

LONG MEAD ORCHARD AND COUNTY WILDLIFE SITE

Catriona Bass introduces a treasured County Wildlife Site and another triumph for local people. This feature also appears in Eynsham News Issue 10, December 2014. Image © Alexandra Veselova



Most people will know Long Mead Orchard from the toll bridge queue: last winter's floods lapping around the trees from December until March, the unnerving sea of silt that appeared in 2011 and (for those who know the queue of old), the many harvests of stinging nettles and thistles before.

This year, all has come good: gorgeous blossom in the spring and a multi-coloured abundance of apples, pears, plums, cherries, almonds, and that strange medieval fruit - the medlar - which followed on. A few people may even have tasted them, thanks to the services of Eynsham Market Garden.

The success of Long Mead Orchard is the result of a collective effort of local people. The local team of Natural England facilitated a grant that funded most of the cost of clearing invasive weed in the Thames to restore the reedbed habitat for birdlife. This provided the silt in which to plant the orchard and wildflower meadow beneath. Local farmer, Graham Podbery, and luminaries of Eynsham - Robin Saunders and David Russell - weighed in with the planting: quite literally, as the silt hadn't dried out when we started. (Planting supplies provided by Evenlode DIY). Now, Raul Ospina Bonill and his local Care Farming group join in with pruning, picking and racking hay.

A chance meeting with Roy Wastie, in the doctor's surgery, opened the history of the famous Wastie family, whose Eynsham apples were known throughout Britain in the twentieth century. This year, we ate our first fruits of the Eynsham Dumpling created by Fred Wastie in 1935. We have four more trees from the Wastie collection: the Oxford Yeoman, Oxford Beauty, Jennifer and Old Fred, himself.

Long Mead Orchard will revive traditional and local varieties of English fruit tree, many of which have been lost altogether. We have a graft of the Bampton Fairing and the Winter Greening (from Wolvercote), which is said to be the John Apple mentioned by Shakespeare. Both the original trees are still alive at over 150 years old. We have, among others, Cour Pendu Plat, brought by the Romans to Britain, and Isaac Newton (a descendent of the apple that fell by gravity on the scientist's head).

Long Mead Orchard is designed to restore a wildlife habit that has almost vanished from our landscape. Our trees are on a vigorous root stock (M25) and will eventually grow very large. Indeed, *Malus Sieversii* (recently discovered to be the mother of all domestic apples) grows to the size of a four-storey house.

This means that, while we are beginning to supply Eynsham with organically and locally grown fruit (thanks to Jonathan and Lucy at the Market Garden who enthusiastically undertook the harvest), there will be plenty for the birds, bees, insects, mice and a whole ecosystem that depends on orchards for survival.

Long Mead offers free visits, in association with Natural England, to pre-schools and schools and (with the Eynsham-based L.O.V.E. Care Farming Project) to adults with physical or mental health issues. Nature walks, bird-watching, pond-dipping, bug hunting, plant surveys, farming, gardening and orchard activities. Email: longmead.countywildlifesite@gmail.com