Tree Fruit growing in Britain: an outline of developments in the 17th century

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Cherry trees in flower, Bowcastle Cherry Orchard, 29 April 2006 Rosemary Winnall

Developments in the growing of tree or top-fruit and fruit production in the 17th century can be summarised under several themes.

Continually, throughout the period, new country estates were established with walled-gardens (an idea from ancient Persia and Roman times), and professional gardeners. Proud landowners vied to collect and display new, exotic varieties, which could be grown and protected against sheltering walls.

To meet this considerable demand, a second theme would be the search for and collection of new varieties. Collectors were sent all over Europe, while traders brought specimens from the East and the New World. Foremost of these were the Tradescants; father, John, (1570-1638), gardener to Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury at Hatfield and, from 1630, to King Charles I, followed by his son, also John, (1608-1662), gardener to King Charles II. John Parkinson in 1640 mentions 3800 plants then available. By 1700, John Ray had catalogued 18,600. As well as describing and cataloguing, growing the new plants was imperative. Nurseries developed, such as John Rea's at Kinlet, specialist collections became popular along with botanic gardens, the first at Padua, 1545; Leyden, 1587, Montpellier, 1593 and Oxford,1621. Charles I and his wife Henrietta Maria developed Wimbledon Manor in 1639. A thousand fruit trees were planted, 150 apples and pears in the pleasure garden, 119 large cherries, 53 rare fruits along the walls, in addition to a ten acre walled orchard.

The Civil War and the Commonwealth, 1642-1660 create another theme during the middle of the century, 'Our long winter' as John Rea of Kinlet described those times. Agriculture, horticulture and forestry were neglected, leading people like Samuel Hartlib and Ralph Austen, both widely influential, to advocate the compulsory planting of orchards and cider apples to encourage the national economy. Ralph Austen (1612-1676), with orchards and nurseries near Oxford,

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experimented and wrote extensively on methods of fruit culture and orchard management. His book, 'A Treatise on Fruit Trees' was widely read. Samuel Hartlib (1600-1662) was an influential essayist with a wide circle of contacts. His book 'A Designe for Plentie by an Universal Planting of Fruit Trees' complimented Austen's ideas. The Rev. Dr. John Beale, FRS, (1608-1683), Rector of Yeovil and with an estate at Backbury in Herefordshire, was one correspondent with Hartlib, and also John Evelyn. In an article in 1657 for Hartlib entitled 'Herefordshire Orchards' he wrote;

'*This County (Hereford)....the Orchard of England. .... all habitations are encompassed with orchards and gardens .....our hedges with rows of Fruit-Trees, Pears or Apples, Gennet-Moyles or CrabTrees. .... Wocestershire is more proper for Pears and Cherries and Herefordshire more proper for apples.*' He went on to regret that the River Wye was not navigable to transport cider to other parts.

Thus cherries were considered well suited in Worcestershire (not stated where), before 1650.

Following the Restoration in 1660, John Evelyn was appointed 'for the retrieving the calamities of England'. Evelyn translated workls by French authors. One of these, by Le Gendre was published in England in 1660 as 'The Manner of Ordering Fruit Trees'. This was followed, in 1664 by Evelyn's own book 'Sylva'. This was mainly on forestry, but there was an extra section or Pomona, devoted to orchards and cider production detailing ideas which he had gathered during his self imposed exile in France. Following the building of Versailles and its great gardens, (Louis XIV and his wife Maria Theresa moved in on October 25, 1660.) there was renewed interest in cultivation, especially in growing pears. Most influential was Evelyn's translation of 'Compleat Gardiner' by Jean de la Quintinye, (1693), Director of the gardens at Versailles and friend of Evelyn. These three significant books alongside that of John Rea at Kinlet in 1665, helped set the pattern for our modern orchards and tree fruit cultivation, a distinct phase of development.

The importance of Le Gendre's book was the re-introduction of dwarf and semi-dwarf rootstocks for apples and pears. This may be considered a final theme of development in the 17th century. Hartlib and Austen had earlier suggested a more careful selection of rootstocks. The so called French 'Paradise' rootstock (*Malus pumila*, now known as M8), was brought from Armenia, the area thought, in the 17th century, to have been the Garden of Eden. Smaller growing apple trees had been known since Alexander the Great and Theophrastus and in Tudor times, but their use as rootstocks was an innovation instead of the wild *Malus silvestris*. *M. pumila* is a large gene pool of great variation. A semi-dwarf form used as the stock 'Doucin' (now Maling 2), also for apples, is still in use. Similarly, the Quince, *Cydonia oblonga* (Miller), is used for pears. Langford in 1681, promoted dwarf trees for table fruit and gardens. Worlidge in 1691 referring to orchards, advocated standard trees where cattle were to graze, and dwarf trees, low grafted, for hay or under-planting. 'This way of planting dwarf Trees is but lately in use, deriving its original from France.' The five reasons which he gave to justify using dwarf stocks still apply to-day.

1. More trees per acre,
2. Trees start cropping earlier,
3. Lower and spreading trees are less exposed to frost and wind,
4. Easier harvesting,
5. Trees healthier, yielding better quality fruit.

There was a shortage of timber and fire wood for many years after the Civil war so cider production was preferred to ale production as not needing fuel to malt the barley. Soldiers had developed a taste for cider and spread their influence widely. Transport was always a problem and usually cider was produced and drunk locally. Many dwellings all over the country grew enough apples for their own use and some to sell. One difficulty was contact with air as cider was drawn from the barrel turning the liquid to vinegar.

Again, as a consequence of timber shortage, coal rather than wood was used for glass-making permitting higher temperatures and tougher glass. As a result it was possible to put cider in bottles rendering transport and use more convenient. Lord Scudamore (1601-71), in Hereford, pioneered the use of bottles in the 1640s. A further benefit was the minute secondary fermentation in the bottles producing carbon dioxide which not only acted as a preservative, but also when released, created bubbles like the newly invented champagne. During the 17th century cider production was widespread at domestic and commercial levels. By trial and error and improved hygiene, cider making became a refined technique and certain districts became famous for their products.

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