them gradually began to be lost.

Today, there is growing recognition of the importance of these old orchards to Worcestershire's landscape, wildlife and our rural heritage. The concept of local distinctiveness, first championed by Common Ground in the 1980s, can be applied in particular to orchards with their rich social and cultural history. It is vital that we support orchard owners and conservation groups and volunteers in restoring and managing these sites and documenting all the many facets of this heritage before it is lost altogether. The Worcestershire Orchards website ([www.worcestershireorchards.co.uk](http://www.worcestershireorchards.co.uk)) aims to be a central point of information for those interested in the history and heritage of orchards in the county.

There are many different circumstances behind why people come to own an old, traditional orchard and varying reasons why people make the decision to maintain or restore one in the face of generally nil financial return. I have had more than one owner say to me 'I thought I was the only one daft enough to be doing this', perhaps indicating that awareness of the true amount of old orchard remaining in the county and the existence of other people also striving to protect and maintain an old orchard is low.

Looking at the work of orchard groups in other counties, and speaking to owners who are members of these groups, it is obvious that the mutual support network and access to sources of help and advice that these groups provide is immensely valuable. Taking on an old orchard and embarking on its restoration can be hugely daunting, whether it is an orchard that has lain neglected on your family farm for 40 years or one that you have acquired along with a house on relocating to a rural village. There are also many folk who have the remnants of an old orchard in their garden, in the form of one or two trees left over when the orchard on which their house now stands was built on. Many people are nervous to get started on restoration work, fearing that in ignorance they will do more harm than good to the health of ageing trees.

This booklet looks at some of the reasons for the survival and continued management of orchards across Worcestershire. I wanted to put the spotlight on a few owners and managers who are doing a fantastic thing in trying to ensure the continued existence of their orchard and I believe all of the orchards included here have something a little bit interesting and unique about them. I hope the booklet will provide a source of inspiration and reassurance to others trying to do the same thing: to preserve and celebrate your piece of our county's rich orchard heritage.

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Rebecca Lashley

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Photographs by Rebecca Lashley unless otherwise credited

## Daffurn's Orchard, Kemerton

### **A Community Orchard owned by the Kemerton Conservation Trust and managed by the Kemerton Orchard Workers volunteer group**

Thanks to Neil and Olivia Chance and Steve and Anna Fletcher

This small orchard can be found in the middle of picturesque Kemerton village, tucked up a quiet lane that winds its way up the southern side of Bredon Hill. The orchard, along with the cottage to which it originally belonged, was owned by the Daffurn family for around 100 years before passing into community and conservation ownership in 2000.

During the final years of her life Betty Daffurn, the last surviving member of the family, became increasingly concerned about the future of the orchard and the potential threat of housing development if the site ever came onto the open market. To ensure its continued survival she dedicated the orchard to the village in her will on the condition that £5,000 could be raised for its purchase. A group of neighbours living next to the orchard shared Betty's desire for its preservation and, taking up the challenge, managed to raise £9,000 in just three weeks through local fundraising. The money was donated to Kemerton Conservation Trust, a local charity established in 1989, who bought and accepted legal ownership of the orchard on behalf of the community.

By this point the orchard was in a much neglected state, with encroaching scrub and dilapidated fencing. The remainder of the money raised was immediately spent on urgent fencing repairs to secure the boundary. The oldest surviving tree on the site was a magnificent 200-year old Barland perry pear: many of the original trees are cider and perry varieties with Betty's father once well-known as a cider and perry maker who supplied at least one of the local pubs.

The group who led the fundraising effort took on the ongoing care of the orchard, supported by Kemerton Conservation Trust, and in 2004 formally established themselves as the Kemerton Orchard Workers. 25 local residents are now members of KOW and monthly work parties regularly attract 8-10 people. Management effort is split equally between caring for the fruit trees and encouraging wildlife into the wider orchard environment: dead timber is left standing or stacked in piles, bird and bat boxes have been installed and bee hives are maintained by a local

beekeeper. The grass under the trees receives an annual hay cut, raked off by the volunteers, followed by 3-4 weeks of aftermath grazing by a dozen or so borrowed sheep. The result of this sensitive regime of grassland management is a glorious display of spring flowers.



Photo © Kate Aubrey

Fundraising to support the group and the orchard is another task the Kemerton Orchard Workers have embraced. They were successful in applying for a grant of £2,000 from the Community Champions fund in 2004, which paid for new tree planting, tree guards and training for the volunteers in pruning and general orchard maintenance. They now organise and run a popular Apple Day in the village every October and most of the fruit from the orchard is turned into juice during this event in just a few short hours. An annual photographic competition supplies images for a calendar sold by the group to raise money and occasionally other local orchard owners have made a donation in return for pruning services. Together these activities cover most of the group's costs, including Public Liability insurance, and the group has even been able to purchase its own juicing equipment for the Apple Day which is hired out to others when not in use.

Organised events such as the Apple Day and blossom picnics are always well attended and general support amongst the wider community for the conservation of the orchard is very high. The group would love more local people to enjoy the orchard on an informal basis, by dropping in to simply sit and enjoy the peace and quiet. There seems to be almost a reluctance to disturb the tranquillity of this little spot, with many walkers stopping to admire the orchard over the gate before continuing up the lane. In common with many volunteer groups the Kemerton Orchard Workers have found converting passive support into active involvement in practical tasks difficult, particularly from younger generations in the village who have the demands of jobs and family to keep them busy. The group know this is an ongoing challenge to ensure the continued preservation of the site in years to come.

**“Events involving the orchard are a great way of bringing the community together, it’s such a valuable asset for the village.” ...Kemerton Orchard Workers**

#### **Further information**

The Kemerton Orchard Workers can be contacted via the Kemerton Conservation Trust [www.kemerton.org](http://www.kemerton.org).

The volunteers organised their training courses in fruit tree care and management via Pershore College [www.warwickshire.ac.uk/colleges/pershore\\_college.aspx](http://www.warwickshire.ac.uk/colleges/pershore_college.aspx).

Vigo are a good, reputable source of equipment and supplies for making juice and cider [www.vigopresses.co.uk](http://www.vigopresses.co.uk).

Advice on setting up a community orchard group can be obtained from the Community Greenspace team at Worcestershire County Council [communitygreenspace@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:communitygreenspace@worcestershire.gov.uk).

## *Southern Long Ground, Hampton*

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### **A traditional market garden plot rented under the Evesham Custom**

*Thanks to Phil Crowther*

The Evesham Custom of land tenancy is a quirk of legislation lending an extra layer of local distinctiveness to Worcestershire’s orchard heritage. The system was formalised in 1895 under an amendment to the Agricultural Holdings Act 1883, establishing a legal basis for an informal arrangement which had become the norm throughout the Vale of Evesham by that time. Standard 12-month market garden tenancies and the right of landlords to give notice at will gave tenants little incentive to invest in the improvement of land or in the planting of long-term crops. By gentleman’s agreement a custom had emerged whereby an outgoing tenant set a level of compensation payable directly to him by the incoming tenant, reflecting any significant investment the former may have made. The Act that formalised this arrangement defined specific crops and land uses where the custom could be applied and the planting of fruit trees is one of these exceptions, explaining in part why orchards became such an extensive part of the Vale landscape in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The landlord in the case of Southern Long Ground is Christ Church College in Oxford. The land south of Hampton is divided into a patchwork of market garden strips of 2 or 3 acres each, almost all owned by one of the Oxford Colleges or the Diocese of Worcester. A number of tenants manage more than one strip, some adjacent, some widely scattered, and several big commercial growers have land here. Some plots have been rented by the same Hampton family for generations. A significant amount of the land was at one time dedicated to plum orchards but this has given way now to more profitable crops including the asparagus for which the Vale of Evesham is so well known, asparagus being another crop specified under the Evesham Custom.

Phil Crowther took on the tenancy at Southern Long Ground after relocating from London to Evesham 35 years ago. A busy paramedic, he learned of the plot’s availability following the death of an elderly gentleman he had attended on a 999 call. Encouraged by his wife to take on the site as an allotment, an Evesham Custom payment of £400 was made to the gentleman’s estate and Phil took over the lease of a neglected plot that appeared little more than a 2 acre jungle of grass. Buried

within the undergrowth were around 200 largely quite old and decrepit plum trees: something of a shock to Phil who admits he knew nothing about orchard management or even much about the history and significance of orchards and market gardening around Evesham.

Neighbours put Phil in touch with an old Hampton nurseryman who visited the plot in the depths of that first winter and accurately identified the variety of each and every plum tree by bark and bud alone. The trees were mainly Victoria's, large and widely-spaced, and half were so dilapidated that they were taken out immediately while the rest were gradually pruned to reduce them to a more manageable size.



Orchard management courses at Pershore College were instrumental in the early days of taking on the site, supplemented by a large dose of trial and error and making efforts to absorb every little bit of advice that came along. Neighbouring smallholders, initially sceptical of how long Phil might last as a tenant and reticent to engage with the newcomer, gradually began to offer words of wisdom and practical assistance which eventually graduated to the sharing of stove-heated sheds, kettles and easy chairs. Phil believes the perceived usefulness of having a paramedic on hand was a key factor in cutting down the time taken to gain acceptance to just 2 or 3 years. Other locals in the area have not proved so neighbourly and attempts to keep chickens were abandoned after repeated thefts.

In the last decade Phil has added quite a number of new trees to fill the gaps that had developed, introducing less widely grown plum varieties and diversifying the fruit to include apples. The orchard occasionally receives an annual pest control spray from a neighbour, who extends the treatment to include Phil's trees if he thinks his own crop will be worth the effort of one, but otherwise no chemicals are applied. Grafting experiments have offered a further learning curve and the recent extension of his vegetable growing area into half of his neighbours plot will now allow more of the original space to be put back to orchard.

A general interest and pleasure in seeing wildlife on the plot, including hares and a variety of birdlife, now extends to providing habitat for the noble chafer beetle, evidence of which was found in several plum trees during a survey in late 2013. This part of the Vale of Evesham is a hot-spot for the beetle and other remaining old orchards within the Hampton complex are also known to support it. Dead but un-diseased timber is now kept on site, either placed within the boundary hedges or propped up in a sunny spot.

Despite the age of the trees and the attentions of deer from Bredon Hill, a sufficient crop of plums was produced in the early days to sell surplus fruit into the Evesham wholesale market, as during the 1980s there were still a number of local processing and bottling plants in operation. As well as providing fruit and veg and space for family get-togethers, working the plot is very much Phil's escape and means of winding down from an at-times stressful job. A small fruit and veg contract recently agreed with a local hotel has now focused his mind on planning for retirement from the ambulance service in 18 months-time and the possibility of becoming a full time hobby market gardener!

**“It provides the perfect stress relief. I felt like a city boy playing orchards when I first took on the plot, suddenly 35 years have slipped by and I’m almost a fully-fledged market gardener.” ...Phil Crowther**

#### **Further information**

The conservation of the Noble Chafer beetle is a high priority in Worcestershire. More details can be found on [www.ptes.org/campaigns/traditional-orchards-wildlife/noble-chafer-beetles/](http://www.ptes.org/campaigns/traditional-orchards-wildlife/noble-chafer-beetles/) or by contacting Worcestershire Biological Records Centre [www.wbrc.org.uk](http://www.wbrc.org.uk).

Historical information about market gardening and fruit orchards in the Vale of Evesham can be found on the website of the Badsey Society [www.badsey.net/oldhome.htm](http://www.badsey.net/oldhome.htm).

A number of festivals are held during the year to celebrate various aspects of the Vale of Evesham's horticultural heritage [www.visitwychavon.com](http://www.visitwychavon.com).

## Brook Orchard, Harvington

### **An orchard managed using organic and biodynamic principles**

*Thanks to Joanna Gordon-Thompson and Chris Brown*

The land that includes Brook Orchard is a traditional Vale of Evesham market gardening plot that came into private ownership at the end of the Second World War when the local authority offered plot-holders the option to purchase. The oldest Victoria plum trees on the site date from around this time. The strip of land consists of a flat, open area on the brow of a hill that then dips gently down a tree-covered slope, six rows wide and 55 long, to a small brook flowing along the southern boundary.

The land was purchased by the current owners 3 ½ years ago as a means to invest a small inheritance. Owning fruit trees was not the primary driver; instead a safe location for bee hives and an outdoor escape from day-to-day desk jobs led the search for a suitable piece of land. There was stiff competition for the purchase with at least three other buyers interested, including a scaffolder who offered a considerable amount to be able to grub up the orchard and use the land for storage. Horrified at this prospect the sellers accepted a lower purchase price from Joanna and Chris, who were local and passionate about retaining and caring for the orchard. Chris' skills as a mechanic were also seen as a bonus to keep vehicles and farm machinery maintained for surrounding smallholders, although this didn't prevent him being required to pass a ploughing proficiency test before gaining full acceptance as a member of the smallholding community. He was told this is a well-

known and well-respected means in the Evesham area of initiating new tenants and owners.

Fruit growing, processing and selling is a significant part of Joanna's family history. She has written records begun by her great-great-grandmother of a fruiterers and grocers business based in Marylebone in London, supplying high-end hotels and gentlemen's clubs. This legacy has fed a strong interest in fruit and produce and inspired a determination to learn about and apply the best methods of growing in tune with nature on a market garden scale. They have gradually begun to diversify the fruit on the site to increase resilience to disease and provide a greater range of options for produce they can potentially process and sell, adding local varieties of apples, gages and some of the older, less commercial varieties of plums.



A previous advertising job with a major wine industry magazine had sparked Joanna's interest in biodynamic agriculture, a mindset of viewing the farm or garden as a living organism in its own right and managing it organically in a way that puts more into the system than is taken out. It is a practice widely used and widely researched in the wine growing regions of Germany and northern Italy. They have chosen to use biodynamic principles as much as is practical to guide management of the smallholding and use organic methods such as garlic sprays and comfrey fertilizers. They want to eventually graft and propagate everything they grow themselves, aiming for a simple system of permaculture.

Joanna and Chris now spend most of their weekends working on the site and the orchard is also a space to wind down and relieve stress in the evenings after work whenever daylight allows. The orchard gives them both space to experiment with their interests – Joanna with biodynamic and organic methods of growing and Chris with engineering and building. Current projects involve construction of a polytunnel frame and future plans include a solar water heater.

The amount of wildlife in the orchard seems to increase year-on-year and is a huge source of pleasure, from noble chafer beetles in the older plums, flocks of swallows hovering up insects on summer evenings to dragonflies hunting up and down the rows of trees. Joanna is one of the lucky few who has seen and photographed an adult noble chafer beetle in her own orchard. Both agree that they get far more out of the orchard mentally and spiritually than they could get elsewhere for the same time and money. They know they could never make a living from the smallholding but are passionate about it being part of a more sustainable and low-impact lifestyle. Their family also enjoys spending time here and are accustomed to swapping labour for relaxation, including their 7-year old nephew who is being trained to drive the tractor and help with mowing.

“Too much gets forgotten about looking after land and growing in a way that works with the natural environment: the land and the ethos of how we manage it will be our legacy to pass on.” ...Joanna Gordon-Thompson

#### Further information

If you are interested in learning more about biodynamic agriculture visit [www.biodynamic.org.uk](http://www.biodynamic.org.uk).

## The Lenches Heritage Orchard, Atch Lench

### **A community orchard owned by a partnership of local investors**

*Thanks to Jan Harrison*

At 5.5 hectares and with around 1000 plum, gage and damson trees this is one of the largest surviving early 20<sup>th</sup> century orchards within the Vale of Evesham, sitting prominently on a south east-facing slope above surrounding arable farmland, much of which was once also under fruit trees.



The orchard was put up for sale by auction at short notice in 1999 and neighbouring farmers were keen to acquire it and convert the land to arable cropping. Faced with the possibility of the orchard being destroyed, local people approached the owner to request a direct sale of the site to the community if funding could be raised, but this was refused. A village meeting was called to discuss an intervention and three residents revealed they were willing to bid for the site in partnership in order to preserve the orchard, but there were concerns that their available resources would still not be sufficient to out-bid other interested parties.

To increase the funding pot 19 households from Atch Lench and Church Lench agreed to contribute financial support on the understanding that this was an altruistic gesture to save the orchard and there was little or no expectation of a return on their money. Combining resources, the community were able to raise the £37,000 needed to secure the orchard at auction. The site was purchased on a quarter-share basis, with three of the shares owned by the original three investors and the fourth share owned jointly by the 19 households who contributed ¼ of the auction price. An unincorporated Trust, 'The Lenches Heritage Orchard Trust', was established to represent the 19 additional investors.

There have been some changes in the intervening years, with one of the original three investors being bought out by the remaining two investors and the Trust equally, thus the orchard is today owned on a third-share basis. The Trust received a £5000 capital grant from Wychavon District Council at around this time and with their blessing part of this grant was put towards the Trust's share of the buy-out.

An agreement was drawn up on the aims and objectives for the future of the orchard. The remaining trees were old and the market for the fruit no longer sufficient to make the effort of trying to manage for a commercial crop worthwhile. Instead landscape, wildlife and community benefit were the drivers. Day-to-day management of the orchard was given over to Chippy, one of the original single investors, who had married into a local orcharding family and had the necessary knowledge and skills. A significant amount of work was carried out in the years immediately following the purchase to restore and lay hedgerows, repair fencing and install seating and a display board. Sheep grazing has been attempted but the integrity of the fencing proved insufficient and the orchard floor is now mown. Any limited income derived from fruit sales goes to reimburse Chippy for his time and effort and the running and upkeep of equipment.

The Trust has not sought much in the way of grant funding and made a conscious decision to remain unincorporated to minimise administrative burdens. One or two small amounts of funding have been received over the years, most recently from Worcestershire County Council in 2013 to re-plant the depleted gage section of the orchard with 60 new trees and to run a plum grafting course. The intention is now to replenish other parts of the orchard by grafting from existing trees.

Management is gradually being tailored towards maximising the wildlife value of the site, in particular since the stumps of recently fallen damsons examined in 2014

were found to contain very small amounts of Noble Chafer frass. It is unknown whether a current, viable population of this beetle is indeed still present on site, but suitable habitat is there and more dead and decaying timber is now being retained. In the summer of 2014 the site was assessed against Worcestershire's Traditional Orchard Local Wildlife Site criteria, which also highlighted some areas of relatively species-rich grassland in addition to the veteran fruit tree interest.

Despite its beauty and tranquillity the orchard is not very heavily used by local people and inevitably a small number of the Trust's original investors have since moved away and lost contact. It is a popular spot for a small handful of dog walkers and some fruit is taken by one or two individuals. Unfortunately it has proved a little too far from the local school for teachers and children to walk there. Chippy is currently assisted in his work to maintain the orchard by a young man undertaking the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme, so an apprentice is being trained and put to good use for the time being! In the long term, awareness of the orchard and of the work to manage and preserve it needs to be refreshed in people's minds to encourage new folks from the local community to come forward and get involved.

**“This is one of the biggest remaining patches of plum orchard between Evesham and Ragley Hall, in an area where there used to be orchards as far as the eye could see. It is in such a prominent position and such a significant part of our landscape heritage. I knew I had to do something to save it when I saw the For Sale sign go up.” ...Jan Harrison**

#### **Further information**

Details of community grant schemes run by Wychavon District Council can be found at [www.wychavon.gov.uk/grants](http://www.wychavon.gov.uk/grants) along with links to other possible funding streams.

The Worcestershire Partnership maintains a funding directory at [www.open4community.info/worcestershire/Default.aspx](http://www.open4community.info/worcestershire/Default.aspx).

Local Sites are those recognised as having county-level significance for their wildlife or geological interest. It is not a statutory (legal) designation and places no public access obligation on the owner.

## Top Stile Orchard, Greenstreet



### Restored cider and perry orchard on a family farm

*Thanks to John Barker*

Old maps show that orchards have been a feature in the landscape surrounding Greenstreet Farm since at least 1747, by which time Top Stile was already an orchard. John Barker's grandfather uprooted his family from Yorkshire to Worcestershire in 1919 seeking greater farming profits and better living standards following the end of the First World War and the farm has remained in his family's hands ever since. The main farming enterprise was, and still is, growing grass to feed cattle but there were also three orchards on the farm that provided additional income through contracts with local producers such as Westons.

As the years went by and trees within the orchards died they were not replaced and fruit gradually played less and less of a part in the management of the farm. By the time John handed on the majority of the farm work to his own children in 1995 only Top Stile orchard, the smallest of the three, was worth restoring. The surviving trees were all cider apple and perry pear of mixed varieties and John prepared for his new venture by taking a cider making course at what was then Hindlip College.

Although by this time the original trees were much depleted in number they represented a rich genetic heritage, being grafted and grown by Worcestershire nurserymen practising their trade at least 150 years ago. John has deliberately set out to preserve this heritage by having all of the replacement trees grafted using scion wood cut on the farm. He believes in a number of instances that the 'old' version of the variety he has propagated out-performs the equivalent same variety available 'new' today. In most case the scion wood was taken to Bulmers for grafting onto vigorous maiden trees at 6ft in height, thus providing a tree whose young timber and developing fruit was quickly out of the reach of grazing livestock.

Since the late 1990s cider making at Greenstreet Farm has gradually increased year on year. Annual production now averages around 2000 litres of a blended 14-variety cider, although a bumper crop harvested in 2012 swelled this to a hefty

5000 litres! Much of this is taken by a wholesaler whose business goes by the appropriate name of Merrylegs. John also supplies one local pub regularly, others on an occasional basis, and sends a number of barrels to the Worcester Beer Festival every year. The orchard makes a very modest profit on the amount of time spent managing the trees and making the cider. John admits that the economics of such an un-intensive style of management wouldn't provide a proper living for anybody dependent on it. The returns are helped by having access to a telescopic platform and tractor, which drastically cuts down the amount of time needed to carry out pruning work.



2015 marked the fifth year that a Wassail was organised and held in the orchard, attended by around 60 people and raising £500 for Macmillan's. The event combines John's love of cider and Morris dancing and keeps alive a tradition dating back to Anglo-Saxon times. For those with an interest in orchards and the eccentricities of rural Britain participating in a Wassail is essential! Most are held in January and you won't have to look too hard to find one in Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire or Somerset.

The replanting carried out over the last two decades should ensure the continuity of the orchard for the next 60 or 80 years. John thinks he is unlikely to graft and plant further trees, perhaps making an exception if he hears about or stumbles across any rare, old varieties in other orchards from where scion wood can be taken. His children are busy with the day to day management of the wider farm and are not interested in taking on the orchard on top of that. John has pledged to continue looking after the trees and making cider until the arthritis in his knees forces him to stop picking up the fruit. He hopes that other local cider makers will then be happy to harvest the crop and take it for their own brewing.

“It’s the tradition really. I’m a big fan of old traditions. Morris dancing, wassailing, old orchards, cider...”...John Barker

#### Further information

Plan your visits to some of the fantastic cider, perry and ale festivals held throughout the country using the calendar maintained by the Campaign for Real Ale [www.camra.org.uk](http://www.camra.org.uk).

To really hone your cider and perry making skills see the courses offered by the Cider Academy [www.cider-academy.co.uk](http://www.cider-academy.co.uk). Pershore College (link above) also offer courses.

## Court House, near Tenbury

### Old cherry orchard on the slope of a Teme Valley dingle

*With thanks to Michael and Tess Savery*

Walking through the orchard behind Court House you are instantly struck by the variety of bird life flitting above your head amongst the branches of 70-80 giant old cherry trees. Some of this diversity is undoubtedly due to location: the orchard is situated on the edge of a quiet, stream-cut valley (known locally as a dingle) next to a large stretch of ancient woodland and this provides excellent habitat

connectivity for wildlife. Michael and Tess have also chosen to enter their 100 acres of land into a Higher Level Stewardship environmental scheme and they supplement this through the provision of nest boxes in the orchard and well-stocked garden bird feeders nearby. They have been rewarded with redstarts and pied flycatchers breeding within the orchard, plus a host of other species such as tree creepers, goldcrests, nuthatches and woodpeckers.



The orchard was already mature, but abandoned and neglected when the land was purchased by the current owners in the mid-1960s, putting the age of the remaining trees at between 80-100 years old. After a long battle to mow the nettles into submission cattle were put into the orchard to graze followed later by sheep. The land, animals and outdoor lifestyle were an addition to Michael’s full-time day job in the business world and, although providing some income, the move to Court House fulfilled a long-held ambition for an enhanced quality of life separate from desk and meetings. The orchard offered such glorious displays of springtime cherry blossom that this, coupled with its evident value for all types of wildlife, meant that Michael and Tess firmly resisted the repeated efforts of persuasion by government officials over many years to participate in the EC’s orchard grubbing up scheme.

The orchard has not been managed for crop production since the 1960s and the trees seem to have settled now into a 12-year cycle of one bumper crop followed by 11 years of negligible fruit. In the past the bumper crops would attract callers asking to pick the cherries but the amount of fruit now isn't attractive enough to passers-by. Needless to say few cherries that do ripen nowadays escape the attentions of the birds. The ageing trees receive very little management overall. Large fallen boughs are left lying where they land to decay in-situ and provide habitat for insects and birds. A couple of fallen but still-rooted trees have also been left to grow horizontally, taking it easy in their old age. Smaller fallen timber is tidied away. The flaking bark and hollowing trunks of the old trees are house and home not just to birds but also the Noble Chafer beetle, whose frass can be seen piled in the bottom of one old cherry stump. Michael and Tess are reconciled to the trees being at the end of their lives and in active decline. Protected in large part by the shelter of the nearby woodland they are not as vulnerable to storm damage as they might be in another location and limb shedding has been kept, so far, to a minimum.

The orchard is visited on a regular basis by deer and this has frustrated attempts to carry out new planting as saplings were eaten as soon as they were put in the ground. Advice and financial support from Worcestershire Biological Records Centre's orchard project in 2015 resulted in Court House orchard being listed as a Local Wildlife Site and receiving a grant to do some further re-stocking, accompanied by more robust guards. This is essential to ensure the continuity of the orchard and the valuable habitat provided for the insects and birdlife. Instead of cherries, nine apple trees were planted with locally originating varieties or those with interesting local connections chosen. If the young trees establish well and the guards prove up to the job, Michael is enthusiastic about continuing with a renewed planting programme over the next few years.

Michael and Tess's children and grandchildren are also very fond of the orchard and the grandchildren in particular are being trained up as the next generation of birdwatchers. Hopefully this bodes well for an orchard still being present at Court House in another 100 years time.

**“There's nothing so beautiful as a cherry orchard in blossom, it's heavenly.” ...Tess Avery**

### **Further information**

Natural England have published a series of fact sheets on different aspects of orchard management, aimed particularly at encouraging and supporting wildlife. To find them visit <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/category/9001> and type 'traditional orchards' into the search box.

## Long Acre, Mamble

### **Newly planted apple orchard**

*With thanks to Lester Evans*

A desire for more space and bigger views provided the motivation for the Evans family to move to Long Acre five years ago. The small field at the back of the house was an added bonus and, more importantly, meant that the lovely views from the house and garden across to Clee Hill could be preserved.

The field was registered as agricultural land but Lester admits he had no idea initially of what they might do with it. A short-lived trial to rent the land for sheep grazing ended when the stock caused damage to trees and hedgerows. However, a bit of research and listening to tales from neighbours soon revealed that the field, as well as the land on which the house now sat, was once a damson orchard supplying fruit for dye to the carpet manufacturers in Kidderminster and further afield. Further investigation found several older village residents who could well remember the damsons being picked, crated and shipped off for pulping from several local orchards, only a few remnants of which now remained. It seemed that the majority of the original trees had been grubbed out during the 1980s when they reached the end of their productive lives and began to decay and die. A few old photographs have since come to light of the fully stocked original orchard in its heyday.

The field at Long Acre still contained a couple of old, decrepit damsons, a Victoria plum and a few pears. The previous owners had also planted a number of apple trees in the gardens surrounding the house, some in inconvenient places. A

suggestion from a neighbour that they have a go at cider making, accompanied by promises of assistance in managing the orchard and harvesting, processing and drinking the results, sealed the fate of the little field to be planted with fruit trees once again.

Over the next year Lester and his neighbour planted around 30 new apple trees, as well as successfully relocating those growing around the garden. Only one of the new trees failed to establish and that was quickly replaced by the nursery. Rabbits are a big issue and each tree has had to be well defended against them, although if he could build the guards again Lester would alter the design to allow better access to control the vegetation inside the wire. The trees are a mix of dual-purpose varieties that can provide fresh fruit as well as juice and cider. They are on half-standard rootstocks and will be pruned to keep them relatively small and maintain the view across the valley. The spring blossom already looks lovely in the second year and most of the new trees are setting a few fruit.



The first attempts at cider making have not gone quite as well as planned, with the finished product a little lacking in drinkability, but simply seeing the young trees grow and having a space of his own to potter outdoors in the evenings (the garden is his wife's domain!) has Lester sold on the benefits of being an orchard owner, regardless of whether future fermentations come right or not!

*“You hope when you finally leave a place to leave behind a little something for somebody else to enjoy for the next 50 or 80 years. They can redecorate the house but they can't do that to the orchard!” ...Lester Evans*

#### **Further information**

If you are thinking of planting or restocking an orchard then consider using old Worcestershire varieties available from local nurseries including:

Walcot Organic Nursery [www.walcotnursery.co.uk](http://www.walcotnursery.co.uk)

Frank P Matthews [www.frankpmatthews.com](http://www.frankpmatthews.com)

## *Birchfield, nr Tenbury*

### **A sanctuary for wildlife in the Teme Valley**

*With thanks to Danny Arnold*

The orchard at Birchfield is shown clearly on tithe maps dating from the 1880s and looking at the majestic old trees there is little reason not to believe that those remaining today are the original ones. A steeply sloping bank is home to around 35 ancient cherries, including several that have given in to age and gravity and have collapsed in a tangle of broken limbs. The current owners' non-intervention approach to management across the whole property has resulted in a rich diversity of insect, bird, mammal, amphibian and reptile life and the dead and decaying wood within the orchard supports rarities such as the noble chafer beetle, lesser spotted woodpecker and redstart. Danny describes himself as a naturally untidy

person, happy to leave nature to do its own thing, and acknowledges that Birchfield has become a scruffier, but more wildlife-friendly place since he moved in, a fact of which he is very proud.

The cherry orchard is just one part of a larger mosaic of habitats at Birchfield including grassland, scrub and a series of pools, the latter created in the 1970s by the damming of three small seepages along the bottom of a wooded dingle. When Danny and his wife first came to view the property almost 20 years ago it was the landscape surrounding the house, and the opportunities for allowing wildlife to flourish within it, that had them sold. Their efforts have since been recognised by the site achieving Local Wildlife Site status.

Little has been done to the orchard in the last 50 years, and it is likely much longer since the trees were regularly pruned or harvested. As they have aged and hollowed a huge number of jackdaws have taken up residence, nesting in the tree cavities and feasting on the crop of cherries that now appears around 3 years in every 4 if the frosts don't nip the blossom. Inevitably, the trees are one by one becoming unable to support the weight of their crowns and Danny thinks that an average of one tree per year has fallen since they moved in. Reluctant to alter the historical integrity of the orchard by planting new, modern, genetically 'improved' varieties of cherry, Frank P Matthews nursery has just been contracted to take graft wood from the orchard and create young, genetically identical versions of the existing trees to begin a programme of replanting over the next few years. A number of plum and damson trees will also be planted along one edge of the orchard, to provide dead wood habitat for wildlife a few decades earlier than the new cherries are likely to.

The diversity of habitats on site provide incredible opportunities for engaging other people with the natural world and this is something that Danny has really embraced. Bug-hunting and pond-dipping forays are a favourite with his grandchildren, local naturalists have held recording days to investigate the invertebrate life, ancient trees, mosses and liverworts and groups such as the scouts, guides and students completing the Duke of Edinburgh scheme are welcomed. A keen naturalist and photographer himself, Danny is also taking part in long-running recording schemes for birds and moths and is proud that Birchfield has so far yielded seven 'firsts' for Worcestershire in the moth world, including two from within the orchard.



Photo © Danny Arnold

**“It’s my mini-wildlife sanctuary where nature is mostly left to do its own thing. It’s important to me to respect the orchard’s 130 years of history by maintaining its character and genetic integrity.”...Danny Arnold**

#### **Further information**

Find out about wildlife recording groups or projects in your local area by contacting Worcestershire Wildlife Trust [www.worcswildlifetrust.co.uk](http://www.worcswildlifetrust.co.uk) or Worcestershire Biological Records Centre [www.wbrc.org.uk](http://www.wbrc.org.uk). If you live in or near the Teme Valley then the Teme Valley Wildlife Group is an excellent one to get involved with [www.temevalleywildlife.com](http://www.temevalleywildlife.com).

## Prospect Orchard, Berrow

### **Mixed fruit orchard rescued from neglect**

*With thanks to Pam and Barry Ellis*

Ten years' worth of bramble growth had enveloped the orchard at Prospect House when the current owners moved into the property in 2006, the legacy of a period of neglect whilst the house had been occupied by tenants. It took Pam and Barry two years of hard work to defeat the bramble and return the orchard floor to a state that would accept a mower. Underneath the thicket a mixed fruit orchard was gradually uncovered, looking quite sorry for itself after a decade of strangulation and the evident use of a hedge flail to prune the trees prior to that.

Knowing nothing about orchard care and management when they moved to Worcestershire, Pam and Barry were unwittingly thrown a lifeline by Country Living magazine through a feature on Dave Kaspar and Helen Brent-Smith's management of their century-old orchard at Day's Cottage, just a few miles over the Gloucestershire border. A single telephone call then started a journey along a steep but fascinating learning curve.

Assisted by Gloucestershire Orchard Group experts Pam gradually began to compile a detailed map of the fruit varieties growing within the orchard. They know that there has been an orchard on the site since the early 1800s, having unearthed a copy of an auction poster dated 1847 which listed a mature orchard as part of the holding. In the 200-odd years since it was first established the orchard has accumulated an impressive 37 different varieties of apple, pear, plum and damson, and that is only the ones Pam has been able to confidently identify so far. Intriguing names such as Strawberry Norman, Foxwhelp and Gin are found along with the more poetical Beauty of Bath and Sandlin Duchess. Somebody, somewhere put a lot of planning into this diverse selection of trees as flowering and cropping times are perfectly staggered to provide fruit from August through to December. The trees are all planted on ridges for drainage, adding another interesting historical dimension.

A large number of the trees consist of cider apple and perry pear fruit and this is all collected and blended by a local cider maker for Hogan's. Day's Cottage take dessert apples but prefer to make single-variety juices, so will have the fruit from

just those trees that crop well enough in any given year. Pam has also recently found a market for the damsons, selling to a local ice cream and sorbet maker. Friends and family are now accustomed to being invited on working holidays during the harvest season. Since 2007 Pam has been keeping detailed cropping records for each individual tree and the bumper crops now total 5 tonnes across the whole orchard, a huge amount of fruit considering the age of the trees. She has done the calculations on the return they get from managing and harvesting the orchard and it averages about 8p per hour – definitely a labour of love and not profit! They are aware of how lucky they are to have an outlet for the fruit produced and are so pleased that it doesn't get wasted.

Just six new trees have been planted in the orchard in the last 10 years and Pam and Barry are now considering their future strategy for replanting the gaps that have developed. Not knowing if future owners will be as enthusiastic about maintaining the trees as they are, there was some debate about whether it was worth doing. However, a feeling that it would be a shame to let such a long history end deliberately with seems to have won out. The original, ageing trees are all on large, vigorous rootstocks and this obviously poses challenges for their management, particularly the perry pears. Choosing the right rootstocks for future trees will be important, to give reasonable crops in Pam and Barry's lifetime but not present too many difficulties in pruning and harvesting. The few young trees they have put in so far are on semi-vigorous MM106 and Quince, but any smaller would perhaps change the character of the orchard too much.

Management of the older trees was supported in 2013 by an orchard restoration grant from Worcestershire County Council. This provided a team of specialist tree surgeons to rebalance the canopies of several of the apples and pears, hopefully keeping them upright and healthy for a few more years. A number of elderly apple trees are propped up with posts and some have fallen and risen again from the ground. The floor of the orchard is mown and strimmed, with the margins left wild to provide nectar and cover for insects. Pam is also currently establishing a wildflower bank in the centre of the orchard. They have considered using sheep to graze the site but don't think this would work well with the management of the orchard: a lot of the harvested cider and perry fruit is picked up from the floor and livestock would need to be removed in time to accommodate this.

Encouraging wildlife is an important part of managing the orchard. The ageing trees provide numerous cavities for things to nest and shelter in with an old, hollow apple

once playing host to a swarm of wild bees for a time. Dead trees are left standing, those that fall are converted into log piles and there is a pond in the corner of the orchard. The provision of pollinator habitat extends to the formal garden where nectar-rich planting aims to attract bumblebees and other insects.



Restoring the orchard has given Pam and Barry a strong connection to the local community and the local economy. They have become members of the Gloucestershire Orchard Trust and attend events run by orchard groups in Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Research into the history of the orchard and the house has broadened out into making links with others in the parish who have remnant orchards, surviving infrastructure such as cider presses or simply those who have lived in the area their whole lives and have stories to tell about rural life in days gone by. They are also proud that their fruit goes to support local businesses and the people employed in them.

**“There is a romance and fascination to an old orchard that draws you in.” ...Pam Ellis**

### Further information

Day's Cottage [www.dayscottage.co.uk](http://www.dayscottage.co.uk) produces and sells juice from their own and other local orchards and also runs a course in various aspects of orchard management in partnership with the Gloucestershire Orchard Trust [www.gloucestershireorchardtrust.org.uk](http://www.gloucestershireorchardtrust.org.uk).

The Hartpury Heritage Trust [www.hartpuryheritage.org.uk](http://www.hartpuryheritage.org.uk) maintains the national collection of perry pear varieties and its Orchard Centre is host to courses on cider and perry making.

Brogdale [www.brogdalecollections.org](http://www.brogdalecollections.org) is home to the national fruit collection (all fruit types, all varieties).

## The Cherries, Bliss Gate

### **Old cherry orchard at the southern edge of the greater Wyre Forest**

*With thanks to Brett and Rosalie Davies*

Brett and Rosalie moved into The Cherries just over a decade ago with the assumption that the beautiful old orchard on their new property would more or less look after itself. The land that slopes steeply from the roadside up to the house was home to around 90 fruit trees, mainly ancient cherries with a scattering of apple, plum and damson. Over the next few years they describe a slow sense of rising panic and a growing realisation that many of the trees were nearing the end of their lives and that high winds were causing limbs, and occasionally whole trees, to drop one by one. Far from being able to take care of themselves, the trees were in urgent need of active management if they weren't to simply fall over and the orchard disappear entirely.

After trying and failing to find a good source of advice or support in the local area they took matters into their own hands, asking a tree surgeon who had been working elsewhere on the property to fill some of the empty stations in the orchard. The new trees were cherries, but inexperience on everyone's part meant that no thought was given to rootstocks or variety. The young saplings were given no protection at all and they quickly fell victim to squirrel damage and died. Brett

and Rosalie replaced the trees and constructed fairly robust wooden guards but these proved too low and the cattle that were by now grazing the orchard chewed the tops off most of the trees. Emergency alterations to the guards to prevent more grazing damage has since enabled some of the phase two planting to recover.

Disheartened after two less than successful attempts at restocking the orchard, and with the old trees continuing to split and decay, Brett and Rosalie eventually had a stroke of luck thanks to the few cider apple trees dotted amongst the lower half of the orchard. These were spotted by a local handyman who expressed an interest in the fruit and the fate of the trees for his own home cider-making. Roy identified each of the cider varieties and began harvesting the apple crop for his home brewing. Around the same time an earth hedgebank in the roadside corner of the orchard was washed out by the 2007 floodwater, unearthing a midden of empty cider bottles deposited in the bushes by decades of fruit pickers on their lunch break. This was taken by all as a sign that finally they were on the right track! A barrel of the first batch of home-brewed cider found its way back to The Cherries in due course and was drunk during one very memorable party, prompting Brett and Rosalie to make the third phase of new tree planting a cider apple one.

The wildlife value of their property has always been of paramount importance. Despite the early traumas and expense they have come to see it as a privilege to have the orchard to look after and their goal is to create and maintain a little biodiverse oasis within the surrounding farmed countryside. In an effort to attract as much wildlife as possible they have created a large pond and manage their anthill-covered lawn as a meadow, which is slowly accruing different species of wildflowers. The cherry trees contain evidence of the noble chafer beetle so dead timber is left standing, fallen timber is kept in log piles and a variety of bird and mammal life constantly comes and goes.

In 2015 the wildlife value of the site was recognised by local naturalists and the orchard was assessed against the county's Local Wildlife Site criteria. The site passed easily and this led to Brett and Rosalie being offered a grant for phase four of the tree planting project. With some expert advice on rootstocks and varieties and Roy's planting and guard construction expertise, the nine new cherries are establishing well. Roy has also taken on the job of pruning the older trees to keep them, their owners and the cattle safe from unbalanced crowns and falling limbs.



**“We love being proper country bumpkins. It’s incredibly satisfying to feel you are doing something that makes a difference for wildlife.”...Rosalie Davies**

#### **Further information**

The type and size of tree guard you need to install will depend on the livestock that have access to your orchard. As a minimum all trees need a spiral plastic guard to offer protection against rabbits. The Worcestershire Orchards website [www.worcestershireorchards.co.uk](http://www.worcestershireorchards.co.uk) has a page dedicated to livestock guard design.