

## More Worcestershire pear mysteries

Wade Muggleton

Worcestershire is synonymous with pears and I have written about the County Emblem, the Black Pear in previous editions of Worcestershire Record (Muggleton 2016 & 2017). There is still a mystery to be solved regarding the fact that two genetically different Pears have a claim to be the Worcester Black Pear. But other pear mysteries also continue to arise.

There were anecdotal claims to a local pear variety known as Worcester Silk (01). It did not appear in any book or catalogue by that name, but claims persisted that it was a local variety. Investigations led to a very old tree on a farm in Ombersley which the farmer said his late father had always claimed to be Worcester Silk. Fruit was collected in 2018: the medium sized pears were of a flat-topped round shape about the size of an average apple. They did not keep very well in store, not lasting much beyond the end of November.



01. 'Worcester Silk' Pear which turned out to be Autumn Bergamot. Wade Muggleton.

As these fruits were unidentifiable, in June 2019 leaves were submitted for DNA analysis, where a no-match result would have suggested a local and previously unrecorded variety. The results however came back with a match to Autumn Bergamot, one of the oldest known pear varieties, believed to date back to the Middle Ages.

If Warden pears, of which the Worcester Black is one, were a tough group to fathom then Bergamots are an equally confusing type. Robert Hogg, in 1884 claimed that the Autumn Bergamot was the same as the English Bergamot, yet today the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale have them as two distinctly different types. There are a good number of these short round pears and like Wardens it is unclear how true they may come from seed. The possibility of variation by seedling propagation may be a factor in producing so many similar pears.

So, on the one hand we have disappointment that perhaps we do not have another local county pear variety, but it is interesting that somewhere down the line it obtained the local name or synonym Worcester Silk. It is the development of DNA fingerprinting that is helping us solve some of these local mysteries.

Another mystery came from a tree in an ancient orchard in Upper Rochford near Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire. The owner had thought it was perhaps a Worcester Black Pear, which samples of the fruit (02) showed it was clearly not, so a leaf sample was submitted

for DNA analysis. The results showed a match with only one other sample that was sent to Brogdale in 1952 by a Mr Smith from Weston Park in Shropshire, giving only the second match and sample of this pear. It has not been given a proper name merely being referenced as "Smith 1" and an accession with a number in the Brogdale collection. The tree in Rochford is probably 80 to 100 years old and the Weston Park sample was sent in 70 years ago. Is there a connection between Weston Park and a farm in Rochford? From speaking to the owner of the farm she was not aware of anything that potentially links the two sites.



02. The mystery Rochford/Weston Park Pear. Wade Muggleton.

Sometimes a bit of historical digging can turn up a link where farms or estates have some past shared ownership that could mean a scion was taken from one site to the other. The fact we have two of the same pears separated by 70 years and 40 miles does suggest something more than a random seedling, so they could be one of those hundreds of missing or lost pear varieties which were mentioned in the 1800s but of which there is no trace today. This DNA profile means that if any future matches appear, it may shed further light on the subject.

Then in Autumn 2020 I was asked to look at some old pear trees in Chaddesley Corbett, which again had sizeable hard and what I presumed to be culinary (cooking) pears (03). They too had leaf samples submitted for DNA analysis in 2021. The results came back as matching the Smith 1 and Rochford 2019 sample. So we had gone from the only record in 1958 at Weston Park Shropshire to now three other trees of this variety; the one in Upper Rochford and two adjacent trees on a farm in Chaddesley Corbett.



03. The Chaddesley Corbett Pear that is a match for the Rochford (2019) and Smith 1 (1958) samples. Wade Muggleton

Although DNA can solve mysteries like the Worcester Silk/Autumn Bergamot, in the case of the Rochford Pear it throws up as many questions as it answers and is a timely reminder of how pears are such an under studied subject and how so many varieties have been lost. The National Fruit Collection at Brogdale currently has some 530 varieties, yet as recently as 1870 Scott's nursery of Somerset

listed a staggering 1,538 named varieties of Pear. Some of those may have been the same with different local or regional names, but many were undoubtedly unique varieties now seemingly lost. Whilst there are historic lists of countless named varieties they are largely minimal in description terms and so when we find a pear like the one at Rochford there is simply not enough information to allow referencing to any of those historic varieties. DNA can go some way towards giving some answers, but much will remain lost in history.

I suspect the Smith 1/Rochford/Chaddesley Pear is one of the lost Warden (hard culinary) Pears. Among the missing varieties are Parkinson's Warden, Godboul't's Warden, the Bell Pear, the Red and White Wardens, the Canterbury Pear and the French and Spanish Wardens to name but a few, but which, if any of them it is, we will likely never know as there is simply not enough evidence to go on. As it does not match anything known today we have the opportunity now to accredit it and give it a name of our choosing. But this is something I am not enthusiastic about as I would much prefer to think that it is one of the historical pears, but sadly it seems unlikely that any evidence will come to light.

On the Worcester Black front there is a historical claim by Bunyard in 1920 that the Worcester Black Pear was actually a French pear, Poire de Livre of Leroy. Only a DNA sample from France would shed light on this as I have failed to find any evidence that the said French variety grows here in the UK. Research is ongoing, but Brexit has made it more difficult to get plant material sent from the EU to the UK. My own view is that le Livre is not the same as Worcester Black, but with only on-line photographs to go by it is inconclusive, and perhaps one day a DNA test will finally give us an answer one way or the other.

#### References

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#### Images

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