Orchards in & around the Wyre Forest - reflections

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It is thought that the Romans introduced the sweet apple *Pomus pumila* and the pear *Pyrus communis* into Britain along with the skills of grafting and perhaps cider making. Post Roman occupation, monasteries are thought to have kept the art of growing fruit trees alive through their orchards or pomeria, at least until their dissolution.

During the following centuries fruit trees were grown on large country estates for the occupants of the house, and for cider and perry making. By 1700 it is thought that orchards were well established on small holdings in Worcestershire. In Bewdley and around Wyre, the coming of the railway in 1863 made markets in Birmingham and the Black Country easily accessible, and after the crown sale of land in 1870 much woodland was cleared and orchards planted, especially with cherry trees, but also with apples, plums and damsons. It must have been a wonderful sight to see all these fruit trees at blossom time (Figure 1).

Fruit was sent by rail from Bewdley or Far Forest stations and could be on sale in the city the same day. In 1886, 110 tons of cherries passed through Bewdley market. Trade continued until the close of the railway line in 1963 after which orchards in and around Wyre started to decline with fruit trees aging and not being replaced. See maps showing orchards in green in 1926 – Figure 2 Callow Hill, and Figure 4 Bewdley before the housing developments on Bark Hill, Blossom Hill and Hales Park, and Figure 3 and 5 showing the same areas in 2015, 89 years later.

At the turn of the 21st century there was concern about the numbers of traditional orchards being abandoned or grubbed up (Figures 6 and 7), with a great loss of biodiversity. So in 2004, with encouragement from John Bingham of English Nature, the Wyre Forest Study Group undertook a year-long study of three small traditional orchards on the land owned by Dr. and Mrs Quayle at Bowcastle Farm.



Figure 1. Hales Park now a housing estate, from Charles Purcell

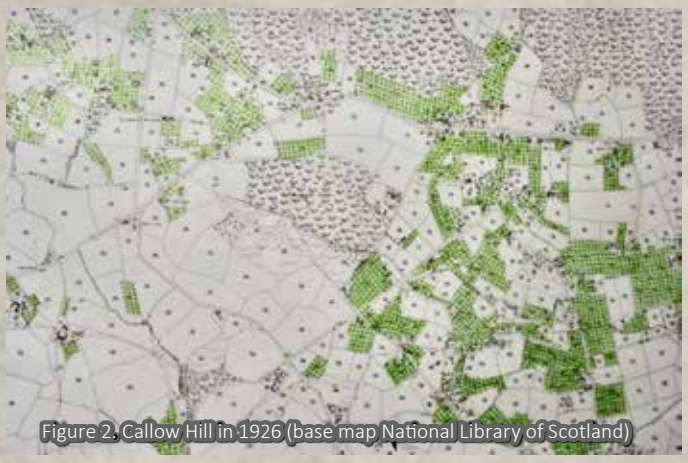


Figure 2. Callow Hill in 1926 (base map National Library of Scotland)

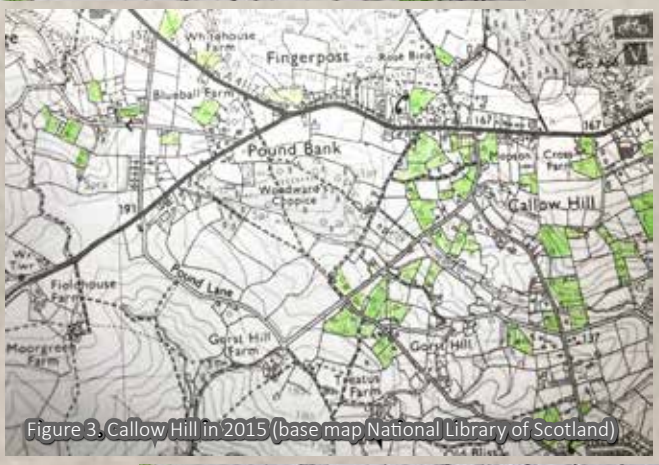


Figure 3. Callow Hill in 2015 (base map National Library of Scotland)



Figure 4. Bewdley in 1926 (base map National Library of Scotland)



Figure 5. Bewdley in 2015 (base map National Library of Scotland)



Figure 6. Traditional orchard clearance near Bewdley, 26th January 2005 Rosemary Winnall



Figure 7. Old trees removed from orchard near Bewdley, 26th January 2005 Rosemary Winnall

The orchards were visited monthly and resulted in 1 868 species of vascular plants, bryophytes, fungi, lichens, vertebrates and invertebrates recorded with a total of 6,353 individual records collected, based on sightings and/or examination of 16 900 specimens. Brian Stephens developed an Index of Vitality for the state of the trees in the orchard. The results were recorded in an English Nature report No. 707 (Figure 8) and became the evidence base for traditional orchard gaining BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) status in 2007. So, owners may now receive funding for looking after these special habitats with their rich biodiversity, and it is good to know that the Wyre Forest Study Group helped to make this happen.

The Heritage Lottery Funded GROW WITH WYRE Scheme, led by the Forestry Commission, ran between 2008 and 2012 and one of the main projects was restoration of orchards. This included:

- audits, condition assessments and ecological surveys completed on many orchards in and around Wyre;
- young trees planted in many traditional orchards with ageing trees;
- new orchards established such as the one in Hitterhill in memory of the late Simon Walker (English Nature warden in Wyre) Figures 9 and 10;
- orchard-themed events held with identification of fruit and demonstrations of fruit pressing;
- fruit pressing equipment installed at

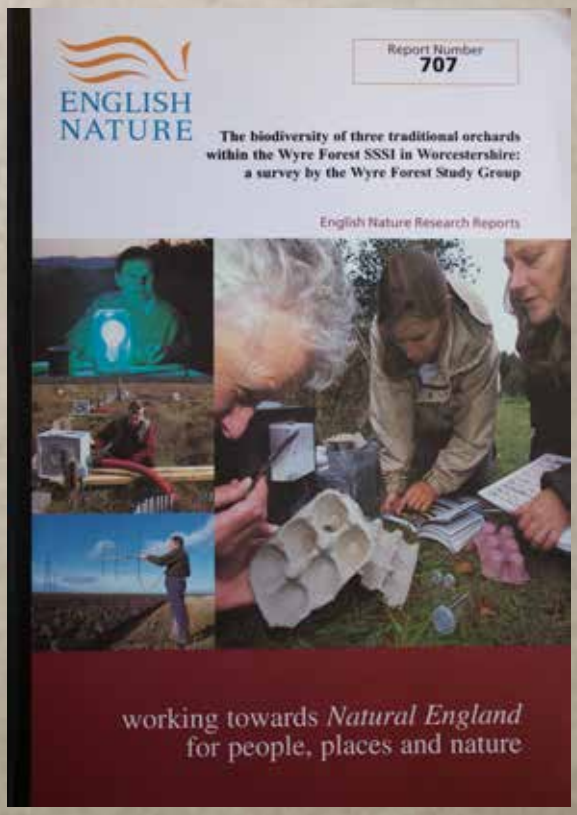


Figure 8. English Nature Report No. 707

Blackstone Farm for operation by Son and Styles;

- training courses held for pruning and fruit pressing.

It is good news to know that many of our Wyre traditional orchards are now restored and the habitat for our iconic Noble Chafer beetle *Gnorimus nobilis* is safeguarded for some years to come!

References

Smart, M. J. and Winnall, R. A. (eds), '*The biodiversity of three traditional orchards within the Wyre Forest SSSI in Worcestershire: a survey by the Wyre Forest Study Group*', English Nature Research Reports, No 707, 2006.

National Library of Scotland https://maps.nls.uk/os/#england

https://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/traditional-orchards/traditional-orchards.htm



Figure 9. Simon's Orchard seat, 31st December 2018 Rosemary Winnall



Figure 10. Simon's Orchard, Hitterhill, 20th May 2012 Rosemary Winnall