

## LEICESTERSHIRE HERITAGE APPLES PROJECT - *Nigel Deacon*

I have collected and grafted unusual apples for many years. Some of them are heritage apples, from all over the country. Others I've found in the hedgerows. Some are curiosities which no-one will ever produce commercially - red fleshed, or egg shaped, or with a peculiar flavour, or which stay on the tree all winter. But in 2007 I met Mel Wilson, who was keen to get involved in promoting local varieties, and it seemed like a good idea. Since then we have collected a wide range of trees; probably 100 varieties; hardly any of them in official collections.

Heritage apples are those which have a history, and a name. Most of them arose long ago as chance seedlings in the area they are associated with. Local seedlings are often well suited to local environments, weather, soil, local demand, and so on.

I sometimes ask friends how many kinds of apples there are. Occasionally one of them is aware of Deacon's nursery on the Isle of Wight, which has about 400, or the National Fruit Collection, which has about 2000. But the true number is much larger than this. A nurseryman in Gloucestershire is compiling a register of named apples growing in the UK. So far he has catalogued 16,800 kinds. There are probably thousands more.

This represents an amazing diversity which gives us a great variety of taste, season and genetics.

In the wild, apples reproduce sexually. Pollen from one apple fertilises another and each pip in an apple is a potential unique tree. For example, a pip from a Bramley will not give a Bramley, but something new. This is the way new types of apple are made. The vast majority of them are average, a few are bitter and inedible, and a very few (about 1 in 300) are as good as or better than the parent.

At a time when we are becoming conscious of the value of good food produced locally, heritage apples are important. Mel and I decided to focus on those from Leicestershire, where we live, so we began by compiling a list. At the start we used mainstream reference books and found about a dozen kinds. Then we looked in older references - classic work by Hogg and Lindley from a previous century, and old nursery catalogues and magazines. After that, Mel began searching through old maps, looking for orchards, and then started sifting through Parish records. After much searching and cross-referencing, we now have a list of about thirty Leicestershire apples.

About a dozen of these were available through specialist nurseries. Did the others still exist? If they did, would we be able to find them, and, more importantly, to recognise them? Think about this:

--How can an apple be recognised if the people who knew it are no longer alive?

--Apples from an old, diseased tree do not look the same as fruit on a young tree. How, then, can they be recognised?

The answer to the first question is "using written descriptions and circumstantial evidence" and to the second is "re-graft, and look at the fruit on a young tree".

For the last two seasons we have been locating very old trees and examining the fruit. There are numerous abandoned apple trees in most parts of the country, and

Leicestershire is no exception. There are many unique seedlings, too, and there is no reliable way to decide whether an untended tree is a lost variety or a unique seedling. But trees from pips are often on old transport routes (I have counted about eighty along the Fosse Way between Leicester and Burford) and this sometimes gives a clue as to whether it has been planted or has arisen by chance.

So far, we have been lucky, and some lost varieties have been located and identified with reasonable certainty. A 150-year-old tree on an old Leicestershire estate (in the walled garden) was identified by Sally Cunningham, using Hogg's 19th century 'bible' of apple varieties, as 'Martin's Costard'. 'Belvoir Seedling' and 'Sweetings' have been found in private gardens. Their owners knew what they were, and we have collected scion wood and grafted some trees. 'Leicester-Burton Pippin', also known as the 'French Codlin' was found on the outskirts of Derby, in a private garden, and it matches book descriptions closely.

An apple from Foxton has proved elusive. Hearsay told us that it was known as 'Foxton's Favourite' and that it was a small green cooking apple which propagated from cuttings; an unusual but useful property. After some visits to Foxton, various people told us they had the apple in their gardens. We looked at these trees during the fruiting season and found that most of them were different. Asking around further, we found new names - Foxton's Delight, Foxton's Pride, Foxton's Red Margaret. Unfortunately we have found no written descriptions of any of these, so we have a problem. Meanwhile we are taking grafts of each tree so we can observe them in the years ahead.

Whilst searching waste land and gardens in Foxton we found the remains of an enormous old tree, the trunk eighteen inches across, containing a few giant apples of good taste and strange appearance; the eye (other end to the stalk) half an inch across and an inch deep. We've no idea what it is, but we are making new trees and giving it a name. It is a real 'find'.

Our searches also led us to Stoney Stanton where there was, until about fifty years ago, an ancient orchard at the edge of an abandoned quarry. One night in 1955 there was subsidence and most of the orchard disappeared into the water beneath. One tree remained at the edge, clinging to cracks in the stone. We visited the site in 2009. The owner has a walkway at the top of the quarry, and the tree is still there. Its apples are very late; they turn orange after Christmas, at which point they are ready for eating. It roots from branches; without this property the tree would have fallen into the quarry years ago. The owner gave us a surprise - he said 'watch this'; then he took a bread roll, broke it in two, and threw the pieces into the lake below. Suddenly, ripples appeared in the distance. They rapidly got closer, and we realised it was a shoal of fish; they splashed and fought for the bread furiously as we watched. Most were a foot long; some were bigger. They were salmon coloured, and cream, and black. The commotion lasted about a minute; then they were gone. "Carp" said our friend. "Put them there years ago."

He gave us some rooted cuttings from the tree. He has no idea of the variety, but his family has owned the land since the early 1800s, and he knows that the tree was planted around 150 years ago.

We have looked for the variety 'Langton's Nonesuch', which comes from Church Langton. This is a handsome dessert apple dating from before 1831. We were lucky in having two colour paintings, taken from old books, to help identification. The apple is no longer known

in England, but Mel traced a tree to a back garden in Hamburg, West Germany, where it is apparently an uncommon apple, 'Langtons Sonterrgleichen'. A few weeks later, another tree was located, also in Germany, and the owner sent photographs, which closely match our illustrations. We are hoping for scion wood to make our own trees.

We are still finding references to other Leicestershire apples. 'Cross's Pippin', and 'St. Cecilia', and some other kinds are still missing. Mel has recently found a mention of 'Lady Leicester' and 'Ashby Seedling' in a Journal of the RHS from 1873. There are plenty more abandoned orchards to visit, lots of old trees to identify, and a growing number of community orchards wanting local apples.

Perhaps eventually we will be able to propagate our trees in large numbers, and spread them around the county. That would be a worthwhile thing to do.



*Pictures: Langton's Nonesuch, Martin's Costard (both rediscovered heritage varieties) and (below), the Calla Colossus, from an ancient unidentified tree, possibly a seedling.*



Nigel Deacon / Mel Wilson, Feb 2010.

<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/suttonelms> & <http://www.heritageorchard.co.uk>