



Wyre Forest Study Group

The Whitty Pear and the 'Hermitage'

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Summary

A record was made of some stone ruins in the Wyre Forest. This article considers a possible connection between the ruins and the nearby Whitty Pear.

The ruins of this 'Hermitage', recorded recently by a group of volunteers, lie within a few yards of the famous Whitty Pear tree (*Sorbus domestica*), which stands in the depths of the Wyre Forest in Worcestershire. The original tree on the site was unique in the Country and as the ruins are clearly not the casual work of a forester making himself a crude shelter, it is unlikely that the tree and the ruins lie close together by chance and a note must be made about the tree as well.

The original Whitty Pear was one of the best documented trees in Britain and was first mentioned in 1678 by Edmund Pitts when he realised it was a great rarity in the country, (1) though common in central and southern Europe. The next independent reference comes in Nash's Worcestershire in 1781. Nash included a drawing of the tree and said that among the locals the tree has been ".....esteemed a curiosity for upwards of a 100 years".

On the 24th August, 1853, a meeting of the Worcestershire Naturalists' Club was held at the Whitty Pear when it was noted that the tree was in an old and decrepit state, "quite bare below, and sending its lank arms a considerable height in the air and only verdant in the lofty branches." A further meeting of the same Club took place on the 25th June 1858 and members had lunch at the spot. The report of the meeting stated that, "amidst the festal scene the old sorb tree appeared the withered wreck of centuries". Sadly, the tree, even though it may not have survived many more winter storms, was burned down by a vandal in April 1862. (2)

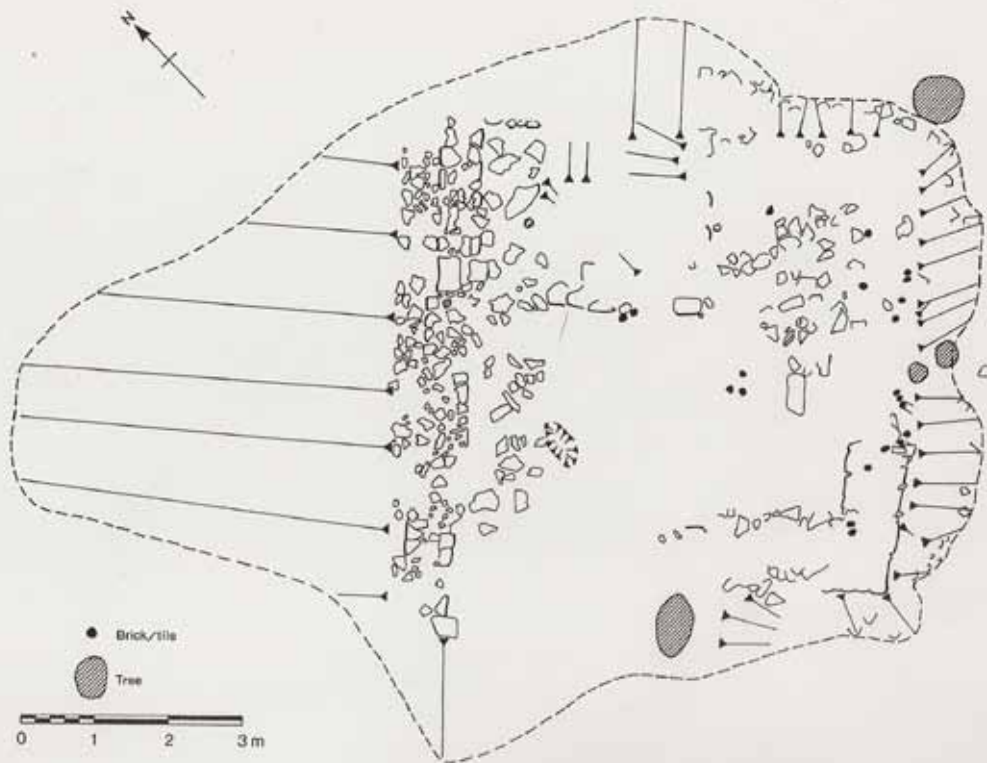
It is fortunate, therefore, that in the early years of the nineteenth century, the Earl of Mountnorris had managed to raise two cuttings from the old Whitty Pear, which he planted in the grounds of Arley Castle. A further cutting, taken in 1916 from one of these two, became the tree we can see today and is therefore some 74 years old.

As to the origin of the tree, nothing definite is known and conjecture centres around the fact that this area of Rock had close links with Normandy in France during the 11th to 14th centuries. The botanist, George Jorden, considered it most likely that a forest keeper brought the tree over when the country was more closely connected with Normandy, as a charm against witchcraft. (3)

There would appear to be no record of any investigation of the nearly hidden ruins we can see near the tree now, except a brief description by George Jorden when he says in his manuscript 'Flora Bellis Locus' written in 1864, "I discovered about fifty years ago, when the thicket was cleared, a heap of loose stones. When some of these stones were removed, there was a portion of a wall, about a foot high, built with clay instead of mortar, and by further examination the faint remains of a ditch which had enclosed the garden in which the far famed tree grew." George Jorden also mentioned that a small privet tree and a small gooseberry tree, and a plum tree grew also in the enclosure. Mr. Lees (also a member of Worcestershire Naturalists' Club) stated that in 1833 he had carefully examined the vicinity of the site and amongst a mound of debris had found some thin bricks and traces of a wall showing that the spot had been occupied, and there was a tradition amongst the old residents of the forest that there was formerly a dwelling at this spot. He further states that a little west of the tree there was a mound of loosely consolidated stones, the remains of a tower or structure of some kind, and that on close inspection the faint remains of a ditch might be traced surrounding the ruined heap showing that there had been a garden or enclosure there, containing about three perches (about 90 square yards), and that inside this enclosure he found an old plum tree and a bush of privet. (4) There appear to be no other independent references to the ruins.

There is no reference to a name given to the building and the name 'Hermitage' simply refers to one theory that a recluse or hermit brought the Sorb tree over from the continent to make use of it as a charm. The Ordnance Survey reference has been quoted in the past as SO748748 but a more careful examination of accurate forestry maps suggests it is nearer to SO749751.

The ruins as they were recorded in July 1989 were almost totally covered over with bracken and leaf litter and certainly no pear trees, privets or gooseberry bushes remained. After clearing the leaf litter away, the site was surveyed and the main features drawn. A grid was set up across the ruins and the stones which appeared to be part of the structure were drawn at a scale of 1:20. The wall lines could be discerned sufficiently for most of the outline of the original walls to be determined but several trees growing out the walls have further deteriorated the remaining structure. Levels were also taken along five transects across the site. No stones were moved and the location of tile and brick pieces are shown on the plan. The number of brick pieces around the south-eastern wall suggests there was a chimney in that area. One piece of pottery was recovered from



THE 'HERMITAGE' RUINS

Original drawing by Sam Whitby, reproduced here with permission from Worcestershire County Council

the surface. It is in a fabric known as post-mediaeval buff ware and is probably from the 18th century or later. The record from George Jorden shows that he found the building in an advanced state of decay in 1814 (or thereabouts) which suggests it was last used at least 40 to 60 years before that, perhaps between 1750 and 1770.

There is nothing in the surface structure of the remains which would indicate for what purpose the building was used, but its substantial walls suggest a permanent home rather than a seasonal woodman's hut and a record, referred to above, of fruit and hedging plants confirms the idea that it was inhabited for a long period. The walls are not in a simple rectangular pattern and the varying wall alignments and 'extra' walls apparently built out from the main enclosing walls may relate to different phases of building or different walls or perhaps both.

The site and the record reported here is now registered with the County Sites and Monuments Record held by the County Council (reference HWCM 7217). The historical documentation and the origins of the Whitty Pear and the associated buildings are of great interest. The author would welcome further comments from botanists and historians on this unusual feature of local curiosity.

Acknowledgements

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1. Trans. Worcestershire Naturalists' Club (1911) vol. V p.88ff. (Most of the following information comes from the following source).
2. Trans. Worcestershire Naturalists' Club. op.cit. p.89.
3. George Jorden. p.148. George Jorden was a noted botanist and wrote extensively of this area of Worcestershire and in particular, the Wyre Forest. George Jorden's work is in manuscript and there is a photocopy in the Kidderminster Library.
4. Trans. Worcestershire Naturalists' Club. op.cit. p.92.

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