



Orchard Roots: Apple Day in the Quantocks

Podcast Transcription

VO: While across the UK orchards have declined by as much as 63% in the past half century, places like Somerset can still boast more than their fair share of apple trees.

The Quantock Hills, to the west of Bridgwater, aren't known for their orchards, but studies suggest they might have covered more of the Quantocks than previously thought.

To look at this further, the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded The Orchard Roots Project, which established a partnership between the Quantock Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Service and the University of Bristol's Department of Historical Studies.

Speaking at the project's Apple Heritage Day at Fyne Court near Bridgwater, historian Professor Peter Coates explains how this partnership has been discovering the significance of the area's historical orchards and what they mean to the local community...

PROFESSOR PETER COATES: Orchard Apple Heritage Day is the fruit, pardon the pun, of this long collaboration that has begun with a traditional academic workshop in the Quantock Hills where we had representatives of the service come and explain to us what they were doing and that was very much us suggesting what we'd like to do and them coming along to mix with academics and this event is very much the product of their ideas - it is something that is genuinely co-designed and co-produced. I wanted to continue the collaboration and I felt that the way to make it really strongly rooted and meaningful was to ask them what they would like to have done, if you had some skilled arts and humanities researchers with a bit of modest funding behind them, and they said we'd really actually like to find out more about the role of orchards in the landscape of the Quantock Hills, in this area that they manage, in particular the buffer zones - obviously there are no orchards up on the moorland, which is the best known part of the landscape through the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge - but like other parts of Somerset this area really had a rich orchard heritage even if we don't think of this as Somerset cider country.

VO: Using his knowledge of surveying and map making, Orchard Roots researcher Dr Nick Nourse set about recording the location of every apple orchard on the Quantock Hills both past and present.

Exploring the landscape in this way, as well as studying old tithe maps, has helped him appreciate the importance of orchards for the local community...

DR NICK NOURSE: They were an enormous feature of the landscape, 175 years ago, as our research into the tithe map has shown. We can cite one landowner who's literally up the road from here at Fyne Court, has only five or six trees on his land - that was an orchard 175 years ago. The trees that are there today are not in terribly good condition - they're alive, they've got apples on them, but he's now talking about where can I get information about how to replant this, could I put a new orchard back here? And that's what we're really hoping for, more than anything perhaps, that we generate enough interest that the landowners have information available to them that they can use effectively to inform and develop their communities, their orchards, businesses, whatever it is and we hope that what we've been doing over quite a long period feeds into really quite a lot of different aspects of the community and its environment.

VO: The project has already created a new set of multi-layered maps that reveal all past and present orchard sites within the AONB area.

When these are plotted against current aerial views, the old historic orchard sites are now immediately visible and easy to find.

Dr Marianna Dudley is also a researcher with the Orchard Roots project.

DR MARIANNA DUDLEY: Apple Day really is a way for us to display all the work and the research we've done over the last few months

and there's really a lot of work to showcase, but we also wanted to take it our into the local community because so much of it is about local apple varieties and how important orchard history can be to local landscape and economies. So we've organised a fun day with apple identification, poetry, school involvement with choirs singing and apple related songs. And also we're kind of continuing the work that we do because we're gathering memories from local people about how important apples and orchards have been to them and so we'll be able to bring that into the project as well.

RACHEL KELLY: I think it's a great activity for academics because it breaks down that barrier...

VO: Rachel Kelly helped coordinate the Apple Day at Fyne Court...

RACHEL KELLY: ... because without academia being interested in these stories they will be lost. We need some way to record all this data and bring it all together and then make it accessible then to everyone again and that's why the digitisation of the tithe maps I think has been brilliant. I've been along to the Somerset Heritage Centre and looked at my house and whether it was near an orchard and, you know, found out more about my local history and where my house was from and, you know, people that lived there before.

VO: Building on this idea of community cooperation, Professor Peter Coates and his fellow researchers are now looking at how similar collaborations could spark new new research into other areas of landscape study...

PROFESSOR PETER COATES: Instead of the old notion of knowledge transfer, I think what we have here is an example of knowledge exchange. We've already spoken to a local man who has invited us to write an article for a local magazine about the project which will have a very largereadership and I would hope that this isn't the last example of collaborative opportunities between myself and the Quantock Hill ANOB Service - we're hoping that we could plan another project perhaps looking at the cultural value of hedgerows, which is another declining feature of the landscape, and

again to use our skills, to bear on a problem of great local urgency and so as researchers we're reactive as well as just saying, well, this is what we're interested in, we think you should be interested in this.

VO: The Bristol based team is encouraged by how this shared approach is changing the way we think about historical research.

And for Marianna and Nick, they're learning how technology such as Geographical Information Systems can help them interpret the landscape in new ways...

DR NICK NOURSE: My previous work was in fairly traditional forms of surveying and cartography - GIS on the other hand, is something which is new and still a little bit difficult for historians but it is an enormously powerful tool once we can get to grips with using it effectively but the opportunities that have given me I think have been substantial.

DR MARIANNA DUDLEY: As an historian it's been such a great chance to work with technology that's not really made open to us as a discipline that often I think - it's been a real learning curve and it's also been a great way to work with external partners and bring that experience back to academic work for me, so I think that was the main thing I'll be taking away from it.