

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Autumn 2021



Dabinett cider apple

A Romany family's return to Hipton Hill Orchards

(All images reproduced courtesy of the Horsley family)

At the end of August, Hipton Hill Orchards received a visit from a Romany family who had picked fruit in the area up until the late 1980s. Several generations of the family had travelled to Evesham over the years to pick fruit and vegetables along with many other Romany families. Most of the orchards have now gone but Hipton remains as an important link to this part of our heritage.



The visit had been arranged by Ken Goodwin from ITV West Country News, reporting on a story of a Gloucester woman who wants to keep her Romany heritage alive. Kelly Horsley has gathered together a vast collection of videos and photos of her Romany ancestors in the hope that she might write a book someday. She told Ken "It would be a dream to get my family's history down in a book so the other people out in the community can see our history and learn about our Romany ways". Her mother Lynn was quite emotional revisiting Hipton Hill after so many years.



She walked into our old orchard and commented that she could "still hear the voices" of the many families who would have picked plums there through the years. The shouting, laughter and song would have echoed across the Vale in times gone-by during a period when plums were so important to the economy of the area. It is wonderful to think that VLHT have saved a small piece of history here on Hipton Hill.

Plums



Perfectly Plump Purple Pershore Plums

And the plum picking continues. Thanks to our volunteers we picked and sold plums in Pershore again each Saturday in August. It was a poor year for many plum varieties but the old faithful Purple Pershores cropped very well and we were also able to harvest a few Victorias and Yellow Egg plums. Thanks also to the Pershore Plum Festival committee for their continued support.

Old ploughs



Not just *any* old iron

We have been given several old horse-drawn ploughs, rescued from two fallen down hovels. They are rusty and in need of some TLC but we intend to clean these up and display a couple at our hovels in North Littleton. We have no idea if these would have been painted or just plain steel when they were being used originally so we would appreciate any information to help us restore these. And if you fancy the challenge of cleaning them up, please let me know.

New Book



Orchard enthusiast Wade Muggleton has produced another very useful book. He had previously inspired VLHT to plant a Worcestershire apple collection with his book *The Apples and Orchards of Worcestershire*, and had then enlightened us about the history and mystery of *The Worcester Black Pear*. In *The Orchard Book*, he has distilled 20 years of orchard know-how into a practical handbook to help you plan, plant and manage an orchard, whatever your garden size or budget. Wade also champions the need for variety rather than relying on one or two named apples; in 2018 three quarters of all apples grown in the UK were of two varieties, Braeburn and Gala. The book also explores the history of apples and orchards in Britain; did you know for instance that the apples we eat today originated in the mountains of Kazakhstan?

Available to pre order from Permanent Publications at:

<https://shop.permaculture.co.uk/the-orchard-book-plan.html>

Bird ringing

As well as harvesting apples at Stocken we are collecting information about the birds that visit the orchard with the help of a licenced bird-ringer. We leave apples on the trees for over-wintering birds such as Fieldfares and Redwings and we hope to be able to catch some of these and fit them with a leg ring. This allows bird-ringers around the country and beyond to report finding any birds already wearing a ring, and to monitor their movements. As well as these wintering thrushes we will also be finding out more about the smaller birds that feed in our orchard during the winter. To catch the birds, mist-nets are set which intercept the birds' flight route. The birds are caught without harm and are quickly weighed and measured, their age, sex and health recorded. They are then fitted with their own uniquely numbered leg-ring before being released. This all helps us to understand the importance of our orchards for birds.

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust (VLHT) is a registered charity, number 1080109. We work to protect and preserve the environment in and around the Vale of Evesham and Pershore. We work with volunteers, funders, farmers and the government to secure the future of, so far, over 350 acres.

Onion Field purchase

We have very recently purchased a small parcel of land adjacent to our community orchard and nature reserve in North Littleton. The 'Onion Field' has been an eyesore for a few years and has been used to tip unwanted vegetables (complete with plastic tags and elastic bands!) as well as being a site where pallets and plastic trays have been dumped and subsequently burned; the most recent fire caught the overhead electric wire and blacked out part of North Littleton! We were very pleased to hear that the site was to be put up for sale and with support



Turning this abused plot of land into a wildlife haven could take some time!

from Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund we were able to purchase the site. Our volunteers have already been busy clearing and separating plastic, metal and green waste but we have a long way to go to undo the harm done to the site. We will need machinery to level the area and clear the damaged ground so we can sow seed and plant fruit trees to extend North Littleton Community Orchard. Our priority is to secure the area to prevent further fly-tipping and fires, and over time we will restore the remnant orchard turning an eyesore into a wildlife haven.

Green hay success



Wildflowers are returning to Mill Bank Meadows

We previously reported that Mill Bank Meadows near Fladbury had received green hay from our adjacent wildflower-rich Mikes Meadow. Our volunteers helped to roll out bales of hay, that had been cut and baled immediately to ensure the maximum amount of seed remained in the hay. This had been hot, hard work and was looking like it had been unsuccessful. We were relieved to see a few new plants appearing on Mill Bank in July and by the end of September several new species had been identified including Ladies Bedstraw, Knapweed, Sorrel and even Pepper Saxifrage. To be able to transfer seed between our sites ensures the seed is suited to local soils and climate and it conserves the species and character of local grasslands.

Thank you to Severn Waste Services for their continued support through the Landfill Communities Fund.



Many of our projects are funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund. Without SWS, VLHT could not own, or protect, anywhere near as much heritage land.



Cider Apples

We made a start harvesting our cider apples from Stocken Orchard early October. Our orchard had become bi-annual cropping, only producing fruit every other year. This year should have been an off year but there is plenty of fruit. Over the last few years, we have been pruning different quarters of the orchard to try to break the bi-annual habit, but in the end it was last year's weather that seems to have done the trick. Late frost prevented much of the orchard from fruiting and having rested, the trees have produced well this year. We will have to wait to see what that means for next year.



Redstreaks harvested and Dabinetts on the tree

These two varieties are reported as having quite different tree growth, Dabinett is weak growing producing a small and spreading tree, while Somerset Redstreak has a vigorous upright habit. In Stocken Orchard we are pruning our trees to grow in a tall conical shape, allowing maximum light into the tree. This helps set and ripen the fruit while the grassland and wildflowers below benefit from reduced shading. We have noticed a difference in the way the two varieties respond to this form of pruning, in line with the previous descriptions; the Redstreaks are taking on the 'Christmas tree' shape while the Dabinetts continue to bow over at the top slightly.

Stocken was originally planted in the 1970s to supply Bulmers, but we now supply local cider producers, reducing the miles travelled to collect the fruit.



Dabinett



Somerset Redstreak

There are two varieties in the orchard, planted in alternate rows. These are Somerset Redstreak, the first to ripen and Dabinett which ripens late October into November.

According to the National Fruit Collection, Dabinett is thought to have originated in the Martock-Kingsbury area of Somerset in the mid-19th Century and is possibly a seedling of Chisel Jersey. Believed to have been named after a Mr Dabinett. A bittersweet variety that produces a soft, full-bodied, high-quality cider.

According to Heritage Fruit Trees, Somerset Redstreak is thought to have originated in the Sutton Montis area of Somerset. As a result of its good performance in a 1917 trial at the National Fruit & Cider Institute, it was subsequently propagated to be included in many commercial cider orchards. An important cider variety producing a mild or medium bittersweet cider.



Volunteers shaking cider apples from the trees in Stocken Orchard, ready for us to gather up.

Bird Records from Lower Moor and Haines Meadows July – September 2021

Rob Prudden

Good numbers of **Lapwings** were present throughout the whole period with between 150 & 175 present most days. The first returning **Teal** arrived on 12th July followed by more arrivals daily building to a high of c65 by mid-September, the first 4 **Wigeon** appeared on 3rd September. Two **Snipe** had returned by 27th July rising to 21 unusually showy birds feeding out in the open from 6th – 11th September. The pair of **Oystercatchers** that had nested locally visited the River Flash most days with their two fledged juveniles till 8th August. An adult **Little Ringed Plover** was present from 1st-3rd July with another on 25th followed by single juveniles on 28th July and 8th August.

Passage waders were worryingly scarce but did include a single **Dunlin**, **Green Sandpipers** on seven dates and a juvenile **Redshank** on 15th July. An adult **Greenshank** found the wetlands to its liking from 6th-11th August and was joined by a juvenile on the latter two dates. The only **Black-tailed Godwits** were a flock of 7 birds that circled the meadows several times at dusk on 4th July before leaving the area to the east. A family party of a female and five juvenile **Avocets** spent the day at the Flash on 24th August. A juvenile female **Ruff** fed around the Flash from 6th-9th September and was followed by a juvenile male on 23rd.

The rarest wader during the period was a juvenile **Pectoral Sandpiper** from 22nd-27th September. This species breeds in eastern Siberia, Alaska & Canada with most then wintering in South America, just a handful of disorientated birds reach the UK each year. Some of these birds fly across the Atlantic on fast moving westerlies, while others arrive from the east. With prevailing winds prior to its arrival being light it seems most likely it had come over the top following through northern Europe before crossing the North Sea from the continent to reach our shores, a trip of c4000 miles.



A Pectoral Sandpiper at Lower Moor
Combined screenshots from video.
Courtesy of Andy Warr

Birds of prey during the period included a resident pair of **Kestrels** that bred and fledged 3 juveniles. Three **Red Kites** were overhead together on 9th August followed by a single bird being harassed heavily by **Jackdaws** on the 31st. A **Hobby** was seen terrorising a small flock of **Goldfinches** on 17th August followed by singles on 31st August and 2nd September. **Barn Owls** were regularly seen hunting at dawn and dusk.

A passage **Wood Warbler** in riverside Willows with **Chiffchaffs** on 19th August was a first for the area and most unexpected. Passerine numbers continue to drop with scarcer highlights being just 4 **Yellow Wagtails**, 5 **Redstarts**, **Garden Warbler**, juvenile **Stonechat** & a single **Whinchat**.

House Sparrows appear to of had a good breeding season around adjacent farm buildings with post breeding gatherings of up to 60 birds seen regularly, this included an unusual all creamy white (leucistic) individual.

Great White Egrets visited the Flash briefly on 23rd July and 10th August, while a **Little Egret** was in the same area on 19th August followed by 3 together on 26th. **Kingfishers** were seen on just 2 dates.

Other scarce birds included a pair of **Common Terns** on 23rd July followed by a pair with 2 juveniles seen daily from 2nd – 4th August. A juvenile **Mediterranean Gull** roosted at the River Flash nightly from 30th July – 6th August.



Spoonbill photographed at Lower Moor
Image courtesy of Tom & Sally Hutchinson

An adult **Spoonbill** was feeding at Lower Moor's River Flash briefly mid-afternoon on 1st September, this was the first record of this species at the site. This individual had been seen just south of Tamworth, Staffordshire at Middleton Lakes from 27th August – 1st September, before dropping in at Lower Moor and was presumably the same bird that turned up at WWT Slimbridge, Gloucestershire a couple of days later. Five **Ruddy Shelduck** with a large flock of **Canada Geese** on 18th August were unexpected. These birds had been around the Mersey Estuary prior to an extended tour around the south Midlands, returning to the Mersey area on 23rd August.

The first **Golden Plovers** of the autumn were a flock of c120 circling high up above the meadows on the last day of September.

More Otter encounters along the River Avon at Lower Moor.

Rob Prudden

Otters are generally shy and secretive so three typically brief sightings along the river in the summer of 2021 pointed to regular habitation. This was proven on 28th August when a female was seen with two young kits just east of Osier Island. The adult was surprisingly fearless, first seen mid river with just her head out of the water, seal-like, while viewing an approaching narrow boat, only finally diving when the craft was just ten metres away. A trace of bubbles breaking the surface showed she was heading for the root structure of an overhanging riverside Alder. Here she met up with her two offspring, much playful splashing and cavorting then ensued. Shortly after the adult was seen bounding up the riverbank closely followed by her two kits. They were then seen play fighting each other while excitedly chirping and squeaking till cattle in the field took offence and ran over to investigate, this leading to a quick dash back to the safety of the river. The female then led her charges off up-river, the youngsters swimming tight up against her shoulders mirroring her every move, diving then resurfacing as one on several occasions. The whole unusually close encounter lasted around twenty minutes giving a close insight into a part of the lives of these enigmatic and special creatures.



On 3rd September an adult with two youngsters were seen at one of the well-stocked fishing pools at the nearby leisure park, the family had almost certainly travelled the mile or so by following the Lench Ditch from the river directly into the heart of the waterpark.

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