



Wyre Forest Study Group

Edmund Pitt (1613-1688) and *Sorbus domestica* in Wyre Forest

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A single specimen of the Service-tree, *Sorbus domestica* L., grew in the Wyre Forest apparently from ancient times until it was burned down in 1862 (Lees 1867). It was the only British specimen known to be growing in the wild. This tree has recently received attention from Hampton and Kay (1995) and Peter Marren (1999) in his new book Britain's Rare Flowers. Hampton and Kay (1995) state that it was first described in 1678 and Marren (1999) that this description was made by '... a local alderman...' I have recently had occasion to trace this alderman. My findings may be of interest.

In the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society for 1678 an extract of a letter from '... Mr. Edmund Pitt, Alderman of Worcester, a very knowing Botanist, concerning the *Sorbus Pyriformis*' appears. That Pitt was 'a very knowing Botanist, ...' was presumably the opinion of the editor. Desmond (1977) mentions this letter. The extract is of sufficient interest to be worth reproducing in full.

'Last year I found a Rarity growing in a Forest of this County of Worcester. It is described by L'Obelius under the name of *Sorbus Pyriformis*: as also by Mathiolus upon Dioscorides. And by Bauhimus (sic), under the name of *Sorbus Procera*. And they agree, that in France, Germany and Italy they are commonly found. But neither These, nor any of our own Countrymen, as Gerard, Parkinson, Johnson, How, nor those Learned Authors Merrett or Ray, have taken notice of its being a Native of England. Nor have any of our English Writers so much as mention'd it. Saving, that Mr. Lyte, in his Translation of Dodonaeus, describes it under the name of the Sorb-Apple. But saith no more of the place, but that it groweth in Dutch-Land. It resembles the Ornus or Quicken Tree; only the Ornus bears the Flowers and Fruit at the end. This, on the sides of the branch. Next the Sun, the Fruit hath a dark-red blush: and is about the bigness of a small Juneting Pear. In September, so rough, as to be ready to strangle one. But being then gather'd, and kept till October, they eat as well as any Medlar.'

The Editor has added a query to the extract:

'Whether a Verjuyce made of this Fruit, either ground with Crabs, or Grapes, or if plentiful, alone, would not, being kept for some time, prove one of the best acid-astringent Sawces, that Nature affords.'

Pitt seems to be under some misunderstanding about: '... our English Writers ...' Nash (1781) states that '... the common people in the neighbourhood, among whom this tree has been esteemed a curiosity for upwards of an hundred years, call it not improperly the quicken pear tree...' Anon (1911) concludes that: '... the existence of

the tree was not generally known before Pitt's time and that its fame arose in consequence of his having drawn attention to its rarity.' As a result of the publication of this extract in Philosophical Transactions Thomas Lawson of Great Strickland in Westmorland apparently wrote to Pitt for a cutting of *S. domestica* which Pitt duly sent [(Newton), (?1689)]. Lawson was the first Quaker botanist and a correspondent of John Ray.

Sorbus domestica also found its way into the Oxford Botanic Garden. How did it get there? In 1706 or 1707 Christian Heinrich Erndtel (1711, cited in Vines and Druce, 1914) a Saxon physician, visited the Garden. He wrote a letter to a friend in Dresden in which he made the following observations about the Garden (translated from the Latin):

(p. 49) 'Beside the Library I frequently visited the Physic garden, where Mr. Bobart, who is an Eminent Botanist, and one of great Civility, is the Keeper and Professor, ... This Garden is famous for scarce Plants & Exoticks of all kinds, the choicest of which Mr. Bobart shewed me. The first was the *Sorbum Verum*, the Sorb or Quicken Tree, which bears the same Flower and Leaves with the *Sorbus Aucuparia*, but the Fruit is different, and more like a Pear, being fleshy, and of the Medlar kind. This tree only grows in one woody Place in England, and that is in Worcestershire from whence this Species was propagated...'

There can be little doubt that Pitt was involved here. If Pitt searched through the botanical literature himself for references to what we now know as *S. domestica* then he was indeed a '...very knowing botanist'. Lees (1867) states that he appears to have been 'the first botanical writer connected with Worcestershire...' So who was he?

He was born in 1613 and he died in 1688 (Meekings et al, 1983). An Edmund Pitt was baptised at Colwall some ten miles south-west of Worcester near the Herefordshire / Worcestershire border on 20 May, 1614 (M. Lawley, pers. comm.). William How's personal, interleaved copy of his *Phytologia Britannica*, published in 1650, is in the Old Library at Magdalen College, Oxford, being part of the John Goodyer bequest of 1664. How has annotated it in preparation for a second edition. These annotations are printed in Gunther (1922). His death in 1656 meant that he never saw it through. On folios two and three there is a block of sixteen annotated records which I believe were submitted by Pitt, in the period 1650 to 1656. My reasons for coming to this conclusion are as follows. The site for one record is given as '...neere Kidermaster Pitts.' Kidderminster is near the Wyre Forest. In this enquiry I have come across the surname Pitt as Pitts, Pytt, Pytts, Pett and even, I believe,

Pink (in Merrett's Pinax of 1666). Other sites mentioned are 'red Morley' (Redmarley D'Abitot), 'Lydberry' (Ledbury), Yatton, 'Alchurch' (Alvechurch) and Worcester. The first three places are not far from Colwall. Alvechurch is not far west of Kidderminster. So Pitt may have taken up botanising near his home as a boy. He became an apothecary (Meekings et al., 1983). Indeed, he became a 'well-to-do city apothecary' in Worcester (Hughes 1990). In 1660 he lived at 6 Mealcheapen Street, Worcester, a large house of some historical interest (Hughes, 1990). In his will he is described as a gentleman. He became a Worcester City councillor in 1646, served as mayor in 1656-57 and was made a permanent alderman in 1670 (Meekings et al., 1983). J.G.L. Burnby (pers. comm.) points out that as Pitt was a mayor in 1656: '... he was probably a "good" Parliamentarian.' Pitt died on 15 September, 1688, aged 75 (Bond, 1974), and was buried at St. Martin's Church, Worcester on the 21 September, 1688 (C. J. Parry, pers. comm.).

This short biography reveals two particular points of interest. Firstly, he was interested in botany and became an apothecary. At this time the medicine practiced by apothecaries was inextricably bound up with plant simples. To become an apothecary his parents must have been able to afford to have him apprenticed. Secondly, Pitt was a Parliamentarian botanist. Was botany mainly the preserve of the generally better-off Royalists? Thomas Johnson, William How, Walter Stonehouse and John Tradescant the elder and the young were all Royalists. There can be little doubt that the sympathies of John Parkinson and Christopher Merrett also lay in this direction. There is some doubt about John Goodyer (D.E. Allen in press). However, although Pitt was

a Parliamentarian he was 'well-to-do'. Thomas Willisel was one of Cromwell's foot soldiers when he took up botany and he was certainly not well-off. However, it is not known if he was a convinced Parliamentarian.

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View from balloon of woodland in Kinlet north

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