

Visit to Wyre Forest

Whole Day Meeting, Thursday, June 13th, 1918

FROM PAUL READE

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On June 13th, the Club had a most enjoyable ramble in the neighbourhood of Bewdley and Wyre Forest, under the able leadership of Mr. J. B. Duncan, of Bewdley. This gentleman, whose fame as a musicologist is well-known, has long been acquainted with the districts and not only knows the habitat of every rare flower in the forest, but also has a keen and appreciative eye for its fine scenery. The route taken commenced at Park Lane, at the upper end of the town, and proceeded by pleasant upland paths through fields reflecting the full glory of summer-time; bright with the pageant of wild-flower beauty; through many a copse and dell, with here and there a patch of charming moorland. One such copse full of the beautiful foxglove was a picture such as artists love. The views seen in the walk were delightful, ever changing, ever beautiful. A halt was made in the golden valley to inspect the plants of the tuberous comfrey (*symphytum tuberosum*), which are rare in this county. Near Park End a lane brought the party into the Cleobury Road. They crossed, and entered Wyre Forest from St. John's Lane. They were conducted by good and easy paths to the site of the Old Sorb Tree, where now a lineal descendent of that tree is growing. They were gratified to find that the sapling, planted some two and a half years ago, had made good growth, is in full leaf and is about 12 feet high. Mrs. Baldwin Childe, of Kyre Park, had sent for the Club's inspection a pen and ink drawing supposed to have been made by George Jorden, about 1855, of the old tree, which was destroyed by fire in 1862. Here an al fresco lunch was taken, after which Mr. F. Ronald Jeffery, of Worcester, gave a short account of the history and interesting facts connected with the tree of which the following is an abbreviated report: The old sorb tree stood in the parish of Rock, in the New Parks part of the woodland formerly known as the Alton Woods. It must have been in existence in 1616, and probably was in existence long before that, as Loudoun mentions that the life of a sorb sometimes extends over 1,000 years. We first hear of the old sorb tree in 1678 when Edmund Pitts, then an alderman, and previously Mayor of the City of Worcester, wrote to the Philosophical Society, informing it that in the preceding year he had found a rarity growing wild in the forest in the County of Worcester described by Libelius under the name of *Sorbus Pyriformus*, and that it resembled the *Ornus* or Quicken Tree (Mountain Ash), but bearing the fruit on the sides and not at the end of the branches, with fruit having a dark red blush next the sun, and about the bigness of a small junketing pear. In September, so rough as to be ready to strangle

one, but being gathered and kept until October, eating as well as any medlar. The old tree is referred to in Nash's Worcestershire, where there is a good plate of it and its fruit, and he stated that among the common people the tree had been esteemed a curiosity for upwards to 100 years. Between 1800 and 1820 Earl Mountnorris succeeded in raising two grafts or cuttings of the tree at Arley Castle, where they are still, with other descendants, in full health and vigour. There is another descendant at the Precentory, Worcester, and one has quite recently been planted in the recreation grounds near Wylds Lane, on Fort Royal Hill, Worcester. In 1862 the tree was burned down by an incendiary, to the great grief of the botanical world, and of the residents in the neighbourhood. The late Rev. Josiah T. Lee, Vicar of Far Forest, gave the following reason for the burning down, stating that Squire Childe, of Kinet, had a great veneration for the tree, and was in the habit of taking all his guests to visit it as a curiosity. The Squire was also a magistrate, and had to sit in judgment on a notorious poacher, and the latter, in revenge for what he considered too severe a sentence with diabolical cunning burned the tree to spite the Squire. Shortly after the destruction of the tree, Mr. George Jorden, a well-known botanist, of Bewdley, carefully collected such relics of the limbs of the tree as could be found, out of which four goblets were made. One of these, in the form of a chalice, and embellished with engraved silver ornamentation, showing specimens of the blossom, fruit, and leaves of the tree, was presented, in 1864, to Mr. William Mathews, M.A., F.G.S., the then Honorary Secretary of the Club. Another of these cups was in 1902, presented by Mr. Edwin Lees to Mr. John Hill White, F.R.H.S., the then Honorary Secretary of the Club. In the Victoria Institute, Worcester, there is a bench, the seat of which was made out of the tree. The botanical name of the tree is *Pyrus domestica* Ehr, and the English name is the sorb or service tree. Locally the tree is known as the whitty pear tree, whitty being a local name for the Mountain Ash, and the name meaning a Mountain Ash with pear-like fruit. Much superstition existed in relation to the old sorb tree, which rivalled the rowan in its evil-dispelling power. The tree in this country is very difficult to rear, but if the first five years can be survived it makes good progress, but its growth is extremely slow, it taking 100 years for its trunk to increase in diameter, and it never bears fruit in less than 60 years. The fruit, when not allowed to bleed, is very harsh, and a gentleman writer, in reference to a similar tree (but cultivated), says that the fruit is acrid in the superlative degree, and the accommodating innocent who has never tasted wild pears and can be prevailed upon to try one, affords an admirable study in expression, but it is as well, before making the experiment to

make sure that no loose brickbat is within reach of the victim. The fruit gets in its work as soon as the teeth enter the skin, and the facial extortions which follow are a certain source of wicked joy in the bosom of the appreciative spectator. Examinations of the vicinity of the site resulted in finding, amongst a mound of debris, some thin bricks and portions of a wall about a foot high, built with clay instead of mortar, and there was a tradition amongst the old residents of the Forest that there was formerly a dwelling at this spot. The remains of a tower or structure were also found, with the faint remains of a ditch, showing there had been an enclosure there containing about three perches, and inside this enclosure there was a bush of privet. There are three theories as to the origin of the tree. One that it was introduced by the Romans; another that it was brought over from Aquitaine by some recluse near his hermitage in the reign of Edward III, when that Duchy was held by the English; and another that it was brought over by a forest keeper at a time when this country was more connected with Normandy as a preventative of witchcraft. Whatever the origin, its existence at this spot was a most singular and interesting botanical fact, and our Club took steps to have the site marked in 1911 by the erection of an inscribed post, which they were able to do by the kindness of Mr. C. W. Roberts of Wollaston Hall, Stourbridge, the owner of the site, and later on, in March, 1916, by the kind gift of a young descendant of the old tree by Mr. Robert Woodward, of Arley Castle, the Club was able to crown its original intention by planting a veritable descendant to keep green the memory of the old tree.

After Mr. Jeffery's address, the walk was resumed to the point where the railway which runs through the forest was reached. Here wild strawberries were found to be growing plentifully, and, as a frugal luncheon had only shortly before been taken, they served as a delicious desert. The great bog was next visited, and the railway was crossed. The route led to Dowles Brook and beyond, and as there was no bridge within a mile or so of the spot, the crossing had to be made on stepping stones, some of the ladies of the party wishing – so it appeared afterwards – that the stones might turn over and afford them the opportunity of having a refreshing splash without the too obvious effort of purposely seeking it. Others of the party, on investigation intent, turned over the stones in some of the shallower reaches of the brook, and succeeded in capturing a crayfish – undoubted evidence of the existence of that crustacean there, which has sometimes been questioned.

Mr. R.C. Gaut made the following notes on the chief plants met on the walk:- In the Golden Valley Mr. Duncan pointed out a good clump of Tuberous Comfrey

(*Symphytum tuberosum*), a plant which is extremely rare in Worcestershire. Near the same place Tutsan (*Hypericum Androsaemum*) was also noted. On the higher ground beyond, Moonwort (*Potrichium Lunaria*), and Frog Orchis (*Habenaria Viridis*) were found among the short grass. The following shrubs were in flower: Wild Guelder Rose (*Viburnum Opulus*), Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*), and the rose which attracted chief attention was a deep pink form (*Rosa stylosa vavsytyla*). Other plants met with on the way through the forest and to the Bewdley Station were Columbine (*Aquilegia vulgaris*), Tuberous Bitter Vetch and its variety (*Lathyrus montanus* and var., *tenuifolia*), Mountain Speedwell (*Veronica Montana*), Mountain Cranes-bill and Bloody Cranesbill (*Geranium pyrenaicum* and *G. Sanguineum*), Bistort (*Polygonum Bistorta*). At the "Great Bog" Bog Pimpernel (*Anagallis tenella*) and Marsh Helleborine (*Helleborine palustris*) were not yet in flower. Fruit of a large form of the wild strawberry (*Fragaria vesca* var. *bercheriensis*) was plentiful. Members noted with regret that the main branch of mistletoe on the "Mistletoe Oak" was dead but small growths on the same branch, it is hoped, will maintain the record.

Then the route taken ran by the side of Dowles Brook to Dowles Manor and by Severn side to Bewdley.

The following new members were elected: Professor Boulton M.A., F.G.S., of Birmingham University; Mr. W. Wickham King F.G.S., of Hagley; and Mr. Philip Martineau, of the Woodrows, near Bromsgrove. There were present at the meeting: Mr. J. B. Duncan, of Bewdley (leader), Ald. and Mrs. Palfrey (Stourbridge), Mrs. Woolridge (Pedmore), Mrs. C. Rea, Mrs. C. Kimber, Mrs. Phillips, the Rev. R.H. Wilmot (Croome), Miss Twinberrow, Miss F. Twinberrow, Miss Randall, Miss Grisman, Miss Mainwaring, Messrs. A. Weston Priestley, R.C. Gaut, J. Grisman, C.E. Pipe, F.R. Jeffery, R.C. Newmarch, W.J. Else, Eric Baedaker, and F.T. Spackman (Hon. Sec.).



Dowles Manor 1970s

Neville Wilde