

The Sorb Tree Song or the Whitty Pear Song

MIKE SMITH¹

The Sorb Tree, Whitty Pear, Quicken Pear, or True Service (*Sorbus domestica* L.) has a long history in the Wyre Forest, usefully summarised by John Bingham in the Study Group's *The Nature of Wyre*². Since the publication of that *magnum opus*, Mike Averill of the Group, aided by Garston Phillips of Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum, has added to the story, and solved a long-standing problem, by discovering the whereabouts in a private collection of two chalices ('goblets' in the verses below) made from the wood of the 'first' Whitty Pear.

That tree was destroyed by a vengeful incendiary poacher in 1862, but direct descendants were in cultivation, and on 30 March 1916 one was planted at the original site, and is still alive. To celebrate the centenary of the 1916 planting, a group of local naturalists, convened by Mike Averill and addressed by Harry Green, met *in situ* on 30 March 2016. I was privileged to be there, and for some reason thought that the occasion should be commemorated in song. Others agreed, and the first performance was given at a meeting of the Worcestershire Naturalists' Club on 20 March 2017. By kind invitation another took place at the Wyre Forest Study Group's convivial Christmas Party on 15 December 2017, when wine made by Peter Doncaster from Sorb Tree fruits and Wyre Forest Uncly's grapes was appreciatively sampled. On both occasions members of the audience joined enthusiastically in the CHORUSES.

The words (©Mike Smith 2017) are based on the account in *The Nature of Wyre*. The story of the Sorb Tree is the stuff of both history and folklore, so the proper form seemed to me to be a ballad – a narrative song of the kind beloved by folk singers. Ballads are usually set to traditional tunes; I didn't know any from Worcestershire (sorry!), so for the verses I used The Gloucestershire Wassail from next door. It is often sung as a sort of secular Christmas carol. For the CHORUSES I took part of The Pace-egging Song (Pace eggs = Easter eggs). I first heard this on a 1960s LP called *Frost and Fire*, by a group called The Watsons, and I was delighted to find that a member of the Study Group audience remembered it and them with affection.

I have been asked, flatteringly, to publish the words in the Group's Review, so here they are. If you've ever tried to write verse in short rhymed lines, you'll know that the rhymes take over – you can't think about much else. Fortunately there are plenty of rhymes for 'Tree' and 'Pear', but a purist might find some of mine a bit dodgy...

1. In the Forest of Wyre,
In fair Worcestershire,
Hard by Bewdley Town,
Grew a tree of renown.
'Twas one on its own;
No other was known;
Through the length of the land
Alone did it stand.
CHORUS Now what could it be?
Some said, the Sorb Tree,
While some did declare
It was called Whitty Pear.

2. But all did agree
'Twas a magical tree:
Ash leaves it did bear
With the fruits of a pear!
Hang a branch at your door,
No witch entered more;
Tie a sprig to your arm,
She could do you no harm.
CHORUS And if healthy you'd be,
Drink the wine of Sorb Tree:
No more ills, no more care,
When you quaffed Whitty Pear!

3. Allured by its fame
From Worcester there came
The Mayor of that Cit-
y, by name Edmund Pitt.
Did he walk? Did he ride?
Did he sail Severn tide?
Howsoe'er, he got there,
And then how did he stare!
CHORUS Yes, gazing stood he
At the single Sorb Tree;
Amazed was the Mayor
At the sole Whitty Pear!

4. The next year – the date
Was sixteen seventy-eight –
The Mayor wrote a letter;
And what could be better?
For he sent it, did he,
To the Royal Society:
There the learned are found;
Great and good there abound.
CHORUS And they all came to see
The wondrous Sorb Tree:
An object so rare
Was the one Whitty Pear!

5. But, *triste dictu*,
In eighteen sixty-two

¹22 Heath Street, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY8 1SE.

²Westwood, B., Shirley, P., Winnall, R., and Green, H. (eds) (2015) *The Nature of Wyre*. pp 44-48. Newbury: Pisces Publications.

Wyre Forest Study Group

A rogue who lived near
Got a sentence severe
From the local J. P.
Who owned the Sorb Tree,
And to punish the Squire
To it he set fire!

CHORUS

So 'twas R. I. P.
For the ancient Sorb Tree:
All folk said a prayer
For the old Whitty Pear.

6.

Appropriately,
He who slew the Sorb Tree
Was transported away
To Botany Bay;
And then George Jorden,
Most pious of men,
Gathered with decent care
What relics there were.

CHORUS

In Worcester Muse-
um are bits of Sorb Tree,
And there's goblets elsewhere
Made from Pitt's Whitty Pear!

7.

But Robert Woodward
Had scions procured,
Which he grew carefully
At his home in Arley.
Like millions more
He died in the Great War;
But, as still may be seen,
In nineteen sixteen

CHORUS

In his memory
Where stood the Sorb Tree
His Mamma planted there
A true Whitty Pear.

8.

Ninety-seven years on
(How swift Time has gone!)
Was planted one more
By a good friend of yore;
And around you may see,
Thanks to the F. C.,
For ages to come
An Arboretum.

CHORUS

But fair though it be,
Yet still the Sorb Tree
Is the fair'st of the fair –
The fine Whitty Pear!

9.

For the centenary
Of the Woodward's Sorb Tree,
A throng did convene
Led by old Harry Green;
And every year
We'll strive to appear
With a glass of Sorb Wine,
And all sing this rhyme:
We'll gather (D. V.)
Beside the Sorb Tree;
Yes, we'll all be there
By the dear Whitty Pear!



Mike Smith at the Christmas Party

Rosemary Winnall



Gathering at the Whitty Pear for its Centenary, 30 March 2016

From left: Rosemary Winnall, Roy Finch, Brett Westwood, John Bingham, David Dench, Mike Smith, Chris Bradley, Jane Scott, Harry Green, Richard Boles, Sylvia Sheldon, Andrew Gerry, Stuart Leadley, Michael Harrison, Denise Bingham, Michael Pettigrew, Mike Averill, R. Winnall