

TRUE SERVICE TREE



What does it look like?

Also known as the whitty pear or the sorb tree, the true service tree looks very similar to a rowan tree, with the same arrangement of leaves. In the autumn however, while the rowan produces clusters of red berries, whilst the true service tree produces pear or apple-like fruits. The orange-brown bark is rough and scaly.

Classification

Kingdom: Plantae
Phylum: Spermatophyta
Class: Angiospermae
Family: Rosaceae
Genus: *Sorbus*
Species: *S. domestica*

How else might I recognise one?

There are two types of fruits - one that looks like an apple and the other that looks more like a pear. In the autumn the leaves turn a vibrant red or orange colour.

Where is it found?

The true service tree is native to Europe but extremely uncommon in Britain - only a handful of wild trees are known. It was first recorded in Britain in the Wyre Forest, but has since also been found in Glamorgan and Gloucestershire. It tends to grow on south facing slopes, often on river cliffs.

Did you know?

- In ancient times the fruit was used to make a cider-like drink. The Romans called this drink *cerevisia* which is where the name service is thought to have originated. The fruits can still be used to make wine, but are only edible when they over-ripen and the frost has helped sweeten them.
- The wood was used to make the staffs of the Knights Templar and was also used for wheels and screws for wine presses.
- In Germany a type of schnapps is produced from the fruits, and bag-pipe like musical instruments are produced from the wood.

Why are they special to Worcestershire?

The first record of a true service tree in the UK was from the Wyre Forest, Worcestershire, in 1677. The local magistrate was very fond of the tree, and used to hold his magisterial court near it. In April 1862 someone who had been convicted of poaching at one of these courts vented his fury by burning down the tree. Luckily cuttings had previously been taken and were being grown on at nearby Arley Castle. In March 1916, to commemorate the death of Robert Woodward who had lived at Arley Castle and was killed in the First World War, one of the Arley Castle saplings was re-planted where the original Wyre Forest tree had been located

Several descendants of the Arley sapling are growing in the county, including specimens at Bewdley and the Bishops Palace gardens next to the Cathedral in Worcester. There are also other trees in the county whose origins are unknown.

Until 1983 the Wyre Forest tree and its descendants were the only known specimens in the UK, but another population was then found growing on cliffs in Glamorgan, South Wales, and it has also since been found in Gloucestershire.

Problems and solutions

We need to understand more about the habitat requirements of the true service tree, and also its genetics, so we can find out how closely related the trees from the different locations are.

Some work has been carried out searching for further wild specimens in Worcestershire, but more needs to be done, and any new trees found need to be protected from destruction.

What can I do to help?

Visit the grounds of Worcester Cathedral and see if you can find the true service tree that grows there, then keep a look out around the county for this rare tree. If you think you have found it, let us know by e mailing us through the Worcestershire Biodiversity Partnership web site (address below).

Find out more?

www.worcestershire.gov.uk/biodiversity click on View the Action Plans.

You can find the Worcestershire Record – the magazine of the Worcestershire Biological Records Centre - at www.wbrc.org.uk. Issue 7 contains two articles on the True Service Tree.

The history of the true service tree in Worcestershire is told by Mary Munslow Jones in her book 'The Lookers-out of Worcestershire'. This is now out of print, but you might find it in libraries.