CHEQUER, or the WILD SERVICE TREE

By Patrick Roper.

Introduction

The chequer or wild service tree[1], *Sorbus torminalis* (L.) Crantz, is one of Britain's largest but least known plants. It will grow as big as a good sized oak and is found as a native in most counties of England and Wales, yet there are many people, including keen naturalists, who have never knowingly seen one. As well as being of interest in its own right, the wild service today is largely confined to our ancient woods, forests and hedgerows and as such is one of a number of key species indicating the antiquity of these.

Description and Geographical Range

The wild service is a forest tree whose range extends from the Atlas Mountains of North Africa to Poland, Germany and Denmark; and from the Caucasus and the Ukraine to England and Wales. Some authors have suggested that the wild service was an introduction into the British Isles but none of the evidence supports this view. The species has been recorded from Iron Age and Roman sites in Britain and was known to the Anglo-Saxons, to Chaucer and to many early authors.

In Britain the tree extends northwards as far as north Yorkshire on the eastern side of the country and to the Morecambe Bay area in the west. It reaches westward as far as Cornwall, Pembrokeshire and Anglesey. Towards the edge of its range the tree is very scarce and, since it is frequently overlooked, it is impossible to prove that it does not and never has occurred naturally in Scotland and Ireland. The tree has not been able to spread north of the Scottish border or across the Irish Sea, although in this context it is worth remembering that it was not officially reported (i.e. by botanists) from Bedfordshire until after 1953 and from Pembrokeshire until 1971, so there are still places where it may yet be found.

The tree is nowhere very common in the wild and often occurs as a single example, or a small group, in a wood or hedge. On the clay soils of the Weald it is scattered like this in many woods and there are very few English or Welsh counties that do not have at least one or two wild examples. In some woods in south Essex, north Kent and Herefordshire it is found in rather greater numbers, but is nowhere a dominant tree.

While it grows best on clay soils and avoids sands, wet areas and chalk, it flourishes in certain carboniferous limestone areas, usually growing on cliffs and in rocky places where competition from other trees is reduced.

Size and shape

The wild service is sometimes referred to as a small tree or bush, but it will grow to a large size if conditions are favourable. The largest in Britain is at Udimore, East Sussex, and this

[1] 'Chequer' is the local name for the tree in South East England, mainly Kent, Sussex and Surrey. 'Wild Service' is the generally accepted English name (the word 'wild' is simply a translation of herbalists' Latin *sorbus sylvestris*, 'sylvestris' meaning wild in contrast to the true service which they called *sorbus legitima*).

had at its peak a spread of some 70 ft (21.3 m), a height of 60 ft (18.3 m) and a bole circumference at chest height of 13 ft 4.5 inches (4.08 m). It grows in open parkland and, at the time of writing (2003), is rapidly collapsing as its life comes to a close. In a woodland situation, where it has to compete with other trees, the wild service will reach over 25 metres (82 feet).

The general outline of the mature tree is distinctive. The trunk is normally unbranched to a height of four of five metres, at which point the majority of the main limbs diverge, often growing upwards at a steeper angle than in many other species. This can give the upper part of the tree a somewhat shuttlecock-shaped appearance like the framework of an umbrella that has been blown inside out. The branches themselves are often tortuous so that the winter silhouette of the tree is distinctive, if not among the most graceful.

In young trees the bark is smooth and grey. Later it becomes rough and then fissured with a texture somewhere between that of an oak and a pear tree. The idea that it is broken up into small squares, advanced by some to explain the name of "chequer tree", is incorrect. In forest conditions it takes a practised eye to distinguish the tree from the surrounding oaks on bark characteristics alone. Under some circumstances the trunk develops a marked spiral twist.

Leaves, twigs and buds

The shape of the wild service leaf is unique among native British trees, though they do resemble some exotic hawthorns and maples, a fact that has given rise to the occasionally used vernacular names `maple service' and `maple-leaved service'.

The early botanist John Ray referred to the leaves as *pedis anserini forma* - shaped like the foot of a goose - and Linnaeus in his 1753 formal description of the species wrote *crataegus foliis cordatus septangulis: lobis infimis divaricatis* (hawthorn with heart-shaped seven-angled leaves: lower lobes spreading). Once seen the shape is easily remembered, and looking for fallen leaves on the woodland floor is one of the easiest ways of finding the tree.

Wild service twigs are brown, streaked with a thin, pale grey patina and dotted with lighter brown, corky lenticels. The leaf buds start to expand rapidly towards the end of April and both leaves and shoots are covered with glistening, whitish hairs so that this new growth looks like thin, silvery-green plaited rope. At this stage wild services can be relatively easily picked out, particularly in hedgerows. By midsummer the leaves are, in the words of the 17th century herbalist John Parkinson, "of a sad greene colour."

There is wide variation in autumn colour, but in many cases the predominant effect is of intense crimson-scarlet that can make the tree a handsome feature in the countryside, standing out from other species over a considerable distance. This dimension is often overlooked in descriptions and the autumn colour described as no more than ‘yellow’ or ‘brown’. In my experience at least 50% of British examples have a 'red' leaf-fall. The leaves usually change colour unevenly so that trees can become a medley of reds, yellows, greens and browns. Lack of appreciation of this quality in the wild service has almost certainly been one of the factors contributing to its being undervalued and underplanted as an ornamental or amenity species.

Flowers

The flowers of the wild service are whitish-cream in a flat corymb like hawthorn or elder. They appear in June and last about ten days. They have the sweetish, slightly fishy smell shared with related trees and shrubs and attract a wide range of insects, predominantly flies and small beetles.

A wild service tree in full bloom, though attractive, is not as distinctive as might be thought. This is partly because of the flowers are usually high in the trees and difficult to see well against the light and partly because many other trees and shrubs with white or cream corymbs are in flower at the same time.

Many mature trees flower, and consequently fruit, only in alternate years or even less frequently. This is a well-known phenomenon especially in cultivated fruit trees and is caused by the amount of warmth and dryness in summer as this promotes flower formation for the following year. At the edge of its range in west Wales and north west England, the wild services often bear fruit only after long periods of years and in parts of north Germany and Poland there may be twenty years or more between good crops of fruit.

Although it may result in fewer potential seedlings, irregular fruiting can have the advantage of forcing any fruit or seed predators to seek sustenance elsewhere during non-productive years and give the seeds a better chance of survival when they do appear.

Fruit

The fruits of the wild service grow in loose, flattish clusters of up to fifty berries, although most bunches have far fewer than this. The individual berries are the size of a small grape and vary slightly in shape. They are green initially, but as they ripen in autumn they turn brown and they are evenly dotted with small, light brown, corky lenticels. This latter fact has occasionally been used to explain the Wealden name of 'chequer berries', but this is unlikely as the lenticels are not at all obvious.

At first the fruits are hard and remain so when they first turn brown. As the weather becomes colder they ripen and turn soft and at this stage are edible with a sharp, pleasant flavour reminiscent of dried apricots, but which has also been likened to prunes, damsons, sultanas, dates and tamarinds.

Each fruit contains between one and five fertile seeds. Each seed has a dark brown and rather fragile outer coat. This thin outer seed skin, the soft, sweet pulp and the relatively small easily crushed seeds enable the fruit to be eaten and enjoyed in its entirety by animals and birds. Unlike the related rowan, though some claim the wild service can be bird-sown, I have never come across young trees under places where birds obviously roost. This implies that the seeds are digested on their passage through the gut and would undoubtedly be a factor in regard to the general scarcity of the tree.

Reproduction

The wild service reproduces in three different ways: from seed, by suckering and by layering. If treated correctly, seeds normally germinate successfully. Once the fruit are ripe, seed should be extracted and rinsed with cold water, The seed should then be stratified by mixing it with damp soil and sand at a temperature as near 3^{o} C as possible for at least 12 to 16 weeks (a polythene bag in the salad drawer of the fridge works well). This cold period

should be so organised that seed can be brought out to germinate in warmer conditions in spring. It should then be sown, with its peat and sand mixture, in pots or trays of seed compost in the normal way and stood out-of-doors or in a cold frame.

Seed may also be germinated simply by sowing it in a standard commercial compost and leaving the pots exposed to all weathers out-of-doors. Some recommend taking precautions against birds and mice, but I have never done this and have experienced no losses from these creatures. Depending on how much cold weather there is, the seed will germinate in either the first, second or, occasionally, third spring after sowing. In colder localities a first spring germination may be expected.

Although seeds normally germinate well, seedlings are very scarce in the wild. Birds certainly take a heavy toll and any that fall to the woodland floor are likely to be rapidly eaten by mice, voles and other creatures. In the past there must have been quite a scrum round some of the trees as the fruit are also appreciated by deer, bears and wild boar. These larger animals would have helped reduce the numbers of mice and voles and would have buried some of the fruit by trampling. The idea that this was an important factor in establishing seed grown trees is borne out by the fact that young wild services today are often found in places where the soil has been mechanically disturbed – on road embankments, at the bottom of inland cliffs and so on.

Many wild service trees sucker very freely; sometimes because they have been damaged in some way, but often for no discernible reason. The suckers emerge from quite close to the trunk to some considerable distance away and not infrequently form a small thicket of stems. Often they are assumed to be seedlings but it is easy to tell if a shoot is a sucker by probing just under the soil surface with the fingers. The root from which it springs can normally be easily felt.

A study undertaken in Epping Forest showed that the majority of wild services there today, originated from suckers rather than from seed and, in many cases, the mother tree had died and disappeared.

Wild service trees probably live to a maximum of 250 to 300. It is their suckering ability that make the trees so tenacious in our ancient woodlands. Individual plants may age and die, but vegetative propagation seems capable of continuing so long as there is no deterioration in the genetic material. Some of the wild services that are flourishing today may be the product, through suckering, of seeds that germinated a very long time in the past. Indeed, where there have been uninterrupted woodland conditions, some groups of trees may, genetically speaking, have originated from one seed hundreds or even thousands of years ago.

While suckering gives the wild service great tenacity, it evidently does not make it much more abundant. Although they grow rapidly and well to a height of 1.5 or 2 meters (5 or 6.5ft), many suckers fail to reach maturity for the same reasons as seedlings: they succumb to browsing, constant defoliation by caterpillars, or disease. Sexual reproduction, though currently so unsuccessful in Britain, remains of great importance for the long-term future of the tree. Whole populations can be wiped out by climatic factors, forest fires, diseases or as a result of human activity. Wild services must have the mobility, as well as the genetic diversity, that dispersal and regeneration from seed provide if they are not to run an increasing risk of local and national extinction.

ECONOMICS and SOCIOLOGY

The wood

"The wood's got a pretty colour to it. When you get an old gentleman and saw it out properly you'll get beautiful stuff". This is how an Sussex forester described wild service wood to me in the 1970s. It is a hard, heavy timber, pale pinkish buff in colour and without a strongly marked grain. At one time the timber was highly valued here, and still is in mainland Europe, for turnery, furniture making and cabinet work; for wooden screws and arrows and especially for pistol and gun-stocks. Anne Pratt, writing in the mid-19th C, says it was preferred to any other wood for the latter purpose and this would appear to have originated in wild service wood having been particularly sought for cross-bow stocks. In various British documents in medieval Latin reference is made to its use in this way, the word *aliera*[2] being used to describe the tree. In one account, dating from 1260, reference is made to two wild service trees that were taken from Havering Park in Essex to the Tower of London to make cross-bows for the king. Havering remains a good area for the tree.

In France, Germany and Poland the wood has been used for making stringed musical instruments; for parts of harpsichords and simple wind instruments such as flutes, fifes and flageolets. In Britain the wood is one of the most sought for the harpsichord jacks that pluck the strings.

The town of Ivry in Normandy once specialised in making "elegant and large" combs from wild service wood and in Germany it was used for weavers' combs. In rural communities throughout Europe it was sought after for tool handles and in particular for the striking portion of the flails that were used for threshing corn. As with pear wood, which is still in demand for mallet heads, wild service wood is resistant to splitting, a fact also reflected in its use for making skittles and butchers' chopping blocks.

Where exactly all the artefacts that were made with wild service wood are today is something of a mystery. Many must still exist in museums, collections, antique shops and households but it is plain that their true nature is not appreciated. An expert trying to be specific about the timber used in a particular object may mistake it for pear wood. Generally, however, it is classified as 'fruit wood', which covers apple, pear, cherry and other related species and is widely used in the antique and furniture trades. In Germany it has been described as the country's most precious and beautiful native wood, eagerly sought by cabinet makers and similar craftsmen.

Another important use for the timber in the past was in the axles and wheels of carts and carriages and for the wooden cogs used in mill machinery. The tree was used by millwrights for this purpose in the Wyre Forest on the Worcestershire/Shropshire border. The species is still not uncommon there along the Dowles Brook where the watermills are situated and it could well have been encouraged to grow in such places. Hanbury, in the late 18th C, said: "The timber is very valuable, being hard, and useful for millwrights who greatly covet it."

In the 17th C, John Evelyn spoke of a house in Surrey which had a room "curiously wainscotted" in wild service wood and in the early 19th C Henry Phillips said that it was "a

[2] The meaning of *aliera* is given by Latham (1975) in his *Dictionary of medieval Latin from British sources* as "? hawthorn", but he fully agreed, when I discussed this with him, that "wild service" would have been meant.

very durable wood for buildings that are exposed to a northern aspect". In many places the wood was used both for roof-beams, for domestic carpentry (as most woods were) and even for gravestones, all a reflection of its durability.

THE USES OF THE FRUIT

Wild service fruit has long been used both in Britain and on the Continent as food, in the manufacture of various alcoholic drinks and medicinally.

In common with the blackberry, raspberry and wild strawberry, it is one of the few fruits in Britain that can, when it is ripe, be enjoyed straight from the plant, a fact which must have been quite important in the remoter past and which has probably helped to ensure the tree's survival in some areas. The taste is something has been described as sharpish; soft, mealy and agreeably acid; of an exceedingly pleasant, acid flavour; and acid but very palatable relish ; and agreeably acid and wholesome. Richard Mabey, author of "Food for Free" told me he regarded it as having one of the most fascinating tastes of any native fruit.

English botanists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries seem on the whole familiar with wild services as dessert fruit and speak of its being widely on sale. Sir Joseph Banks, alluded to a small kind of service gathered by the Romans as "probably the same as we gather wild". It is from about the middle of the 19th C that its popularity wanes and its consumption becomes increasingly confined to children and to those areas where the tree was abundant.

In the past the fruit was commonly sold in markets both in this country and on the Continent and they were regularly sent to London markets from the countryside. They were available in Kent and Sussex, on the Isle of Wight under the name of 'sorbus berries', in Worcestershire and at Witney, Oxfordshire where they were sold ‘to make a conserve’

Sometimes wild service fruit seems not to have been very highly regarded. In medieval France there were a number of sayings along the lines of people or things not being worth a service berry as though this were the least valuable object of which one could conceive. A 12th C example is *il ne valt pas la moitié d'une alie* (it isn't worth half a wild service berry). Andrew Boorde, the 16th C English physician, thought that in common with medlars the fruit engendered melancholy, while Worlidge dismisses them with the laconic "services are a fruit more common than desirable, therefore I shall only name them."

The principal demand, especially in the 19th C, for the raw fruit appears to have come from children and, in an era before sweets were common, they probably had a place alongside things like tiger nuts and liquorice stick. My father who lived as a boy on the edge of Epping Forest in Essex in the early years of the last century says that all the local children knew where wild service trees grew, although they were very scarce, and great enthusiasm and energy was displayed in obtaining the fruit which were know as 'sarves', 'sarvers, or 'sarvies'.

This attraction for children and, to some extent, adults has been one among the many causes that have contributed to the wild services' scarcity in cultivation as the trees were often pulled about and branches broken by people searching for fruit. Hanbury, writing in 1770, describes how they were important to the poor: "the wild service bears excellent fruit which being gathered in the woods, tied in bunches, and exposed for sale, not only proves grateful to many persons, but likewise affords a maintenance in the autumn to those poor people who make it their business to gather it."

An exception to this general lack of regard for the fruit occurred in the Weald, particularly the Kentish part, where the berries were, within living memory, regularly collected and threaded by their stalks onto sticks, making a fat, cylindrical bunch 'a yard or more long' which, after hanging out in the frost to blet or soften, as is done with medlars, were brought indoors where they were said to keep through much of the winter. Because both services and medlars are brown authors often say they are not eaten until they are rotten. The fruit pulp, however, just happens to be this colour when it is ripe and is quite different to the brown flesh of apples or pears when they have gone bad. Wild services, if kept too long, do deteriorate in quality, but generally it is a fruit with a remarkably long shelf-life.

Little now seems to be remembered in the Weald about the uses to which wild services or chequer berries were put, although one informant told me that "the gentlemen used to take them with their whisky" - a precursor of the olive or peanut perhaps. An elderly man I knew 30 years ago grew up on a farm in Kent where chequer berry sticks were regularly made. When he was a child each member of the household had a stick of his or her own and would eat just one or two berries a day throughout the winter. Such restraint seems remarkable, particularly in children, and if this was the general tradition it seems possible, in a period when fresh fruit and vegetables were much scarcer, that the people of the Weald were aware of the value of the daily dose of vitamin C that would have been obtained from the berries. Modern analysis has shown them to be rich in this particular vitamin while one 18th C dictionary claims that sorb apples are "good to purge watery humours and against the scurvy."

The fruit were sometimes used in cookery. The classical Roman author Apicius gives a recipe for an omelette of brains, eggs and service berries and in Italy true services, and probably wild services too, were added to various stews, while in Poland they were cooked with bread and potatoes. Both in Britain and abroad rowan berries and other *Sorbus* fruit were used in similar ways and the practice could well have been more common in the days when the distinction between sweet and savoury dishes was less carefully drawn. Until relatively recently pottages into which almost everything edible went were one of the commonest forms of food.

The fruit of various *Sorbus* species, including the wild service, were sometimes dried in the sun before they were fully ripe then ground into a sort of low grade flour. Wild service berries were used in this way in Germany, the flour being mixed with that of barley or rye.

One of the best ways the fruit can be used is to make a ratafia by putting them in a jar with sugar and topping up with brandy, vodka or any other spirit of choice before leaving the result to mature for as long as willpower permits. I once came across an old recipe for such a ratafia in The Chequers Inn in Smarden, Kent:

> Checker
>
> Pick off in bunches in October. Hang on string like onions (look like swarm of bees) hang till ripe. Cut off with scissors close to checkers (do not pull out).
>
> Put in stone glass jars. Put sugar on 1lb-5lb checkers. Shake up well. Keep airtight until juice comes out to top. The longer kept the better. Can add brandy. Then eat.

The fact that this recipe comes from a Chequers Inn in the heart of the Weald of Kent is no coincidence. There is a strong association in this area between the wild services, or chequer trees, and public houses. At the Chequers in Smarden there is a wild service growing in the rear courtyard and evidence to show that the inn was named after the tree is given by Maynard:

> Mr. Mills, a local archaeologist, who has lived in Smarden for over 84 years .... informed me that the origin of the "Chequers" sign is not that generally accepted - the early form of ready reckoner - for he could well remember when he was a boy seeing the sign of this inn garlanded in the autumn of the year with the fruit of the chequer-tree .... He explained that there were many chequer trees at Smarden and the surrounding districts and was kind enough to show me some fine specimens growing in his garden.

I have been told that the Chequers Inns in Goudhurst, Laddingford and Lamberhurst (all in Kent) all derive their name from the tree and The Chequers at Goudhurst has changed its name to The Chequer Tree.

The origin of the name ‘Chequers’ for inns and public houses is interesting. The chequer board was an emblem for a drinking house that originated in ancient Egypt and was widely used in Britain in the same way as the barber’s pole or the pawnbroker’s brass balls: they indicated what the place was to people who could not read. The chequer pattern also appears frequently in coats of arms and, in some places, there is, or may be, an association with a Chequers Inn and a local noble family.

In the Weald the chequer board was probably used as an inn sign in the same way as elsewhere and many inns thus became known as ‘The Chequers’. Wild services were perhaps often grown at or near these places to use in beer making and became known as ‘Chequers trees’, i.e. the trees of the Chequers Inn. Other landlords may then have started calling their inns ‘Chequers’ because it indicated that a well-known type of beverage was available.

Many linguists argue that the word ‘service’ as used for the tree is related to the Classical Latin word *cerevisia*, a kind of beer, and still familiar to many in its modern Spanish form *cerveza*. I am personally of the view that this is rather unlikely and that ‘service’ simply derives from the Classical Latin *sorbus* and the many forms it has taken over the centuries. Wild service fruit have, however, been used to make, or to add to, alcoholic drinks from the earliest times. Virgil, writing in 30 BC, said that the Scythians from southern Russia (where the tree is still abundant) made an intoxicating drink out of service berries rather than grapes.

Both the fruit of the rowan and the true service have been used to make a fermented drink, a kind of cider or beer analogue. In the case of the rowan, there was a Welsh beverage called *diod griafol* (rowan drink) which diarist John Evelyn said was “an incomparable drink”. The chances are, however, that he copied this comment from someone else and never actually tried any. In France a drink called *cormé* was made from true services. This apparently had a reasonably good taste, but smelt awful. It would seem probable that wild service fruit were also fermented in this way and, like *diod griafol* and *cormé*, drunk young: the process was just a simple and quick way of converting wild sugars into alcohol. Clavel in a treatise on fruit trees written at the beginning of the 19th C, was at a loss to understand why his French compatriots had not planted both wild and true services more widely. He said: "A drink can

be made from wild services either with juice pressed from the berries or by grating and crushing them and mixing with water".

Both wild and true services were also added to beer like hops and acted both as a flavouring and a preservative. I think it most likely that the large number of Chequers Inns in the Weald were named after the tree because they made a distinctive brew which was flavoured with the berries, a drink that it was sometimes claimed, would keep away plague.

If fruit are crushed and fermented a spirit or eau-de-vie can be distilled from them. The eau-de-vie from wild service berries is still made in Europe particularly in south-west Germany and north-east France. It is a colourless liquid with a distinctive bouquet, very strong and, to my palate, somewhat harsh and dry. The Grand Larousse encyclopaedia, however, praises the drink highly describing it as "*très rare, d'une exquise delicatesse .... très parfumée*".

Medical uses

From classical times (and probably long before) until the 18th century fruit, and sometimes other parts, of the wild service were valued medicinally. The fruit was appreciated mainly for its binding or costive properties as a cure for dysentery, diarrhoea and colic. It was its reputation for curing stomach upsets that won it the specific name of *torminalis* meaning 'of the colic'. Many have assumed, incorrectly, that this name meant that the berries caused colic rather than cured it, however Turner in his "Herbal" said "The sorb apples being yellow in colour before they be full ripe, if they be cut in pieces and dried in the sonne, if they be eaten they will stop the belly. Also the pouder of them, after they be beaten or ground, if it be taken in stede of parched barley meal, and taken in, and the broth of them doth the same". Similarly Parkinson says services are "binding, fit to be taken of them that have any scouring or laske, to help stay the flux: but take heed, lest if you bind too much, more pain and danger may come thereof than of the scouring".

Many other curative powers have been claimed for services and a number belong more to the magical than the medical. This, no doubt, came about because of the widely held ideas in regard to the magical powers of the tree. An example is an old belief in rural France that if someone ate seven or nine unripe true services without pulling a face they would change sex. In England Surflet, writing in 1600, claimed that the "cervice tree" had the power to "raise up, renew and revive a qualified and appeased madness". He may well have borrowed this notion from the French author Estienne who said there was a danger of reviving rabies by taking a nap under a true service tree while the Comtesse d'Aulney wrote in 1682 that a service wood wand could renew the virulence of an exhausted poison.

Evelyn wrote that wild service fruit taken with new wine and honey "make a *conditum* of admirable effect to corroborate the stomack". He also claimed that the water distilled from the stalks and leaves was "incomparable for consumptive and tabid bodies" - that if "distill'd warm into the ears" it cured earache and that it was a sovereign remedy for green sickness in virgins. Green sickness is the anaemia that was caused in young women by poor diet and other factors. As though this were not enough, Evelyn also claimed "the wood or bark contused and applied to any green wound, heals it; and the powder thereof drunk in oyl olive, consolidates inward ruptures" and, lastly, "the salt of the wood taken in decoction of *althaea* to three grains, is an incomparable remedy to break, and expel, gravel."

Folklore

Country people in earlier centuries regarded the wild service as having magical powers which were just as effective, if not more so, than those of the rowan. It would appear from this that they were clear about the relationship between the two trees long before systematic botany had formalised it. This is surprising as there is little superficial resemblance between them and they rarely grow in the same places.

Throughout northern Europe the rowan was regarded as sacred and both its wood and fruit were thought to provide protection against evil spirits and witches. It was often known as the quicken or wicken and these words derive either from Anglo-Saxon *cwic* meaning ‘alive’, or *wicce* meaning ‘a witch’. Quicken and wicken have both been used as names for the wild service.

Grindon writing in 1883, said that in some parts of Northamptonshire where the wild service was abundant it was carried in procession at village feasts and I have been told that branches were also used in Northamptonshire for beating parish bounds in the Rockingham Forest area. Boulger reports that wild service berries were hung up indoors as a protection against witches, while in rural France the leaves were suspended from rafters above mangy cattle. As the leaves dried the mange was reputed to disappear.

I have been told that trees were once deliberately planted, or encouraged to grow, in oak woods as they were thought to induce bigger crops of acorns, an important food for free-range swine. The wild service favours richer, heavier soils and it could be that people noticed that oak trees bore heavier crops of acorns on these high nutrient soils where services grew and ascribed this phenomenon to their presence. Aalmost inevitably, Ellis writing in 1742 said "it is reported by our Country People that the Cross of our Blessed Redeemer was of this sort of wood".

The wild service in orchards and gardens

Both the wild and the true service have been cultivated from the earliest times but it is difficult to disentangle one from the other in older accounts as they are often lumped together, sometimes with medlars too, under the names *sorbus*, *sorbum* or 'service', with many variant spellings. Sometimes they are given names that seem to occur nowhere else. The Romans certainly knew the trees well and they are mentioned by Virgil, Martial, Cato and especially the elder Pliny in his *Natural History*.

In France the 9th C *Capitulare de Villis*, a schedule to one of the laws of Charlemagne, included services among what was clearly the standard range of fruit trees in those days. Chaucer, who was a forester as well as a poet, gave a list of what he regarded as well-know fruiting trees: apple, bullace, cherry, hazel, medlar, peach, pear, plum, quince and service. .

During the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries printed accounts of how to cultivate and propagate plants were more frequent, partly of course because printed books became commoner. The early herbals tend to imply that the fruit of the wild service was readily available and instructions for its cultivation are seldom given. Culpeper, for example, in his *Complete Herbal* of 1653 says "it is so well-known in the place where it grows that it needs no description".

The tree was undoubtedly planted from time to time in the Tudor and Stuart periods. Francis Bacon spoke of services as a garden fruit and Sir John Oglander of Nunwell in the Isle of Wight "planted above a hundred young elms and ashes, some chestnuts and service berries" in the early part of the 17th C when Thomas Tusser was recommending it among fruit trees in his *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*. It was not until the late 18th C that horticultural writers started talking as a matter of course about raising and growing services. Part of the explanation is the increasing enclosure of common land, of disafforestation and the growing momentum of the Industrial Revolution. The wild service was no longer a well-known tree of the countryside as it had been in Culpeper's day, and many of the places where it grew had been turned into pasture or arable. There was still, however, a need for variety in fruit for dessert since large-scale food importation and preservation had not yet begun and services were often commended for the months of October and November.

William Boutcher, a Scotsman from Edinburgh, said that all kinds of service fruited better if grafted on pear stocks and he named eight separate varieties, three of which appear to be *S. torminalis* (the manured service tree, the maple-leaved service tree and the common wild service tree). Forsyth, who was gardener to the king at Kensington and St. James's, clearly knew the tree in the wild and in 1802 spoke of it being grafted on hawthorn as dwarfs for shrubberies, or grown as standards and as specimens for lawns. He said that some people trained them as espaliers, a pursuit that would hardly have been undertaken if the fruit were not fairly well-known and liked. Marshall, in a general introduction to gardening, refers to services several times and, among the more usual information for this period, says they were used as stocks for grafting medlars. Wild services are still occasionally found in, or alongside, orchards today. While these may have been planted, or have occurred naturally in the hedges, some could have arisen as suckers from stocks used for medlars.

By 1820 Phillips was saying that "the service-berry-tree is now so thinly scattered over the country, that many farmers do not even know its existence". He warmly commended its planting and in doing so gave an indication of why it was not as popular as other forest trees: "I know many noblemen and gentlemen object to fruit-bearing trees being planted on their estates, on the principle that it encourages depredations to injure their plantations; but this seems but a poor excuse for depriving themselves and the public of the beauty and variety which the blossoms give at one season of the year and the fruit at another, particularly to those who have park-keepers or bailiffs on the premises."

By the middle of the 19th C the popularity of the wild service was waning rapidly, although the *Gentleman's Pocket Diary* of 1880 recommended it as an October dessert. Grindon, in 1883, said that the fruit were sometimes offered for sale but that they were "next to worthless".

It is curious that no one ever seems to have made an effort to improve the wild service. If one had only wild apples, pears or services to work on, the latter would, on palatability grounds, seem to offer the best prospect. Perhaps it was that it could be eaten straight from the unimproved tree that inhibited attempts at development. Others have suggested that it was the great length of time that had to elapse before seedlings bore fruit, or it may have been simply the sheer size of the tree that was discouraging.

On the ornamental front attention moved away from native trees in 19th C Britain with the growing pace of introduction of exotic plants from other parts of the world. It was not long under these circumstances before the wild service started to disappear from the less

comprehensive gardening books and, because of this, would have been stocked by fewer nurseries. People who knew their trees at first hand continued to commend it, although such authors were often naturalists rather than gardeners. Boulger, for example, in 1908 said that "the form, the lightness and the early autumnal colouring of the leaf give to the wild service tree whatever claim it has on the score of beauty to a place in our shrubberies". After this though accounts by those who knew the tree tend to be more of the 'I cannot understand why it is not planted more frequently' type. In 1937, W.J. Marchant, one of the country's most distinguished nurserymen, wondered in his catalogue why the species had been so neglected: he thought that, although a splendid tree, it was because it was only a native species. Contrast this with Hugh Johnson's remark a generation later to the effect that people occasionally grow it not because it is spectacular, but because it is wild and native. In 1937 Marchant's sold plants of *S. torminalis* for three shillings and sixpence or five shillings and sixpence: when I visited the nursery in 1982 they said that, owing to lack of demand, they had used a row of young, standard wild service trees to make stakes.

Thus the wild service declined massively in the countryside and was pushed to one side in the horticultural world by changing needs, shifts of fashion and the effects of a market economy often working together. Lord Rothschild, one of the earliest nature conservationists, tried to give the wild service a boost when he said to the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves around 1913 that they should "ask the Board of Agriculture to take such steps as may be necessary to preserve the Yew, Holly, Service Tree (*Pyrus torminalis*) and the Wayfaring Tree (*Viburnum lantana*) in the Government forests".

The situation has improved over the last thirty years or so. More nurseries are offering the species and county and district arboricultural officers are using it, often grown from local seeds or suckers, for amenity planting; mature trees are being more carefully looked after and many organisations and private individuals have obtained plants, sometimes after considerable difficulty, for gardens, farms, nature reserves, country parks, and similar places.

The wild service and the arts

The wild service has seldom featured in the works of artists and writers and I take this to be a reflection that it has not been an abundant or widely known species for the last two or three hundred years. However, in natural history and gardening books the wild service is illustrated with remarkable frequency. In recent years several major titles on trees and shrubs have used flowering or fruiting sprays on their front covers or dust-jackets, most notably perhaps the publisher's of Bean's "Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles". Of the wealth of species from all over the world listed in the S-Z volume, the fact that the wild service should have been chosen speaks no only of its value as an ornamental tree, but will have done much to encourage its wider planting. Likewise, the fine illustration of a fruiting spray in the 'Diary of an Edwardian Country Lady' has undoubtedly raised the profile of the tree.

In the literary world the tree has fared just as poorly, but it wins a place in the work of John Clare, the Northamptonshire writer who had such a profound love and knowledge of the countryside. This is his poem about the wild service written in 1832 (though not published until 1978). ‘Surry’ is East Midland dialect for the tree:

The Surry Tree

Tree of the tawny berry rich though wild

When mellowed to a pulp yet little known
Though shepherds by its dainty taste beguiled
Swarm with clasped leg the smooth trunk timber grown
And pulls the very topmost branches down.
Tis beautiful when all the woods tan brown
To see thee thronged with berries ripe and fine
For daintier palates fitting than the clown
Where hermits of a day may rove or dine
Luxuriantly amid thy crimson leaves
When different shades in different garbs appear
And furze spread heath a deeper green receives
And fancy every sort of feeling weaves
And autumn comes and mellows all the year.

In his poem *The Last of Autumn* , Clare calls the species the 'service' rather than the 'surry':-

Still to the woods the hungry boys repair,
Brushing the long dead grass with anxious feet,
While round their heads the stirr'd leaves patter down,
To seek the bramble's jet-fruit, lushy sweet
Or climbing service-berries ripe and brown.

To this day the terms 'surry' and 'service' are both used for the tree in the area of the East Midlands where John Clare was born.

What's in a name?

A great deal of misleading information has been published over several centuries in which the wild service is confused with the true service, the rowan, the whitebeam, the medlar and other trees.

In the north of England, particularly in North Yorkshire, Durham, Northumberland and southern Scotland, the Swedish whitebeam, *Sorbus intermedia*, is commonly called the service tree. More occasionally there is confusion with the cornelian cherry, *Cornus mas*, shadbushes, *Amelanchier* spp. and even sweet gale, *Myrica gale*, and alder.

The Anglo-Saxons used the words *syrfe* and *surf-treow* for the wild service and these are the antecedents of the word 'serve' which is still occasionally used in some parts of south-east England (Anglo-Saxon 'f' was pronounced like our modern 'v'). The plural of 'serve' is 'serves', and both this and the words *sorbus* or *sorvus* easily transmute into 'service', 'services' or 'sorvices' if the plural is reduplicated. Such reduplication is not uncommon in southern England: 'wasps' becomes 'wapses' and 'fairies' 'fairises', the latter sometimes having been equated with 'pharisees' and used to fuel speculation about the lost tribe of Israel settling in the Weald.

In the Isle of Wight in the 19th C children bought the fruit of under the name of 'sorbus berries' and one wonders if the classical Latin had survived for over 1500 years in this area where Roman influence was strong, especially as the scientific name *Pyrus* rather than *Sorbus* was used as the generic name until the present century.

The term 'choke-pear' and 'choker' or 'chocker' as well as 'chess-apple' have occasionally been used for wild services and, while these might seem to show a relationship with the word 'chequer', I think it is probably coincidental. A 'choke-pear' was a pear, often wild or a

cultivar seedling, which was so harsh that it could not be eaten raw, whereas 'swallow-pear' was a term for one that could. Wild service fruit have had both 'swallow-pear' and 'choke-pear' applied to them and either would be appropriate depending on whether the fruit was ripe or unripe. The same usage is found in mainland Europe: in Alsace, for instance, wild services were sometimes called *poires d'angoisses* (pears of anguish).

Despite its superficial resemblance to these and other words 'chequer' as a name for the wild service and its fruit appears to stand alone, without antecedents, and to be confined to a well-defined area of South East England. I believe this strengthens the case for a relatively recent origin of this word for the tree, perhaps around the 13th or 14th C, in association with the names of inns or related local custom or activity.

The third series of words for the wild service derive from the hypothetical Old High German words *alisa* or *eliza* whence the French *alise* and from which we also get our word 'alder'. *Alise* came to England as *alie*, its Old French form, and was spelt *aley* by Chaucer in his translation of the *Romaunt de la Rose*. The same root can be seen in French ales the name still sometimes used in the West Country for the endemic Devon whitebeam, *Sorbus devoniensis*, and its fruit.

Another group of names confined, it seems, to Britain are those that allude to the similarity between wild service leaves and those of some of the maples (*Acer* spp.). In Pembrokeshire, for example, wild services are known as 'maple cherries' and this does appear to be a genuine vernacular term. (In Welsh the wild service is known as the *cerddinen wyllt* and this seems simply to be a translation of the English)

Finally there are in Britain some country names that seem to be unrelated to other words for the wild service. 'Woodland pear' from Sussex is straightforward enough. 'Hawthorn-gogs', also from Sussex, and 'arsey-garsey' from Kent look like expressions that have been transferred from hawthorn.

Conservation

In 1936 Barbara Briggs writing before the conservation movement had got properly into its stride said: "This pretty, interesting and uncommon tree should be protected. In these days the rarer trees are becoming the responsibility of the nation and it is our duty to see that they do not die out through our neglect or ignorance." Since then thousands of wild services have collapsed from old age or disease, have been blown over or felled to make way for roads, houses or more efficient farming and forestry and have not been replaced by planting or natural regeneration.

The tree, however, has become better known due to many factors, but particularly as it can indicate by its presence an ancient woodland or hedgerow. Wildlife trusts, reserve managers, farmers, foresters, local authorities and many others involved in the countryside now go to some lengths to look after any existing wild service trees and, where appropriate, to plant young ones.

Replacement planting is to be thoroughly encouraged, but care needs to be taken that this is not overdone. The wild service is naturally a scarce species. In the vast majority of woods where it occurs, there are usually only one or two examples when there may be thousands of oaks, ashes or hornbeams. This sense of proportion should be maintained.

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