

Wheathampstead Community Orchard

Hertfordshire has a long history of orchard cultivation, as is apparent in old maps such as that of Dury and Andrews (1766) which shows many acres of orchards in the county. One of the earliest recorded orchards in Britain was planted in 1280 by Eleanor, wife of Edward I, at the Palace in Kings Langley. For Wheathampstead in particular, the Dury and Andrews map (below) shows small orchards behind all the houses on both sides of the High Street and along the southern end of Lamer Lane.



© Hertfordshire Record Society 1974

Many varieties of fruit tree (apples, pears, plums, gages, cherries) have been developed in the county. Perhaps the most famous orchard nursery was that of Thomas Rivers at Sawbridgeworth, where the world-famous Conference pear was first grown in 1875. Another very large orchard was Lane's of Berkhamsted which by 1902 was growing 20,000 apple, pear, plum and cherry trees.

By 1924 there were 1,749 acres of orchard in Hertfordshire, and still 1,170 acres as late as 1962, including several in the parish of Wheathampstead. Hicks (2011) says that there are now just 605 acres of "true" orchards at that time though with many smaller remnants, including in domestic gardens. There are no commercial orchards in the county today, but community orchards can be found at Tewin, Sawbridgeworth (Thomas Rivers), Croxley Green, Shenley Park, Highfield Park, and Codicote. Most of these are involved in the Hertfordshire Orchard Initiative.

The East of England Apples and Orchards Project (EEAOP) website lists 13 native Hertfordshire varieties of dessert apple and seven of cooking apple, plus another 50 "lost" varieties. They also list six varieties of cherry, eight of pears, and 22 of plums and gages. The EEAOP propagates and sells many of these trees, including apple varieties such as

Fairie Queen (Ware Park 1937), Hitchin Pippin (1896), Brownlees Russet (Hemel Hempstead 1848), and Hormead Pearmain (Great Hormead 1826). They also sell Caroon cherry, which was developed in Geddeston in 1725. For their catalogue, see below.

Community orchards

The charity Common Ground have been working to save old orchards and encourage the establishment of new community orchards since the late 1980s. There are several hundred such orchards in England today but, until now, not in Wheathampstead. Late in 2011, exploration of a long-forgotten piece of land at the eastern end of the Meads revealed a tangle of nettles, brambles, scrub elder trees and litter, including lumps of concrete and rusty wire netting.



In among the jungle and almost invisible from the outside, there were three old apple trees. Was this once an orchard? Could it become an orchard again? The ground was obviously very fertile and the old trees, though neglected, were still producing some fruit. Discussion with older local residents, plus consultation of mid-twentieth century maps, showed that the land had once received the overflow of treated water from the sewage works that had operated a few yards to the west. Hence the fertility of the soil. At least two local residents had grown vegetables there; a single conifer on the site had started life as a Christmas tree. Since then, the area had been used as a dump for surplus soil and rubble from nearby groundworks. The land, which extends in all to about half an acre, is owned by the Parish Council who, in January 2012, approved a proposal and funding to create a community orchard to be planted with Hertfordshire apple and pear trees and, in due course, to be open to all, residents and visitors alike.

The first task was to clear the site, of which about a quarter of an acre is useable. This involved taking out the elder trees, including the stumps and roots, cutting down the weeds and brambles, removing the larger chunks of rubble and the old sewer pipe, and more or less levelling the heaps of soil.



This work was completed at the beginning of April 2012, revealing the old apple trees.



The plan was then to spray the weeds at least twice during the rest of 2012, to continue to level and improve the ground, and to prepare the soil for planting about 25 trees early in 2013. However, the wettest summer, and eventually the wettest year, on record meant that

this was not possible so the project was put on hold for a year. Then, towards the end of 2012, we were approached by a local man who was raising Saddleback pigs in a nearby field and asked if we would consider using his pigs to clear the site. This was a win-win: he needed a new space for his pigs; we needed to clear the site as cheaply and thoroughly as possible. We welcomed the opportunity to do this using traditional organic and eco-friendly methods.



This involved a lot of work erecting a pig-proof fence, access gates and a pig sty. The cost of fencing materials was met by the Wheathampstead and District Preservation Society (WDPS) and the framework for the sty was lent by another local man.



The pigs arrived in January 2013 and stayed on site until late in the summer. They were a great attraction for local people, especially when the sow produced 12 piglets in July.



After more work to level the ground,



two of each of the following varieties were planted by volunteers on a wet day in January 2014.

Apple

Brownlees Russet (Hemel Hempstead 1848)
Thomas Rivers (Sawbridgeworth 1892)
Rivers St Martins (Sawbridgeworth 1896)
Crimson Newton Wonder (Holwell 1921)
Bushey Grove (Bushey 1926)
Young's Pinello (Letchworth 1935)
Fairie Queen (Ware Park 1937)
Dawn (Ware Park 1940)
Gavin (Bayfordbury 1956)

Pear

Fertility (Sawbridgeworth 1875)
Conference (Sawbridgeworth 1875)
Parrot (Sawbridgeworth 1895)
Saint Luke (Sawbridgeworth 1897)



A water supply was created by constructing a corrugated roof that fed rainwater into a storage tank.



In the event, this was hardly needed because of unusual amounts of rainfall in the next two years. The area under the three mature trees was sown with grass seed.



The first fruit appeared in the autumn of 2015,



Followed by birds, butterflies, bees and other wildlife.

The crop was disappointing for the next few years but 2023 saw a bumper crop. The fruit is picked and put in boxes and local people are invited to help themselves.



(With acknowledgements to Hicks "Orchards" in 'An Historical Atlas of Hertfordshire' (University of Hertfordshire 2011)

For more information about orchards in Hertfordshire, see <http://www.englishinparticular.info/orchards/o-herts-i.html>

East of England Apples and Orchards Project (EEAOP) <http://www.applesandorchards.org.uk/>

Hertfordshire Orchard Initiative <http://www.hertfordshireorchardinitiative.org.uk/>

Common Ground <http://www.commonground.org.uk/> <http://www.english-in-particular.info/orchards/o-herts.html>

For a history of orchards in Hertfordshire, see http://www.hertfordshireorchardinitiative.org.uk/guidance-and-info-history-of-hertfordshire-orchardshoi_2

If you have an apple tree in your garden but you don't know the variety, you might like to try <http://www.fruitid.com/>

Patrick McNeill