

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 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 Hormean Pearmain (Great Hormead 1826). They also sell Caroon cherry, which was developed in Geddeston in 1725.¹ For their catalogue, see below.

¹ 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 Initiative².

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, not 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 clean water from the sewage works that had operated a few yards away to the west. Hence the fertility of the soil! At least two local residents had even 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 various nearby groundworks.

The land, which extends 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.

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

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 raises Saddleback pigs in a nearby field, who 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; 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.



At the time of writing (2nd January 2013), the pigs are due to arrive in a few days' time. They will stay on site until late in the summer, after which the ground will be finally levelled and prepared for planting the trees early in 2014. In the meantime, there is more work to be done including setting up a water supply, reinforcing the hedgerows, and restoring the old apple trees. The site will later be sown with grass seed and, 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/> .