

# Wheathampstead Community Orchard

by Patrick McNeill

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 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. The East of England Apples and Orchards Project (EEAOP) website lists eleven native Hertfordshire varieties of dessert apple and seven of cooking apple, plus another 50 "lost" varieties. They also list seven 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 Hormean Pearmain (Great Hormead 1826). They also sell Caroon cherry, which was developed in Geddeston in 1725.<sup>1</sup> For their catalogue, see below.

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<sup>1</sup> For a history of orchards in Hertfordshire, see <http://www.hertfordshireorchardinitiative.org.uk/guidance-and-info-history-of-hertfordshire-orchards-hoi>

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 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<sup>2</sup>.

### **Community orchard**

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, none in Wheathampstead.

Late in 2011, exploration of a long-forgotten piece of land at the eastern end of The Meads, in the middle of the village, revealed a tangle of nettles, brambles, scrub elder trees and litter, including lumps of concrete and rusty wire netting.



However, in amongst 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 away to the west. Hence the fertility of the soil!

Later research led to a meeting with an elderly lady whose father, Arthur Wren, had planted the three trees when he was manager of the sewage works from the 1920s to 1953 and grew a wide range of flowers, vegetables and fruit there. She recalled that they had been grown from pips. If this is so, they are not a recognised variety. To date, they have not been definitely identified.

The sewage works closed in 1976 and the Parish Council bought the whole site from Thames Water in 1983. While most of the site was restored and is now a Local Wildlife Site, the part that is now the orchard, which extends to about half an acre, became a dump for

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about orchards in Hertfordshire, see <http://www.England-in-particular.info/orchards/o-herts.html>

surplus soil and rubble from nearby ground-works, leaving it in the state in which it was rediscovered in 2011.

In January 2012, the Council approved a proposal and funding to create a community orchard, to be planted with Hertfordshire varieties of 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 pipes, 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 the 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. He asked if we would consider using his pigs to clear the



site. This was a win-win: he needed more space for his pigs; we needed to clear the site as cheaply and thoroughly as possible; so 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.



Three pigs, a one-year-old and two four-month-old gilts, duly arrived early in January 2013 and got to work rooting out the nettles and other weeds.



They were soon joined by a young boar and the older gilt produced ten piglets at the beginning of June. These quickly became a major attraction for local people, especially the many children who loved to visit.



However, this young family needed to have the site to themselves so the other pigs moved out. The problem then arose that a long spell of dry weather and consequent hard ground, combined with the piglets being too small to carry on with the rooting out of weeds, meant that the nettles made a comeback, so some spraying was needed after all.

The pigs moved out in September, the weeds were sprayed and cut, the site was chisel-ploughed in October, and the resulting dead vegetation and other rubbish was removed by hand.



A system for harvesting rainwater was built at the end of November, using scaffold poles and corrugated steel sheets donated by local people and a 1,000 litre tank bought on eBay and collected by another volunteer. There followed the driest three weeks on record for the time of year but more than 150 litres were collected in two nights just before Christmas. And then, on the night of 21 December, the steel panels making up the roof were stolen. Almost at once, the heavens opened! However, the roof was replaced in January, using less theft-attractive materials, and the system is working well.

Finally, on 18 January 2014, 19 volunteers planted 26 apple and pear trees.



There are two of each of the following native Hertfordshire varieties, all supplied by EEAOP.

**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)

All 26 trees have taken, have had their first pruning, and are flourishing. By mid-September, they looked like this.





In the coming months and years, the three old apple trees will be restored. The area around the old trees will be levelled, sown with grass seed and kept mown as a picnic area. Most of the site, around the new trees, will be maintained as rough grassland and cut to encourage wild plants and flowers, with an access path through the trees. In two or three years' time, we will have the first crop of fruit, an area rich in wildlife, and a delightful spot for a picnic.

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

### **Links**

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.england-in-particular.info/orchards/o-herts.html>

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/> .