

TRUE SERVICE TREES OF WORCESTERSHIRE

AUGUSTA PATON

The True Service Tree—*Sorbus domestica*—is a native of the continent of Europe and was not known to grow wild in this country, except for one single tree whose origin has been a matter of speculation for generations.

This ancient Sorb Tree (or Whitty Pear, to give it its local name) grew in Wyre Forest in Worcestershire and was first mentioned by Edmund Pitt, an Alderman of Worcester, in 1678. He wrote that he found this rarity growing wild in Wyre Forest and that no other writer or botanist of that time had ever mentioned it as a native tree. (See Jeffrey, 1918.)

The next specific reference appears in Cox's *Magna Britannia* of 1690, (Cox, 1720) when Pitt's discovery was referred to. Then when Nash published his *History of Worcestershire* in 1781 (Nash, 1781) he tells the story of the tree. He gives some excellent illustrations and writes: 'It has been a curiosity for upwards of 100 years.' The height was then 40 feet (12.2 m.).

Though some early botanists stated that the Sorb Tree grew in the mountainous parts of Cornwall and in Staffordshire, these were thought to be mistakes, as 'diligent search was made in these places for the tree by many botanists during the eighteenth century, but failed to reveal any other tree'. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the Wyre Forest tree was the only specimen growing wild in Britain.

It seems unlikely that the tree was native as no other specimens were recorded in early days. That it was very old is certain. One theory for its introduction into the Wyre Forest was that the Romans brought it from the continent. This hardly seems likely, although a Roman villa was discovered about eight miles away.

An examination of the site made about a hundred years ago showed that in early times there had been a dwelling. Among debris some thin bricks and portions of a wall about a foot high were found, and a little to the west a mound of loosely consolidated stones, which were the remains of some structure. This gave rise to a second theory which was that the tree was brought from Aquitaine and planted by some hermit or recluse in the reign of Edward III, and that he made use of the fruit and leaves for disposal as charms against witchcraft.

The most likely theory however seems to be that the young tree was brought over and planted by a forest keeper when this country had connections with Anjou and Normandy. It is, however, certain that 'the existence of the tree was a most singular and interesting botanical fact'. (Jeffrey, 1918.)

The appearance of the Sorb tree (*Sorbus domestica*) is very similar to that of the Mountain Ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*), but the leaves are more downy beneath and the clusters of flowers are not so flat. The greatest difference concerns the fruit. This consists of small bunches of 'pears', green, but tinged with yellow

on one side when they are ripe. The fruit is extremely harsh and astringent, but when it is kept until October it has the same pleasant acidity as a medlar (*Mespilus germanica*). The tree was cultivated in Anjou and in central and southern Europe for the sake of its wood, and also for its fruit, from which was made a kind of wine or perry. It was also preserved in a dried state like prunes. The wood was valuable as it is very hard and takes a high polish, and was much sought after by turners and cabinet makers. It was also used for mill machinery and mathematical instruments.

In old days the Rowan tree (*Sorbus aucuparia*) was deemed to have protective powers, and the Sorb tree (*Sorbus domestica*), being so like it, was supposed to be even more efficacious. The dried fruit used to be hung in the cottages as a protection from witches and even in 1867 the idea of its virtues had not entirely died away.

There are several English names of *Sorbus domestica*, e.g. the 'True Service', the 'Whitty Pear' and the 'Sorb' tree. The name 'Service' probably derives from the Latin *cervisia*, a beer made from malt, as from ancient times its fruit was used for making a kind of beer. In the west country the local names for the Mountain Ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*) were the 'Whitty', 'Wicken' or 'Quicken' tree and the 'Whitty Pear' simply means the Mountain Ash with pear-like fruit. 'Whitty' may be derived from the Anglo-Saxon *witan* meaning knowledge or wisdom and no doubt had some connection with the supposed virtues of the Rowan tree as a charm against witchcraft.

Another name for *Sorbus domestica* is 'Cheque' tree, possibly derived from 'choker', 'an allusion to the unpalatable fruit, fit to choke one'.

The final chapter in the history of the Wyre sorb tree is a sad one. This ancient tree, venerated by botanists from all over the country, had become a withered wreck by the middle of the nineteenth century, the top branches alone bearing flowers and fruit at their extremities. In 1858 a large party of naturalists exploring the forest gathered beneath it for lunch: four years later it was destroyed by fire. The miscreant of this dastardly deed was a notorious poacher. He had been sentenced by a local magistrate, Squire Childe of Kinlet, to what he considered too severe a term of imprisonment. In order to spite the squire, who was particularly fond of the sorb tree, he burnt it to the ground. Just retribution speedily followed. The poacher not long afterwards was convicted of setting fire to some farm buildings. He was transported and condemned to spend the rest of his days at Botany Bay.

All that was left of the old sorb tree was a blackened stump and various limbs. These were carefully collected by Mr George Jorden, a well known botanist of Bewdley. Out of these branches he had four goblets made. The most elaborate of them had silver bands round the rim and foot on which were engraved respectively the blossom and early leaves of the tree and the fruit and mature leaves. It was presented to Mr William Matthews, Honorary Secretary of the Severn Valley Field Club.

On the 30th June 1864 about eighty members of this club met at the site of the old tree, and around its blackened stump they sang a requiem lamenting the destruction of a tree so long an object of veneration. Unfortunately the words and music sung on this sad occasion have not been recorded.

Beside the goblets a bench was made from the sorb tree's wood which was presented to the Hastings Museum, Worcester Victoria Institute. There is now no record of this relic. Two boxes were also made by the foresters. An inscription

on one reads, 'Box made by John Simmonds out of the old Witty Pear Tree, Wyre Forest'; on the other, 'This box was made of wood out of the old Witty Pear Tree (*Pyrus sorbus*), Alton Woods, Wyre Forest by Francis Bent and given to me in June 1912—John Slade Lea'. John Lea was the son of the Rev. Josiah Lea (1822-1899) who was an original member of the Worcestershire Naturalists' Club. John Lea died in 1962, aged 92. The two boxes have now been presented to the Folk Museum at Hartlebury Castle by his neice.

The Worcestershire Naturalists' Club was anxious to perpetuate the memory of the old tree, and Mr Robert Woodward of Arley Castle, a keen arboriculturist, who had managed to raise some young saplings promised one to be planted on the spot. In the meantime the Club met to erect a memorial post which bore the following inscription:

'On this spot stood for some centuries the only specimen in this country growing wild of the Sorb or Whitty Pear Tree (*Pyrus domestica*) which was burnt down by an incendiary in 1862. This post has been set up by the Worcestershire Naturalist's Club, 25th July 1911, to mark the site. The Right Rev the Lord Bishop of Worcester, F.S.A., President, F. T. Spackman, F.G.S., Honorary Secretary'

On Thursday, March 30th 1916, the young sapling was planted in the presence of many members of the club. The ceremony was performed by Mrs Woodward. It was a solemn occasion as Mr Robert Woodward (Junr.), who had raised the young tree, had been killed in action. As it had been his intention to plant it in the forest, his mother was carrying out her son's wish.

The young tree grew and thrived. In 1920 it was well established. By 1925 the leading shoot was 20 feet (6.1 m) high. In 1935 it narrowly escaped the fate of its predecessor as a forest fire swept that part of the wood but fortunately passed a short distance away. By 1939 the young tree's girth 3 feet (90 cm) from soil-level was 32½ inches (82.5 cm) and its height approximately 35 feet (10.7 m). Today this tree has a girth of 45 inches (1.1 m.) and is over 40 feet tall (12.2 m). It produces flowers and fruit, but not every year. At its base there is an inscription which reads:

'This sorb tree, a direct descendant of the original tree, was presented by Robert Woodward of Arley Castle and planted by Mrs Robert Woodward on the 30th of March 1916. John Humphries Esq., M.A., M.D.S., L.D.S., President—F. T. Spackman Esq., F.G.S., Hon. Secretary.'

Sorbus domestica in this country is very difficult to propagate. It is said not to bear flowers or fruit until it is about sixty years old. Between 1800 and 1820 Lord Montmorris of Arley Castle succeeded in raising two saplings from seed; these were planted in the Castle grounds and grew into fine specimens. The *Gardeners' Chronicle* of 1907 (see Woodward, 1907) contained an article on the Sorb Tree and told how these seedlings were planted at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1903 one tree measured 53 feet (16.2 m) in height and 7 feet 9 inches (2.4 m) in circumference at breast height. This magnificent specimen is now over 60 feet (18.3 m) tall and 12 feet (3.7 m) in girth. A younger tree, also grown from a 'pip', was planted in 1903. A year later it was 5 feet 3 inches (1.6 m) high and 6 feet (1.8 m) high by 1907. It too is now a fine mature specimen. A third tree growing in the Arley arboretum is not mentioned in the 1907 catalogue.

A tree grown from a 'pip' by the late Sir Chad Woodward about thirty years

ago is growing in the grounds of Arley Cottage. It has already borne flowers and fruit which is contrary to Jeffrey's statement made in 1916 (Jeffrey, 1918) that it does not flower before it is sixty years old in this country.

There are other descendants of the Sorb tree propagated at Arley. One grew in the Precentory Garden at Worcester. In 1907 it was about 20 years old and was 13 feet (4.0 m) high and 13 inches (33.0 cm) in girth. This tree had to be removed a few years ago, but has been replaced by one near the Chapter House. This must now be about 8 or 10 years old and is well established, but there are no signs of another tree which was growing before the war in the Mount Royal Gardens in Worcester.

Two trees grow in the Botanic Gardens at Oxford. The guide to the Gardens of 1912 says: 'One tree over fifty feet high is said to have been planted around 1790 from fruit gathered in Wyre Forest.' Whereas the fruit of this tree is like a small pear, the fruit of the other tree is more like an apple and they are known as the Whitty apple and the Whitty pear trees.'

Two more trees, which are almost certainly descendants from Arley, were recorded in 1905 by H. J. Elwes in *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* (Elwes and Henry, 1906). He writes: 'At Croome Court, Worcestershire, the seat of the Earl of Coventry, there are two good sized trees in the shrubbery, one of which is 59 feet high and 6 feet 2 inches in girth. The other with a clean stem, about 50 feet by 7 feet is beginning to decay. Lady Coventry told me that the fruit, which is only produced in good seasons, makes excellent jam when fully ripe, but some seeds which she was good enough to give me did not germinate.'

Another tree was said to grow locally at a farm on the Croome estate, but though the farmer and the writer searched all through a copse for it, all we found was a beautiful Wild Service Tree—*Sorbus torminalis*. This lovely shrub or small tree is fairly common in south Worcestershire.

'The only specimen in this country growing wild' . . . so runs the notice on the post marking the site of the old Sorb tree in the Wyre Forest. But this is not so. From a wood in south Worcestershire another of these interesting trees has lately been reported. It is growing, apparently quite wild, in a little thicket near the edge of the wood. Round it the plants are typical of a rather calcareous soil: ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), maple (*Acer campestre*), dogwood (*Swida (Thelycrania) sanguinea*), guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) and privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*), and not far away grow oaks (*Quercus petraea*), spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*), butterfly orchids (*Platanthera chlorantha*), houndstongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*), dropwort (*Filipendula vulgaris*) and four different kinds of wild roses. It is a spot beloved of birds, and nightingales sing there in the spring. Man has obviously not been responsible for planting this part of the wood, so the supposition must be that the Sorb tree is bird sown. Perhaps the seed was from one of the trees at Croome Court before decay set in, or from the farm mentioned previously; neither is far away. But whatever its origin there this tree grows, a beautiful specimen producing flowers and fruit in due season. It is a little under 40 feet (12.2 m) in height and its girth at 3½ feet (1.1 m) from the ground below a large branch is 50 inches (1.3 m), but it is by no means fully grown yet. Although *Sorbus domestica* has not been proved conclusively to be indigenous as far north as Britain, the south Worcestershire tree would seem to be quite as wild as its famous predecessor in the Wyre Forest.

Long may it flourish in its peaceful sylvan setting, undisturbed by vandals or incendiaries

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