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CHAPTER ONE

Orchards, landscapes and history

Introduction

This book is one of the outcomes of a large Heritage Fund project, Orchards East, which began in early 2017 and continued, through the multiple disruptions of the Covid epidemic, until the end of 2020. The project was concerned with all aspects of the orchard heritage of the eastern counties – defined as Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, the old county of Huntingdonshire (including the Soke of Peterborough), Norfolk and Suffolk. It involved a range of practical activities, including the planting of new community orchards and the teaching of necessary skills such as grafting. It also featured a major regional survey of orchards, carried out by volunteers; detailed studies of the biodiversity of selected orchards; oral-history interviews; and extensive research in a range of local and national archives. This book presents the results of all these investigations. It examines the history of orchards and fruit-related industries in the eastern counties, investigates the current number and condition of orchards in the region and attempts to evaluate the importance of the orchard legacy, in terms of biodiversity, history and culture. Although it touches on many fields of academic interest, it is primarily a history of orchards in the landscape: how their numbers and extent changed over time, how they affected the wider environment in the past and how they may benefit it today, and in the future.

Remarkably little has been written about the history of orchards as features of the English landscape compared with, for example, ancient woods or hedges. The history of particular types of fruit, especially apples, has received much scholarly attention, most notably in the works of Joan Morgan,¹ but little research has been undertaken into the orchards in which they were grown. Although orchards have been present in every village and beside almost every farm since at least the early Middle Ages, the principal histories of rural settlement in England – including Taylor's *Village and Farmstead* and Robert's and Wrathmell's *Region and Place* – conspicuously fail to discuss them.² Moreover, while some recent writers on ecology have given orchards a measure of attention, our greatest historical ecologist, Oliver Rackham, specifically excluded them from his monumental

1 See, in particular, J. Morgan and A. Richards, *The New Book of Apples* (London, 2002).

2 C. Taylor, *Village and Farmstead: A History of Rural Settlement in England* (London, 1983); B. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, *Region and Place: A Study of English Rural Settlement* (London, 2003).

2 The Orchards of Eastern England

History of the Countryside, and most general studies of ecology and wildlife ignore them.³ All this is somewhat surprising given, as we shall see, the great interest in orchards and old fruit varieties that exists among the general public, and the presence in most parts of England of extensive, active and knowledgeable networks of orchard enthusiasts.

Until comparatively recently, well within living memory, orchards were a common sight throughout England, a familiar part of the environment. Not all were of any great antiquity. Some, located beside old farmhouses and filled with tall, spreading trees, had been in existence for centuries (Figure 1.1). But many were commercial enterprises, or were planted close to hospitals, colleges or other institutions to provide food for the residents, and were creations of the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Many, indeed, were modern – intensively managed fruit farms comprising closely spaced, low-growing trees, rather different from our romantic image of an orchard (Figure 1.2). Historical interest does not reside in antiquity, however, and even these relatively recent additions to the environment are an important aspect of our culture and our landscape, and worthy of the historian's attention.



Figure 1.1 A typical 'traditional' farmhouse orchard, with tall, spreading trees on vigorous rootstocks growing in unimproved permanent grassland.

3 O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (London, 1986), p. 65.



Figure 1.2 Bramerton, Norfolk. Closely planted apple trees on dwarfing rootstocks, typical of post-war commercial orchards and ‘fruit farms’.

Examples of all these kinds of orchard, and of others, can still be found throughout England. But in almost all parts of the country orchard numbers have fallen, steadily and to an often catastrophic extent, since the 1950s. This has been for a variety of reasons, including foreign fruit imports, the decline of small farms, changes in agricultural subsidies, the rise of the great supermarket chains, urban expansion and house building on ‘infill’ sites in rural villages and, perhaps most importantly, changes in lifestyles and in attitudes to food.⁴ And not only have we lost the majority of our orchards over the past half century but the wide range of fruit varieties once grown in them has also dwindled. Most shops now sell only a limited number, many with recent origins. This is not simply a matter of losing some odd-looking fruit with strange, evocative names – D’Arcy Spice, Dr Harvey, Norfolk Beefing. It also means that a diverse range of tastes has been lost to our experience, almost unnoticed.⁵

4 A. King and S. Clifford, ‘The Apple, the Orchard, the Cultural Landscape’, in S. Clifford and A. King (eds), *Local Distinctiveness: Place, Particularity and Identity* (London, 1993), pp. 37–46; S. Clifford, ‘Save Our Orchards: One Insight into the First Two Decades of a Campaign’, in I.D. Rotherham (ed.), *Orchards and Groves: Their History, Ecology, Culture and Archaeology* (Sheffield, 2008), pp. 32–42.

5 King and Clifford, ‘The Apple, the Orchard, the Cultural Landscape’, pp. 73–5.