

# THE HIDDEN ORCHARD



**Coton Orchard is one of the green spaces under threat from the GCP's C2C off-road busway. Debbie Whitton Spriggs delves into its fascinating history and what makes this habitat so special.**

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It's a damp autumn morning in Coton Orchard. As I walk through rows and rows of twisted old fruit trees, various creatures weave in and out of my field of vision – foxes, a roe deer, a peregrine, three species of woodpecker. It's like a watching an implausibly busy wildlife film. From behind a towering hedge of ash and alder, a massive old Bramley appears like a silent sentinel. Its hefty red-blushed fruit are strewn across the scruffy sward; unlike the green supermarket 'cookers', these have a delicate sweetness and depth of flavour to rival any eating apple.

Eventually the rows give way to dense copse: a tangle of birches, hawthorn, more alder and brambles. And somewhere off to the left, a meadow, suffused with memories of an old vineyard.

### A super-charged ecosystem

It's exactly what Nicholas Gates and Benedict McDonald describe in their book, *Orchard*, as "the ramshackle beauty" of a wild fruit grove. It may not have the grandeur of the Beechwoods or the atavistic appeal of Wandlebury Ring (the go-to woodland walks within striking distance of Cambridge) but this hidden plot must have an ecosystem to rival either. Like all lightly-managed traditional orchards, it has the legal designation of Priority Habitat. This is no guarantee of protection but does place a duty of care on local planners – albeit in rather evasive terms, such as 'giving appropriate consideration'.

A traditional orchard seems to stand for something quintessentially English and bucolic, a piece of heritage we instinctively want to preserve. But its significance for nature may not be immediately obvious. To appreciate why these orchards are among the richest ecosystems in Britain, we have to understand something of the secret life of fruit trees.

These Bramleys are a hundred years old. That's no age for an oak but ancient for an apple, which matures fast and acquires 'veteran' status at

fifty. But like oaks, apple trees are exceptionally hospitable to microscopic life. An ageing apple is in its most vital phase; the dying wood becomes increasingly alive with fungi and invertebrates, which in turn sustain an astonishing variety of larger creatures. Bats and small birds move into the proliferating crannies and crevices, while the shrinking heartwood opens up accommodating hollows for larger nest-builders. There are insect species that

breed only in the decaying trunks of fruit trees, and food chains unique to orchards. Take the lesser spotted woodpecker, for instance. I'd never seen one of these before living in Coton – but here they are. These once-common orchard specialists are now nationally scarce, and as an 'indicator species' they testify to the biological health of this place. Two buzzard nests in the taller tree canopy and at least eight species of bat



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foraging along the hedgerows (including rare barbastelles and Nathusius' pipistrelles) all supply further evidence of a thriving ecology.

These super-charged ecosystems in all their complexity and subtlety are good reason to prioritise orchards like this one. But to appreciate their real significance we have to go back to a time when this country was mostly forest. Not a lifeless forestry-commission-style forest, but a woodland-and-pasture patchwork, filled with fruit and nut trees and foraged by wild boar, cattle and horses. That particular garden of Eden is long gone, but it turns out that low-management orchards are, in effect and by happy accident, a near-enough re-creation of those ancient, indigenous landscapes. This means that British wildlife is intrinsically adapted for life among the fruit trees and will surge into a place that is recognisably home, having all the desirable amenities such as rough pasture, rotting fruit and decaying wood.

But so many of these throw-back orchards that once covered thousands of acres across the south and west of England have now vanished, turned over to intensive production for supermarkets or ravaged by suburban development. Just north of Cambridge, the famous Chivers Orchards have been supplanted by a forest of flats in the ironically named 'Orchard Park', leaving the 60-acre Coton Orchard as the largest in the county. It is also the eighth largest in the whole of the UK.

### **A family enterprise**



**Albert Gazeley, skilled antique restorer and watchmaker**

Coton Orchard was planted in the early 1920s by a farmer who subsequently gave large areas of the land around Coton, including the orchard, to Cambridge Preservation Society (now Cambridge Past Present and Future). They sold some of it on in turn, and after two further owners the orchard was bought in 1996 by Albert Gazeley. A Londoner by birth, the young Albert had been evacuated to Cambridge during the war and then stayed on,

eventually becoming an apprentice to Stockbridge Antiques. As well as being a skilled antique restorer and watchmaker, he was an adventurous and inventive entrepreneur who was simply excited about the idea of owning an orchard. He had known the Chivers family, had fond memories of childhood days spent in orchards around Cambridge, and saw this as an opportunity to preserve an important part of the region's heritage.

His daughter, Anna, recalls how he turned his talents to developing the business. With John and Andy, the two agricultural workers inherited from the previous owner, the family continued to make juices using the old

wooden apple presses, selling it in the shop along with the fruit. The Coton Orchard bottles all sported beautiful labels which were reproductions of watercolours by the renowned botanical artist, Anne Abraham. Albert Gazeley had commissioned her to paint one of each different variety for the purpose. As well as award-winning juice they also produced – with the help and advice of Chilford Hall Vineyard – a medal-winning Riesling from the orchard's vines. But new rules and regulations and the requirement to pre-pay alcohol duty soon made it unviable without selling at £80 a bottle. Sadly, Coton no longer has a winery.

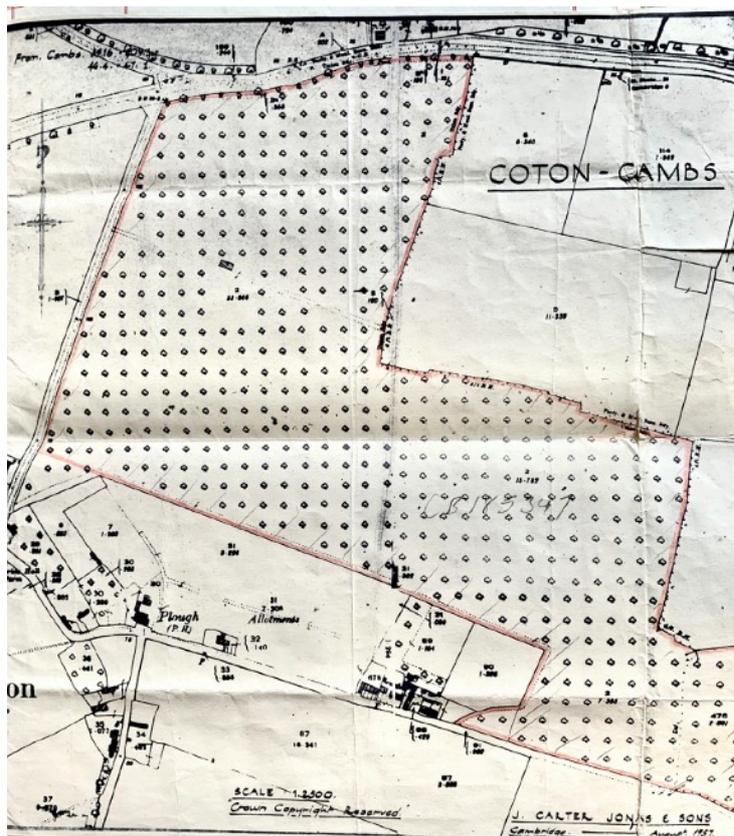
In the face of ever-tightening strictures the family strove to keep the enterprise going, steadfastly refusing the Common Agricultural Policy payment to grub up fruit trees in the early nineties. Eventually, however, maintaining the whole site as a productive orchard became untenable, and swathes at the southern and eastern boundaries were left untended – with the glorious unintended consequence that approximately one third of the orchard is, essentially, a rewilded landscape, a maze of tanglewood with ancient apple trees buried beneath. It is this combination of accidental wildness and light-touch agriculture that makes Coton Orchard such a hidden treasure.

### Restoring and revitalising

Coton Orchard is still owned by the Gazeley family, but in recent years Anna has had to manage it on her own and it has been all she could do to keep things ticking over. An accountant by training, she freely admits that until recently she knew little about fruit trees or the creatures that live among them. But she is learning fast and her enthusiasm is evident.

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In consultation with The Orchard Project advisors and other experts, she has begun a programme of restoration and management that will maintain and enhance its value – both as a productive, traditional orchard and as a wildlife site. Alongside the veterans and the wild wood, new trees will ensure succession for future generations. Already a biodiversity goldmine, the habitat is now being managed (or un-managed, perhaps) to make even more of its potential – so as to be 'good ancestors', to use Robert Macfarlane's wise phrase. It felt fitting that in the orchard's centenary year, the first new Bramley sapling was planted in the shelter of its veteran forebears.



Coton Orchard on a map from 1957

Anna's father had always intended that Coton would be a community orchard, and there are plans to realise that vision whilst still protecting its ecological capital. Children from the village school will be invited to learn about nature in the orchard at a summertime BioBlitz. And in anticipation of those visitors, it now has a magnificently carved 'story bench'. Eventually this will sit in the new 'story orchard', that will include new trees donated by the People's Trust for Endangered Species (PTES) and the Queen's Green Canopy project.

With a growing network of community orchards and a groundswell of support for moving our apple consumption away from intensively farmed, imported fruit and back to locally produced native varieties, this is surely Coton Orchard's moment.

### **Hanging in the balance**

But just as the orchard begins this exciting new chapter, it has come under threat. The Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) plans to make part of the Cambourne-to-Cambridge (C2C) transport link an off-road busway – along a route that will cut through Green Belt and green corridors and right through the middle of Coton Orchard. If it goes ahead it will be a tragedy for Coton, Cambridge and the county – and an especially painful one since it could be avoided by taking an on-road route instead.

The 30-metre width of concrete and tarmac and the business of construction will remove approximately a third of the existing habitat, introduce light and noise pollution, and split the site in two. All of this is likely to have an impact far beyond what is actually dug up. The reason is, as Bates and Macdonald explain, that these traditional orchards are being left as “isolated postage stamps within a sterile wider world” –



**A visit from Steve Oram, PTES Orchard Biodiversity Officer**

to the extent that “the remaining fragments are often too small or too scattered to save, to remain intelligible to the wildlife that inhabited them.” Once they've fled from the construction plant, the bats and the badgers will not return. A visit from the PTES Orchard Biodiversity Officer validated these concerns. “The fragmentation of a large site into two smaller sites would cause biodiversity loss at a landscape scale,” said Steve Oram. He went on, “Because it has been undisturbed by ploughing and untainted by fertilisers or pesticides, the soil will have reverted to its natural, pre-agricultural

state. Underground fungal networks will have proliferated and natural drainage patterns formed. A strong soil structure like this helps with retention of rain water that stops flash flooding. It is a carbon store equal to a rain forest.”

Anna's first inkling that anything was amiss was a letter in 2016, followed by a visit from a representative of the City Deal (forerunner of the GCP). She says the official who came seemed to know little about Coton or its orchard, and informed her that it was unproductive agricultural land. A few surveys followed, then everything went quiet. But in lockdown the pressure was

ramped up with constant phone calls and emails, and the threat of being taken to court and being required to pay costs if she didn't co-operate.

The GCP bulldozer is now on full steam ahead. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the route was carried out last summer, by their own planning consultants, but they've said there will be no separate report for Coton Orchard. There will be tallies of species across the whole route that may or may not sound an alarm, but will they be able to get a real purchase on ecological value and the redemptive potential of this unique place which is more than the sum of its parts? Anna has yet to receive the promised report.

The GCP claim that they would achieve 10–20% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) with their mitigation measures, but these are poorly conceived – a bit of grass planting between the carriageways, some new woodland near the village school. In any case, no amount of mitigation can compensate for the loss of Coton Orchard. And since there is a demonstrably viable way to avoid the damage, the BNG would technically count for nothing.

For the GCP, it seems, ploughing up 'unproductive' land and felling trees apparently nearing the end of their useful lives is just not significant in their version of the Big Scheme of Things. Yet, Gates and Macdonald go so far as to say that removing a dead tree may be as serious as plucking out a sapling. Perhaps it *did* look rational on the screen of a GCP official; a decisive route taken at the click of an electronic mouse. Would they – could they – have done that if they had actually seen where the real mice and the voles and the shrews live? The seductive language and smart visuals of their consultation documents gloss over the muddy, tangled reality.

There are so many puzzles. Why are the GCP and other powers-that-be so intent on building an off-road busway that is going to cost at least £200M when they could have an on-road scheme at less than a tenth of the cost? Why select a route into the city that doesn't really get most passengers to the places they'll want to go? Why, in the teeth of the Climate Crisis, when Cambridge Nature Network are busily planting away to join up our Green Corridors and claw back some of the county's losses, is the value and potential of Coton Orchard being ignored? It's like saving up to buy a small diamond ring whilst throwing the crown jewels into the dustbin. Whichever way you look at it, it makes no sense. Who stands to benefit?

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But that's how it goes. A swathe of orchard here, a patch of wetland there ... On the current trajectory, traditional orchards will be gone by 2050, Benedict Macdonald predicts.

We are told that it is unavoidable. It certainly is complicated, with so many competing and conflicting needs in the equation. If only we could feed it all into some clever bit of software and get an answer that would provide the optimal solution, the grand plan that will best balance and satisfy the needs of all parties – including those who, like the land and its flora and fauna, have no voice. One thing, however, should be completely clear:



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not looking after nature where we possibly can, especially here in the most nature-depleted county in Britain, is in no one's interests.

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### **The fight goes on**

For someone living in the shadow of this threat, Anna appears astonishingly upbeat. (Though I know she has her darker moments and sometimes feels simply exhausted by it all.) If there's a silver lining in all this, it's been the support and friendship of villagers and others. A few months ago, when Anna and her next-door neighbour were out walking, seeing the unspoiled views around Coton that would be desecrated by the busway and puzzling over various aspects of the scheme, they found themselves repeatedly exclaiming, "But that's bonkers!" Out of that conversation, the other BBC (Bonkers Busway Cambridgeshire) was born. Anna, who is also a professional photographer, began by simply posting images from Coton Orchard on Instagram. But she then got to grips with some animation software, and the BBC news desk – with bright young anchorman, Sam – began reporting on the issues. Like David selecting his pebbles and slinging his shot at Goliath, Sam picks out his points carefully and lands accurate blows. Bonkers Busway now has a growing Twitter following, helped along by some notable names. Miriam Margolyes in full cry proved an extremely popular interview. To the amusement of Anna and C2C campaigners, the GCP Joint Assembly actually

accepted a public question from the cartoon newsreader. Sam's a busy chap, obviously, so couldn't be there to read it out in person.

Saving Coton Orchard is, of course, just one objective in the campaign being led by Cambridge Past Present and Future together with Coton Parish Council, Coton Busway Action Group, Bonkers Busway and others. The arguments have been amply rehearsed elsewhere. But as far as Coton Orchard is concerned, suffice to say that everyone who sets foot inside has precisely the same reaction. "Wow!" they say. "I never imagined it was like this." If only the GCP officers and the County Councillors could see for themselves. Both Anna and James Littlewood of CPPF have offered invitations, but they have not been accepted.

As the sun set on a crisp, clear winter day, Coton Orchard held its first ever wassail. Led by the Wassail King and Queen, guests processed through the trees, partook of mulled cider and apple cake, then performed a rousing Wassail poem written specially for the occasion. In keeping with ancient tradition, there was much hollering and banging to scare away pestilential forces, and toasting and blessing of trees to invoke bounty and protection.

"Wassail the apple! Beat the bounds! Wassail this hallowed ground!"



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