Suckley apples from a traditional orchard in the Three Counties

National Apple Day (21 October) saw home-grown varieties celebrated and apple events held all over the country – but there is a sour note for the British apple. Since the 1960s, two-thirds of our nation’s orchards have been lost and our apples are under threat.

Orchards in the Three Counties have been hit hard – with up to 80 per cent being lost in some areas. Despite this, the area still has the greatest concentration of traditional orchards in Britain, accounting for around a third of all surviving orchards – a statistic a three county partnership is determined to grow.

A grant of £332,000 has been awarded by HLF to fund a project which will 'grow orchard communities' in key areas of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. By getting local people involved in enjoying, understanding and caring about traditional orchards the project aims to help save this iconic and much loved part of our landscape.

Traditional orchards, with their tall trees standing in pasture, have been part of our Three Counties landscape for hundreds of years. Planted to suit local soil, climate and culture, they reflect local conditions and are tied in to the landscape and to the people who planted and picked them. Sadly, many traditional orchards have disappeared from our landscape but those which remain are a priceless part of the heritage of the Three Counties.

The survival of these orchards depends on active management. Unfortunately, a great many old orchards are not receiving this, either because they are no longer profitable or because orchard owners do not have access to the labour,

skills and knowledge that are needed to keep the ancient trees in good condition. Many have been replaced with bush orchards growing supermarket varieties, which means that not only our landscape but also our rich heritage of orchard fruits is under threat.

For the past twelve months the Three Counties Traditional Orchard Project, led by the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership, has been working with orchard enthusiasts and local groups to develop detailed proposals to help arrest the decline of local orchards. The project has been modeled on a concept which is already working well in part of the AONB, where volunteers have been trained to help champion and look after veteran orchards in their area. The development year was a great success and showed that people across the Three Counties were not only willing to get involved with restoring traditional orchards but also wanted to celebrate their history and heritage.

Traditional orchards are firmly rooted in the history of the Three Counties - orchards and orchard fruit have been a key element of life and landscape here for many centuries. Cider and Perry from the area was originally in great national demand in the 17th century and is undergoing a resurgence in popularity today. Our county emblems – including the apple for Herefordshire and the pear for Worcestershire – testify to their enduring importance to this part of the UK. They are wonderful places for people and for wildlife, providing a refuge for many rare species of flora and fauna and the inspiration for many of our local tales and traditions.

This unique project – once again linking orchards with the communities which live amongst them – is an opportunity to save some of those which remain.

Paul Esrich, Manager of the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership, said: “We’re absolutely delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has given us this support. The skills needed to keep these old orchards in good repair are quickly vanishing so over the next three years we're planning to ensure that local experts share their expertise by training local people in all aspects of orchard management and heritage conservation. Traditional orchards need people to survive and we hope that anyone living around our project areas with an interest in orchards will get involved with this exciting project."

Reyahn King, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund West Midlands, said: “We’re extremely pleased to support this project, which will not only enable key natural heritage organisations to help halt the decline of traditional orchards in the Three Counties but also equip local people of all ages with the skills and enthusiasm they need as future custodians of this wonderful natural heritage.”

The AONB Partnership is keen for traditional orchard owners and potential volunteers with an interest in this project to get in touch, especially those who live in or close to Tenbury, Alfrick, Evesham and Pershore (Worcestershire), Longney and Gorsley and Kilcott (Gloucestershire) and Breinton, Whitbourne and Hildersley (Herefordshire). It would also like to hear from those with orchard knowledge, skills or expertise which they would be happy to share with others. For more information about how to get involved, visit the Malvern Hills AONB Partnership website.

Notes to editors

About the project partnership

The project partners currently include: Colwall Orchard Group, Gloucestershire County Council, Gloucestershire Orchard Trust, Herefordshire Council, Vale Landscape Heritage Trust, Malvern Hills AONB Partnership, Natural England and Worcestershire County Council,.

About the project areas

The project aims to build teams of local people who can help to champion and restore traditional orchards in key orchard areas throughout the Three Counties. These focus areas will be:

- Whitbourne, Breinton and Hildersley in Herefordshire
- Alfrick and Suckley, Tenbury Wells, Pershore and Evesham in Worcestershire
- Gorsley and Kilcott and Longney in Gloucestershire

The purpose of AONB Designation

The primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty. This primary purpose was reaffirmed in a 1991 policy statement on AONBs, (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: A Policy Statement 1991, CCP356). The statement also identifies subsidiary purposes which should be taken into account in pursing the primary purpose.

About Malvern Hills AONB

The Malvern Hills Area was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1959. The designation covers 105 square kilometres and includes parts of Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. The area is famed for its dramatic hills and for the pure spring water that flows from them, but it offers so much more besides. A rich cultural heritage of forts, castles and priories stands proudly from this landscape of ancient woodland, rolling pastures and wild, open commons. The geology of the AONB is varied and fascinating and the area is home to a diversity of locally and nationally important wildlife.

The AONB designation signifies that the natural beauty of this area is of national importance. A Partnership of local and national interests works together to conserve and enhance the area through the implementation of a five year AONB Management Plan. The Malvern Hills AONB is one of a family of 46 similarly designated areas across the United Kingdom.

Further information

For more information contact Paul Esrich, Malvern Hills AONB Partnership Manager, at pesrich@worcestershire.gov.uk or call 01684 560 616.