

The ANCIENT tree column

This month, the Ancient Tree Forum and Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group introduce us to...

Roger Deakin's Thorpeness Apple

Not all ancient trees are large and some may not even be recognised as trees. Fifty metres from the sea on the inward side of a shingle bank near Thorpeness in Suffolk is a very unconventional apple tree that is no more than 1m high. It is regularly drenched by sea spray and despite being inundated in a storm surge in the winter of 2013-14, the tree produced edible fruit the following summer.

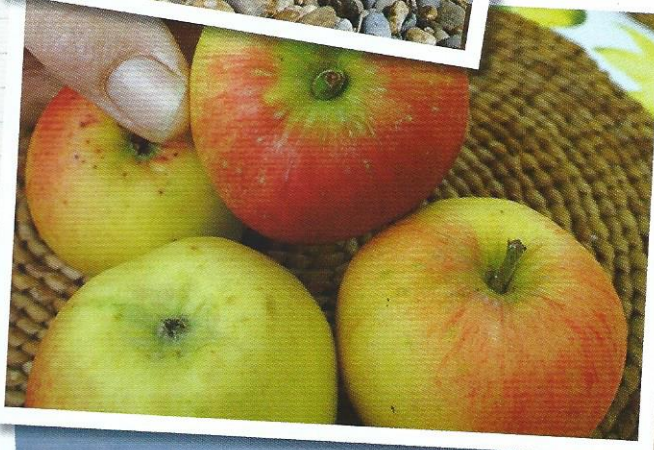
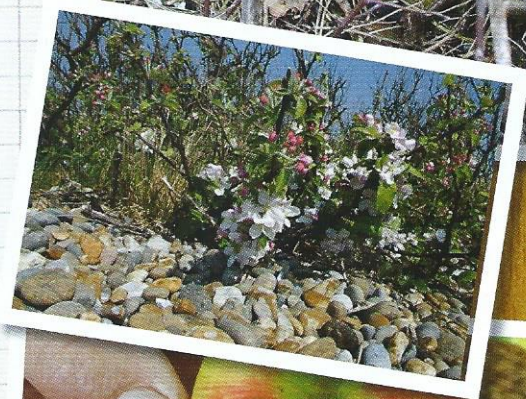
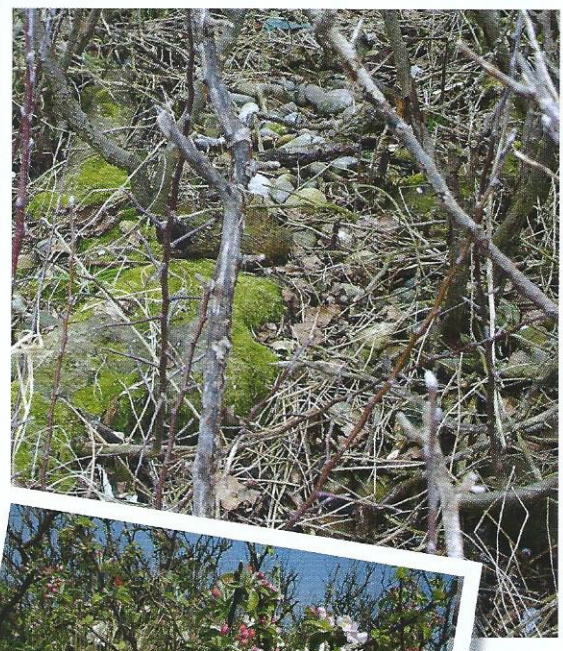
Apples are generally not long-lived but this tree has been there for as long as anyone local remembers. The tree is 7 x 12m in spread and there is no apparent trunk. Flattened branches run snake-like along the ground, periodically covered in gravel. The whole plant sits in a depression in the shingle, its fruit scrumped by locals, but nobody clears the plastic and bottles blown into its tangle of sticks. It achieved literary fame through its inclusion in *Wildwood*, by Roger Deakin, whose evocative writing describes his regular stopover for an apple before walking on to Aldeburgh to buy sprats.

The fruit is nice enough for the Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group to graft and distribute young trees to a dozen or so traditional orchards in the county (away from the sea they make large trees). Generally called "Thorpeness", or "Roger Deakin's Apple", it is also on sale, grafted onto a semi-dwarf garden rootstock, as "Aldeburgh Beach Apple" from a Suffolk nursery.

There are many fruit trees that grow close to the sea along this part of the coast. One hundred metres south of Roger Deakin's Apple is a scruffy 1.5m high tangled pear and 100m from the cliff edge at Dunwich Heath, some miles north, is another apple tree this time 4.5m high and propagated for local gardens for its large delicious fruit. Around Minsmere are more than 20 apple trees and several pears. Most of these trees are self-seeded, and some are likely to be descendants of feral apples taken to the beach in ploughmen's and fishermen's lunches.

The Ancient Tree Forum champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain's ancient and veteran trees and gives advice on their management at www.ancient-tree-forum.org.uk. The Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group records and protects old orchard sites and will soon be publishing these as a map at www.suffolkbiodiversity.org/orchards.aspx.

The two organisations are running the ATF's summer forum in Suffolk on 18 and 19 June, with a focus on orchards and fruit trees. See the ATF's website for details.



Photos courtesy of Rob McBride