



Walton, S. (2016) 'Cider with Grundy: on the community orchard in Ambridge.' In: Courage, C., Hadlam, N. and Matthews, P., eds. *The Archers in fact and fiction: academic analyses of life in rural Borsetshire*. Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 129-137.

Official URL: <https://www.peterlang.com/view/product/78778>

ResearchSPAcE

<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/>

This author's accepted manuscript version is made available in accordance with publisher policies.

Please cite only the published version using the reference above.

This cover sheet may not be removed from the document.

Please scroll down to view the document.

**Cider with Grundy:
On the Community Orchard in Ambridge**

Dr Samantha Walton

Lecturer in English Literature: Writing and Environment

Bath Spa University

Abstract

This chapter explores cultural and literary landscape of Ambridge through attention to the orchard. The practices of cider-pressing, wassailing, and drinking cider with are all fundamental to village life. However, these traditions cannot be seen as uninterrupted, continuous, or unthreatened within the long history of Dorsetshire. Since 1960, Britain has lost around 2/3rds of its orchards due to economic pressures, the rise of imported fruit, and changes in land use. In 1988, the environmental activist group Common Ground started the ‘Save Our Orchards’ campaign, in which they attempted to spark interest in threatened orchards and urge communities to establish new ones. This hope was made a possibility with the new Community Right to Buy law that came in in 2011. Uncannily, within a month of the change in the law, Ambridge established its own Community Orchard, used for cider-pressing and rites and activities including Wassailing and the Apple Day. This last festival was wholly invented by Common Ground as part of the Save Our Orchards campaign, and its purpose was to kindle communal and personal expressions about the meaning of nature-culture connections. Through attention to these contexts, I will read *The Archers* as a literature of place, reflective of histories of ecological and economic change in rural England, and of those cultural actions that sought to celebrate local distinctiveness and revive the notion of the orchard as a community asset and site of shared local knowledge and meaning.

Cider with Grundy

According to Ambridge law, there’s always been an orchard on Grange Farm land. It may have been established during the hey-day of cider making from late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century (Clifford and King, 2006 p.92). After they lost the farm, Oliver let the Grundys continue collecting apples for cider-pressing. Aside from the yearly

harvest, the orchard fell into neglect. Ed used it for grazing cattle, but the trees were uncared for, meaning non-cider varieties and perry-pears went to waste.

The idea of establishing a Community Orchard was hatched by Professor Jim Lloyd in late September 2011. On a 'golden afternoon', Jim volunteered to help Joe with the cider apple. To the background sound of bird song, Jim quoted the opening lines of John Keats' 1819 ode 'To Autumn'

Seasons of mist and mellow fruitfulness
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run

'I think Keats must have imagined a scene just like this one' when he wrote those lines, Jim mused. In answer, Joe suggested that Keats should have turned his talents to celebrating the local apple variety: 'I tell you what; he should have written a poem to the Borssetshire Beauty... Makes the best cider of the lot of them.' This may risk reducing Keats to a mere forerunner of Ambridge Poet Laureate, Bert Fry. However, the comparison between folk and urbane literatures gives us a clue as to how the Community Orchard will be poised from its beginning between distinct literary genres which reflect on human-nature relations. Romantic, pastoral, and georgic tropes are all discernible, while the activities of environmental arts charity, Common Ground, also contributed directly to *The Archers'* Community Orchard plot. Understood culturally and historically, *The Archers* can be seen as an environmental literature which has the potential to profoundly influence its listeners' attitudes human-nature relations and ecological interdependence. An examination of the different literatures that influenced representations of the Community Orchard will give a sense of how the scriptwriters are playing with different literary traditions in order to contribute to public debates about rural culture and the current environmental crisis.

Romanticism

Romanticism has become a byword for simplified, idealised depictions of the countryside. Listeners to *The Archers* are sometimes accused of having 'romanticised' attitudes to rural life, while snippets of Romantic verse are often quoted in rather

superficial ways (sorry Jim) to celebrate the beauty and balance of the natural world. In literary scholarship, the Romantic construction of 'Nature' as a sympathetic and beneficent deity has been criticised as a fantasy of bourgeois writers whose poetry obscured the exploitative economic relations and social destructiveness of the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions (McGann, 1983). However, from the 1990s onwards, environmental critics—ecocritics—rehabilitated the Romantics, arguing that their vision of 'Nature' was more complex, and might form the basis of more ethical and ecologically-conscious relationships between humans and nature. For example, Keats wrote his ode 'To Autumn' during an exceptionally warm September, following three years of atrocious weather caused by the eruption of a volcano in Indonesia. To Jonathan Bate, "'To Autumn' is not an escapist fantasy...it is a meditation on how human culture can only function through links and reciprocal relations with nature. ... [T]here is a direct correlation between the self's bond with its environment and the bonds between people that make up society' (2000, p.257).

In the collaborative enterprise between Jim and the Grundies, local knowledge and affective ties combine with Jim's Romantic understanding of nature to develop the orchard as a site to build and strengthen bonds between nature, individuals, and the wider community. In the present context of environmental crisis, building such reciprocal links at the local level is essential, but must take place in the context of wider awareness of how one place inevitably connects to and affects other places. For Keats, an Indonesian volcano made links between human and natural flourishing apparent. For Ambridge residents, the impact of global ecological interconnectedness is felt in a variety of ways: Adam's innovations at Home Farm have forced some serious thinking about industrial agriculture and loss of soil fertility, while the flood sparked concern about river management, land development, and climate change. Romanticism, viewed as an ecological literature concerned with revealing the interdependence of culture and nature, is a more positive model for *The Archers* than the chocolate-box, sentimentalised genre of writing it is often mischaracterised as.

Georgic

As a Classicist, we can assume that Jim's attitude to the countryside has been shaped by his knowledge of Virgil's *Georgics*. The *Georgics* is a long poem comprised of four cycles, written by the Roman poet in 29BC. It meditates on the changing agricultural

seasons, providing practical information about all aspects of rural life, from bee-keeping to fencing corn-fields, grafting fruit trees to enriching soil. It doesn't idealise rural work or look at the lives of labourers through rose-tinted spectacles: it is upfront about the conflicts and challenges of rural life, ultimately emphasising 'the importance of paying close attention to the natural world, of living harmoniously with animals and plants by practicing good stewardship' (Becker, 2006, p.43). The spirit of Virgil's *Georgics* can be felt in Jim's regret that the apples are going to waste, while a great deal of Classical virtue underpins his belief in responsible cultivation and productive husbandry. Luckily for the enterprise as a whole, Jim also put his Classical training to good use when he diffused the first conflict encountered by the new Cider Club: how to divide the cider yield up, and whether the Grundies—as owners of the cider press—get extra. Jim's diplomatic solution might have been taken straight from the *Georgics*:

Come then, and learn what tilth to each belongs
According to their kinds, ye husbandmen,
And tame with culture the wild fruits, lest earth
Lie idle.' (Virgil, 1881 p.35)

Save Our Orchards!

The orchard revival can also be seen as part of a wider response to environmental crisis and communal fragmentation in the context of rural modernity. Since 1960, Britain has lost around two thirds of its orchards due to economic pressures, the rise of imported fruit, and changes in land use, particularly house and road development. Loss of orchards has meant a loss of habitats for wildlife and copious varieties of apples: '[o]f the 2,000 culinary and dessert apples, and hundreds more cider varieties, which have been grown in this country, only a few handfuls are widely known and used today' (Clifford and King, n.d.). The loss of orchards and apple varieties is threatening to biodiversity and crop resilience, and also to community identity through the loss of somewhere to work, socialise, collect produce and enact rites and rituals which connect people to places and environments. With the loss of orchards comes the loss of a cultural landscape and a lived 'taskscape': 'where the habitual practices of humans form familiar practices which can become landscapes or places' (Clope and Jones, 2000, p.652).

Reviving the decaying Ambridge orchard took place in the context of environmental activism focused on the orchard and spearheaded by the environmental arts and activism group, Common Ground, run by Sue Clifford and Angela King. After 20 years of campaigning for orchards, in August 2011, the government released a *How to Guide* on Community Orchards, which advised groups on how to negotiate new laws such as Community Right to Reclaim Derelict Land and Right to Bid (DCLG). The *Guide* quite rightly cites *Common Ground* as the instigators of the movement. Common Ground's 'Save Our Orchards' campaign began in 1988, when they commissioned the photographer James Ravilious to produce a book and a touring exhibition titled 'Orchards: Photographs of the West Country' (Ravilious, 1989). These black and white images depict the charms of rural England; in one image—which could come straight out of the Fairbrothers' marketing material for Upper Class Eggs—sunlight streams through apple trees and falls on a brood of hens pecking in the grass, while in another, a May Queen sits amongst blossomed boughs in a scene recalling Lynda's Spring Pageant (or should that be *The Wicker Man?*). However, the images are also riven with conflict. Some depict trees being felled and burnt, while the 'Save Our Orchard!' posters displayed by campaigners suggests that these serene places and lively social spaces are under imminent threat.

Pastoral

It's the willingness of Ravilious to show the charms and challenges of orchards that mark his series as a complex, even georgic reflection on the real labour of orchard management. In contrast, we can look to an *Archers* plotline interwoven with the Community Orchard revival. In late Summer 2011, Leonie Snell and James Bellamy headed to Dorsetshire to write a book that captured everything 'villagey and quaint' about Ambridge: *A Little Bit of Heaven: A Year in the Life of a Country Village*. Their perspective on the rural is in keeping with another long—indeed, Ancient—tradition of reflecting on the countryside: the pastoral. The pastoral genre was inaugurated in the Greek and Roman period and derived from the *Idylls* of Theocritus and *Eclogues* of Virgil. Although the Classical authors' works are not so simplistic as to fancifully idealise the rural, the 'pastoral ethic' they inaugurated finds expression in countless representations of bucolic, harmonious country life. The pastoral, in overview, represents a Golden Age of retreat from the troubles of city affairs: shepherds are warm

and safe in their huts, the culverts aren't blocked and the pigs never escape. Like the Arcadia region in Greece which many pastorals reflect, Ambridge is 'the perfect location for a poetic paradise, a literary construct of a past Golden Age in which to retreat by linguistic idealisation' (Gifford, 2001, p.20). This is exactly the kind of idyll that James and Leonie want to capture.

However, it's a project that has sensible Ambridge residents running for cover, because the village that James and Leonie imagine doesn't exist, and probably never did. The pastoral is thick with the aura of nostalgia and loss, and to capture Ambridge as they want to, James and Leonie have to edit out all those aspects that make it real, lived-in and modern. They want a picture of Ambridge frozen in time, a pastoral literature to sell as an imaginative 'retreat' for London readers. It was a clever plotline, a 'play within a play', in which the scriptwriters reminded listeners that *The Archers* invites complexity and conflict, and (although rural listeners may disagree on this) offers a more realistic representation of country life.

As the Community Orchard was established at the same time as James and Leonie were scoping out the village for shots, the newly-established Cider Club had to be discreet, or risk being transformed into bucolic peasantry under the couple's lens. As Jim warned: 'We'll have to swear everyone to secrecy over the cider making otherwise they'll be down on us like bats out of hell.' By distancing the orchard from the pastoral, the scriptwriters aligned it with more complex literary traditions and the Common Ground campaigns that inspired it. This was achieved openly—for example, by scriptwriter Keri Davies inviting Sue Clifford to discuss tree-dressing on the Archer's blog (2012)—and more subtly, through embedding the orchard the Ambridge cultural landscape.

New Traditions

Since the Community Orchard was established, it's been used for Tree Dressing rituals, Apple Days and, in January 2016, a Wassailing ceremony featuring Joe Grundy and Pheobe Tucker as Wassail King and Queen. During the Wassail, local amateur historian Jenny Aldridge discussed the pagan origins of the ritual, while Kirsty, the incomer, and Roy, the local, tried to work out what on earth was going on as Pheobe was lifted into a tree with a slice of toast held to the chorus of the Borsetshire Wassail. Whatever it is, Roy exclaimed, 'it's been going on for hundreds of years.'

Wassails are indeed medieval in origin, and have a root in both courtly and country traditions. However, although these practices are presented as fundamental to village life, the recent Community Orchard revival shows that these traditions cannot be seen as uninterrupted or continuous within the long history of Dorsetshire. While Wassailing apple trees in winter did continue for centuries in a few villages, the reason for Roy's sketchy knowledge of the ritual is that for Ambridge, Wassailing is a 'new tradition'. Unsurprisingly, Common Ground popularised the revived ritual, which was nearly-forgotten in much of the countryside. Like their hybrid, multicultural Tree Dressing rituals (inspired by the Indian Chipko Movement) and the wholly invented Apple Day (now a popular UK-wide Autumn festival), Wassailing was seen by Common Ground as an event through which cultures and communities—in all their intricacy and variety—can be performed, explored, and strengthened, and in which human-nature interdependence could be acknowledged and celebrated.

The revival of Wassailing says as much—perhaps more—about the future of human-nature relations than their history. Seen as a 'new' tradition', not a heritage piece, Wassailing can attest to the complex, conflicted and far from idyllic history of British orchards. Wassailing's revival demonstrates how environments can be consciously changed through processes of reinterpretation and community co-production. Places should not remain static or be preserved in aspic; revived and newly invented rites can stimulate collective and individual expressions about the history and future of human-nature relationships, threats to environments and biodiversity loss, and the meaning and value of places in the present moment to the lives that depend on them.

Response by Professor Jim Lloyd

'[U]ndique totis / usque adeo turbatur agris', so Virgil tells us in the *Eclogues*, and indeed, 'everywhere the whole land / Is in such turmoil', threatened by irrational building schemes and the scheming of predatory developers. Virgil's so-termed pastoral 'idyll' was also under threat of the machinations of Rome; just another element of his masterpiece that has been woefully misunderstood (although I do credit Dr Walton for acknowledging this distortion, and would ask that she add that the damage was done by sentimentalising Victorians). As Saunders contends, the *Eclogues* are deeply concerned with 'absence, melancholy and loss' (2008, p.3), which is exactly what I experienced seeing the apples wasted and the orchard lie idle. While Keats was indeed on my mind

that day, perhaps Dr Walton should turn her attentions to more local poetic traditions. As I went on to explain to Joe, Bert Fry has a worthy ancestor in the peasant-poet John Clare ('The mavis thrush with wild delight, / Upon the orchard's dripping tree, / Mutter, to see the day so bright, / Fragments of young Hope's poesy' (2014 p.23)), while in John Philips' 1708 poem, *Cyder*, we find a far more detailed almanac of orchard management than Virgil was able to provide. Philips cautions against the damage caused by snakes, 'House-bearing Snails' and 'filthy Swine' that invade unguarded orchards (pp.24-26). Indeed, on that note, the further we can keep James and Leonie and their saccharine fantasies away from the Cider-Club, the better.

Works Cited

- Bate, J. (1995). The 'Ode to Autumn' as Ecosystem. In L. Coupe, ed. 2000. *The Green Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. pp.256-261.
- Becker, R. (2006). Timely Engagements: Summer and Sustainability in 'The Georgics of Virgil.', *American Poetry Review*, 35:6, pp.43-44.
- Clare, John. (1827). February. In E. Robinson, G. Summerfield and D. Powell ed. 2014. *The Shepherd's Calendar*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. pp.22-28.
- Clifford, S. and King, A. (2006). Cider and Cider-Orchards. In *England in Particular*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. pp.92-94.
- Clifford, S. and King, A. (n.d.) Save Our Orchards. *Common Ground*, [online]. Available at: <<https://www.commonground.org.uk/save-our-orchards/>> [Accessed 6 June 2016]
- Cloke, P. and Jones, O. (2000) Dwelling, Place, and Landscape: An Orchard in Somerset. *Environment and Planning A*, 33(4), pp.649-666.
- DCLG, (2011) *Community Orchards How To Guide*, [online]. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/11466/1973262.pdf> [Accessed 6 June 2016]
- Davies, K. Tree-Dressing Day. *The Archers: Blog*, [online]. Available at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thearchers/entries/45cf70a5-a35b-3852-a863-b2ba655884b5>> [Accessed 6 June 2016]
- Gifford, T. (2001). *Pastoral*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Philips, John. (1708) *Cyder: A Poem in Two Books*. London: Jacob Tonson.

Ravilious, J. (1989) The Orchard Archive. *Common Ground* [online] Available at
<<https://www.commonground.org.uk/james-ravilious/>> [Accessed 6 June 2016]

Virgil, (c.29BC) *The Georgics of Virgil*. Translated from Latin by J. Rhoades, 1881.
London: Kegan Paul.