

Worcestershire's Vanishing Cherry Orchards

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01. One of the best remaining old cherry orchards, Teme valley, 66 trees.

One of the fastest disappearing habitats in the county is perhaps the large old cherry orchards that were once characteristic features of the landscape of Western Worcestershire. The areas around Wyre Forest, Rock, the Shelsleys and even down as far as Alfrick and Suckley were once populated with these orchards with their vast trees and high value crop such that considerable effort was focussed on nurturing, protecting and getting in the valuable annual harvest.

The world has of course moved on since those days and today cherries are grown on dwarf bush like trees in poly tunnels in Herefordshire. No one grows cherries on standard trees and picks up long ladders, that is now mere history.

Studying the last few remaining orchards is a bit like detective work, but detective work made doubly difficult by the fact that whilst apples are much studied, written about and there are at least some identifiers still around there is comparatively little published material on cherries and finding an expert is almost impossible. So whilst we have some wonderful names of varieties grown 80, 100 and more years ago. Trying to interpret if the surviving trees are Napoleon Bigarreau's, Frogmore Early's, Waterloo's, Elton Heart's, Black Oliver's ... etc is extremely difficult. Norman Grubb's 1949 work simply entitled "Cherries" is still perhaps the best source material.

Cherries of old essentially came in three colours, Red, White or Black. Whilst today all Supermarket cherries are Red and are pretty similar looking, 100 years ago there was a far more diverse range of size, shape colour and stalk length.

Through first the Grow with Wyre Project and now the Three Counties Orchard Project we have worked in several of these old cherry orchards and we do find a range of varieties but whilst we can record what came from what tree, in many cases we have been unsuccessful in concrete identifications. I have spent years studying

apples, a comparatively popularist subject, whilst cherries are a disappearing, perhaps almost lost, subject.

Our technique for collecting samples looks rather bizarre in that a sprout bag is placed over a branch in a glove like manner to allow the fruit to ripen to its potential without being eaten by birds. It only in an exceptional year that unprotected fruit will ripen to its fullest extent, due presumably to the sheer volume and the birds are sated!

From a biodiversity point of view these orchards are a rich habitat with their big old trunks often heavily decayed and considerable aerial deadwood forming a home for countless invertebrates creating a food chain all the way up to woodpeckers, owls and mammals. This is where a contradiction occurs in that whilst they may be rich in wildlife today this was not always so, in their heyday they were serious commercial ventures and any tree not paying its way would have been ripped out and burnt. Birds were constantly scared away and even shot in some cases and of course in the post WWII agricultural revolution sprays of some fairly noxious concoctions were widely used. So they have become wildlife havens by virtue of not being in management. This creates a bit of a problem in that they have no value in an agricultural sense, beyond firewood which in sadly the fate of many of the old trees.

Whilst one or two are being managed through projects like the Three Counties one the rest are living on borrowed time and when the orchards go the habitat and its creatures go as well.

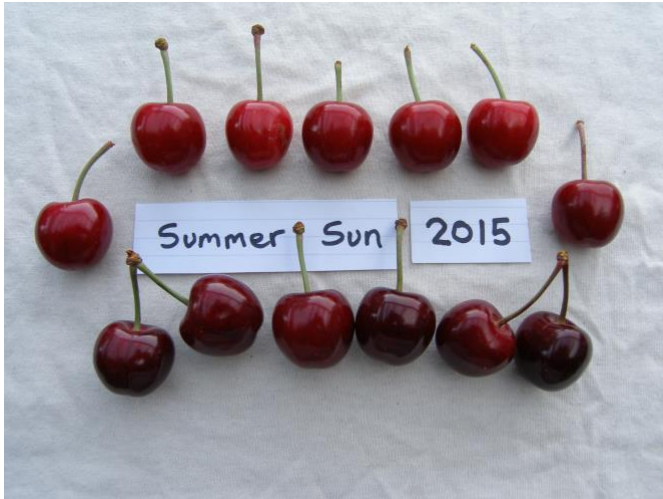
There is no happy ending to this tale, this piece of history is passing, so should you get the chance go and experience a cherry orchard of old do so whilst you still have the chance.

Comment on the pictures

- 01. One of the best remaining old cherry orchards. This one in the Teme valley still has 66 standing trees.
- 02. & 03. Modern varieties like Summer Sun 02 and Stella 03 are somewhat much of a muchness at least visually.
- 04. A long stalked black cherry of as yet unidentified variety.
- 05. An as yet unidentified White dessert cherry.
- 06. An as yet unidentified Black dessert cherry.
- 07. Possibly variety White Heart from an old orchard in Wyre Forest.
- 08. Even as standing deadwood there is high Bio diversity value.
- 09 Their age, size and weight is often their undoing as every winter a few more are toppled.
- 10. Norman Grubb's 1949 work Cherries is still considered the definitive work on the subject.



04. A long stalked black cherry variety not yet unidentified



02. Modern variety Summer Sun.



05. An unidentified White dessert cherry



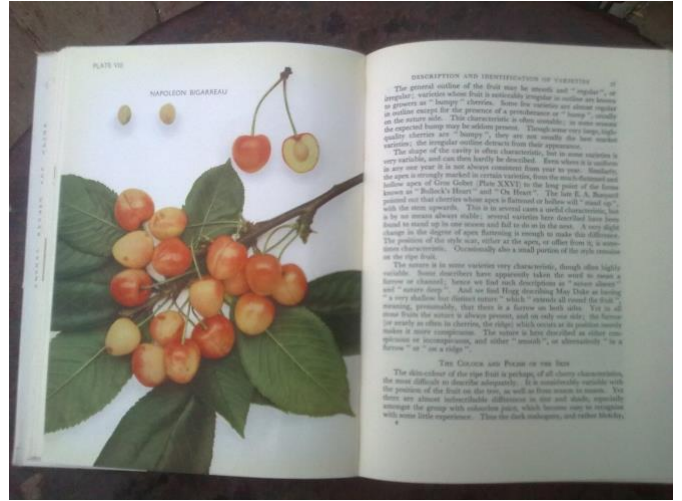
03. Modern variety Stella.



06. An unidentified Black dessert cherry.



07. Possibly variety White Heart from an old orchard in Wyre Forest.



10. Norman Grubb's 1949 book 'Cherries' is still considered the definitive work on the subject.

Reference

Grubb, Norman, H. 1949. *Cherries*. Crosby Lockwood & Sons London

For more details on The Three Counties Orchard Project see www.TCTOP.org.uk



08. Even as standing deadwood there is high Biodiversity value.

Images

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