ORCHARDS EAST

RECORDING CONSERVING CREATING

December 2020

Welcome to our final bulletin from this Heritage Funded project in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk.

The Final Lap

Tom Williamson, Joint Chair

The Orchards East project is now drawing to a close, after four eventful years: Howard Jones, our wonderful Project Officer, will continue to work but only for a few hours a week, until July, when we hope to hold our (long postponed!) final conference.

As Howard explains elsewhere in this newsletter, our achievements in terms of planting new orchards and holding training course have been phenomenal. But so, too, have been our research and survey work, thanks to a wonderful band of volunteers – to whom many, many thanks.

Public and private archives have been systematically examined; oral

sites have been examined on the ground, with more detailed follow-up studies of a number of important examples.

We now know a lot about orchards in eastern England. Some of these findings have been presented in a small book which was co-written with Monica Askay – *Orchard Recipes from Eastern England*, published by Poppyland Press (selling at less than £10 a copy, a perfect late Christmas present!!). More detailed treatments will appear over the next six months, in the form of a report – 'The State of Orchards in Eastern England' – and a book, which will be published by the University of Hertfordshire Press.

One crucial finding concerns the extent to which orchards have been lost over recent decades. Until the nineteenth century, fruit growing was on a limited, semi-domestic scale, with farm orchards producing a relatively limited surplus for local sale: more specialised commercial production was restricted to a few districts, most notably west Hertfordshire and the Fens around Wisbech.

But the orchard area grew steadily through the nineteenth century, and especially following the spread of the rail network, with new areas of commercial production developing, such as the 'Prune' orchards of south Bedfordshire. Large-scale industrialisation created big urban markets for rural fruit growers, and also led to the development of local processing industries, such as Chivers' jam or Gaymer's cider.

By 1900 there were around 20,000 acres of orchards in the seven

Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Norfolk and Suffolk). But growth continued strongly thereafter and, while the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the slow attrition of old, 'traditional' farmhouse orchards, commercial enterprises – many of which, initially at least, were broadly similar in character – continued to expand. The peak appears to have been reached in the late 1950s, when there were around 47,000 acres of orchards, of all kinds, in the eastern counties.

Since then, and in spite of the creation of new 'community' orchards and the efforts of private enthusiasts, the orchard area has contracted at a frighteningly rapid rate. As a result of your survey work we now estimate that there are a little under 5,000 acres of orchard remaining in the eastern counties, of which perhaps 3, 800 are commercial enterprises.

The loss has important implications for both biodiversity and historic landscape character. The work of Orchards East will accordingly continue, the project morphing into a new body, the 'Orchards East Forum' - an umbrella organisation working alongside, and made up of representatives from, the East of England Apples and Orchard Project and the various county orchard groups. It will act as an arena for the exchange of ideas, a platform for making bids for further research grants, and as a lobbying group, fighting to preserve, develop and expand this most important aspect of our landscape heritage.

A big 'thank you' to all our wonderful volunteers; to Howard and to

these strange, Covid-blighted times); to all our helpers and advisors – too many to list; and above all to the Heritage Fund, for their financial support and advice. Well done all!

Look what we did!

Howard Jones, Manager

Our Heritage Fund grant for Orchards East is sadly drawing to a close, but what an enjoyable and fantastic ride it's been!

With Heritage Fund support, we have surveyed more than 10,000 historic orchard sites across East Anglia, investigated the history of orchards and fruit in the region, recorded peoples' orchard stories and memories, and studied the importance of orchards for biodiversity and wildlife. We've planted 63 new community orchards, delivered 45 orchard management, pruning and grafting workshops, plus 10 traditional fruit cookery workshops. We've given talks for more than 40 community groups, advised more than 100 orchard owners, and identified fruit varieties from many many more! More than 800 wonderful invaluable volunteers have been involved in many ways throughout the project.

A volunteer group will continue some of Orchards East's work; look out for their new website which will go live in January. This includes advice for orchard owners, details of orchards you can visit in the region, and some brilliant teaching materials for primary school teachers. We are also organising a celebration and orchard conference for the coming summer, at which time we hope social distancing rules will be at least somewhat relaxed – look out for details in due course.

Paul Read, Joint Chair

However, the Orchards East project does still have some planned work to complete next spring.

The summer/autumn orchard biodiversity surveys were carried out as planned in 2019. Then Covid-19 brought the survey to a standstill from March 2020, just as the spring surveys were about to commence.

So wish us some New Year luck this spring 2021; that we can finally carry

MULBERRIES!

Paul Read, Joint Chair

We associate summer with cherries or ”soft fruit” such as strawberries, blackcurrants, blueberries and raspberries, but there are others; tree fruits, probably forgotten because no dwarfing rootstocks exist to reduce their tree size to suit suburban gardens.

Mulberries, a genus of 24 species, is distributed world-wide. Two of these have been grown in England for centuries, the Black and the White Mulberry, and a third, the Red Mulberry, for just a century or so.

BLACK MULBERRIES (which are dark red!)

The **BLACK MULBERRY** *Morus nigra* fruit is a soft, fragile fruit that does not travel well. It has a red-black, intensely juicy, slightly acid cluster of drupelets (a bit like a blackberry) on slow growing. wide-spreading trees with characteristically rough-surfaced heart-shaped leaves. These large self-fertile trees produce fruit from late July to the end of August. The fruit is eaten raw, dried, or used immediately (in ice cream for example), rarely sold in markets, but kept for use by its owner. They are incredibly juicy, messy to harvest, and truly delicious - if you have the patience to wait up to 8 years for the crop.

The oldest, and most available, clonal variety is called **Chelsea** (after the Chelsea Physic Garden where the original tree still grows) or **King James**, who in the C 17th thought his gardener was importing White Mulberry trees, *Morus alba*, from France to feed silkworms for his new silk industry, but instead they were Black Mulberry. The Romans brought us the first *M. nigra* trees, probably long after apples, but most likely before pears! In Suffolk, most are in large old gardens; the only one I know is in an orchard with other orchard fruit.

WHITE MULBERRIES (which are often jet black ….or white, or dark red!)

The **WHITE MULBERRY** *Morus alba*, probably first introduced into England for silkworms in the 17th C, is just as much a misnomer as the black. The fruit varies from jet black to reddish to creamy white, and some stay tiny, green and insipid, while others are huge and juicy and some are catkin-like. So it is imperative to obtain a good named clone. Its main characteristic is shiny, very

It is fast growing and some varieties make huge old trees, far larger than Black Mulberry. They are quite common in old farm and country house orchards although some may be crosses with the Black *Morus nigra* or the American Mulberry *Morus rubra*. Many trees are seedlings, some planted in the belief that they are Black Mulberry! In Thornham Hall Walled Garden, Suffolk, there are two trees that produce the small green useless fruit.

However, a good clonal selection can be rewarding, and as any species of mulberry cuttings roots easily, no grafting is needed. The most frequently found forms produce jet black fruit when ripe, which travel reasonably well, are extremely prolific and fall off the tree when ripe, carpeting the ground.

They suffer from two major problems: fruit falls on the ground attracting everything that likes fruit including blackbirds, badgers, rats, muntjac, voles and, it is reported, hedgehogs, and they stain everything purple for several weeks.

The best black-fruited White Mulberries can be eaten raw (excellent with muesli or cornflakes) or used as alternative to blueberries in muffins (my favourite), sponges and upside-down puddings. The only preparation needed is to remove the short green stalks by hand. They do not have the intense juiciness of the black, are more solid and have lower acidity. Our oldest tree at Home Farm, now 40 years old, was propagated from a tree in a small orchard in Oakley, Suffolk (sadly no longer there), is highly productive and overtops the house.

There are now several named black-red varieties available from nurseries, such as **Wellington,** from USA, **Agate** and others from Europe and Asia, and. with long juicy catkin-like fruit, is **Pakistan,** possibly the same as the recently available **Giant Mulberry**, and slightly frost sensitive.

Despite there being many good forms in Asia, especially China, most *white* fruited *Morus alba* trees in England have very poor fruit, even if they look good! The best white variety is **Carman,** a recent introduction, and possibly **Paradise**. We are testing many varieties, but we do know that most *Morus alba* are reasonably hardy.

RED MULBERRIES (except that some are black…or white!)

In the USA, *Morus rubra*, the American Red Mulberry, has been crossed with *M. alba* to produce fruit that is red, pink, black or white. Most of these are not available in the UK. The only trees we know of in Suffolk are probably the dark

of July to the end of September. **Ivory** is a white fruited hybrid.

Mulberry trees have been grown in England for centuries, but are found in old orchards only in the black *Morus alba* forms, and were never grown commercially. In southern Europe, Near and Middle East (Turkey is the largest grower) and India, they are widely grown; *M. nigra* to eat fresh and *alba* for both fresh and as dried fruit with muesli (available from some shops near you!) and are excellent in fruit cakes.

Juicy *M. nigra* varieties are excellent added to Summer Puddings, and a friend makes fabulous goat's milk Black Mulberry ice cream!!

Fig 1 A 30-year old black fruited white mulberry *Morus alba,* probably a seedling, in a Suffolk garden. It is over 8m high and produces well over 20kg of fruit each year (most of which is eaten by birds).

Fig 2 (left) The black fruit of the White Mulberry in Fig 1, native to China, *Morus alba,* with the characteristic shiny hairless leaf.
Fig 3 (right) Ripe fruit of Black Mulberry **Chelsea***, a Morus nigra*, native to Iran, ripe and completely unripe fruit are present together so the tree produces a crop continually over many weeks.

Fig. 4 White Mulberry *Morus alba* **Pakistan** fruit from a tree in a Suffolk orchard.

A recent book in the Reaktion Book's Botanica Series is Peter Coles' "*Mulberry*". This tracks silk culture in China with *M. alba* by 2000 BCE; to Rome by 50 BCE (where both *alba* and *nigra* were present); *M. nigra* in England by 100 CE; to Spanish Mexico with silk making using *M. rubra* in 1530; to silk

Finally, from 17th C, the explosion of Mulberry trees in Europe, *nigra, rubra*, *alba* and their hybrids for fruit and wood and *alba* as shade trees, often pollarded, lining French roads and village centres in southern Europe. Ancient *M. nigra* trees still exist today in English gardens, and in cities. In the late 1990s, I had an office off St John Street, in the City of London, overlooking an ancient and contorted Black Mulberry in the Charterhouse Precinct, said to be planted in the 17th C, one of many in the capital. For the tale of London's mulberry tree heritage see www.moruslondinium.org

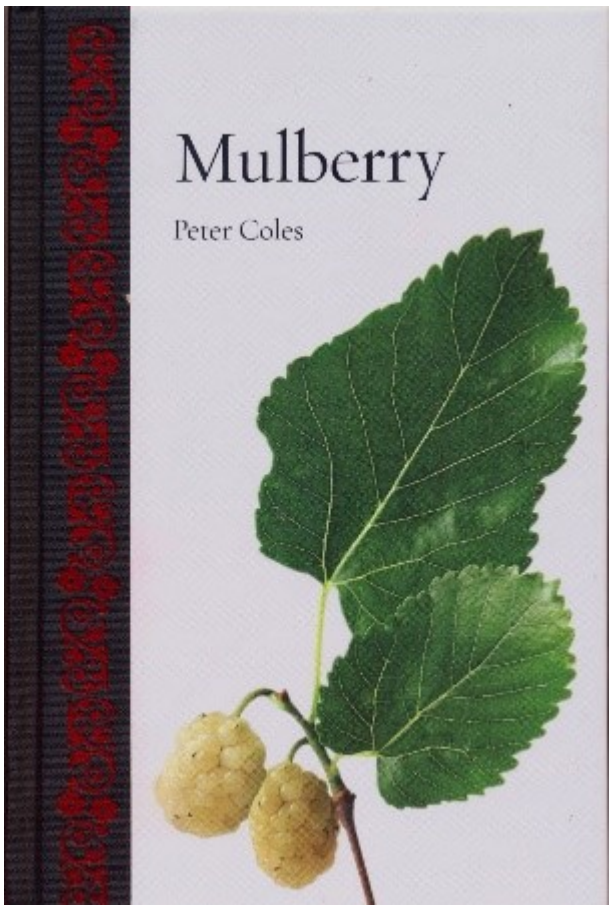

Fig. 5 "*Mulberry"* by Peter Coles of the Morus Londinium Project

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Wishing everyone a Merry Christmas

and a Peaceful New Year!

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