Bewdley Cherry Fair

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Historical Background

There is a long tradition of a Cherry Fair in Bewdley. When the local trade in cherries developed is uncertain, probably during the Industrial Revolution when large urban markets emerged, but certainly it flourished with the railway after 1861, and the perishable fruit could quickly reach the conurbations of the Midlands, Northern England and the South.

The small district round Bewdley and Wyre Forest, in North Worcestershire, West of the River Severn, became, apart from Kent, the largest centre for cherry production, being ideally placed for rail distribution. Cherries prefer well drained soil, suitable temperature regime with winter cold chill, and moisture. Locally, the many small-holdings with well-drained sloping fields, not suitable as arable land, proved profitable for orchards. From the Middle-Ages live-stock rearing was a mainstay, and, under orchards, this could continue. Other crops could also be grown between the trees, such as soft fruit, daffodils and hazel nuts.

A fair was set up in Bewdley with a Charter of King Edward IV, 1472, for St. Anne's Day, 26th July. There is no mention of cherries in the Charter, but the date is the nearest of the ancient fair-days to the cherry season, so this day seems to have become a Cherry Fair, when or how we do not know.

Our familiar tree fruits of temperate climate (Family Roseaceae), evolved in the isolated forests on the mountain slopes of the Tien Shan and westward to the foothills of the Caucasus. Trade along the Silk Road brought fruits to Mesopotamia and the Middle East, where grafting and orchard cultivation developed about 4000 years ago. Subsequent invasions and migrations brought fruits to the Greek, then Roman, Empires thence to Europe.

It is believed that several *Prunus* species established in Britain after the ice ages, with archaeological evidence of Wild Cherry (*P. avium* L), Sloe *(P. spinosa* L), Bird Cherry (*P. padus* L). (Godwin,1956). The Romans realised the value of Kent for growing fruit; also fruit came from Germany, (German, apfel and English, apple), and later with the Normans and Crusaders. These ancient stocks were not supplemented until 1533, when Henry VIII sent his Fruiterer, Richard Harris, to France and the Low Countries to collect new varieties and set up an orchard in East Kent near Teynham.

From 1525 several books included references to fruit. Sir Anthony Fitzherbert's 'Boke of Husbandry', although mostly agriculture, included a section on apples, pears, cherries, damsons and plums, and details of propagation. The first herbal to mention fruit, in a medicinal context was 'Grete Herball' by Peter Treueris in 1526, translated from French. Leonard Mascall in 1572 wrote the first really practical work on fruit growing, again translated from French. Interest in fruit continued with Elizabeth I, in attempts to render England less dependent upon imports.

The writings of the 16th century herbalists and apothecaries gave way to more systematic study and a developing scientific approach, influenced by the 1605 and 1620 works of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Techniques of fruit cultivation progressed during the 17th century, especially after the Civil War, largely in the gardens of country estates with professional gardeners, and encouraged by significant books on horticulture.

Among the last of the apothecaries was John Parkinson (1566-1650). His famous book of 1629 details many fruits and vegetables, with nearly 1000 entries giving evidence of cross breeding and selection. His later work of 1640 cited 3800 plants. Parkinson listed 30 varieties of cherry. One of these imported by John Tradescant in 1611, now known as Noble, can still be seen growing at Far Forest and the fruit was displayed for tasting at each recent Cherry Fair.

The two most significant nurseryman in the mid 17th century were Ralph Austen (1612-1676) with large nurseries at Oxford and locally John Rea (1605?-1677) of Kinlet. Austen, a self taught scientist, and much involved with the Protestantism of his times, promoted massive planting of fruit trees to revive the National economy. He corresponded with the circle of Samuel Hartlib, (1600-1662) and through the 'Treatise of Fruit-Trees' (1653) and Austen's other works, his innovative and experimental approach to gardening and fruit culture was widely disseminated.

Contemporary with these men was John Rea (1605?-1677), of Norton's End, Kinlet, near Bewdley. His book, 'Flora, Ceres and Pomona', (1665), was an attempt to up-date the work of John Parkinson, but also included the first reliable, specific and practical details for fruit culture. This famous nurseryman recommends 16 varieties of cherry. He first introduced the term 'Dukes' for hybrids between acid and sweet cherries. One which he named, 'Carnation', still exists in the National Collection. His huge collection of fruit and flowers which he recommended for use in walled gardens included; 20 apple varieties, 21 pears, 45 plums, 5 nuts, 35 peaches, 11 nectarines, as well as the largest stock of tulips in the Country.

Local interest continued with the researches of the pioneer of scientific horticulture, Thomas Andrew Knight, (1759-1836). Son of the rector of Bewdley, of the famous family of Ironmasters, first President of the (later

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Royal) Horticultural Society, Fellow of the Royal Society, (to which he submitted over 40 scientific papers, particularly on vegetable and livestock breeding and plant physiology), he lived and worked at Elton Hall and Downton Castle on the River Teme near Ludlow, experimenting and propagating new varieties of fruit and vegetables. Several varieties of cherry, which he raised, are still growing in local orchards for example Knight's Early Black. There is evidence that Knight's study of garden peas was the inspiration for the work of Gregor Mendel, (1822-1884), the father of genetics, eighty years later.

In 1886, over 110 tons of cherries passed through Bewdley market. On July 26th 1907, 200 carts came into Bewdley, their owners selling and buying cherries. The police took proceedings against some for obstruction, but the cases were dismissed after reference to a markets Charter of James I in 1601, and the "right of Custom some 80 or 90 years old at least, of selling cherries near the church", (Gaut, 1939, p422). There are undated photographs of stalls by the church of late 19th or early 20th century, before the War memorial was installed. So the tradition of a Cherry Fair goes back 195 years for certain, that is, to about 1817, and as far as is known the only Cherry Fair in the Country.

Some of the cherry varieties grown in Worcestershire during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were, according to Gaut, 1939, p423; "Bigarreau, Bigarreau Napoleon, Black Eagle, Early Rivers, Elton, Governor Wood, Imperatrice Ugenie, Knight's Early Black, May Duke, Mumford, (or Mountford), Oliver's Black, Ox Heart, Smokey Dun, Waterloo, White Heart."

A number of other cherry varieties were only grown in the West Midlands, cited by Norman H. Grubb, (1949), based on unpublished work by J. Goaman; Black Elton, Black Oliver, Bottlers or Butler's Green Stalk, Ironsides, Lulsley Early Black, Mumford's, Norbury's Early Black, Ribbesford Black, Seabright, Smoky Dun, Wellington B, West Midlands Bigarreau.

The 1957 national fruit tree census showed 737,000 cherry trees; 76.6% in Kent; 8.0% (59,000) in Worcestershire; 2% in Herefordshire. The remaining 13.4% scattered, mostly in Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, East Anglia and the Tamar valley in Cornwall. So, 55 years ago, north Worcestershire produced 8% of the National crop of cherries. Soon after 1957, within a few years, the trade ceased.

Great interest in fruit developed in the late 19th century. In 1883, 1545 varieties of apples and pears were displayed by the Royal Horticultural Society. Now, one hundred years later, there has been another surge of interest in fruit, this time with a realisation that in the face of modern cultivation and marketing many old varieties of fruit were in danger of disappearing completely. Many old varieties of cherry in particular are in great danger of being lost. The discovery and rescue of old types of cherry is urgent and important, but is neglected. There are about 300 varieties of cherry listed, mostly needing pollinators, while new self-fertile varieties are being introduced steadily. Many varieties were grown around Bewdley, and some, like the variety Ironsides, exclusive to the West Midlands, making a significant contribution to the local economy. Hales Park Farm in Bewdley was an extensive cherry orchard until covered with houses, but at least the estate roads were named after cherries; Waterloo Road, Cherry Close, Ironside Close, White Heart Close, Elton Road, Early Rivers Place, Morello Close and Grosvenor Wood, which should be Governor Wood, (an 1842 variety from Cleveland USA, named after the Governor of Ohio).

Most local orchards which remain are now derelict and only valuable as wildlife refuges. The realisation that orchards formed a valuable semi-woodland habitat has prompted renewed interest in the old trees and species associated with orchards. An attempt is being made to find and propagate what remains of this dwindling heritage of genetic variety, to rejuvenate old orchards and restock with traditional varieties. Not all the old cherry trees are dead, but growth is minimal on any which survive making grafting difficult, and systemic bacterial canker makes successful grafting problematic. Graft-wood of most varieties is available from the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale, and this can be obtained virus-free, but this forms a single limited genotype. A wider genetic pool is desirable to retain local variations and adaptations to local microclimates, especially those of traditional West Midland varieties.

In reviving the Bewdley Cherry Fair, albeit in a very modest way, we are hoping to generate interest in cherries and awareness among local people, of different cherry varieties and flavours.

Modern cultivation of cherries on dwarf stocks (Colt and Gisela), with new self fertile varieties, means that cherries can be grown as single trees, and in protected conditions, making them once more a commercial proposition. This should be encouraged. With more demand, encouragement from super-markets, increased supply and more home grown cherries available as a main crop and not just a special luxury, perhaps prices may fall allowing more people to enjoy this delicious fruit.

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The railway line through the Wyre Forest

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