



Wyre Forest Study Group

THE SORB TREE OF WYRE - THE TRUE SERVICE or WHITTY PEAR TREE (*Sorbus domestica*)

Fred Jennings

This article first appeared in the Worcestershire Biological Record Centre's
Worcestershire Record No. 15 November 2003

In 1931, when I was nine years old, I was brought to live in the forest of Wyre in a wooden bungalow in Skeys Wood. For a time I was a pupil at Button Oak School and later at Lax Lane in Bewdley. I soon built up a love of the forest and the trees and wildlife to be found in it. More importantly, I got to know a lot of people who lived and worked therein, such as the tree fellers and the hauliers who took the timber away. My brother, my friends and I had great times with the charcoal burners listening to their stories and being enthralled with their work to produce the charcoal. All this came to an end when we went to live in Kidderminster after about two years.

Many years later, in about 1975, my wife and I went to a meeting at Stourport, where a speaker was giving a talk about the Wyre Forest. He was Edwin George, Head Ranger with the Forestry Commission in Wyre. That was the start of a long and rewarding friendship with Edwin, and my love affair with the forest was rekindled. My special interest in the Whitty Pear of Wyre started in 1982 when members of the Wyre Forest Society and the Forestry Commission put forward a plan to develop an Arboretum in the forest, and this area was to incorporate the Whitty Pear. Planting started in the winter of 1983/84. There are now 74 sites of 1 to 3 trees of various species, purchased and planted by members of our Society and the Forestry Commission. Lately, some have been donated by members of the public.

From time to time I had a few discussions with Dr. Norman Hickin about the special Whitty Pear tree and other aspects of the forest. I felt I wanted to find out more about the history of this tree and to find out if there were any other trees growing locally and where they were. I obtained Dr. Hickin's book "The Natural History of an English Forest", and this and other publications helped in my quest.

The first record of a special tree growing in Wyre, was made by Edmund Pitts of Worcester in 1678. The Royal Society, that had an interest in all things natural, was informed. It was mentioned at one of their meetings and members were shown pieces of the tree and subsequently many interested persons visited the tree. By 1862 it was dying and rotting away and unfortunately, at this time a person with a grudge of some sort set fire to it. A member of the Worcester Naturalists Club, one George Jordan found its burnt shell and took a piece to be kept at the Club. Before this time, in 1855, he had taken a flowering branch to show to the members. He must have had quite an interest in the tree, because in Withy Bed Wood there are 5 of these trees in a

group, which are said to have been planted by him. There are lots of references and drawings of the old tree at various stages of its life, in a number of publications of naturalists' clubs further afield than Worcestershire, printed in the 1700s and 1800s.

The Whitty Pear tree has bunches of white flowers in May and June which produce small pear shaped fruits about the size of a good Damson in October.



Whitty Pear fruit, 30-10-2003

Rosemary Winnall

A family by the name of Woodward, who lived at Arley Castle across the River Severn from Wyre, had recognised the importance of this rare tree. Fortunately they had grown some trees from cuttings or seeds from the old tree before it was burnt down. One has to propagate the trees from seeds or cuttings, as it appears that they do not germinate naturally. I can also say that of all the trees that I know, where lots of fruit has fallen on good soil, I have yet to find one that has germinated. A Worcester Naturalists' Club field meeting at Arley Castle in May 1898 is documented, where, it is said, they admired two fine trees in full flower grown from cuttings from the old Wyre tree. One of them has subsequently died and was felled in early 1950.

Not much more was written about these trees for a number of years, but Mr. Woodward had a young sapling that he wished to plant in the forest near the spot where the old tree grew. A date of the 30 March 1916 was set for Mrs. Woodward to plant this specimen. Many eminent ladies and gentlemen gathered from far and wide, members of many Naturalists Clubs and other interested groups and friends from around the district. I have a photograph of this gathering, and from their clothing I would say they were all well-to-do. The sapling looks about 6 feet tall, there are 19 people standing around, one lady with a spade, Mrs. Woodward I would think. There is a white post with a plaque on it.

Wyre Forest Study Group

From all that has been written about these trees since the original was found and recorded, it was said that this was the only tree of this type in the country until others were grown from its seeds or cuttings. So it was very rare indeed. Its natural habitat is Asia Minor, eastern Europe and the Balkans, but we know that there are lots of trees, some quite old, in western Europe in Italy, Greece, Spain, France, Austria, Germany and Switzerland. How did they get there? Was the species a natural colonist or was it brought into Britain by people long ago?

In ancient times the fruit was fermented in grain to make an alcoholic drink. The Romans called this drink *cevevisia* from which the name Service is derived. Also in days gone by monks and others made mead, and if a brew made from Whitty Pear was added to it, it enhanced the flavour and the alcoholic content. That might have been one of the answers as to why the trees were spread around. Did the old Wyre tree come as a result of seed brought over by the Romans or travellers from the continent? Was the old tree that was burnt the last of generations of these trees growing in this area of Wyre?



Whitty Pear, 1993

Fred Jennings

Another possibility about why the tree was grown is to be found in the tree itself. The timber is very fine-grained and very hard. It was therefore used to make cart and wagon wheel hubs and rims, screws for wine presses, gears and other parts of the machinery in water mills grinding wheat to make flour. In modern times its other use is to make a very thin veneer which at the same time is very hard-wearing. These trees are now being grown commercially in France. In 1993 it was voted tree of the year in Germany. In many places it is the most expensive timber available.

Whilst I was at the Forestry Commission's Alice Holt Conservancy I learned the following. In Switzerland it is the rarest native tree species with 170 known specimens. They are starting a programme to grow more. In Baden Wurttemberg (Germany) there is a programme to conserve and propagate *Sorbus domestica*. In the northern Black Forest (Bavaria) there is a programme to protect and preserve the few surviving specimens of *Sorbus domestica* and to grow more from root suckers, grafting or from seeds. A programme has been started in Austria to create an inventory of existing trees. A total of 90 trees are known and a breeding programme is planned. They have classed it as an endangered species. In Spain they are evaluating field records to learn more about the numbers of these trees and locations.

I can vouch for this timber being fine-grained and a beautiful colour because a few years ago we cut some dead branches off our tree. A friend who is a wood turner, Mr Les Wagner, produced some fine eggcups, some small chalices and some cups on stems, also some salt and pepper pots. And these are now treasured items of mine.

The old tree had superstitions associated with it. It was known locally as *wichen* and it was said that if a sprig from this tree was hung in the house or worn on a person's clothing, gremlins and nasties would be kept at bay.

I have collected seeds from our Wyre tree for a number of years and grown quite a few trees. Some are growing well and others have survived for a few years, then just died. It is hard to get seed to germinate. Last year I collected nine seeds and not one has germinated. I hope to continue my attempts to propagate the species. A friend and fellow member of the Wyre Forest Society, Mrs. Pam Thew, has had a lot more success at growing trees than I have. She has given some away and these are growing in various locations. Of more interest still, she has made quite a few bottles of wine from pears she has extracted the seed from. Very nice and full-bodied it is too!

Now I have to relate a recent development. In 1993 an amateur naturalist, Mr. Marc Hampton, who lives in South Wales, found out what turned out to be True Service Trees growing among shrubs and small trees on a cliff face quite near to the sea on the Glamorgan coast. Further checking and study by experts in the field of biology and dendrology confirmed that what he had found was in fact *Sorbus domestica*. The oldest of the group, very stunted and misshapen, was by various measurements estimated to be 400 years old. Young trees are growing off roots that have threaded their way along cracks in the cliff face. Furthermore, there is another group of trees high up on another cliff face about 3 or 4 miles away. It is generally agreed that no man would have planted them where they are and that they appear to be native. More specimens are rumoured to be growing on cliffs along the lower Severn Valley,



Wyre Forest Study Group

the Avon Gorge near Bristol, and the Wye Valley. I must find time one of these days to have a look to confirm these sightings myself. Because of the above findings, True Service *Sorbus domestica* has been added to the list of trees indigenous to this country. The evidence is to me a bit thin, but then that is how it is up to now.

A few words about the trees in the Withy Bed Wood, Button Oak, until a few years ago the domain of Dr. Cadbury. He built a chalet in there as a retreat. He must have planted the three trees that are growing quite close to the building. The five trees that are growing in a group farther into the forest on a steep slope are more interesting. By the height and look of them they must be quite old. They seem to have grown tall rather than putting on much girth. The tallest I would say is 50 to 60 foot tall and even the thinnest of them is not much less. They are still growing well. I have never found any fruits on them, but what I did find when I checked them on 1 July 2003 were seven tiny suckers growing off thin roots of the old trees. In one case two suckers were from the same root, the tallest of them being no more than 4 or 5 inches tall. This is something I have not found before on any tree that I know, except the one in Croome Perry Wood, more of which later. I think these trees are well over 100 years old and this is why I think George Jordan planted them in the late 1800s. Other trees that have derived from Wyre are to be found in or near the grounds of local country houses. The rich gentry used to exchange special plants to help landscape their gardens and this resulted in the distribution of the trees. Mature trees now found in Worcester Cathedral grounds and in the Oxford Botanical Gardens, might well have been donated by the Woodward family through their connections with these institutions.

When I visited the Croome Perry Wood tree recently, I found it very healthy and growing lots of pears. It has quite a big sucker about 10 to 12 years old. It is about 11 feet tall and is 4.5 inches girth at 3 feet above the ground. There is a big question mark about how this tree came to be planted at this spot and by whom. Is it a descendent of the Wyre tree or was it brought from somewhere else as a sapling? There are no other special trees in this wood as far as I know, so why is this one there?

A mile or two away in the grounds of Croome Court, two *Sorbus domestica* trees are growing within an extensive arboretum. These bear apple-shaped fruit and so are not related to the Wyre tree. Some distance away, across the fields in a small coppice, but still in the estate grounds, is a fine specimen of *Sorbus domestica*. It has four main trunks growing at an angle to the ground as though it was blown from the upright by a gale many years ago. Once again, when I saw it a few weeks ago, it was covered in apple-shaped fruit. I would think these three trees were imported when this landowner was developing his arboretum in the late 1800s or early 1900s.



Young Whitty Pear trees
grown from seed, 1993

Fred Jennings

On my visit on 4 July 2003 to check the trees at Arley House Arboretum, where the Woodward used to live, I found the large tree very healthy with lots of fruit. One of the two saplings that was growing in 1997 is missing, but the other is growing well. Talking to the head groundsman he said, "Do you know of the four trees growing in the small wood near our entrance cattle grid but not on our land?" On looking there are four fine trees, three in a row along the edge of the lane and one about 4 yards back. I could not see any fruit on any of them but they are really healthy. What a find! How many more are there about? For most of the year, to the untrained eye they can be easily mistaken for Ash trees!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank various people who have helped and encouraged me in my interest of *Sorbus domestica* over the years. Ian Hickman and Richard Boles from the Forestry Commission have given permission for the development of the Wyre Forest Arboretum, jointly with the Wyre Forest Society. The Morgan Trust and Julie Davies kindly allowed me to visit the trees on their land. I would like to thank all other landowners who have allowed me access to their individual trees for observation and measurement. Hugh Milner of the Forestry Commission Conservancy at Alice Holt has provided information and data for trees in Britain and on the continent. Thanks are due to Harry Green for his encouragement with this project and to Rosemary Winnall for typing and editing the script. Last, but not least, I would like to thank my wife Cathleen for her understanding and help with all my work over the years!

References

The Natural History of an English Forest, by Norman E Hickin (Arrow Books 1971) ISBN 0 09 906240 2.

Note from Rosemary - Fred Jennings lived for a time in the Wyre Forest many years ago. He has been a long-standing member of the Wyre Forest Society and has worked in a voluntary capacity on conservation work across the forest for over twenty years. He has recently discovered that he is related to George Jordan, the botanist, who is his great-great-grandfather on his mother's side. They lived at "The Factory Farm" at Oretton, near Farlow, where Fred spent time as a child.

Wyre Forest Study Group