

Muggleton, Wade. 2017. The Traditional Orchards Dilemma  
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## The Traditional Orchards Dilemma

Wade Muggleton



01. Early spring orchard blossom. Wade Muggleton.

Traditional Orchards are wonderful places rich in biodiversity as well as a link to local history, culture and a bygone era. They are a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority habitat and have been supported by Countryside Stewardship schemes. Any of you lucky enough to have spent time in one at any season will know there are few more fascinating and idyllic habitats in which to while away a few hours.

There is however a dilemma starting with their name: “Traditional Orchards” the name for those that survive today but they are neither traditional nor orchards in the true or original sense. Whilst they maybe Orchards in the dictionary definition of “a place where fruit trees are grown” but virtually none that survive now are part of a productive system contributing to the farm income and producing fruit for market. The Traditional part is less applicable still, for in their day these orchards were not the scenic oases of wildlife that we find today. Back when they were a productive part of the farm that were managed with brutal efficiency and any tree not paying its way would be removed and replaced; deadwood was probably not tolerated and some of the chemical sprays used, particularly in the 1950’s and 60’s, beggar belief as their toxicity was great - DDT and even mercury were used at one point. So traditionally they would not necessarily have been very pleasant places to hang round in. The irony is that it is their very neglect, dereliction and decay that have made them so rich in wildlife.

This presents us with something of a problem in that we have a habitat that has changed, that does not fulfil its original function any more, and indeed if it did we may well not be as interested in them for much of the wildlife that captivates us would not have been there were they still in commercial production.

So all of this comes down to a question of what should be their future management and direction. How should we manage these orchards going forward? As Traditional Orchards? Or as something else, perhaps more like managing a nature reserve?

Having spent 17 years as countryside officer at Worcestershire County Council and dabbled in all manner of traditional orchard projects and initiatives I am coming to the conclusion it is the latter. These orchards are neither traditional nor orchards so a form of management more befitting them as nature reserve is, I believe, the way to proceed. This plays out in several ways.

### Pruning

Fruit trees are traditionally pruned to aid productivity. We prune to get more and better quality fruit, to let light and air into the tree and to cut out the three D’s: Dead, Damaged and Diseased. However, virtually none of the ancient trees in these old traditional orchards are in production so these factors no longer apply. The biggest threat to these old trees is their own size and bulk. The commonest reason for their demise is being blown over in extreme weather events. With an ageing root systems and large unmanaged crowns they all too easily break up or come down.



02. Spring apple blossom is an appealing feature of spring. Wade Muggleton.

Managing them for conservation consists of a very different form of pruning. what we look to achieve needs lopping off a few unwieldy branches to make them less top heavy or unbalanced and so keep them standing for as many years into the future as possible.

### Planting

When it comes to replanting or gapping up traditional orchards there is another problem in that many of the old trees are diseased or even dying, so gapping up with new healthy young trees from the nursery maybe tantamount to placing a new born baby in ward full of sick people. I have seen many disappointing replantings.

One slightly controversial way around this is to gap up stone fruit orchards with apples and pears and vice versa as the *Prunus* genus suffer from a completely different set of diseases to *Malus* and *Pyrus* genera. It does obviously change the nature and character of the orchard but at least maintains it as an orchard of sorts.

### Biodiversity

The remaining traditional orchards have become synonymous with havens for wildlife and the facts back this up. The 2006 Wyre Forest Study Group report in conjunction with English Nature into their study of three traditional orchards in the Wyre forest found a staggering total of 1,868 species of plants, animals, fungi, etc and that was just in three orchards which in total only covered 5.39 hectares. One only has to spend a few minutes in an ancient orchard on a sunny day in Spring or Summer to see the place abuzz with insects life which in turn supports a higher food chain: a fact of their dereliction and no longer being in production.

### Deadwood management

Historically deadwood was seen as highly undesirable and something to be chopped out. Now of course we understand the value of deadwood both standing and lying for all sorts of creatures, some virtually un studied, that live in deadwood and play a valuable role in pollination and the food chain. So retaining piles of deadwood on the ground and standing aerial deadwood are all highly desirable. Another example of the ‘traditional’ aspect being turned on its head



03. Apple orchard in summer. Wade Muggleton.



04. Traditional orchards are often tranquil, beautiful and teeming with life. Wade Muggleton.



05. Unused apples perhaps going to waste or feeding wildlife. Wade Muggleton.

**The Future**

So if we are to accept that traditional orchards are really not orchards nor traditional in the true sense where does this take us in the years to come ? Where will any future generation of these orchards come from? These are habitats that started out as one thing and have become another. A process that will not be repeated for modern orchards are short lived consisting of dwarf trees.

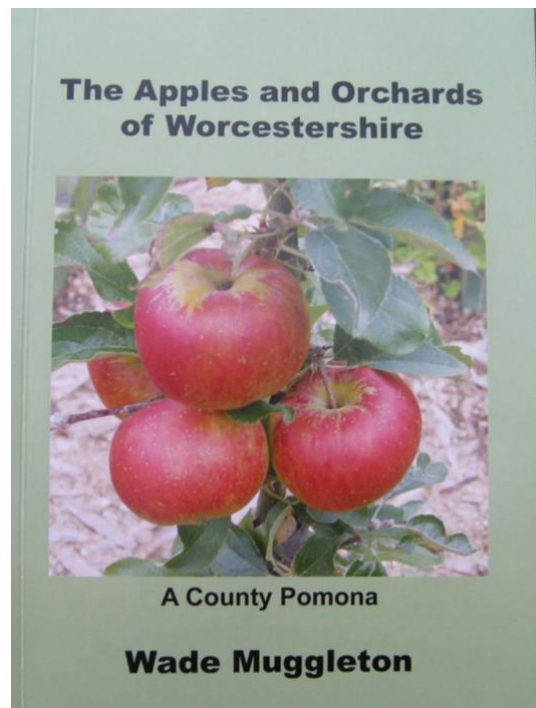
We can say with certainty that Traditional Orchards, as we call them, will be scarce. None of the owners I know and work with and who are enthusiastic about these places are in agriculture for a business. They have acquired an old orchard often with a property whilst a few have bought their Traditional orchard out of interest or a love of wildlife. So none of the traditional agricultural factors apply and in many ways they are already nature reserves, pleasure gardens, a setting for a nice house and as such we should accept that a few may contribute fruit for juice, cider or perry and a box of apples for family and friends but overall they are nature reserves and as I have come to conclude they need to be treated as such.



06. Noble chafer pair. A rare beetle dependent on decaying fruit trees. Wade Muggleton

**Reference**

Smart, M. J. & Winnall, R. A. (Es). 2006 .*The biodiversity of three traditional orchards within the Wyre Forest SSSI in Worcestershire: a survey by the Wyre Forest Study Group.* English Nature Report no. 707



07. *Apples of Worcestershire* by Wade Muggleton. Available from the shop page of [www.marcherapple.net](http://www.marcherapple.net) £8.50 including P & P

**Images**

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