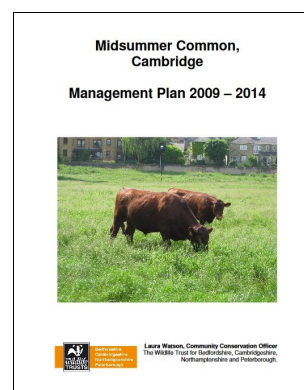


It started as a walk around Midsummer Common.

Back in 2008 the Council commissioned the Wildlife Trust to prepare a Management Plan for the Common. I was chairman of **Friends of Midsummer Common (FoMC)** at the time and they ask me to help the consultant. So I walked her round the Common showing her the various features and places to study.

She stopped me at one point and asked about land at the top of a bank. I confessed ignorance saying that I had never been there. We climbed the bank together and entered a small grassed pound overrun with brambles and nettles. Neither of us knew whether it was part of the Common but her final Plan¹ said it would be a good place to plant a few fruit trees.



3.2.4 Objective 4:

To enhance The Pound through the creation of an orchard.

Rationale:

Although part of the common, The Pound is not utilised for grazing or events and is merely a link to Maids Causeway. This relatively small area of grassland has great potential to be the location for a more positive use such as a community orchard. This change in land use would link well to the adjacent allotments and would act as a demonstration of locally produced fruit. Fruit growing plays a significant part in the heritage of Cambridgeshire and it would be apt to reflect this on the common.

The Council responded saying the pound was their private land and they had other plans for it, one being to make it into a coach park. Shocking! Near where I lived! I suddenly became very interested in a small piece of land that I never knew existed.

Through the study of papers in the County, City and Jesus College archives, I unearthed evidence that Parliament had designated the pound as part of Midsummer Common in 1930 and it had been registered as such under the *Commons Registration Act 1965*. The Council were not pleased to learn this. But they still owned the land and it took time to persuade them to let it become an orchard.

Once they agreed, it was time to study the site in more detail. It was less than a hectare in size so didn't need an Environmental Impact Assessment. The soil was tested and a pH value just below 7.5 made it suitable for fruit trees. The site was covered with nettles, brambles, thistles and stones (see below) which would need clearing before trees could be planted. So a plan was needed.



Nettles across the site



Brambles round the edge

1. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Papers/ManagementPlan2009.pdf>

I prepared a detailed proposal for the Community Orchard¹ drawing upon knowledge gained from study tours to orchards in this country and abroad, attendance at a EU training programme on community orchards and practical tree planting organised by the *Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Biodiversity Partnership*. It was hoped that the Orchard would provide historical continuity, habitat diversity, landscape enhancement and a source of nourishment for those living in Cambridge. I asked the City Council to give us a licence to carry out work on their 'common land' which they delivered in March 2011 (long after the work had started!).

What to plant?

The City Council's 2001 Conservation Plan for Midsummer Common² called for new tree plantings to be of native species and local provenance. The *East of England Apples and Orchards Project* identified, catalogued and grew a variety of native fruit trees. All their trees are grown on rootstocks that create half standard sized trees. To ensure successful pollination and a good crop of fruit, it is necessary to select varieties that flower together or are self fertile. A mix of fruits - apples, pears and plums - seemed a sensible starting point. So what varieties did I choose?

Ease of cultivation, climatic tolerance, and the range of flavours and uses have made apples the world's most cultivated fruit. The *East of England Apples and Orchards Project* lists 12 dessert, 5 culinary and 2 dual purpose apple varieties native to Cambridgeshire. Two of the eaters are local to Cambridge: the **New Rock Pippin** which has a spice-like sweet flavoured yellowish fruit for picking in late October and eating in January to May, and the **Wayside** which has a distinctive fruity-tasting crisp sweet fruit for picking in late September and eating in October and November. Another eater, the **Histon Favourite**, has a sharp and crisp flavour when picked in late September for eating into December. All three are good for juice. Culinary apples are used primarily for cooking. One of these, the **Jolly Miller** apple, has a greasy yellow skin with reddish flush ready for picking and cooking in late September. All four are grown on a MM106 rootstock and reach a height of 3.0-4.6m with a spread of 3m.



One plum and two gage trees are local to Cambridgeshire. The plum, **Wallis's Wonder**, flowers early and yields a medium/large yellow red-flushed sweet fruit for picking in late September or October. The two gages flower later but are partially self fertile. The **Cambridge Gage** is one of the most popular and reliable of the greengages ready for eating and cooking in mid/late August. The **Willingham Gage** produces a good crop of excellent quality flavoured fruits which ripen in late August or September. All three are grown on a St. Julian 'A' rootstock and reach a height of 2.7-3.6m with a spread of 3m.

No pear variety is local to Cambridge but the **Warden** was found nearby. It produces large green flushed brown sweet fruit for picking and culinary use in October. A suitable pollinator is the **Laxton's Foremost** dessert pear which is a large yellow pear with a reddish flush and a few red stripes. The flesh is buttery and sweet for picking and eating in early to late September. Both are grown on a Quince 'A' rootstock and reach a height of 2.7-3.5m with a spread of 3m. It was thought best to plant them as espaliers by way of variety.



1. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Orchard/proposal.html>

2. See <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Papers/ConservationPlan2001.pdf>

Where to plant?

The Orchard site is divided by footpaths into three distinct areas (see right). It was decided to stagger the tree planting into 3 phases and locate each of these into one of the 3 areas.

Phase 1 in January 2010: 5 New Rock Pippin, 5 Wayside, 3 Histon Favourite and 2 Jolly Miller apple trees were planted in area A.

Phase 2 in June 2010: 4 Wallis's Wonder plum, 3 Cambridge Gage and 2 Willingham Gage trees were planted in area B.

Phase 3 in January 2011: 3 Warden and 3 Laxton's Foremost pear trees were planted in area C.

These 30 trees were as initially proposed for the Orchard but no sooner had they been planted than other trees started arriving, mostly donated by followers.

Space was found to plant 4 crab apples and 2 quince trees in area A in March and September 2010. A medlar shrub (2011), two apricot trees (2015) and a mulberry tree (2016) were planted in Area B. A cherry tree (2013), a mountain ash (2015), a hazel (2015) and a fig tree (2020) were planted in area C. And 6 stella and 6 sunburst cherry trees were planted along the entrance corridor in December 2012. So the total became 56 trees, all of which are doing well.



Who does the planting?

All parties - the *Wildlife Trust*, the Council and FoMC - recognised that the Community Orchard would only be created if a volunteer group took on the task. *Common Ground* tell us that "the success of a community orchard lies in the strength of local commitment to it. Local people are the key to running it and deciding how it is used". FoMC followed this advice and set up a volunteer group from its members to do the work. There were many volunteers at the beginning but they became harder to find as the work progressed.

The first task was to clear the site of brambles, nettles, thistles and other noxious weeds. Once these were out of sight there was much building material and countless stones to be removed. And years of accumulated litter. It was a thankless task and one that has continued throughout the life of the Orchard.



Nature has a way of bringing unwanted weeds to life where they are least welcomed. And stones never stop appearing to blunt the blades of the mower. Our volunteers have a role to play in all these tasks.

Planting the apple trees

In January 2010 I bought 15 native apple trees from the *East of England Apple and Orchard Project* and parted with £195 of Council money. No sooner had the trees arrived than a large party of FoMC volunteers turned up to plant them. They gathered round and were shown how to do this and whether to dig round or square holes! They were then paired off, given a tree each and told where to start digging. It didn't take long to have a group of expert diggers!



Start digging holes for the fruit trees



Showing the way

Copying mum



Getting ready to dig hole

Hole dug and smiling



Showing rootstock

and where to bury it

Fruit trees come in a number of forms depending on their age, size and how they have been shaped at the nursery. Ours came as bare rooted maidens - one year old looking more like walking sticks than trees. They were all on a MM106 rootstock. Kenny, the Council tree expert, told us what this meant and showed us how to go about planting them. He picked on two of us to follow his instructions under the watchful eyes



Checking depth and root spread

Watering in

of the Executive Councillor, Julie Smith, who seems to have found more exciting things to watch!



Fixing a guard

Adding a post

That done, everyone went off to plant their tree and be shown how to drive in a post and fix a guard around the 'walking stick' tree. It was a joy to see family groups planting their 'own' tree and leave the site duly satisfied with their labours. Just hope they visit their tree as it grows from a walking stick into one bearing fruit.

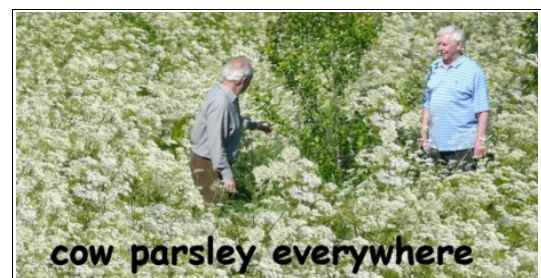


Planting the family tree

Time to go home

Planting the plum and gage trees

In June the same year I bought 8 plum and gage trees; a further £96 was taken from the Council budget. These trees were on a St. Julian 'A' rootstock which should match the apples for height and spread. A smaller group of volunteers were called into action and being well trained from earlier in the year had the trees planted in double quick time. Although on a similar rootstock to that of the apples, they grew upwards much faster. A few years later this area was miraculously and briefly overrun with cow parsley.



cow parsley everywhere

Planting the pear trees

Our chosen space for planting pear trees was a narrow strip of land between a wall and a footpath. Training pears as espaliers is a space-saving way of growing fruit on a wall. They require little pruning once established and are attractive in blossom and fruit and architectural during winter. But we had to build a frame to hold the trees and a community team from Astrazeneca spent a day with us driving in and cementing the supports in place. Two volunteers, Charlotte and Ray, have trained and pruned the trees over the years. And the pears are quick to disappear!



Bees galore

A year after the trees were planted someone thought it would be a good idea to have a beehive in the Orchard; colonies of bees were disappearing around the country and we should do our bit to help them



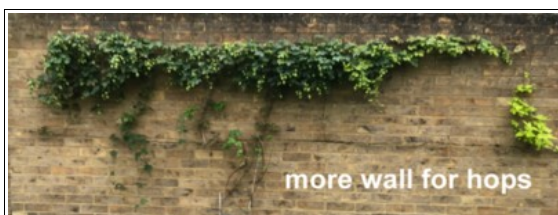
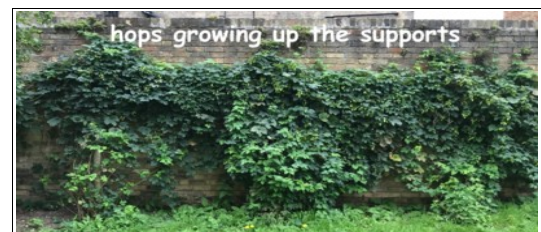
recover. And they are important pollinators for flowers, fruits and vegetables so would benefit our fruit trees. So we went looking for help and found Will, an experienced local beekeeper. After taking advice about Health and Safety, he installed a bee hive discretely in the hedge away from the footpaths and protected by a small fence. A swarm of bees followed and Will now gives regular tutorials for visitors and offers them a taste of the honey. Long may the bees be with us.



Hops for bees (or for brewing?)



Our beekeeper suggested we plant some hops for the benefit of his bees. Others thought they might find their way into some local beer! We chose a wall up which they would grow and volunteers erected supports. After a couple of years there was a splendid flowery growth and someone picked them for a home brew. Charles, who manages the hops, sees a future in an Orchard brew and has plans to grow more hops wherever there is an empty wall. And there is plenty of that. Community Orchard Beer Festival soon?



Playing boules



A friend found a set of boules and thought it would be a good idea to have a court in the Orchard. So I persuaded my good friend Barry, the new chair of FoMC, to help me do the digging. We marked it out, stripped away the grass and levelled the earth. People started playing and there was talk of having an Orchard team. Then fierce debate ensued amongst the Committee as to what the orchard was for and whether games such as boules should be allowed therein. In the spirit of compromise the new boules court was seeded over and a notice erected to encourage people to carry on playing.



Somewhere to sit and relax

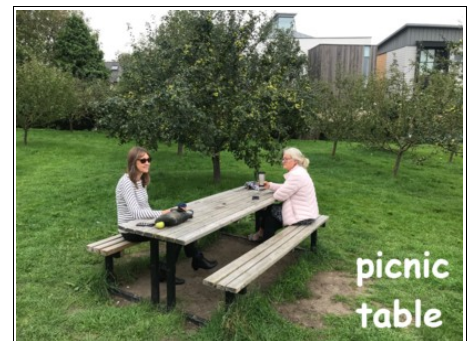


The Council donated two very old town benches for use in the Orchard. I called Barry into action to help me restore them. New wood and a paint over left them looking like new. They now sit happily amongst the trees and are very well used by strangers passing through



for work or shopping, or for some quiet time for young couples!

It was not long before someone suggested a picnic table would be a welcome addition to the scene. Local residents and the Beth Shalom Synagogue shared the cost. I bought and assembled it and the Council concreted and fixed it in place. It is proving very popular, especially for students with laptops and ladies with coffee flasks. Social distancing is remembered by some! It won't be long before someone asks for an umbrella over the table, a barbecue next to it, and a drinks machine nearby. And why only one such picnic table?



Improving access to the Orchard

This story started with me climbing up the bank to discover a piece of land that became the Orchard. In those days not many people made the climb because the bank was steep and there wasn't much to see at the top.



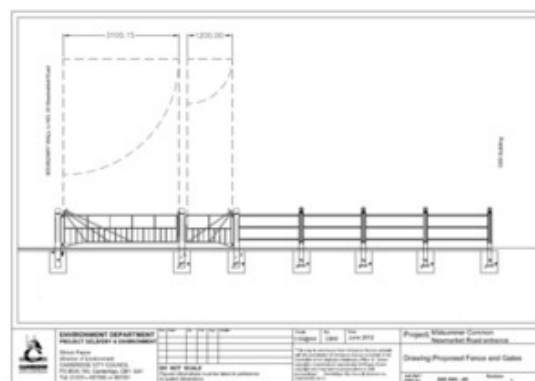
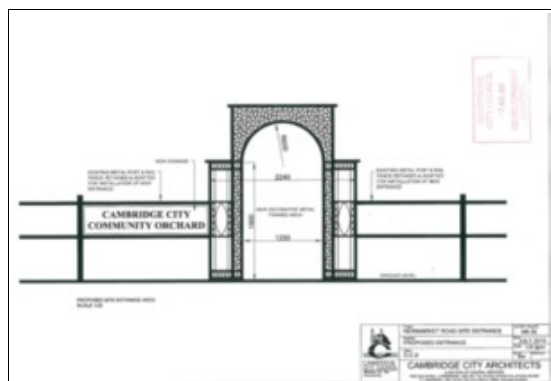
But once the Orchard materialised the pedestrian (and bike) traffic increased, sometimes on hands and knees. On pressing, the Council arranged for a smart flight of steps to be built into the bank and people of all ages can now make the journey. To encourage more of them, a hand-crafted sign was bought and fixed to the gate.



At the other entrance to the orchard from the Newmarket Road, the master plan proposed changing what was there into something more enticing. Ideas were found from similar orchards elsewhere. But this was not to be - the Council had other ideas about the entrance.



What started off as appealing (below left) was judged by another officer in the Council to be out of character with its surroundings and we ended up with just railings (below right) hidden far back from the pavement. Once installed, volunteers set about making the road-side new space more attractive for visitors.



Wildflowers in the Orchard

The Orchard proposal said that "if wildflowers are not already present, they can be sown as seeds or planted as plugs once the new trees are established". Since the site was cleared there has been a regular influx of 'foreign' plants leading to arguments over whether they are weeds or wildflowers. One year a blanket of cow parsley appeared amongst the stoned fruit. Docs are regular intruders and with long tap roots are a pain to dig up. Plentiful dandelions and buttercups remind the visitor of their lawn at home.

Soon after the apple trees were planted a bed within them was planted with wildflower plugs; flowers appeared in the first year but never again. Wildflower seeds were scattered around the bank entrance; flowers appeared in the first year but never again. Beds were dug up behind the cherry trees and plugs and seeds were planted; wildflowers appeared in the first year but never again. Experts told us we were wasting our time because the soil was too rich. And these endeavours had a serious downside - disturbing the soil brings noxious weeds such as docs to life.



Installing the new entrance (see above) provided an unexpected opportunity. By leaving a large gap between the railings and the pavement there was a vacant space that could be cleared and fresh soil added for wildflowers. Susan and her helpers did a grand job sowing the seeds and she erected a notice board for posting news about activities in the Orchard. Susan continues to tend this entrance area with great care and a large variety of plants.



There are plans to try again to get wildflowers, edible herbs and shrubs such as currants growing in parts of the Orchard itself. This would provide significant aesthetic and nourishment value for the local human population, as well as valuable forage for pollinators. By creating a raised bed, sealing the weeds and adding fresh soil it is hoped to echo planting schemes of medieval monastic and Victorian kitchen gardens; places designed to provide nourishment to large numbers of people.

Maintenance

Everyone enjoys creating an Orchard but volunteers are less plentiful when it comes to maintenance. It is particularly annoying when they are



asked to repair damage caused by others as one group had to do after cable layers left a badly filled trench across the site. level the ground they have other commitments when it comes to cutting the grass, pruning the trees and weeding the hedgerows.



Mowing the grass every fortnight is a perpetual problem. One helper mowed the whole site and covered over 6 miles on his pedometer! Hugh

and Felix are the current mowers and have done much more than this together throughout the year.



Pruning the trees is a more skilful task which Stepan has mastered and carried out throughout the year. Then the Council recognised his efforts and gave him a job leaving us to look for a replacement. Kit has taken his place and displays her tree climbing skills with Matilda. And Elsie on her gap year is ready to assist.



Weeding is a never ending task for young and old alike. They seem happy to stay on their knees for a

whole morning but often fail to reappear. The hedge planted round the site to hide the urban fabric makes for a pleasant Orchard seen from the inside. But those being hidden want to see out and ask for the heavy duty brigade to come in and do the job. We have a tool store on the site so if you see the door open it means work is going on and passers by are always welcome to join in.



Picnic time

From the early times, the new Orchard has been home to regular picnics attended by volunteers and their friends. Tents were erected, tables, chairs and food appeared and

much talking and games took place. On one occasion a seasoned volunteer turned his hand to blowing bubbles pretending he was a West Ham football fan.





On another occasion a class from a local school turned up with their sandwiches and were given tutorials on the planting of trees. Back in school they sang and recorded a song about the Orchard. Many families turn up and have their own picnics under the trees. Others meditate or pick the fruit. Two young men had a



boxing match every morning and told me it was an excellent way to lose weight. Seeing all of this going on makes the effort in creating a Community Orchard seem very worthwhile.

**Written by the one who got it started over a decade earlier with a walk around Midsummer Common.
December 2020**