



Twenty years of
Wolvercote Community
Orchard



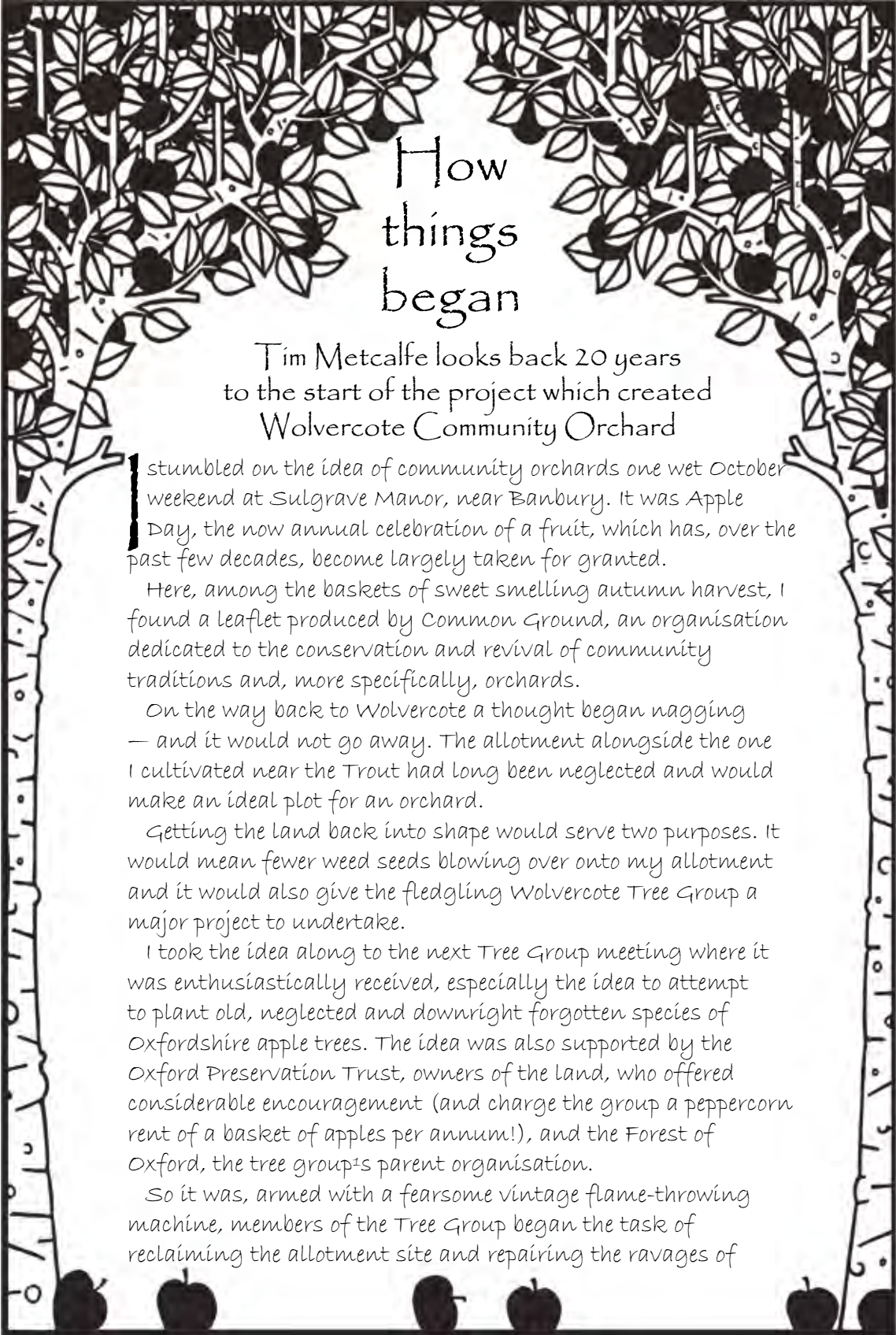
Wolvercote Community Orchard 1993-2014



Printed by: Parchments of Oxford
www.parchmentuk.com

Designed and edited by Tim Metcalfe
Published by the Apple Press, Wolvercote, 2014

With thanks to Tim Healey, Oxford Preservation Trust, Oxford
Dictionary of National Biography, James Turner and all the many
volunteers who over the years have given their time to make Wolvercote
Community Orchard what it is today



How things began

Tim Metcalfe looks back 20 years to the start of the project which created Wolvercote Community Orchard

I stumbled on the idea of community orchards one wet October weekend at Sulgrave Manor, near Banbury. It was Apple Day, the now annual celebration of a fruit, which has, over the past few decades, become largely taken for granted.

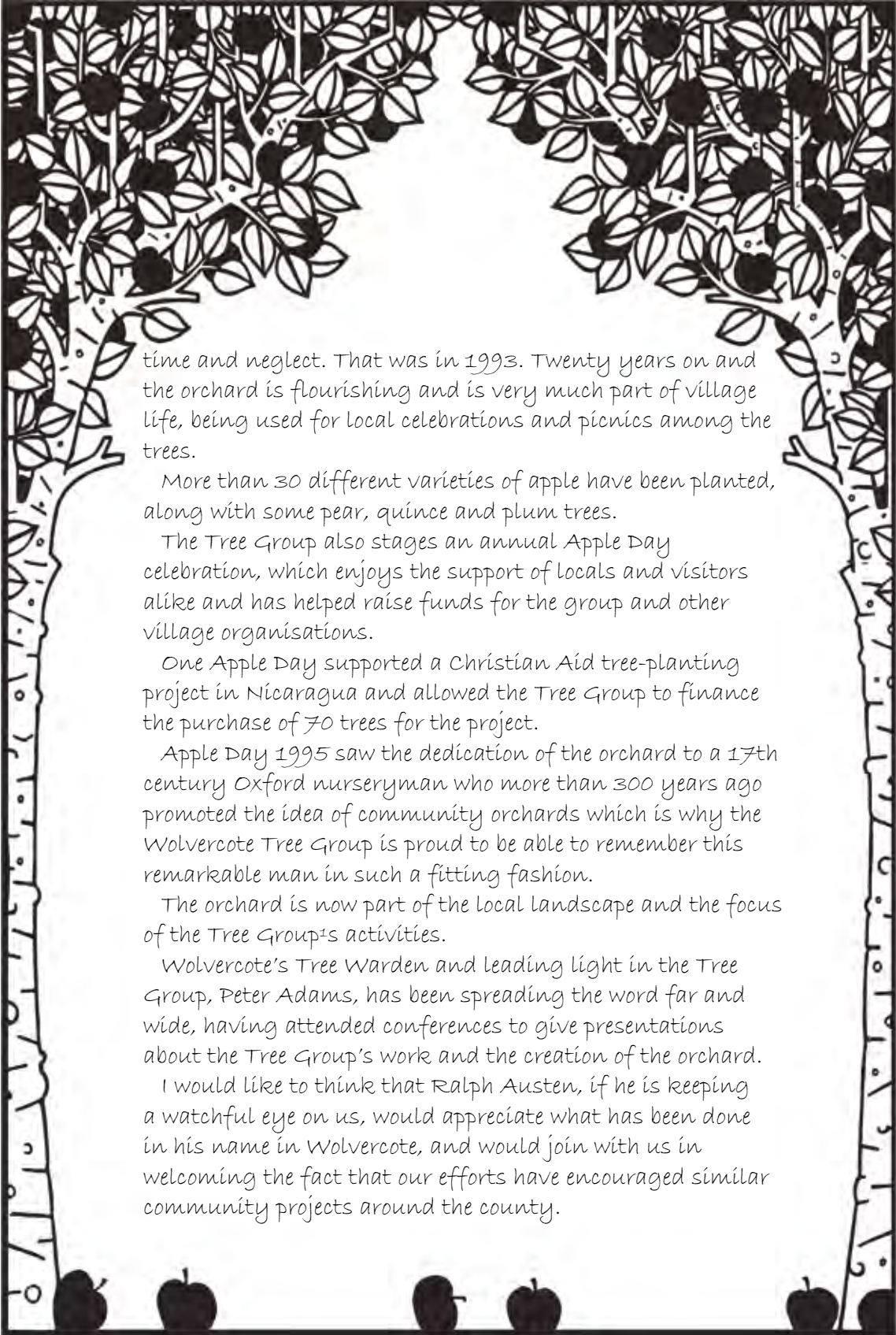
Here, among the baskets of sweet smelling autumn harvest, I found a leaflet produced by Common Ground, an organisation dedicated to the conservation and revival of community traditions and, more specifically, orchards.

On the way back to Wolvercote a thought began nagging — and it would not go away. The allotment alongside the one I cultivated near the Trout had long been neglected and would make an ideal plot for an orchard.

Getting the land back into shape would serve two purposes. It would mean fewer weed seeds blowing over onto my allotment and it would also give the fledgling Wolvercote Tree Group a major project to undertake.

I took the idea along to the next Tree Group meeting where it was enthusiastically received, especially the idea to attempt to plant old, neglected and downright forgotten species of Oxfordshire apple trees. The idea was also supported by the Oxford Preservation Trust, owners of the land, who offered considerable encouragement (and charge the group a peppercorn rent of a basket of apples per annum!), and the Forest of Oxford, the tree group's parent organisation.

So it was, armed with a fearsome vintage flame-throwing machine, members of the Tree Group began the task of reclaiming the allotment site and repairing the ravages of



time and neglect. That was in 1993. Twenty years on and the orchard is flourishing and is very much part of village life, being used for local celebrations and picnics among the trees.

More than 30 different varieties of apple have been planted, along with some pear, quince and plum trees.

The Tree Group also stages an annual Apple Day celebration, which enjoys the support of locals and visitors alike and has helped raise funds for the group and other village organisations.

One Apple Day supported a Christian Aid tree-planting project in Nicaragua and allowed the Tree Group to finance the purchase of 70 trees for the project.

Apple Day 1995 saw the dedication of the orchard to a 17th century Oxford nurseryman who more than 300 years ago promoted the idea of community orchards which is why the Wolvercote Tree Group is proud to be able to remember this remarkable man in such a fitting fashion.

The orchard is now part of the local landscape and the focus of the Tree Group's activities.

Wolvercote's Tree Warden and leading light in the Tree Group, Peter Adams, has been spreading the word far and wide, having attended conferences to give presentations about the Tree Group's work and the creation of the orchard.

I would like to think that Ralph Austen, if he is keeping a watchful eye on us, would appreciate what has been done in his name in Wolvercote, and would join with us in welcoming the fact that our efforts have encouraged similar community projects around the county.

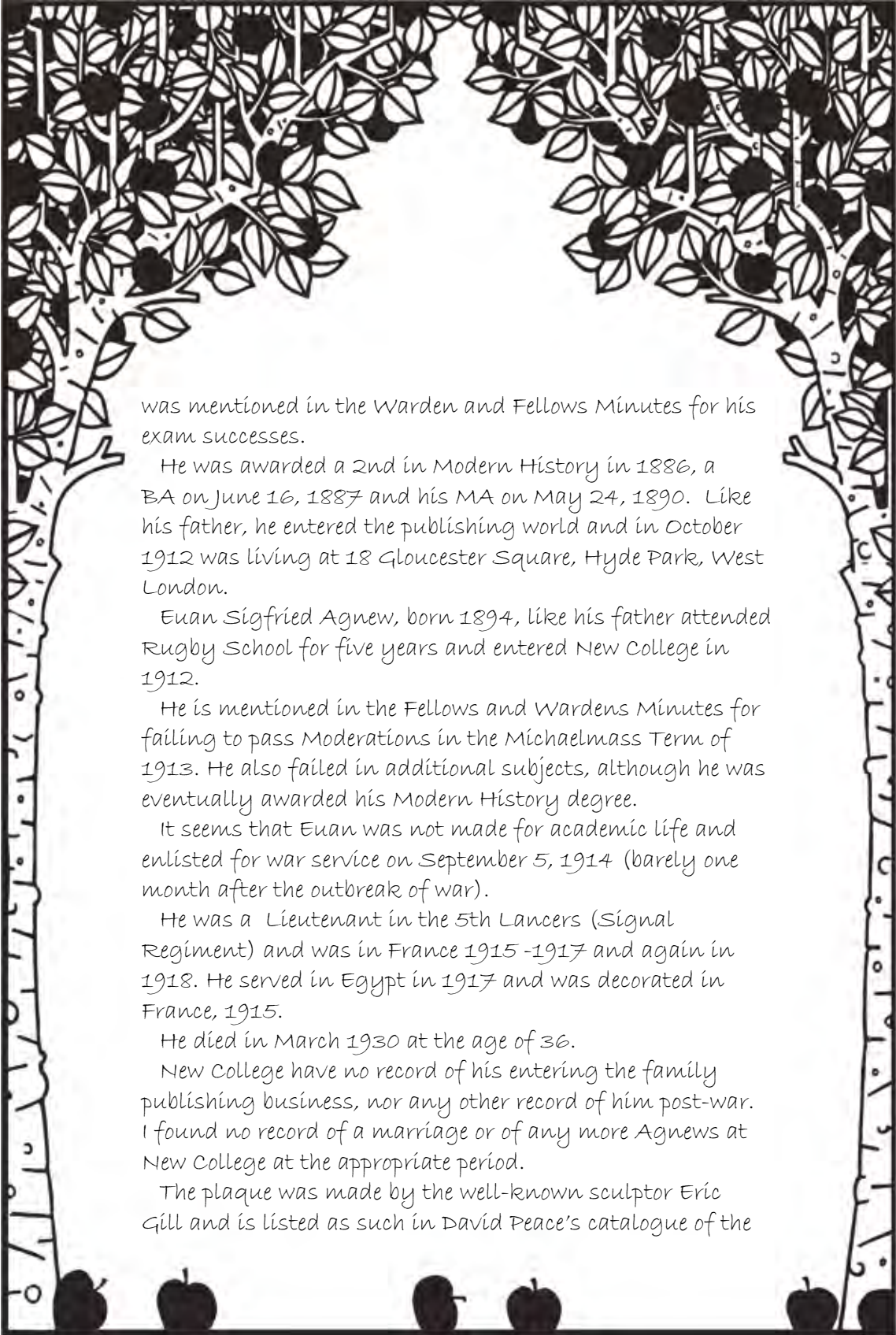
The Agnew Plaque



From the Oxford Preservation Trust's Annual Report 1933/34 we note that Philip Leslie Agnew, who was a Life Member of the Trust, donated £500 towards the purchase of 13 acres of land opposite the Trout Inn at Godstow.

There is no mention of his son in this Annual Report or in the subsequent Trustees Minutes. It is only from the wording on the plaque that it becomes clear that the land was purchased in memory of his son, Euan Sigfried Agnew, New College, 1912-1914.

From the New College archives it is clear that P. L. Agnew had a blemish free academic record at New College. He was the son of William Agnew, print-seller and publisher of Pendleton, Manchester, born 30 June 30, 1863. Philip Agnew was a commoner who matriculated on October 14, 1882. He passed all his exams and



was mentioned in the Warden and Fellows Minutes for his exam successes.

He was awarded a 2nd in Modern History in 1886, a BA on June 16, 1887 and his MA on May 24, 1890. Like his father, he entered the publishing world and in October 1912 was living at 18 Gloucester Square, Hyde Park, West London.

Euan Sigfried Agnew, born 1894, like his father attended Rugby School for five years and entered New College in 1912.

He is mentioned in the Fellows and Wardens Minutes for failing to pass Moderations in the Michaelmas Term of 1913. He also failed in additional subjects, although he was eventually awarded his Modern History degree.


It seems that Euan was not made for academic life and enlisted for war service on September 5, 1914 (barely one month after the outbreak of war).

He was a Lieutenant in the 5th Lancers (Signal Regiment) and was in France 1915-1917 and again in 1918. He served in Egypt in 1917 and was decorated in France, 1915.

He died in March 1930 at the age of 36.

New College have no record of his entering the family publishing business, nor any other record of him post-war. I found no record of a marriage or of any more Agnews at New College at the appropriate period.

The plaque was made by the well-known sculptor Eric Gill and is listed as such in David Peace's catalogue of the



Inscriptions, number 747, made from Hopton Wood stone and dated to 1940.

A few years ago the plaque was cleaned up by sculptor Giles Macdonald. While he was washing it he met an 85 year-old man, born and bred in Godstow who could remember the caravans and huts that used to occupy the allotment land and he remembered the wall along the roadside being built (or repaired,) although he did not see the plaque being installed.

Giles said that the gentleman recalled that there was a spelling mistake on the plaque - and he is right! Euan is spelt incorrectly - it is Ewan on the plaque and Euan at New College.

Perhaps the wall was in too poor a condition, or non-existent to erect the plaque in 1933/34 when the land was purchased, hence it being done in 1940, when the elderly resident would have been about 20.





Oxfordshire apples

Author and historian Tim Healey reveals the myths and legends surrounding Oxfordshire's many varieties of apple, some well-known, others forgotten

If Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Somerset are counties better known for their apple breeds, Oxfordshire has its own noble history going back at least to the tenth century when Appleton (Æppeltune or Appeltun) took its name from an orchard. The manor was owned by Abingdon Abbey and undoubtedly serviced its needs in fruit.

Throughout mediaeval Britain apples were cultivated and juiced for cider in the monasteries, and many new breeds came to Britain under the Tudors and Stuarts. Cooked apples already made a favourite English dessert in 1590, when Robert Greene could think of no finer compliment to pay his lady in *Arcadia* than 'Thy breath is like the steame of apple pyes.'

Under Parliamentary rule the Puritans encouraged market gardening. And when Cromwell's men took control of Oxford after the English Civil War, self-taught nurseryman Ralph Austen championed their ideals. Pioneering new crops and horticultural practices, he believed, should alleviate poverty and unemployment.

"Every gentleman should go down from Oxford and plant an apple tree in his village to alleviate the starving and the poor," he wrote.

Austen had been brought up in Staffordshire but was a student at Magdalen College and chosen a university proctor in 1630. A keen supporter of the Parliamentary cause he was especially prominent under the Commonwealth when he kept a small nursery near what is

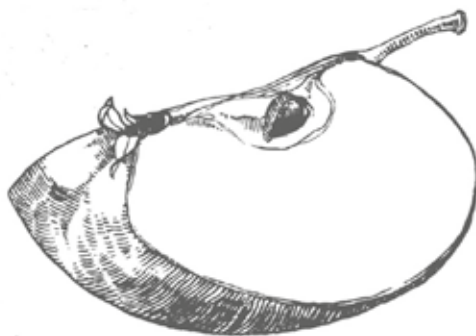
now Bonn Square in Oxford, and published two notable books on growing fruit trees.

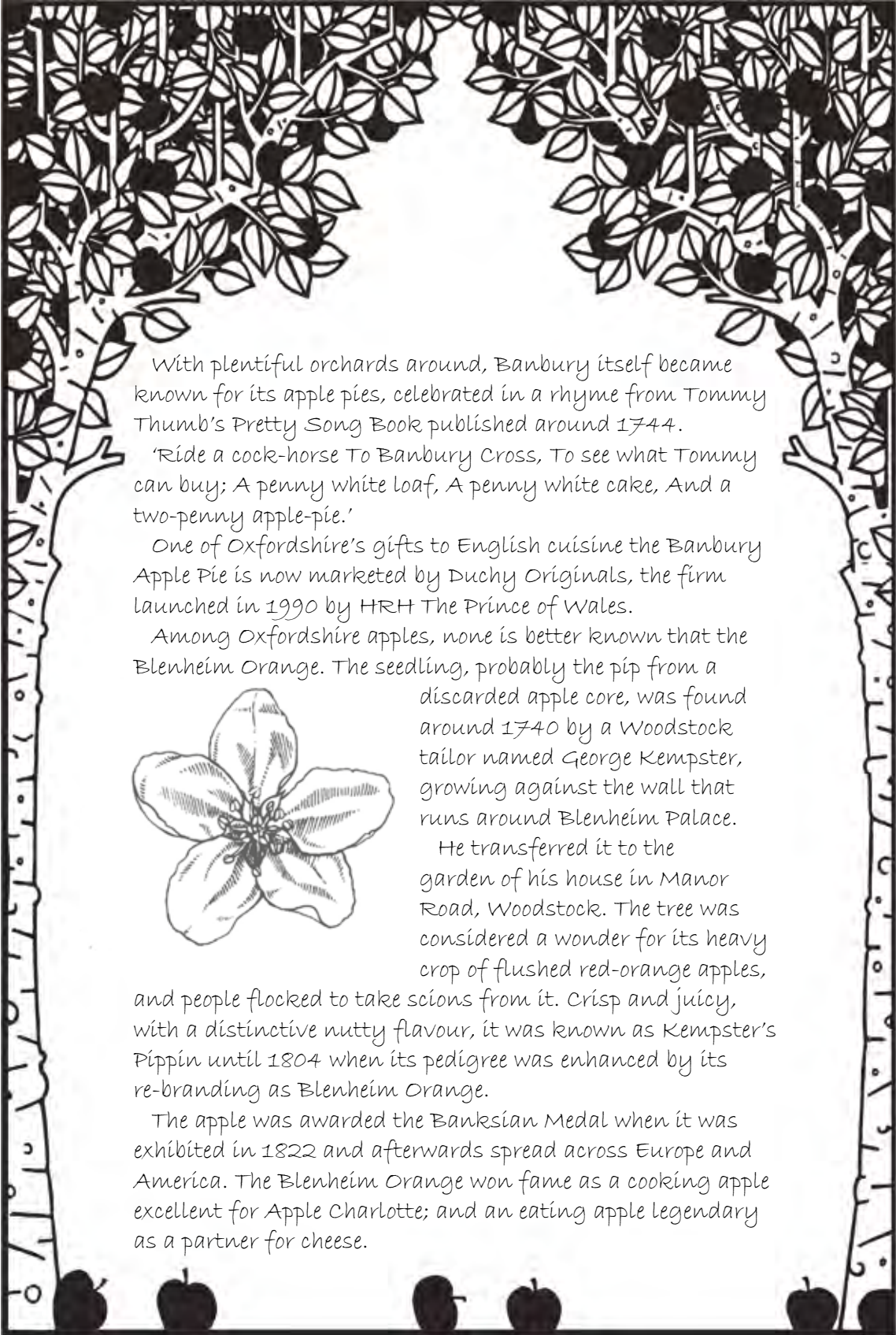
In 1659, Ralph Austen set up the first cider factory in Oxford. 'It has been observed that those who drink Cider and Perry daily, or frequently as their common drink, are generally healthy persons and long lived,' he wrote.

Ralph Austen's faith in nature and community place him among the great British pioneers of self-help. He died in 1676 and was buried in his parish church, St Peter-le-Bailey, on the site of Bonn Square. His name is remembered in a fitting fashion with a plaque at Wolvercote Community Orchard, whose members have done much to resurrect his memory.

Up towards Banbury, another 17th-century apple-lover was also very active. This was Colonel Edward Vernon of North Aston. The village had been famed for its orchards since Tudor times — there were 15 in the manor — and in 1593 a Nonpareil was brought over from Normandy to grace the estate.

Known locally as the 'Folks Apple' it was cultivated by Colonel Vernon who then disseminated it throughout England and Europe as the 'North Aston Apple'. Future generations of gardeners would prize it as a dessert fruit for the connoisseur, both aromatic and flavoursome, with a nice balance of sweetness and acidity.



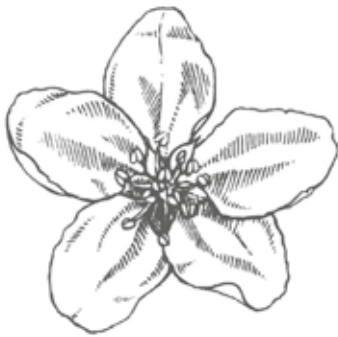


With plentiful orchards around, Banbury itself became known for its apple pies, celebrated in a rhyme from Tommy Thumb's *Pretty Song Book* published around 1744.

'Ride a cock-horse To Banbury Cross, To see what Tommy can buy; A penny white loaf, A penny white cake, And a two-penny apple-pie.'

One of Oxfordshire's gifts to English cuisine the Banbury Apple Pie is now marketed by Duchy Originals, the firm launched in 1990 by HRH The Prince of Wales.

Among Oxfordshire apples, none is better known than the Blenheim Orange. The seedling, probably the pip from a

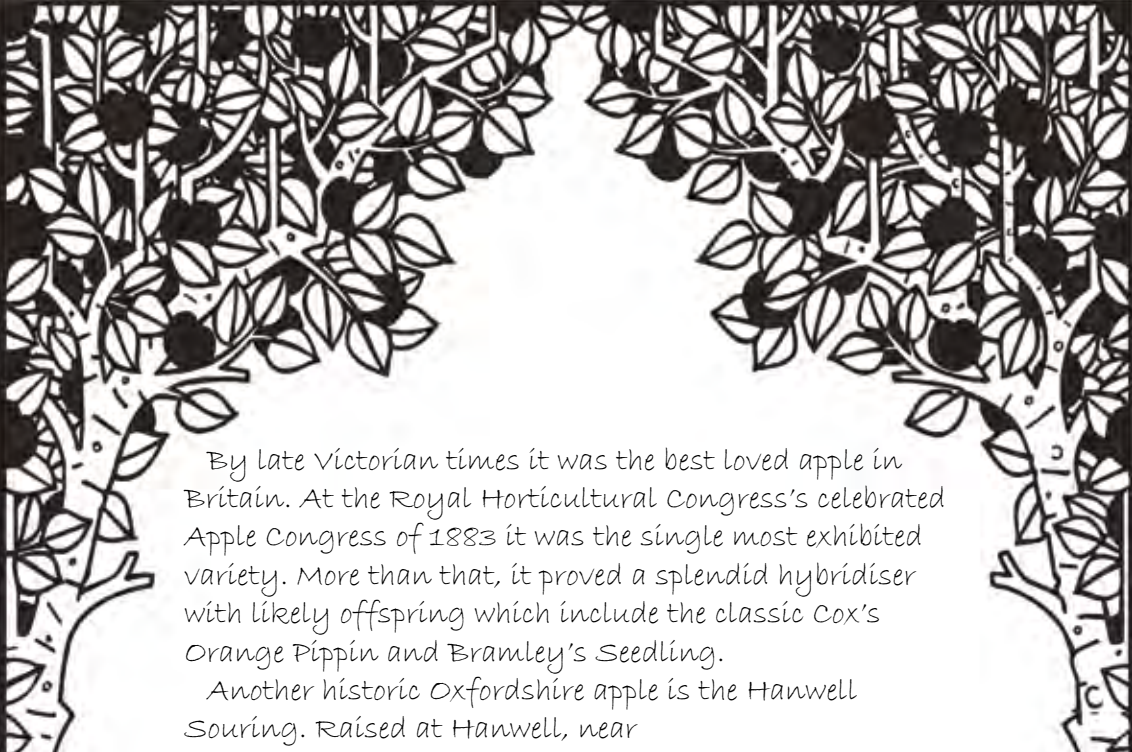


discarded apple core, was found around 1740 by a Woodstock tailor named George Kempster, growing against the wall that runs around Blenheim Palace.

He transferred it to the garden of his house in Manor Road, Woodstock. The tree was considered a wonder for its heavy crop of flushed red-orange apples,

and people flocked to take scions from it. Crisp and juicy, with a distinctive nutty flavour, it was known as Kempster's Pippin until 1804 when its pedigree was enhanced by its re-branding as Blenheim Orange.

The apple was awarded the Banksian Medal when it was exhibited in 1822 and afterwards spread across Europe and America. The Blenheim Orange won fame as a cooking apple excellent for Apple Charlotte; and an eating apple legendary as a partner for cheese.



By late Victorian times it was the best loved apple in Britain. At the Royal Horticultural Congress's celebrated Apple Congress of 1883 it was the single most exhibited variety. More than that, it proved a splendid hybridiser with likely offspring which include the classic Cox's Orange Pippin and Bramley's Seedling.

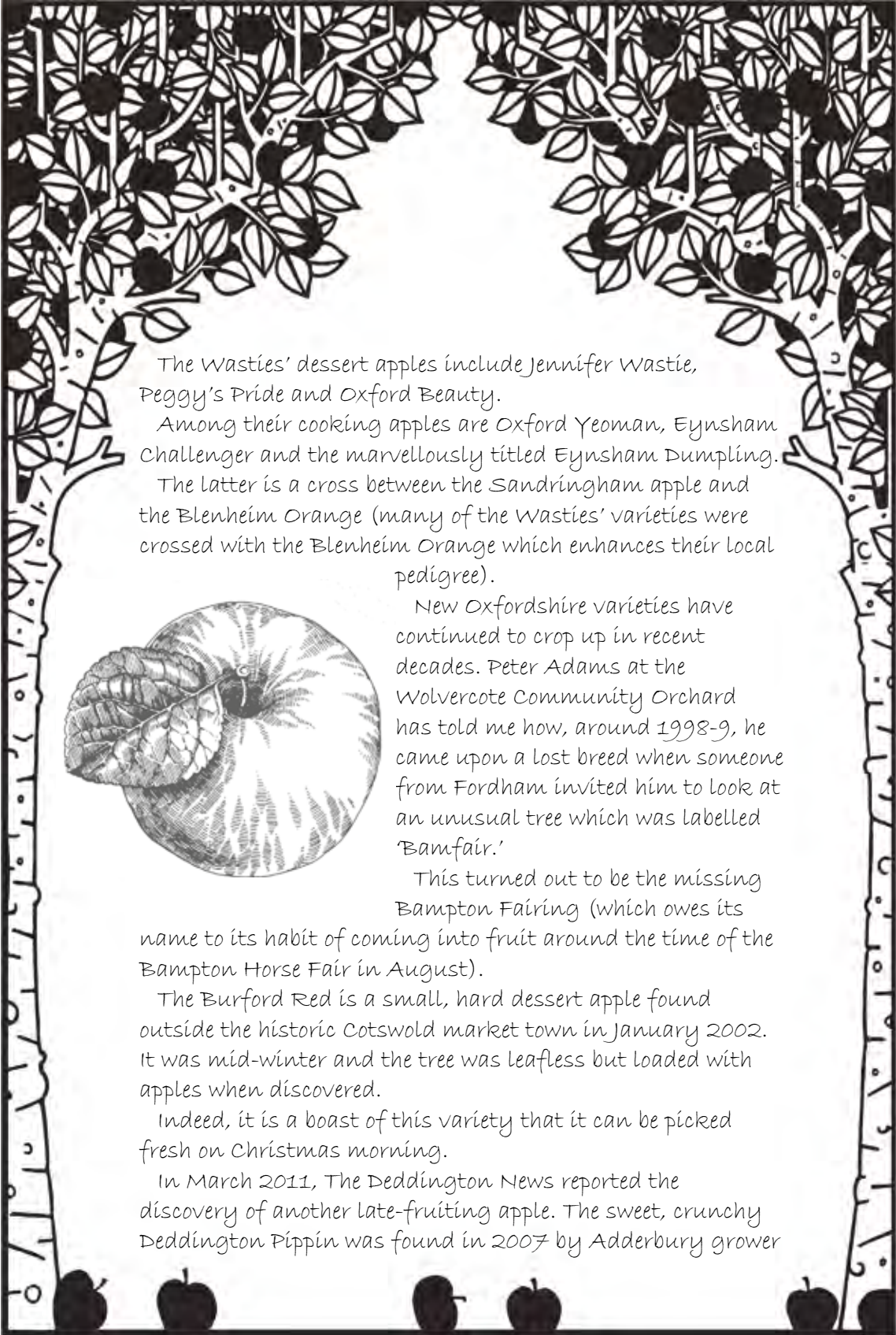
Another historic Oxfordshire apple is the Hanwell Souring. Raised at Hanwell, near Banbury, in 1820, it was named for its strong acidity. This is a large, old-fashioned Victorian cooking apple said to make a sharp purée and once valued in cider-making. It was to be eclipsed only by the rise of the Bramley.

North Oxfordshire has so far taken the honours as far as local apple breeds are concerned. But during the 20th century, West Oxfordshire seized the initiative as two Eynsham men created a profusion of new varieties.

Frederick William Wastie and his son James Frederick ('Young Fred') tended orchards at Eynsham where at least 49 breeds were developed.

Writing for *The Eynsham Record*, local historian Brian Atkins located 14 available varieties which feature in Joan Morgan's definitive *The Book of Apples* (1993); and an astonishing 35 more rarities identified by the specialist nurseries, Bernwode Fruit Trees in Buckinghamshire.





The Wasties' dessert apples include Jennifer Wastie, Peggy's Pride and Oxford Beauty.

Among their cooking apples are Oxford Yeoman, Eynsham Challenger and the marvellously titled Eynsham Dumpling.

The latter is a cross between the Sandringham apple and the Blenheim Orange (many of the Wasties' varieties were crossed with the Blenheim Orange which enhances their local pedigree).




New Oxfordshire varieties have continued to crop up in recent decades. Peter Adams at the Wolvercote Community Orchard has told me how, around 1998-9, he came upon a lost breed when someone from Fordham invited him to look at an unusual tree which was labelled 'Bamfair.'

This turned out to be the missing Bampton Fairing (which owes its name to its habit of coming into fruit around the time of the Bampton Horse Fair in August).

The Burford Red is a small, hard dessert apple found outside the historic Cotswold market town in January 2002. It was mid-winter and the tree was leafless but loaded with apples when discovered.

Indeed, it is a boast of this variety that it can be picked fresh on Christmas morning.

In March 2011, The Deddington News reported the discovery of another late-fruiting apple. The sweet, crunchy Deddington Pippin was found in 2007 by Adderbury grower



Andy Howard who reported: "It is called a pippin because it probably comes from the discarded seed of an apple (possibly thrown from a car window) which has been wild pollinated, maybe by a crab apple."

Photographs of the Banbury Road site in 1938 confirm there was no tree there at that time, so the tree must date from a later period. The size confirms it as 65-70 years old. Andy Howard added: "It is also a pippin due to its location: no one would intentionally plant a tree in that position, half way up a bank on a main road."

Apples do not grow true from seed; the discarded core of a Cox's Orange, for example, is unlikely to result in a tree bearing the same fruit. It will have cross-pollinated with other species to form a different variety.

So, Nature is continually creating new breeds, and the Oxfordshire hedgerows may even now be bursting with more undiscovered treasures.



Wolvercote
Community
Orchard is dedicated
to the life and work of

Ralph Austen

(c.1612–1676), horticulturist and religious radical

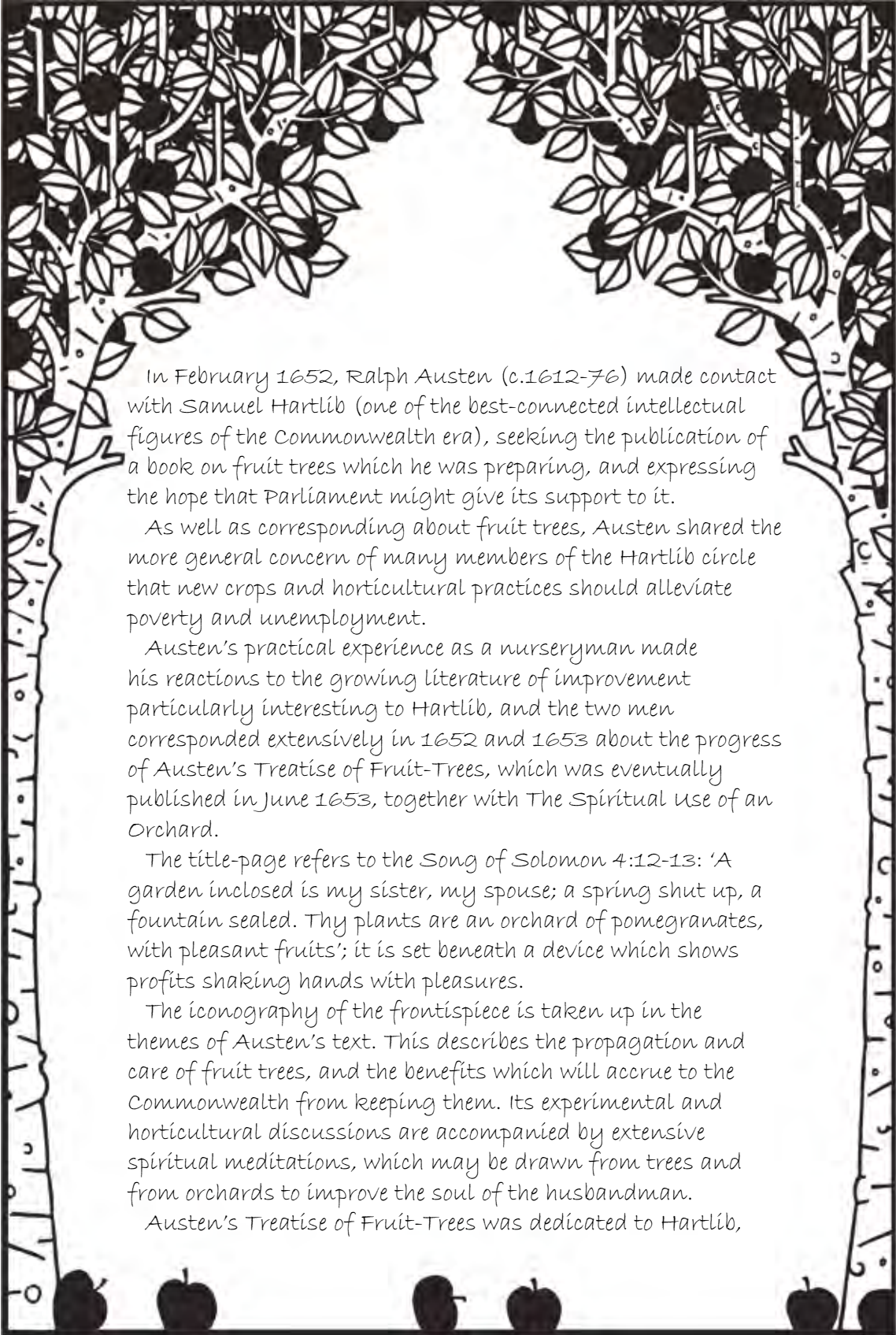
Ralph Austen was a nurseryman from Leek in Staffordshire, who came to Oxford since 1646. A keen supporter of religious and political reformation, Austen acted as a secretary to the Parliamentary Visitors of the university of Oxford from 1648, and was appointed their registrar in 1650.

He was thus closely involved with the expulsion of opponents of the new settlements in church and state from the university, and with the continued monitoring of educational standards and political obedience there.

During the 1650s, Austen kept a small nursery in Oxford, but his plans to enclose part of Shotover forest in 1655 failed because he lacked the capital necessary to buy out the rights of local commoners.

Thereafter, he unsuccessfully sought the patronage of Major-General Fleetwood, having petitioned Parliament to promote the planting of fruit trees just before the death of Cromwell in 1658. Austen set up a cider factory in Oxford in 1659, and made a living through his continuing activities as a gardener, planter, and nurseryman.





In February 1652, Ralph Austen (c.1612-76) made contact with Samuel Hartlib (one of the best-connected intellectual figures of the Commonwealth era), seeking the publication of a book on fruit trees which he was preparing, and expressing the hope that Parliament might give its support to it.

As well as corresponding about fruit trees, Austen shared the more general concern of many members of the Hartlib circle that new crops and horticultural practices should alleviate poverty and unemployment.

Austen's practical experience as a nurseryman made his reactions to the growing literature of improvement particularly interesting to Hartlib, and the two men corresponded extensively in 1652 and 1653 about the progress of Austen's *Treatise of Fruit-Trees*, which was eventually published in June 1653, together with *The Spiritual Use of an Orchard*.

The title-page refers to the Song of Solomon 4:12-13: 'A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits'; it is set beneath a device which shows profits shaking hands with pleasures.

The iconography of the frontispiece is taken up in the themes of Austen's text. This describes the propagation and care of fruit trees, and the benefits which will accrue to the Commonwealth from keeping them. Its experimental and horticultural discussions are accompanied by extensive spiritual meditations, which may be drawn from trees and from orchards to improve the soul of the husbandman.

Austen's *Treatise of Fruit-Trees* was dedicated to Hartlib,

and included extensive comment on modern books of husbandry which Hartlib had sent to its author as well as discussion of classical agriculture. It argued that the true, ancient husbandry had not consisted simply of tillage, but had also included horticulture, which had been Adam's original employment in Eden, before 'he was put away from this worke to till the ground, a lower and inferior labour'.

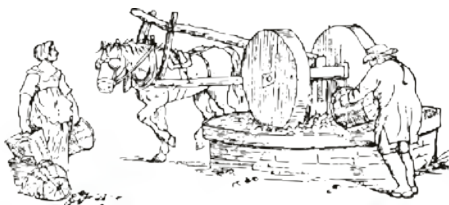
Viticulture had been restored by Noah, Austen argued, and the Bible provided plenty of historical examples of the advantages of growing plants and trees.

Such activity was profitable and it also generated fruit which was beneficial to health.

Moreover, the husbandman in his orchard had constant opportunity to meditate on the Fall and on original sin, 'whereof we were all guilty in such a Place', encouraging him to turn his skills and his profits to the public good.

In Austen's writings, the teachings of the book of nature (the spiritualised orchard) and of the book of scripture are shown to be in close harmony. Biblical history is deployed to justify a particular approach to improvement, and to suggest that bodies and souls, as well as material conditions, can be returned to a paradisaical state through prudent and devout activity.

JAMES TURNER.



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Apple varieties in the orchard

Winter Queening
Wolvercote Wonder
Rev Wilkes
Tom Putt
Eynsham
Dumpling
Genadier
Early Victoria
Orleans Reinette
Flower of Kent
Bramley
Oxford Sunset
Dabinette
Gladstone
Morgan Sweet
Blenheim Orange
Leathercoat
Sunset

Lord Darby
Ellison's Orange
Hanwell Souring
Oxford Conquest
Darcy Spice
Ribstone Pippin
Tideman's Early
Ashmead Kernel
Falstaff
Lanes Prince Albert
Ecklingville
Charles Ross
Discovery
Winstone
Bampton Fairing
Oxford Beauty
King of the Pippins
Annual Sweeting

Cox's Orange Pippin
James Grieve
Peggy's Pride
Costard
Egremont Russet
Newton Wonder
Sargent Peggy
Howgate Wonder
Foulkes Foremost
Merry Weather
Worcester
Pitmaston Pineapple
Jennifer Wastie
Wheeler's Russet
Sargent Peggy
Woodstock Pippin
Red Army
Jo's Pippin

OTHER FRUIT TREES

PEARS:
Baxter Pearmain
Josephine de Malines
Conference Pear
Marston Duchesse
William Bon
Chretien

GREENGAGE:
St Julian Gage
Cambridge Gage

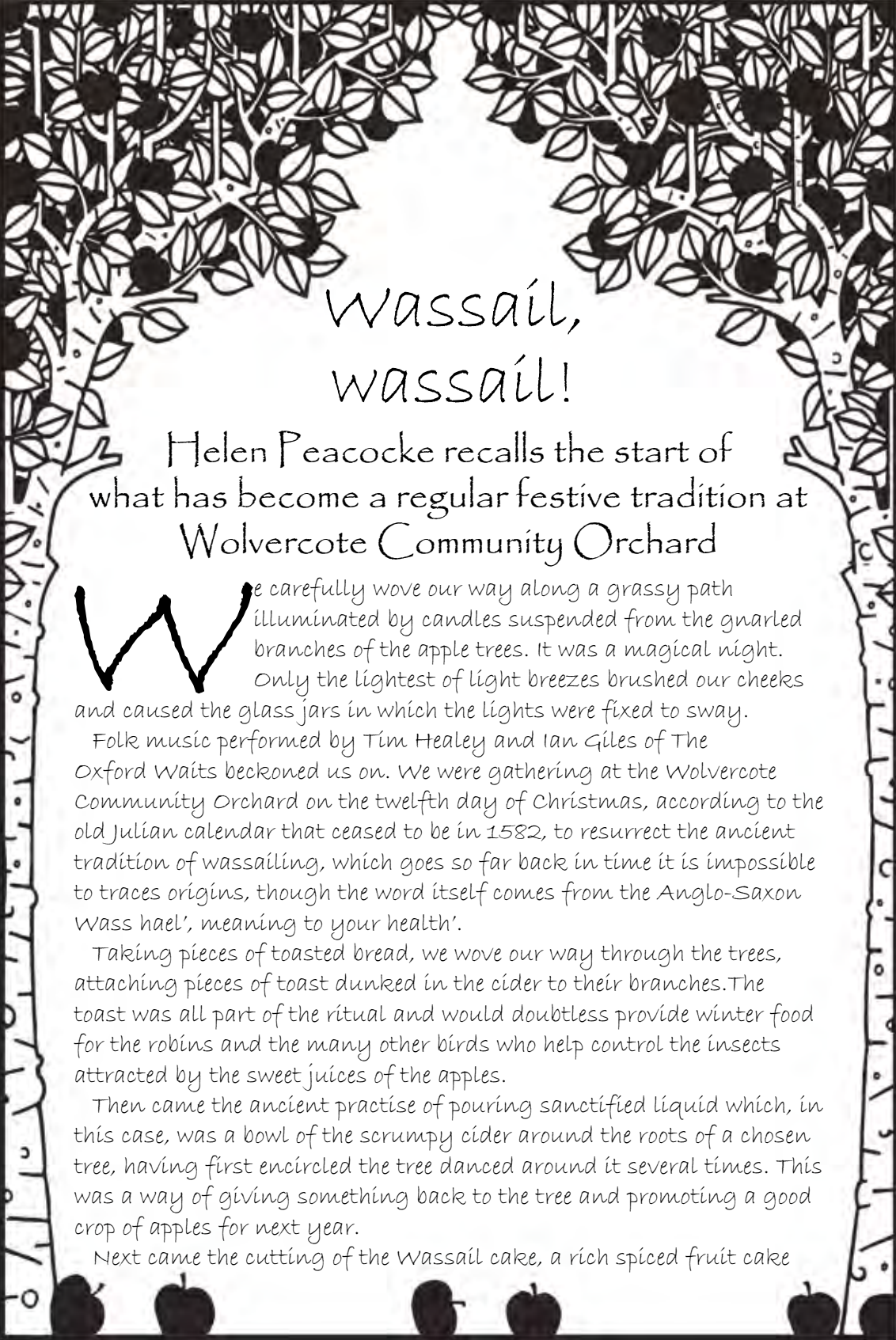
PLUM:
Warwickhire Drooper
Victoria

QUINCE:
Meeches Prolific
Vranya

CHERRY:
Morello
Mercer

DAMSON:
Langley
Bullace

OTHER TREES:
Mulberry,
Walnut, Hazel



Wassail, wassail!

Helen Peacocke recalls the start of what has become a regular festive tradition at Wolvercote Community Orchard

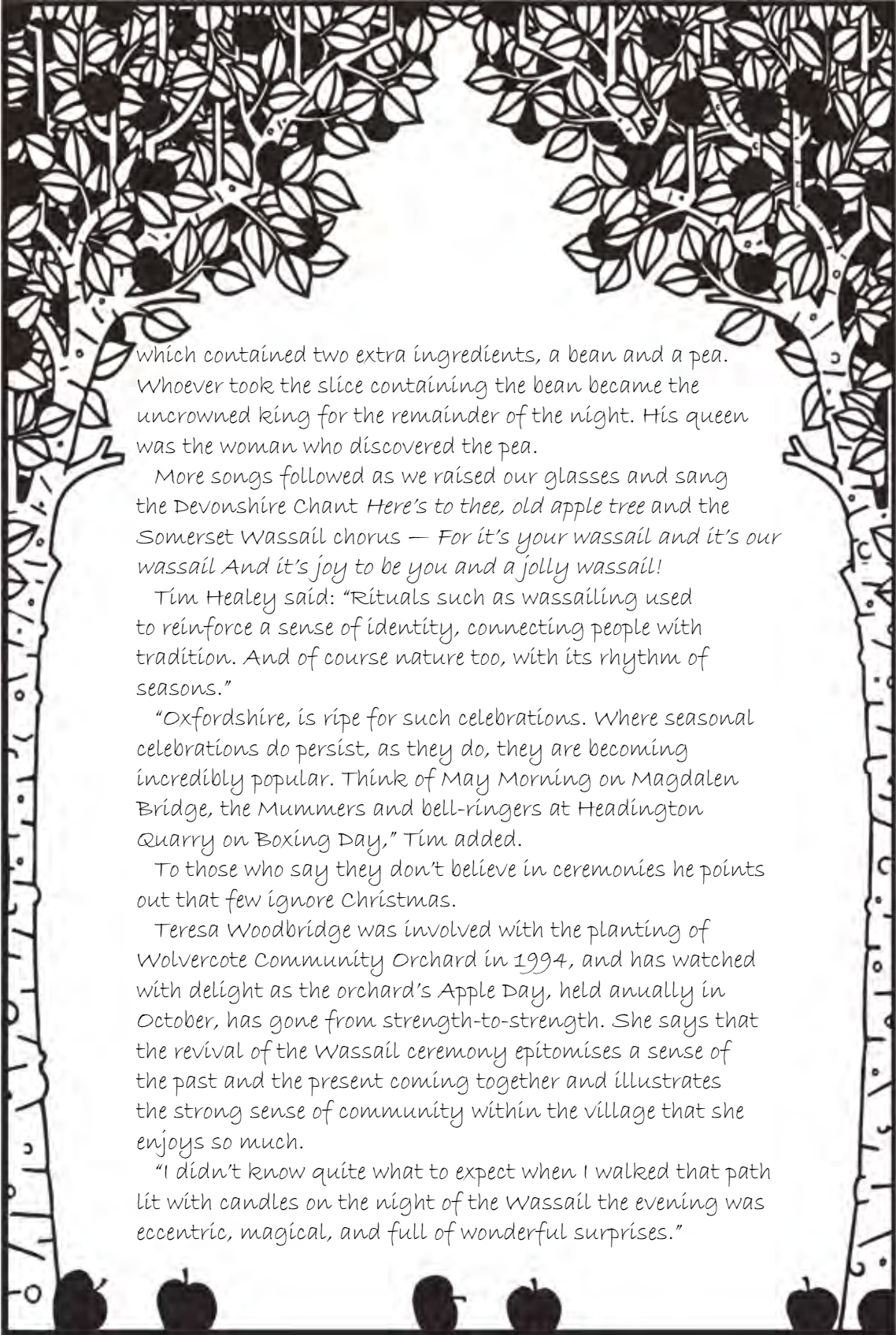
We carefully wove our way along a grassy path illuminated by candles suspended from the gnarled branches of the apple trees. It was a magical night. Only the lightest of light breezes brushed our cheeks and caused the glass jars in which the lights were fixed to sway.

Folk music performed by Tim Healey and Ian Giles of The Oxford Waits beckoned us on. We were gathering at the Wolvercote Community Orchard on the twelfth day of Christmas, according to the old Julian calendar that ceased to be in 1582, to resurrect the ancient tradition of wassailing, which goes so far back in time it is impossible to trace origins, though the word itself comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'wass hael', meaning 'to your health'.

Taking pieces of toasted bread, we wove our way through the trees, attaching pieces of toast dunked in the cider to their branches. The toast was all part of the ritual and would doubtless provide winter food for the robins and the many other birds who help control the insects attracted by the sweet juices of the apples.

Then came the ancient practise of pouring sanctified liquid which, in this case, was a bowl of the scrumpy cider around the roots of a chosen tree, having first encircled the tree danced around it several times. This was a way of giving something back to the tree and promoting a good crop of apples for next year.

Next came the cutting of the Wassail cake, a rich spiced fruit cake



which contained two extra ingredients, a bean and a pea. Whoever took the slice containing the bean became the uncrowned king for the remainder of the night. His queen was the woman who discovered the pea.

More songs followed as we raised our glasses and sang the Devonshire Chant *Here's to thee, old apple tree* and the Somerset Wassail chorus — *For it's your wassail and it's our wassail And it's joy to be you and a jolly wassail!*

Tim Healey said: "Rituals such as wassailing used to reinforce a sense of identity, connecting people with tradition. And of course nature too, with its rhythm of seasons."

"Oxfordshire, is ripe for such celebrations. Where seasonal celebrations do persist, as they do, they are becoming incredibly popular. Think of May Morning on Magdalen Bridge, the Mummers and bell-ringers at Headington Quarry on Boxing Day," Tim added.

To those who say they don't believe in ceremonies he points out that few ignore Christmas.

Teresa Woodbridge was involved with the planting of Wolvercote Community Orchard in 1994, and has watched with delight as the orchard's Apple Day, held annually in October, has gone from strength-to-strength. She says that the revival of the Wassail ceremony epitomises a sense of the past and the present coming together and illustrates the strong sense of community within the village that she enjoys so much.

"I didn't know quite what to expect when I walked that path lit with candles on the night of the Wassail the evening was eccentric, magical, and full of wonderful surprises."



Wolvercote Community Orchard

1993-2014

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