

Traditional Orchard Habitat Action Plan

1. Introduction

Traditional orchards were once a common feature of the Worcestershire landscape and along with Herefordshire and Gloucestershire the county held a significant part of the national orchard stock. Or rural economy and in spite of extensive losses studies have suggested that the county still contains about 8% of the England total (Robertson and Wedge, 2008).

Their high ecological importance and the significant threats to them were recognised by their inclusion in the UK BAP priority habitat list and subsequently within Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

2. Current Status

2.1 Description of habitat

Habitat structure is the defining feature of this habitat. Traditional orchards comprise a group of fruit trees planted on permanent grassland. Historically they were planted in a wide variety of situations and soil types for the production of a range of fruits. Orchards on full-standard (vigorous) rootstocks planted in the late 19th or early 20th

agricultural chemicals or machinery. Several centuries of British fruit production has created thousands of cultivars of apples, pears and plums, a number of which originated in Worcestershire. These historic cultivars are an important element of the biodiversity and heritage of the county.

Old, traditionally managed orchards support many features of high value for wildlife. Most trees are relatively short-lived

they are of negligible value for wildlife but this can be improved with the adoption of integrated pest management systems and the planting of features such as hedgerows.

2.2 Distribution and extent

Historically the main concentrations of orchards were in Kent, Devon, Somerset and the three counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. However, the type of fruit grown has varied widely between and within these areas.

In Worcestershire, there are concentrations of orchards in the Teme Valley, the Alfrick and Suckley hills, the Severn Vale, the Vale of Evesham, and the Wyre Forest. The historic significance of fruit growing is apparent in much of the heritage, for example 'Persore' being so named as it was once the heart of pear growing country and the city of Worcester crest incorporating three black pears.

resource, although its precise extent is difficult to document as many surviving traditional orchards are no longer associated with productive agriculture or horticulture and thus will not appear in land use census figures. Figures extracted by Natural England from Ordnance Survey data and the 2000 Agriculture Census suggested an estimated area of traditional orchard in the county of 2,236 hectares. Data from the 2011 Traditional Orchard Inventory compiled by People's Trust for Endangered Species suggests an area of 2,055 hectares, a potential loss of 8% in 10 years. It is likely that losses continue despite the uptake of creation, restoration and management options for traditional orchards within agri-environment schemes.

2.3 Protection of the habitat

Legal protection can be granted through the designation of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Traditional orchards are listed under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006.

Sites not meriting SSSI status can be listed as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS). Although not a statutory designation LWS status does confer some protection through the planning system.

Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) may be used by Local Planning Authorities to protect fruit trees where it is in the interests of amenity to do so. TPOs can thus be used to protect fruit trees in relic orchards that are no longer cultivated for fruit production (the trees can be pruned in accordance with good agricultural practice).

Where development is proposed it is possible to protect existing orchards and include them as part of the public open space provision within the development.

Local Planning Authorities may identify and acknowledge old orchards as characteristic elements of a Conservation Area in Conservation Area Statements. They may use policies in their Local Plan for the protection of landscape character,

Conservation Area character and amenity open space, which can include those orchards identified as important.

Neighbourhood Plans may include policies that highlight the importance of orchards for wildlife and local distinctiveness.

Orchards can be declared Local Nature Reserves by Natural England. This is useful particularly in urban situations.

2.4 Summary of important sites

Some examples include:

Agricultural intensification has caused the single greatest loss of orchards by far. Most of the traditional orchards that were vulnerable to loss in this way have been destroyed already but some are still at risk.

Conflict between commercial and conservation objectives in the management of traditional orchard

the three counties of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. It has encouraged the sharing of skills and expertise, worked with experts to survey orchards for wildlife and fruit varieties and with volunteers to restore neglected orchards, encourage an understanding of the history and heritage of our orchards and to grow and plant rare local variety trees into their areas of origin. Unlike most orchard projects the focus has been on working in private orchards where owners are no longer able to manage their trees.

TCTOP has also overseen the development of an Orchard Champions course in partnership with Garden Organic. To date 40 champions have graduated from the course and in return for five days of training are giving volunteer time to traditional orchard projects. There is an intention to link the orchard champions scheme with the Parish Tree Warden network.

One of the greatest concentrations of traditional orchards remaining within the county are in the Vale of Evesham. A number are in conservation or community ownership and under active management: Tiddesley Plum Orchard recently restored and extended by Worcestershire Wildlife Trust; Hipton Hill plum orchard managed by the Vale Landscape Heritage Trust; and the Lenches Community Orchard owned and managed by a group of local trustees.

The Transition Orchard Workers are a volunteer group working predominantly in the centre and south east of the county to provide orchard training courses and assist private orchard owners with restoration and management. The

The Marcher Apple Network was formed by a group of people living in and around the Welsh Marches, to try to ensure the conservation of old varieties of apples and pears and to stimulate public interest in them. They offer assistance in identifying old varieties, propagate new trees of old varieties and assist with the establishment of traditional orchards where specimen trees of may be planted and managed and organise events that celebrate and encourage the revival of interest in traditional fruit varieties.

The Teme Valley Apple Group is a small group of orchard owners and enthusiasts who aim to promote an understanding and appreciation of orchards in the Teme Valley and preserve local heritage varieties through grafting and new planting.

A large number of community orchards have been planted across the county within the last 15-20 years. Some of these have very active associated community groups who run events and achieve a high level of engagement with local people. Worcestershire County Council's Countryside Service offers support and training to these groups.

Worcestershire-origin varieties of fruit are specifically promoted by and available from Walcot Nursery.

Events such as the annual Tenbury Applefest and a revival of the old tradition of Wassailing do a great deal to engage the public and raise the profile of orchards and local fruit growing.

The National Perry Pear Collection at the Three Counties Show Ground was created in partnership between the County Council, the Three Counties Cider & Perry Association, the Three Counties Agricultural Society and local experts.

with good resistance to pests and diseases, as well as preserving trees which are part of our cultural landscape.

The results of an ongoing project led by local orchard expert Wade Muggleton to locate, photograph and describe the fruit varieties originating in Worcestershire can be seen at www.worcestershireorchards.co.uk. A book 'The Apples and Orchards of Worcestershire' has also been published and is available from www.marcherapple.net/shop or by contacting the Worcestershire County Council Countryside Service.

5. Associated plans

Ancient and Veteran Trees, Urban, Grassland, Hedgerows, Noble Chafer, Bats.

6. Conservation Aim

The extent and condition of the traditional orchard resource in Worcestershire is understood, more sites have been brought into good, restorative conservation management programmes and new orchards have been created which incorporate the planting of locally distinctive varieties.

7. Conservation Objectives

Establish a charitable/community interest trust to work county-wide to champion Worcestershire's orchard heritage

Promote appreciation of the landscape character value to Worcestershire of traditionally managed orchards with 'standard' trees on vigorous rootstocks

Provide training opportunities to increase the skills and knowledge of orchard owners and managers

Promote the creation, restoration and management of orchards throughout Worcestershire and the development of functional habitat linkages between orchards

Focus training and support on the users and managers of community orchards or orchards created for amenity/landscape reasons within development to address issues around lack of management or inappropriate management

pethin

References and further information

Alexander, K (2011). *The noble chafer and traditional orchards: an old-growth species in the English cultural landscape*. British Wildlife 23(1):17-22.

Alexander, K. N. A (2008). *The spatial importance of traditional orchards for invertebrate conservation, with a case study of the BAP priority species the noble chafer *Gnorimus nobilis**. In: Rotheram, ID.ed. *Orchards and groves: their history, ecology, culture and archaeology*, 109-118. Sheffield: Wildtrack Publishing.

Bailey, D., Schmidt-Entling, M. H., Eberhart, P., Herrmann, J. D., Gabriela Hofer, G., Kormann, U and Herzog, F (2010). *Effects of habitat amount and isolation on biodiversity in fragmented traditional orchards*. Journal of Applied Ecology **47**: 1003-1013.

Horak, J., Andrea, P., Podavkova, P., Safarova, L., Bogusch, P., Romport, D and Zasadil, P (2013). *Biodiversity responses to land use in traditional fruit orchards of a rural agricultural landscape*. Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment **178**: 71-77.

Johnson, H (2008). *The traditional British orchard; a precious and fragile resource*. Online article for Building Conservation.

<http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/traditional-orchards/traditional-orchards.htm>

Lashley, R (2015). *Stories of Worcestershire Orchards: Celebrating old orchards in Worcestershire and the people who care for them*. Worcestershire Biological Records Centre.

Lush, M., Robertson, H. J., Alexander, K. N. A., Giavarini, V., Hewins, E., Mellings, J., Stevenson, C. R., Storey, M and Whitehead, P. F (2009). *Biodiversity studies of six traditional orchards in England*. Natural England Research Report 25. Natural England, Peterborough.

Rimmington, N (2010). *Traditional Orchards and the Historic Environment (A report for the Malvern Hills AONB to support the development of a Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project for Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire)*. Herefordshire Council.

Robertson, H and Wedge, C (2008). *Traditional orchards and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan*. In: Rotheram, ID.ed. *Orchards and groves: their history, ecology, culture and archaeology*, 109-118. Sheffield: Wildtrack Publishing.

Smart, M and Winnall, R (eds) (2006). *The biodiversity of three traditional orchards within the Wyre Forest SSSI in Worcestershire: a survey by the Wyre Forest Study Group*. English Nature Research Report 707.

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/80011>

People's Trust for Endangered Species: traditional orchard survey and development of the National Orchard Inventory. <https://ptes.org/get-involved/surveys/countryside-2/traditional-orchard-survey/>

