



Case Study: Cultivating Heritage and Diversity in a Shropshire Orchard

[Tom The Apple Man](#)

INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Shropshire, Tom Adams journey into fruit tree propagation began with a serendipitous encounter which became the catalyst for a deep dive into the preservation of agricultural diversity, a journey that unfolded into a thriving orchard, a commitment to sustainability, and a dedication to community engagement

BACKGROUND

Tom, once a gardener, delved into the art of fruit tree pruning and discovered a hidden interest in preserving heritage apple varieties. The journey began with courses and identifying apples from a relative's farm, leading to the surprising revelation that four apple varieties in their orchard hadn't been seen for over a century. Recognising the importance of preserving these varieties, Tom learned the art of grafting and embarked on a mission to revive and propagate these rare apples. "Years ago when I was working as a gardener, I did some fruit tree pruning and really liked it. And so through that, I went on some courses and learned how to prune. So, I got an interest that way. I took some apples from a relative's farm to get identified by the [Marcher Apple Network](#). One of those, varieties that I took was on their hit list. They were looking for them because they hadn't been seen for 100 years. And as it turns out, there were four varieties in this orchard that hadn't been seen for over 100 years. And they might have been the last existing trees of those varieties. So I learned how to graft and that really got me on the path to where I am now. That was a great thing to to be doing!"

BENEFITS

During our conversation, Tom emphasised the significance of agricultural diversity beyond the common varieties found in supermarkets. We spoke about the broader implications of climate change, Tom stressing the importance of preserving genetic diversity to ensure resilience in the face of environmental challenges, the dangers of monoculture and the positive impact of diverse ecosystems. "Diversity is so important. If we were to go down the supermarket route, we'd have three or four varieties, and that would be it, we'd have lost a really important genetic diversity because as the climate changes, we're going to need as many traits from different gene pools as possible. So it's so hugely important plus, it's also cultural diversity as well"



AT A GLANCE

At the site on the Welsh/English border, all of trees are grown using agroforestry and permaculture principles. Tom achieved certified organic status from the Soil Association in 2020, and manages the site holisitcally for biodiversity, habitat creation, carbon sequestration and soil health.

The orchard is home to over 150 varieties of apple, as well as, soft fruits, medlars, perry, damsons, gages and more.



TOM THE APPLE MAN

Organic Fruit Tree Nursery
Fron Uchaf, Lower Barn, Weston Rhyn,
Oswestry, SY10 7NQ

CHALLENGES IN THE AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE

When we spoke, Tom shed light on the challenges faced by small-scale growers, particularly those supplying supermarkets. Stories of massive orchards being acquired by supermarkets at the expense of local growers, coupled with hefty fines for minor product issues, highlight the struggles faced by these producers. We also touched upon the financial burden and mental strain associated with running a small agricultural business. There is a need for policy to support and sustain these small scale growers not only to preserve heritage and diversity, but livelihoods.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

Beyond the orchards, Tom actively engages with the community, hosting open days, educational tours, and collaborating with local businesses. A special focus is given to involving school children, aiming to instil an appreciation for local and heritage varieties early on. Fostering hands-on learning and connecting children with the food they consume. "My thought is that if we can get the kids growing and eating really good quality, nutrient dense foods, that would probably normally be out of their price range, they can have access to resources and education to make change."

FUTURE PROJECTS AND COLLABORATIONS

Future projects include initiatives to promote local varieties, a juicing bike for children to make their own juice. The collaborations with a local hot sauce producer and explores grant applications for educational projects.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF SHROPSHIRE FOOD

Looking ahead, Tom shares his vision of a future Shropshire food economy characterised by numerous small-scale, local producers - a local food economy of bustling vibrant markets, a shift away from the convenience of supermarkets towards supporting local businesses.

I had to ask Tom for his favourite variety and he shared his fondness for Ashmead's Kernel and Puckrupp Pippin.

Ashmead's Kernel

A good keeper, with a unique pear drop flavour

Place/Date of Origin: Gloucestershire 1700

Season of use: Dec-Jan

Taste: Sweet/Sharp

Puckrupp Pippin

An attractive yellow apple that is firm and creamy.

Type: Dessert

Place/Date of Origin: Welsh Marches

Season of use: Nov-Jan

Taste: Aromatic

TREE MAP

Many of the apples grown in the nursery originate from the rugged countryside of the Welsh borderlands.

"There are fewer orchards now than 200 years ago when many of these apples were bred. But from the remnants of these once-great orchards, still hanging on by a thread, we have managed to rescue many old varieties and save them from extinction. In one particular orchard in South Shropshire, four different varieties, that hadn't been seen for well over 100 years, and were not represented at the National Fruit Tree Collection at Brogdale, were rediscovered."

