# Dunchurch Allotment Communal Orchard



***By Paul Sanders, Secretary***

This year, our communal orchard, named Hodgy's orchard, celebrates its 10th anniversary. It was planted in an area of the allotment site that had become overgrown with brambles and was unusable as an allotment plot due to shading from large trees.

At the time, it was decided to plant heritage fruit varieties, which were purchased from Bernwode Fruit Trees, a fruit tree nursery in Ludgershall, Buckinghamshire. This nursery is dedicated not only to preserving historic tree fruit varieties but also to identifying and reviving those thought to have been lost. When Simon and I visited Bernwode in 2015, the passionate owners, Derek and Judy Tolman, were busy in the greenhouse grafting scions (the part of the plant to be propagated) onto rootstocks (the plant's root system).

Bernwode's catalogue boasts about 600 apple varieties out of an estimated 2,000 in the UK. During our visit, we left with approximately twenty saplings, including a few pear trees and a couple of plum varieties.

Because apples do not breed true, planting an apple seed will not get you a tree much like its parent. Instead, for thousands of years, people have used grafting to hang on to apple varieties they like, taking a cutting from an old tree and growing it onto a new set of roots. That means that each apple tree is a clone of a long-ago progenitor. Some of these fixed genotypes are presumably as old as the Roman period. The Romans, when they invaded the British Isles two millennia ago, are said to have brought domesticated apples with them.



*Clearing brambles for the orchard*

Grafting is a widely used method for propagating apples and other top fruits for several reasons. Grafted trees typically produce fruit within 2–3 years, whereas trees grown from seed may take 5–10 years. Additionally, grafting allows growers to combine

desirable traits, such as improved disease resistance. Choosing the right rootstock influences a tree's growth rate, size, and overall health. Our trees were grafted onto M9 rootstock, which produces dwarf-sized bushes.

The term 'heritage' or 'heirloom' apples refers to varieties that originated at least fifty years ago or more. These apple varieties have been carefully preserved and passed down through generations. In contrast to the hybrid apples commonly seen in markets, which combine attributes from multiple varieties, heirloom varieties remain in their original, natural forms. By planting heritage trees, we help preserve these unique varieties that might otherwise be lost.

Each variety we planted has its own history, with many dating back hundreds of years. For example:

- Gilliflower: A culinary/dessert apple and one of the oldest English varieties, dating back to 1629. It was grown from Cumberland to Kent.
- Lemon Pippin: A dessert/culinary apple thought to be English or Norman in origin and known to exist in England before 1685. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was dried for tarts and also enjoyed as a dessert apple.
- Nancy Lee: A dessert/culinary apple that likely originated as a 'wilding' from a discarded core or dropped apple. It was adopted by Dr. Alexandra Freeman in Oxfordshire and named Nancy Lee after her grandmother.



*Ethelburt Oakenfull laden with fruit*

Not all the trees we planted ten years ago have survived the challenges of time. Some succumbed to extreme weather patterns, while others, like the Ethelbert Oakenful apple, suffered structural damage. Last year, the weight of its abundant fruit caused its extended branches to split back to the main trunk.

Looking ahead, our intention is to replace the trees that have died with young heritage saplings, ensuring the orchard continues to thrive for future generations.