

The Old Sorb Tree

WHITTY PEAR OR THE TRUE SERVICE TREE, *SORBUS DOMESTICAL*, PREVIOUSLY *SORBUS PYRIFORMIS*

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Many Worcestershire naturalists have been fascinated by the history of the Old Sorb Tree in Wyre Forest starting in 1677 and lasting to the present day.

The first purpose of this note is to construct a reference time frame of the main points in the history of the Wyre Forest tree. The second is to remind us that the centenary of the planting of a replacement tree near the site of the old original is not far away: 2016 in fact! A good chance to review the history and prepare for a celebration!

The characteristics of the tree are that it has pinnate leaves similar to Rowan *Sorbus acuparia* (to which it is related) or Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* (to which it is not related), has clusters of white flowers, and bears fruit up to about 2.5cm diameter shaped either like small pears or small apples. "A Rowan bearing small pears".

1677 The Wyre Forest tree was first recorded by a botanist and reported the following year.

1678 In the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* for 1678 is published an extract from a letter from Edmund Pitt, Alderman of Worcester, "a very knowing botanist" (according to the editor), concerning the *Sorbus pyriformis*.

"Last year [1677] I found a rarity growing wild in a forest in the county of Worcester" [323 years ago] and goes on to comment that the species is known in France, Germany and Italy where commonly found. ... "But various learned people have seen it as a native of England".

Edmund Pitt, 1613-1688, was born at Colwall, near Worcester. He probably was interested in botany as a boy and became a well-to-do apothecary in Worcester and in his will (in Worcester County Records Office) is described as a gentleman. In 1656 he was Mayor of Worcester and later permanent Alderman of the City.

1706 28 years later in 1706 or 1707 a visitor to the Oxford Botanic garden reported "the Sorb or Quicken tree with flowers and leaves like Rowan but with different fruit being like a small pear. The tree grows in one woody place in England, and that is in Worcestershire from whence this species was propagated". This appears to be a tree planted in Pitt's lifetime, perhaps from seed or cutting taken from the Wyre Forest tree.

1781 Nash writing in 1781 [103 years later] states: "Rock: In the eastern part of the parish, about a mile

from Mopsons Cross, between that and the Dowles Brook, in the middle of a thick wood belonging to Mr Baldwyn, is a very uncommon tree, which I suppose to be the *Sorbus Sativa Pyriformis*, mentioned by Mr Pitt in the *Philosophical Transactions* for the year 1678, the bark resembles a pear tree, as does the fruit, except that it is not quite so large as the smallest pear; the leaf and blossom exactly resemble a mountain ash; the common people of the neighbourhood, amongst whom this tree had been esteemed a curiosity for upwards of an hundred years, call it not improperly the "quicken pear tree". Not generally known before Pitt's time when he drew attention to it. It was 40 feet high".



Sorbus domestica, Wyre Forest, (Tomkinson & Everett)

1800-1820 Between 1800 and 1820 the Earl of Mountnorris raised two cuttings at Arley Castle and a descendent of one of these trees was planted near Worcester cathedral.

1834 [157 years after Pitt] Charles Hastings in *Illustrations of the Natural history of Worcestershire* writes: *Pyrus domestica*, True Service-tree. In the middle of Wyre Forest, near Bewdley, first noticed by Alderman Pitts, 1678. [Pitt actually wrote in 1678 "last year I found ... " that is 1677] recently visited by Mr Lees, who reports it to be a state of decay, and some woodcutters having recently made a fire against its weather-beaten trunk, its destruction seems impending.

1853 [175 years after Pitt] On 24 August 1853 the Old Sorb Tree was visited by the Worcestershire Naturalists Club who reported the old tree in a very decrepit state. Lees (1867) later wrote "At our visit it was in a very decrepit state, with lank, bare, and lofty branches, and only exhibited vitality at its very summit. Very little fruit was then produced, and the sorb-tree presented the scraggy and decrepit aspect shown in the annexed woodcut. This venerated sylvan monument, which, left only to Nature's care, might have existed for centuries longer. was mischievously burned down in 1862".

Following this visit Edwin Lees wrote that hard fruit of the tree were once hung in foresters houses to give security from the witch and some people carried a piece of Rowan or Witchen in their pockets as a similar talisman. It was thought that Whitty Pear and especially its fruit were even stronger in the way of protection. Apparently many members of the club sought a similar talisman by trying to dislodge fruit from high in the tree!

Shortly after, the fire remnants of the tree were collected (probably by George Jordan – see below) and turned into cups or chalices. Where these are nowadays is a mystery. I am told that two small boxes made of the wood are in the Hartlebury County Museum.

1864 [187 years after Pitt] On 30th June 1864 80 members of the Severn Valley Field Club visited the



Sorbus domestica, Wyre Forest tree, (Lees)

1858 Again on 25th June 1858 the club visited and lunched by the tree stating that “amidst the festal scene the old sorb tree appeared the withered wreck of centuries”. 181 years after Pitt – must have been an old tree when he saw it in 1677.

site and sang a requiem round the blackened stump. We do not know what they sang!

1862 [185 years after Pitt] Destroyed by fire in April 1862 by a miscreant – Apparently he was a notorious poacher and he burnt the tree as revenge on the magistrate, the Squire of Kinlet, who he thought had given him a too severe a sentence as a poacher. The Squire owned the land, often visited the tree and took many guests to view it. The miscreant was also later convicted of setting fire to farm buildings and was transported to Australia. So the annihilator of the revered sorb tree spent his remaining days at Botany Bay.

1867 [190 years after Pitt] Edwin Lees *The Botany of Worcestershire*. Parts of his account are exactly the same text as in Hastings’ book! Lees writes in his Flora that he was responsible for those notes but they were not acknowledged! He writes “In connection with Bewdley and Wyre Forest, Mr George Jordan merits high commendation as an untired explorer and guide for many years, and still at the great age of 85, retaining much botanical zeal. While his strength allowed, he was ever-ready to lead the way to the purlieus of the forest Having many times guided the Club and its members to time-honoured though decrepid Sorb-tree *Pyrus domestica*, which he regarded with almost

filial love, its wanton destruction by ruffian hands was a source of much grief to him, and he gathered up with decent care the relics that were left of the limbs of the old veteran, some of which he yet retains”.

1911 [234 years after Pitt] 50 years after the burning a memorial post with a sign was set up on the site of the tree. It was decided at the gathering to plant a sapling of the Whitty Pear that had been raised at Arley Castle by Mr Robert Woodward on the site when it was large enough (the young trees grow very slowly) - see photograph in Review 2006. Sadly Robert Woodward was killed during the First World War in 1915.

The sign erected read:

At this spot stood for some centuries the only specimen of the Sorb or Whitty Pear *Sorbus domestica* which was burned down by an incendiary in 1862. This post was set up by the Worcestershire Naturalists Club 25th July 1911 to mark the site” (by the Bishop of Worcester & the Club Secretary)

1916 [239 years after Pitt] On 30th March a large party gathered at the spot and the sapling was planted by Robert Woodward’s mother. At the time a useful history of the tree was read by F. Ronald Jeffrey and published in the *Transactions of the Worcestershire Naturalists’ Club*.

1982 Start of the Wyre Arboretum near the 1916 Sorb-tree where several young Sorb trees were planted between 1993 and 2000.



Whitty Pear, photograph taken around 1980

Neville Wilde



Notice on Wyre Tree, 2009

2005 Fred Jennings, who has been interested in the Whitty Pear for many years, wrote an interesting article summarising his studies in Wyre Forest Study Group Review.

2010 333 years after Pitt this tree is 94 years old.

2016 We must celebrate its one hundredth year.

Miscellany

Written in 1905 “At Croome Court, Worcestershire, the seat of the Earl of Coventry, there are two good sized trees in the shrubbery, one of which is 59 feet high and 6 feet 2 inches in girth. The other with a clean stem, about 50 feet by 7 feet is beginning to decay”. We don’t know where these trees came from. One was still present in October 1995.

1983 and 1993 Marc Hampton discovered two cliff sites on the Glamorgan coast where *Sorbus domestica* was growing. These are steep cliffs with bands of softer and harder limestone rock and the trees root into the softer areas. These trees are in an exposed position, stunted and rarely fruit and are so similar to Rowan that it was quite difficult to confirm the identification until a few fruits were found. It is highly

1920s and 1930s The Worcestershire Naturalists’ Club often visited the tree in the 1920s 1930s. Worry at one time that it was being crowded by plantation trees and a space was cleared round the tree.



Wyre Forest Study Group

unlikely that trees would have been planted at this site or derived from trees planted nearby and so they are almost certainly native trees – perhaps a remnant of a previous Welsh population. These trees were shown to be re-growths from a base which had apparently been bigger trees and had died back. The age of the oldest growing trees was estimated at about 300 years. Continental reports indicate that Sorb trees can live for 1000 years.

1995-1999 Four sites discovered by Mark & Clare Kitchen on the west side of the Severn Estuary in Gloucestershire. These two findings do reinforce the view that the Whitty Pear still grows in Britain as a native.

Late 1990s A small group of Worcestershire enthusiasts convened to gather information about the Sorb Tree and formed The True Service Group. Aims were to find and measure Worcestershire specimens and to make a record of planted trees. Fred Jennings independently collected much information on British Sorb Trees and was involved in establishing the Wyre Arboretum. During this period Frances Claxton became involved in DNA studies for British and European trees and prepared a preliminary report in 2000. Information on both these endeavours published in Worcestershire Record. Since then studies have lapsed and the time has come to start again and consolidate the information available.

Descendents

Over the years the tree has been propagated from seed (with difficulty) or cuttings or by using suckers. The fruit produces seed erratically, apparently dependent on temperature. It is a tree of warmer climates. Various Whitty Pear Trees have been planted in the county and elsewhere in England and Wales over a long period of time. Trees grown at Arley Castle may have been given to owners of big houses and gardens. We know of some and I expect there are others. Some are known to be progeny of the original tree; others may have been imported from Europe. For example there are trees at Croome Court and Arley Arboretum. One was planted at Worcester Cathedral in the early 1900s by Minor Canon Woodward, a relative of the Arley Castle Woodwards, and this one is mentioned several times in the *Transactions of the Worcestershire Naturalists' Club* as a flourishing tree. Apparently a cricket-loving canon later found that the tree obscured his view of the Worcester County Cricket ground across the River Severn and it was felled. Fortunately two others had been planted in the cathedral grounds. Five trees are known in Withybed Wood and they are thought to be progeny of the original tree planted by the famous Wyre Forest botanist George Jordan at an unknown date.

Where did the Wyre tree come from? Was it a native British tree? Is the species a British native?

Sorbus domestica

There has been much speculation about the origins of the Wyre Forest Tree. Was it native or planted? If planted – by whom and when. Brought by the Romans? Brought from Aquitaine (Dordogne) in France? The early naturalists found remnants of buildings and Edwin Lees thought a hermitage existed on the spot perhaps from pre-Reformation days when the land was in possession of a monastery. Or possible it was a tree of a lost British population.

829 Mark Hampton has suggested that the Wyre tree may have been planted from stock cultivated at South Wales monasteries. In *The History of Britons* a Welsh monk Nennius describes a tree with pinnate leaves and apple or pear shaped small fruit - a description akin to Rowan with pear shaped fruits and could be nothing but *Sorbus domestica*. (About 850 years before Pitt). Based on linguistic studies Marc Hampton suggests that True Service once grew wild in South Wales. There is also similar evidence of old records from Cornwall. So perhaps there was once a native population in warmer times and maybe we are observing their descendents.

Preliminary DNA studies in 2000 at Kew Gardens suggested little difference between trees from across Europe perhaps indicating European scale movements of orchard grown trees derived from a wild population. Frances Claxton, who was involved in this work produced a preliminary report (not for publication) and as far as I am aware nothing further has been published to date.

True Service timber is hard and dense and used for furniture making – beautifully illustrated in von Schmelting's book which contains much detailed information on the tree (in German). The fruits have been used to make a drink. Indeed about ten years ago two members of a local Worcestershire True Service Group studying the species produced a pleasant white wine from the fruits.

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Brett Westwood and Rosemary Winnall at the Whitty Pear 10th October 2009

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