**The National Fruit Collections at Brogdale: an Insider View**

The pretty, medieval market town of Faversham on the North Kent coast has much to recommend it to visitors. It can boast of more than 300 listed buildings, a picturesque creek housing iconic Thames Barges, a thriving artisan food community, regular arts and crafts markets and a history reaching back to the Domesday Book and beyond. It was the nation’s capital for gunpowder production at the time of the [Spanish Armada](/16c/16c-spanish-armada), holds one of only six genuine Magna Carta charter documents, and is the home of Britain’s first commercial brewery, Shepherd Neame (established in 1698, although the town’s true brewing history is said to be centuries older). Sitting on the outskirts of the town, as you head towards the village of Painters Forstal, is a true national treasure, a living museum of horticultural and historical note: Brogdale Farm, the home of the National Fruit Collections - the largest collection of fruit varieties held on a single site, as listed in the Guinness Book of Records.

On the face of it, Brogdale is a relatively-modest, hundred or so acres of fruit trees and plants, accessed through a cluster of utilitarian, 1950s-style farm buildings - most of which are converted into offices or retail units, currently occupied by an eclectic mix of rural and commercial enterprises. The largest structure, a packing and cold storage space, has a smart extension - the headquarters of Farm Advisory Services Team Ltd, who have maintained the orchards on a day-to-day basis since 2008. The National Fruit Collections themselves, at least the trees the fruits grow on, are the property of the Department of Environmental and Rural Affairs, DEFRA. They have been sited at Brogdale since 1951.

There is, though, so much more to discover about the National Fruit Collections. Layer upon layer of historical soundbites are revealed by any one of the knowledgeable guides (note: if you’re lucky enough to get Ted ‘The Head’ Hobday, fast approaching his hundredth decade – but don’t tell him I told you so - please say hello. Still leading three guided walks a day, there is no better advert for the benefits of fresh air and seasonal produce than Ted. Mike Austen too – ask him to tell you about the time a certain national treasure, a Dame no less, made him afternoon tea in her garden). Visitors learn about the origins of some of the oldest varieties, what it means to ‘blet’ a medlar, and what the ugliest (allegedly!) apple in the world, the Knobby Russet, tastes like. They might spot a famous face or two filming in the orchards or shopping in the marketplace - during my own years on the management team at Brogdale we played host to many ‘celebrity’ chefs, some more than once; plus famous gardeners, comedians, politicians and weather presenters (note: until usurped by the Cambridge Botanical Gardens in July 2019, by a mere 0.2 degrees, Brogdale held the record for the UK’s highest-ever temperature - 38.5 degrees Celsius, recorded on August 10th, 2003, in a little weather station that looked like a beehive on a stick).

While this is all very nice, you might well ask why it is we need a National Fruit Collection? Indeed, why its maintenance and scientific curation should be partly funded by the taxpayer? Certainly, the Collections’ recent history is a rocky one, and it is only down to the intervention of a number of passionate, forward-thinking conservationists (including the Prince of Wales) that the trees were not grubbed up years ago and the land sold off for housing development. To understand why it is so important to retain what is, essentially, a living museum of horticultural material, we need to go back a few hundred years. Half a millennium in fact, to the reign of Henry VIII.

Depictions of Tudor banquets bear testimony to how much Old Harry liked his fruit. Having travelled extensively in Europe, whether for diplomatic or warring purposes, Henry had partaken of many a luscious cherry (no double-entendre intended)! He was particularly fond of the sweeter varieties and often lamented the lack of these in England. In 1533, an enterprising fruiterer to the Royal courts called Richard Harrys (a more modern spelling would be Harris), of the creek village of Conyer near Sittingbourne, spotted a business opportunity. In a deal brokered by the incumbent Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, Harrys acquired just over a hundred acres of land at nearby Teynham, in order to expand his business. Whether it had been the crown’s land to rent out was another matter - after Richard Harrys’ death, when his sons effectively inherited the lease, the original ownership of the land became the subject of a legal dispute lasting nearly three decades. Harrys took himself off to Europe to source as many different fruiting plants and cultivars as possible, capitalising on the growing demand for newer and more exotic varieties. What was labelled ‘the chief mother of all other orchards’ was created.

A few years later, Henry’s dissolution of the monasteries brought about an unforeseen social disaster, in that many of the nation’s poorer subjects had relied on these establishments for employment, education, food, medicines and general sustenance. Monastic kitchen gardens, with their established crops of fruit, vegetables, honey and herbs, disappeared. Famine befell large swathes of the population, and Henry began to show remorse for his short-sightedness in doing away with what were essentially social economic and welfare hubs. In an effort to right this wrong, market gardens and estate farms were expanded and re-established, and Richard Harrys enjoyed royal patronage and support for his propagation, plant-collecting and conservation efforts. His Teynham orchards, containing many old and new varieties - the original National Fruit Collection - thrived.

Over the 17th and 18th centuries the area between Rochester and Canterbury became known as the Faversham Fruit Belt, and Kent’s reputation as the Garden of England was strengthened. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, consumer habits started to change. Supermarkets began to spring up around the country, with their swish, central-supply logistics, demanding uniform-looking (and tasting) fruit that both travelled and stored well – characteristics lacking in most old varieties. Growers grubbed up older, less reliable crops to make way for new, disease-resistant and commercially-viable varieties, fruit that stood up to the rigours of transportation and longer-term cold storage.

In order to preserve the older cultivars as a scientific and genetic database, the trees and plants were repropagated at Brogdale Farm, a few miles from Teynham, and brought under the governance of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (which later became DEFRA). The original site is now mostly given over to housing. Thus, the current National Fruit Collection was born. The scientific research was originally overseen by Wye College, latterly a branch of Imperial College London, but which closed in 2009. This then passed to Reading University, now the main contract-holders for the upkeep and curation of the Collections.

At least two trees or plants of each variety are maintained, in case one should become diseased or damaged. Meticulous records are kept of how each species and variety performs under different conditions: environmental (weather, climate change), storage (dry, ambient or chilled) and pest and disease controlants - essential information for growers, but also useful for researchers in nutritional, biological and pharmaceutical fields. Every individual variety of each fruit species has a different genetic ‘fingerprint’ and must be preserved as a fruiting plant or tree. Unlike plants which are derived from seeds, a true fruit variety can only be replicated through a type of cloning called ‘grafting’ - taking healthy growth from an existing tree and splicing it onto a rootstock (a stem or stump of the same species with an established root system).

Biochemist Dr Joan Morgan, the UK’s leading pomologist (apple specialist), was the driving force for the formation of the Brogdale Horticultural Trust when the collections once again came under threat in the late 1980s. Dr Morgan’s own extensive works \_*The New Book of Apples\_* (Ebury Press 2002) and \_*The New Book Of Pears\_* (Ebury Press 2015) are beautifully illustrated, coffee-table-worthy tomes - a must for anyone wanting to discover more about this integral part of the UK’s national, historical, cultural and scientific heritage.

Although the land itself has been under private ownership since the late 1990s, DEFRA have a secure lease for the orchards housing the National Fruit Collections. This will ensure these 4,000+ fruit varieties will continue to be preserved, in the best possible environment for them, for generations to come.

**By Debbie Hickman, former Operations Manager for the Brogdale Horticultural Trust.**

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