

Centuries of tradition



Fruit growing in orchards is entwined with our culture.

It was the Romans who brought fruit trees to Britain. Prior to their arrival, the Celts and Norse settlers were sustained by native species like Crab Apple, Gean and Sloe.

The blossoming of fruit cultivation, and with it the development of the 'Garden of Kent', began in the Middle Ages. However, it was the Victorians who really encouraged the establishment of new varieties of fruit, listing some 1,500 different apples.

The Weald then boasted thousands of acres of orchards, with tree varieties selected over the centuries to suit the soils and climate. Most farms had an orchard, providing supplies of cider, cooking and eating apples and a range of other fruit.

Fruit and hops were never described as growing in fields, always 'gardens' or 'orchards'. One explanation is that tithes – taxes paid to the church – were claimed on fields but not gardens.

The tradition of fruit growing in the Weald has created a uniquely 'textured' countryside. Neat rows and angular patterns of orchards contrast with the smooth sweeps of pastures, shaws (linear strips of woodland) and woods.

Apple Day

October 21st (or the Sunday nearest) is Apple Day – a day in honour of traditional orchards, a day of celebration for everyone from growers to schoolchildren, from cider-makers to conservationists. Events encourage the consumption of apples and apple products and give people an opportunity to 'Wassail'.

Further information

Common Ground Tel: 01747 850820

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or events guides in your local newspapers.



Myths and legends

The rose-tinted image of fruit-laden boughs and confetti-like blossom is rooted in centuries of traditions. Throughout ancient cultures, the apple – be it tree, fruit or blossom – is universally seen as a symbol of fertility, goodness, a protection from evil and a potent symbol of magic.

Orchard 'wassailing' is one legacy of the many myths and legends associated with apple trees. Wassailing is a ceremony, often involving song and dance, where people drink to the health of apple trees in the hope that they will bear well. Drums, bells and whistles, and the beating of branches with sticks, are used to wake the sleeping powers of fertility and to ward off evil influences. Cider is poured over the tree roots, or bread, soaked in the 'wassailing bowl', placed in the tree branches as an offering back to the tree.

**Stand fast root, bear well top
Pray the god send us a howling good crop,
Every twig, apples big
Every bough, apples now.**

**Hail to thee, old apple tree!
From every bough
Give us apples now;
Hatsful, capsful,
Bushel, bushel, sacksful,
And our arms full, too.**

Traditional wassailing song from 19th-century Sussex and Surrey

Wassailing is still an important local tradition in many Weald villages, but no one place performs the ceremony in exactly the same way. The actual date of wassailing festivals varies from region to region – twelfth night, New Year's Eve or Christmas Eve.



Apple bobbing