

Wild-growing Apples and Mistletoe in the Wyre Forest - Wimperhill and Longdon Orchard

SUSAN LIMBREY

2014 was an excellent year for recording apple trees. Blossom was abundant and fruit set well, so trees were conspicuous in May and fruit noticeable in October. It was a good year for Mistletoe too, the recent mild winters having favoured it. Some bunches were seen only in November after leaf fall.

25 apple trees were recorded, of which 6 bore Mistletoe (one, with Mistletoe, being now dead), and there was Mistletoe on one Rowan and one hawthorn. Four apple trees were not recorded until December, and one other was not seen in blossom time, but of those seen in May, 16 had blossom, and 11 of those bore fruit.

Many of the trees are close to long-established tracks and paths. I don't think this is an artifact of lazy field work. Any apple trees surviving ground work for conifer plantation would fail to thrive for lack of light once over-topped, and could only stay alive close to the edge of a stand, growing tall and spindly. With recent felling to create wider margins to tracks, some of these trees have emerged in poor condition, bending over as support is removed and having many dead branches. Some appear to have been part of forest panel boundaries, located on wood banks, and are multi-trunked, suggesting the effect of hedge management. Others are located on very steep slopes above streams or hollow ways, where no conifers were planted. There is a strong association of apple trees in one area of Wimperhill with Wild Service Trees and Rowans, and, where they appear to be part of relic hedges, with hawthorn.

Since I first noticed apple trees in the forest, several have died. One, beside the track between Brandwood and Wimperhill, was destroyed in forestry operations, but I think I have found a shoot regrowing from its root. I have never seen any other apple trees in Brandwood. Identification of the true indigenous Crab Apple, *Malus sylvestris*, seems to be controversial. The leaf stalks and undersides of the leaves of all these trees are hairy, which is not supposed to be so in *M. sylvestris*. The fruits are all acid, but not so mouth-shrivellingly so as the true crab, and also have some sweetness. They are small, only those of the more flourishing trees reaching 5cm diameter. Those in full sun ripen to red and yellow, the others remaining yellow or yellow-green.

Apple pips are said to be dispersed by Blackbirds, but I doubt this. Blackbirds do take a lot of pips from fallen apples, but I have never seen a pip in a dropping. The seed coat is less hardened than that of the small-seeded fruits which clearly are dispersed in this way, and is probably broken up in the bird's crop. Blackbirds

would hardly feed so avidly on apple pips if they got no nourishment from them. Consider, however, the number of apple cores discarded over the centuries as people have moved through and worked in the forest. Might not this have something to do too with the location of apple trees?

The history of Longdon Orchard needs further study. On the first edition Ordnance Survey map, first printed in 1832, with later revisions such as addition of railways, including the Severn Valley Railway but not the branch through the forest, and with no change to the detailed mapping, the names Longdon Orchard and Lower Longdon Orchard appear, but the mapping symbol does not distinguish the area from the rest of the forest, while a different symbol is used for orchards in farmland. Field name maps, based on the tithe maps of the 1840s and available on-line on the Secret Shropshire web site, show unenclosed forest and use the names Upper Longdon and Lower Longdon without the word 'orchard'.

This is the first phase of a wider survey. The rest of Longdon Orchard and adjacent areas, as well as the railway line and Shelfheld, where there are apple trees around the wet flushes, will be included next year.

My thanks to Phil Rudlin for telling me of two trees in an area recently opened up from a former exclusion, and also indicating locations of trees for recording next year. Thanks too to Andy Grubb for creating the map opposite showing tree locations. Any other information as to the whereabouts of apple trees in the forest will be gratefully received.



Apples, Longdon

Susan Limbrey

