

The Barley Plum rediscovered – plants, people and sustainability on the Cotswold Hills

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Introduction

A matter of great personal satisfaction to me, the more so with hindsight, is that how, on moving to this village during 1970, I was able to interact with a rare breed now sadly extinct, namely the common land worker. I use this term to distinguish between traditional people who carried with them anything but common time-honoured rural traditions and the ensuing wave of ‘new rural settlers’ who saw the countryside differently.

Sid Gaskin (01) moved to Little Comberton in the Vale of Evesham at that time; although very much a common man he carried with him an air of the uplands. He was a Cotswold dry-stone waller and builder, like his parents before him, born and bred in the Gloucestershire parish of Woodmancote on Cleeve Hill, where he plied his trade and spent his youth. Sid Gaskin’s father was a thatcher who on occasion walked daily from Woodmancote to Ashton-under-hill, an across-the-hills round trip of 20 miles. Such memorable self-reliant characters hallmarked self-sustaining rural communities. In about 1920 another such hill character, one Thomas Jeanes, killed an ox with a single blow from a pickaxe for a gallon of strong cider, presumably drunk first. Such people, by their own admission, frequently lacked academic education, but contributed profoundly to mine.



01. Sid Gaskin demonstrating from scratch the perfect preparation of a pheasant for the table, Little Comberton, November 1977.

This background sets the scene for this account of the rediscovery of a ‘lost’ Cotswold Hill plum which is very much a part of that ‘lost’ world. It was a world of ancient cherry and walnut trees, fertile orchards, Mussel plums and winter cheese made from ‘green’ bullaces, all now scarcely evident; identical scenes of upland self-sustenance mark communities in all the low mountains of Europe, Asia and North Africa.

Discussion

During 1976 Sid Gaskin, knowing my interest in fruit trees, enquired as to whether I might like a “Barley Plum,” adding that he would find one for me next time he was “up at Cleeve.” I was expected to “look after” the tree which, note especially, was “rare.” It duly

arrived during the autumn of 1977 and was planted in a boundary hedge in my garden at Little Comberton (SO967432) and this plant forms the basis of this description. It was called Barley Plum because “it ripens with the barley” by the second week of August, depending on the season, continuing to near the end of the month. That a plum should be named after a definable rural event is a measure of its relationship with traditional rural practice.

By 2015 I had singularly failed to find any references to Barley Plum. That changed on 22 September 2015. Knowing that the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale Farm in Kent had no record of Barley Plum but that it had been taken over by the University of Reading, I contacted Dr Matthew Ordidge at Reading. That proved to be a turning point and led to a sequence of events that finally confirmed that Barley Plum was hitherto unknown as a living tree.

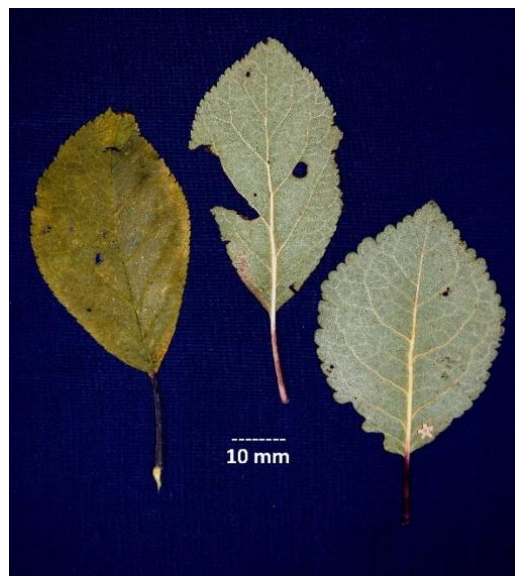
Dr Ordidge contacted Mrs Ann Smith, secretary of the Gloucestershire Orchard Trust and in so doing initiated a surge of information. Mr Charles Martell confirmed that, following an entry in his book (Martell, 2007), Barley Plum was a lost variety but with a documented record. Almost immediately Mr Jim Chapman indicated that this record comprised a handwritten note in his copy of Taylor (1949) which he ascribed to K.V. Rolfe. The note is located on page 20 of that book in the section on chance seedlings in hedgerows and woodlands. It first cites “Bredon - Barley Plum”, then on the next line “St Kea” [Kea, a Cornish plum (PFW)], adding “see Notes and Queries concerning Evesham and the Four Shires, vols 1 & 2, ed. E. A. B. Barnard, 1911 – 14.” This annotation is evidently the only known documented reference to Barley Plum.

Nomenclature

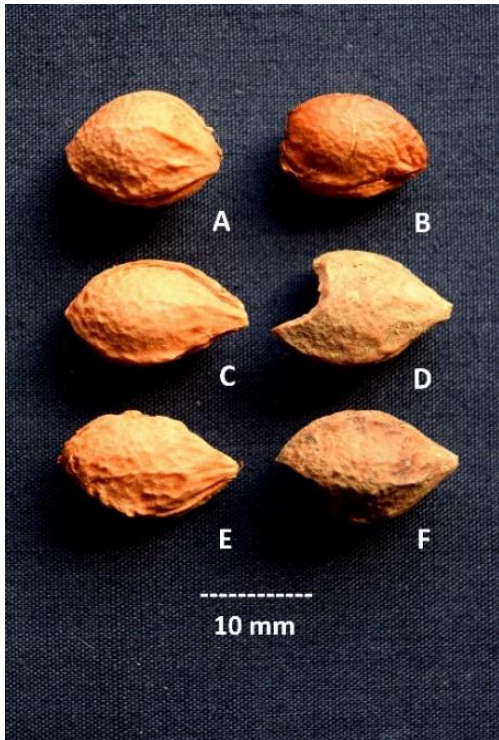
In this account plums are understood to be *Prunus domestica* L. ssp. *domestica*. damsons are *Prunus domestica* ssp. *insittia* (L.) Bonnier & Layens var. *damascena* L and purple bullaces are *Prunus domestica* ssp. *insittia* (L.) Bonnier & Layens var. *nigra* Asch. & Graebn. White bullaces are held to be *Prunus domestica* ssp. *insittia* (L.) Bonnier & Layens var. *syriaca* (Borkh.) Koenhe.

Description of Barley Plum

In describing plum, damson, sloe or gage tree features it is in my view unwise to place undue emphasis on any one character or finer point of detail due to frequent variation of those characters (02, 03); this is in addition to clonal variation within single named cultivars over time. Features such as fruit stone size may also vary over time (13); for these reasons critical observations made here are somewhat generalised only.



02. Damson Merryweather, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, September 2015. Leaf laminae from a single tree varying from obovate with base cuneate and edges bluntly dentate to broadly ovate with edges crenate. This distinctive damson has ovoid fruit stones typically measuring 19 mm x 12 mm x 7 mm.



03. Variation in damson fruit stones. A: unknown form or cultivar, Castlemorton, Worcestershire, September 1983. B: small fruited primitive selection, fruit stone sloe-sized, moorland farm, Cwmystradllyn, Merionethshire, August 1982. C to F: cultivar Farleigh, C & E: Little Comberton, Worcestershire, 1979. D & F: Offenham, Worcestershire, 2003 (gnawed by *Apodemus*).

The Barley Plum tree grows in loamy clay at 30 m altitude and has a distinctive form at maturity (05. in leaf, 06. in winter). It is comparatively upright and compact in leaf with dense foliage; there is no symmetrical radiating crown of primary branches. The tree is now some 25 feet or eight metres high and the circumference of the trunk five feet from the ground is 45 cms or 18 inches. The bark is grey and smooth (04) with scattered irregular excrescences and closely set obscure horizontal thin pale stripes which may be characteristic. Young shoots are imperceptibly but densely hispid with erect silver hairs from 0.1 mm – 0.3 mm in length.



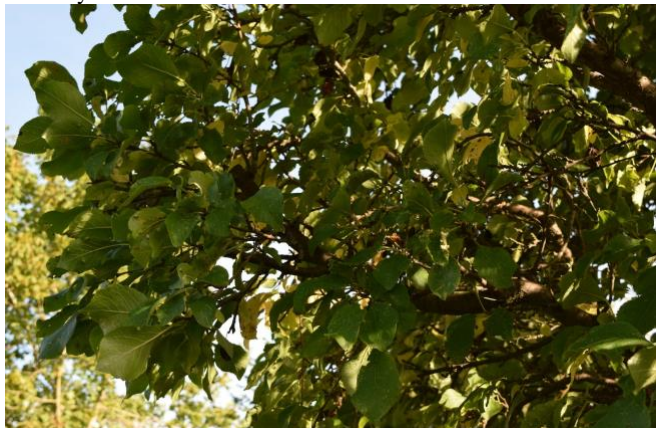
04. Bark detail of Barley Plum, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, December 2015.



05. Form and habit of 40-year old tree of Barley Plum in leaf. Little Comberton, Worcestershire, September 2015. Note the dense foliage and ascendant habit.



06. Form and habit of 40-year old tree of Barley Plum in winter, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, December 2015. Note the relatively strict ascendant habit.



07. Leaf character and disposition of foliage of Barley Plum, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, September 2015.

The foliage is flimsy and leaf laminae shape is mostly broadly obovate the bases long-cuneate (08). The leaf edges are forwardly dentate, occasionally crenulate. The undersides of the leaves closely resemble those (seen) of sloe and damson Farleigh, appearing silvery when pressed (08 and 09) with stout silver hairs distributed on every vein (not for example as in leaves of Greengage, strongly pubescent only or mostly in the axils of the main veins). Measured parallel to the main vein the thickness of Barley Plum leaf laminae is 0.2 mm in fresh material and in this regard and in shape they correlate with some forms of sloe (leaf lamina thickness 0.15 mm - 0.19 mm (10)) and damson but not with the damson cultivar Merryweather (02) (leaf lamina thickness 0.35 mm - 0.4 mm) or with Greengage (leaf lamina thickness 0.4 mm). This indication of flimsiness is tangible when leaves are held in the hand.



08. Leaves of Barley Plum, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, September 2015. Laminae ovate to obovate bases cuneate.



09. Foliage, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, September 2015. Leaves of Barley Plum (x 4, above) in relation to leaves of Farleigh Damson (x 3, below).



10. Leaves of a form of enclosure hedgerow sloe *Prunus spinosa* L. Little Comberton, Worcestershire, September 2015.

The rather small ovoid fruit (11) average 30 mm (1.25 ins) in length and 22 mm in width and attenuate somewhat to the stem eye which is offset, skin reddish-purple with thin whitish pruinose bloom accentuating the purple colour, soon lost, suture line evident. On the tree pendant, singly or in loose clusters of two to five, stalk conspicuous, typically 20 mm long. Flesh colour yellowish. At Little Comberton the fruit is prone to the fungus *Sclerotinia laxa* Aderh. & Ruhl. Fruit stalks imperceptibly hispid appearing glabrous.



11. Ripe fruits of Barley Plum, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, 23 August 2015.

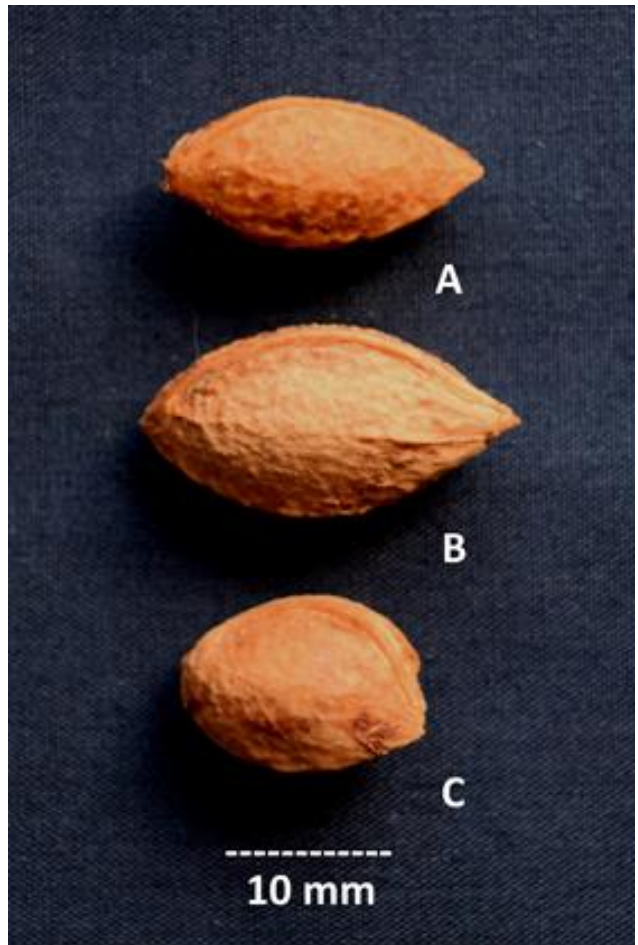
Fruit stone elongate, resembling some damsons (03, 12 to 15), especially Prune Damson but more elongate than Farleigh Damson, not suborbicular like sloe, somewhat tumid, typically measuring 20 mm x 9 mm x 7mm, surface with regular effaced sculpted pitting. A passing resemblance to fruit stones of 'Gr.ST. 92-6' growing in the Stadspark at Groningen (Woldring, 1998) is likely to be coincidental. Stone clinging. Dual purpose plum. An excellent moderately sweet firm-fleshed culinary plum. Freezes well and in the past probably also preserved well by traditional means.



12. Fruit stones of Barley Plum, Little Comberton, Worcestershire, 2015.



13. Fruit stones of Barley Plum, Little Comberton, Worcestershire showing size variation, top, 2015; below, 1983.



14. Fruit stone of Barley Plum (A), Little Comberton, Worcestershire, 2015, in relation to fruit stones of other varieties. (B) plum Blaisdon Red, Westbury-on-Severn, Gloucestershire, 2001, and (C) plum Rodley Blackjack (or Rodley Jack), Westbury-on-Severn, 2002.



15. Prune Damson or Shropshire Prune fruit stones, Pershore, Worcestershire, 1983. Note some similarity between fruit stones of Barley Plum and Prune Damson.

Taxonomy

The taxonomy of plums, damsons, sloes and bullaces is complex, partly because of variation observed as a consequence of sexual reproduction (Woldring, 1998). Tutin *et al.*, 1992 cited *Prunus fruticans* Weihe (*Prunus x fruticans* Weihe in Chater (2010) and Stace, Preston & Pearman (2015)) as a hybrid between sloe and damson but great caution needs to be exercised in attempting to determine such plants.

Chater (2010), writing under sloe *Prunus spinosa* L., states that: "There is enormous variation in habitat, morphology and time of flowering and leafing between populations. Densely spiny bushes with short, divaricate twigs, dense bunches of flowers well before the leaves emerge and small fruits with sub-globose stones are frequent and grade into forms that are scarcely spiny with longer, less divaricate twigs, sparse flowers coming out later with the leaves, and larger fruits with somewhat flattened stones. These in turn grade into what are **assumed** to be *P. x fruticans* and it is impossible to tell how much of the variation is due to hybridisation."

These comments are pertinent to any discussion, including this one, of damsons and damson-like plums, the origins of which are uncertain. Having studied the characters of Barley Plum it is not in my view presently possible to say whether it is a plum-like damson (on the basis of fruit stone features) or a damson-like plum (on the basis of fruit). Given the distinctive and somewhat 'primitive' form of the tree in conjunction with leaf and fruit stone characters (08, 12 to 15) some genetic influence of either or both sloe and damson seems credible (Grigson, 1996; Woldring, 1998). Some indigenous Gloucestershire plums have damson affinity through shape (e.g. Old Pruin) or flavour (e.g. Rodley Blackjack) (Martell, 2007). DNA analysis may well aid understanding of the phylogenetic relationships of the Barley Plum.

Barley Plum is a distinctive tree whatever taxonomic status it may eventually be accorded. It seems to sit alone in certain regards, such as by virtue of its 'natural' uncontrived growth form, 'primitive'

foliage characters and relatively early ripening closely following the plum cultivar Rivers' Early Prolific.

Distribution and historical significance

Up to now Barley Plum is known only from "Bredon" (*vide supra*) and Cleeve Hill in Gloucestershire where trees may still exist and might be sought. If "Bredon" implies Bredon Hill, as seems possible, it is perhaps unlikely that Barley Plum is now extant there. Both of these sites are places where settled communities existed on hillslopes probably continuously from later prehistoric times. Sloe and damson are frequently found on prehistoric (Godwin, 1975; Zohary & Hopf, 2000) and historic (Van Zeist & Woldring, 1998) human occupation sites. There is no reason why Barley Plum should not be of considerable antiquity and a quintessential Cotswold native fruit tree. Its apparent geographical isolation is likely to be significant and make it a unique culture-relic of calcareous Cotswold escarpment hillslopes.

I intend to make some suckers of Barley Plum available to the Gloucestershire Orchard Trust. In the meantime attempts should be made to relocate it on Cleeve Hill or Nottingham Hill or possibly elsewhere on the Cotswold Hills.

Acknowledgements

I am especially grateful to Dr Matthew Ordidge of the University of Reading for effectively mobilising commentary and helping to disentangle the story of the Barley Plum. I also thank Mr Jim Chapman, Mr Charles Martell and Mrs Ann Smith for their assistance. Finally my special thanks to the late Mr S. Gaskin for making this contribution possible and for some memorable visits to the Cotswold Hills.

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Images full captions

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