Grant proves fruitful for orchard survey

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Suffolk folk with memories of scrumping for apples, cooking plum tarts or making quince jam will have little idea how the countryside around them, its horticulture and traditions, were shaped over centuries by thousands of orchards that once covered the county.

But now, with National Apple Day celebrated on 21 October, a £47,800 grant from the HLF will help reveal how local life was affected by the abundant fruit tree cultivation of the past. In days gone by the range of local produce was staggering, including apples, cherries, pears, damsons, plums, quinces, cobnuts, filberts, walnuts and even figs and apricots.

Thanks to the HLF grant, enthusiastic local volunteers, working alongside experienced conservation professionals, will survey as many of the surviving orchard sites as possible over a three-year period.

Run by the Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group (STOG), the project takes as its starting point early 20th-century maps that showed more than 6,000 orchards. The most recent records suggest that just one in six of these remain, often as fragments of the original, mainly on local farms, or smallholdings with a few found on large country estates.

As well as producing an accurate inventory of what remains, the project will carry out badly-needed restoration work and also plant up to 20 new orchards. The history and traditions of Suffolk's fruit and nut-growing - including specific local varieties - will also be gathered together for publication online and as a printed publication. Advice on how to protect orchards in future will be made available to planning officers. Guidance on how to establish their own orchard will be available to community groups, schools, local associations and parish councils. There are also plans to organise a one-day national conference on traditional orchard habitat.

Robyn Llewellyn, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund East of England, said: "I enjoy windfall apples from my garden so I'm delighted that a lottery windfall can support historic orchards across Suffolk. Although many of the county's traditional orchards have been lost to development or modern agricultural methods, this project will ensure that the history and traditions associated with fruit-growing are not lost but revived and conserved for future generations. Volunteers will also gain skills in surveying and mapping, planting, protecting and managing this precious natural resource."

For STOG, chairman Paul Read, said: "Orchards are a long established traditional ingredient of the farmed landscape throughout Britain and vary widely in form and appearance between regions and counties. In Suffolk their contribution to the landscape and culture depends upon the tall tree forms as well as the species and varieties of fruit. So one important component of our project is to train volunteers to propagate trees for planting in both restored and new traditional orchards in Suffolk."

Notes to editors

- Large commercial orchards in Suffolk are rare and relatively modern. They were planted as a result of the arrival of the railways. Some of the oldest sites remain as fragments with just a few trees while others, generally associated with farmsteads, are almost intact. The pattern of orchards within the county and distinctive local types of this cultural landscape occur in the High Suffolk 'claylands', the South Suffolk hills and the Sandlings.

- Much of the management, storage methods and culinary use of the traditional fruit and nut varieties has been forgotten and this is a major reason why the old trees have been lost.
- The planned survey programme will target at least 700 sites across 470 Suffolk parishes. STOG has a force of 110 parish-based volunteers and many professional specialists in horticulture, conservation and wildlife who will be involved in the project.

Further information

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