Know your Bristol Stories

Orchard Roots Bristol
Urban and rural community orchards: Linking town and country

‘Know your Bristol Stories’ joined forces with Horfield Organic Community Orchard (HOCO) to work on the Heritage Lottery Fund’s ‘All Our Stories’ project ‘Orchard Roots Bristol’ (ORB) to explore connections between Bristol residents, food production and local heritage. In 1998, HOCO members reclaimed an overgrown corner of an allotment a few miles northeast of Bristol University to create an orchard that is now thriving, with over 70 varieties of apple, plum, pear and nut trees.

ORB offered another opportunity to put Bristol University’s ethos of the engaged university into practice. I run a course on ‘Public History’ in partnership with BBC History Magazine, Icon Films (an independent company specializing in history and natural history documentaries), Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust and the ss Great Britain, which allows students to gain hands-on experience of how historical research is handled and communicated beyond the traditional university setting. I’ve also worked with Bristol Zoo on a collaborative project involving two AHRC-funded research students. Involvement in these sorts of activities also helps me deepen my understanding of the city in which I’ve lived for over twenty years.

I’d previously attended an Apple Day at HOCO, which is just a twenty-minute walk from my home. But I knew very little about the history of the orchard and its site or the varieties of apples growing there. It was great fun and rewarding to attend the Open Day and Apple Day (as well as the annual Wassail in January). On these occasions, I chatted with members and local residents, listened in while early career researcher Marianna Dudley interviewed HOCO members and others, and sampled the home made cakes and freshly-pressed apple juice. At Apple Day, I viewed the display of maps used for the re-survey exercise undertaken by the project’s other researcher, Nick Nourse, who produced a more accurate and readily-updatable map that will be available at future events and on HOCO’s website. I also enjoyed talking about the culture, history and ecology of small scale orchards with Cherry Ann Knott, HLF Committee Member for the South West, who joined us for Apple Day in October 2013.

I was also really pleased to have the chance to link up with another orchard project I’ve been involved in for 40 miles away in rural Somerset. Here, in the Quantock foothills, I’ve been working with Marianna, Nick and the team that manages the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Through our project on orchard decline since the early 1800s, we wanted to raise local awareness of how small orchards once loomed large in the local landscape. Inspired by HOCO’s efforts as well, we also hope to encourage locals to consider restoring some of the orchards that were grubbed up.

Thanks to projects like ORB, I’m developing a much stronger sense of place and a sharper appreciation of the local history and heritage of my city and region – which is easily overlooked when I’m engrossed in the historical study of places and communities much further away.

Peter Coates, Professor of American and Environmental History, University of Bristol, Strand Leader

Public engagement at the University of Bristol

Engaging the public is a vital part of life at the University of Bristol. It is integral to research and teaching that is grounded in societal need and is responsive to society’s interests, concerns, priorities and aspirations. As an engaged University, Bristol’s staff and students are active in developing conversations and partnerships with all facets of society. Engagement is facilitated in a number of ways, including through the Centre for Public Engagement which supports and promotes public engagement with research and teaching across the University.

Kate Miller, Acting Head, Centre for Public Engagement
The wide open eye

ORB explored and celebrated fruit growing in a particular place – a community orchard in Horfield, Bristol. The stories gathered during the project blossomed, cross-pollinated, and matured to a fruitful harvest. They touched on rich seams, such as the role of Bristol University’s Long Ashton Research Station (LARS) in fruit cultivation and cider making.

HOCO began in 1998 on some very overgrown allotment plots. Orchard members, past and present, took part in a workshop in April that wove together their memories and experiences – from inspiration and planning, to the perspiration of clearing and planting, and the ongoing labours of pruning, composting, and harvesting 100 fruiting trees, bushes and vines.

Research at Bristol Record Office into historic land use showed it was mainly rough pasture for grazing, and woodland. In the later nineteenth century, as Bristol expanded, the larger fields were redefined as smaller allotment garden plots.

The local community and wider public shared their stories of fruit and food growing at a ‘Know your Orchard Roots Bristol’ event at HOCO in June. Voices from allotment holders and people with Long Ashton connections rounded out the picture.

Two field trips to the Quantocks, where less than one per cent of historic orchards remain, interleaved a different landscape with the ORB story. We found orchards planted in the 1970s shaped by the endeavours of LARS (closed in 2003) to improve commercial cider production. Ghost orchards, the result of decades of neglect, testified to the difficulties for fruit growers of make a living from their labours and produce.

Learning, sharing, and fun flavoured all ORB activities and events. Stories and images gathered were transcribed or digitised and turned into an exhibition, enjoyed by more than 200 people, at the Celebration & Apple Day event at HOCO in October. Trees showed off their new, permanent name labels, and the very local varieties trumpeted their heritage. A large reproduction of the 1843 Horfield Parish tithe map held at Bristol Record Office was also on display. The distinctive ‘elbow’ shaped plot (number 58) now cultivated by HOCO, can clearly be seen on the Orchard map re-worked by Nick Nourse.

Orchards are shaped by human culture and by nature. ORB shows how one voluntary community group transformed a small area of marginal, hard to cultivate clay on limestone, into a fruitful and beautiful orchard that inspires learning, growing, and community celebrations.

Teaming up with the University of Bristol’s History Department brought the skills and knowledge of two researchers whose interests complemented the project, as well as technical support and extra publicity. Getting the best from this kind of collaboration requires crystal clear understanding of the different roles and capacities of all partners, and active communication. Academics working with voluntary and community groups may find it helpful to keep this question fresh in their minds: How does my research meet the needs of this community group?

Shannon Smith,
Co-ordinator Horfield Organic Community Orchard
HOCO website: community-orchard.org.uk

“I live in a flat that has no garden and I really wanted to do some kind of gardening. Being a member means enjoying all the lovely fresh fruit, and thinking up things to do with it.”

Christine Churchard, HOCO Member since 2012
Listening and learning

My role as post-doctoral researcher on Orchard Roots Bristol (ORB) was to help HOCO gather and process oral material that documents its history and development, and explores connections with the local community, Bristol market gardeners, and wider apple-growing traditions of Somerset and Gloucestershire.

Stories of HOCO members were recorded at a workshop in spring, and from the public at an ‘All Our Stories’ event in early summer. We collected some great stories from Bristol’s past, and were able to record what the orchard has meant to members and the local community. The audio recordings and digital photos have created a resource for HOCO. They were used to create an exhibition that will be available at public events in the orchard for years to come. The transcripts and images are available for researchers interested in the process of setting up and maintaining an organic orchard in the midst of an urban environment.

I have worked on orchard history previously, for the AHRC-funded project ‘Fallen Fruits: Mapping Orchard Decline in the Quantock Hills’. Part of my role on ORB was to enhance the partnership between Bristol’s History Department and the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Service. I was involved in planning Quantock Apple Heritage Day, which displayed our research to local people and encouraged active engagement between the University, the AONB service and the area’s residents. Working with event planners, design agencies, local food producers, and the AONB service, and talking about our work on community-run local radio, was valuable experience. The AONB Service has reported heartening follow-up interest from local people wishing to restore old orchards or plant new ones - a fantastic outcome.

We were also able to bridge urban and rural orchards by inviting HOCO members to join us on our two field trips: an ‘orchard hunt’ in springtime and a subsequent apple identification exercise in the autumn (among the cider varieties identified were Court of Wick, Improved Dove, and Yarlington Mill). HOCO members’ extensive knowledge of apples and perspectives as growers helped us understand the challenges of growing fruit, whether in a rural or urban setting – not to mention correcting our misconception of how old an ‘old’ apple tree actually was! We know of a private orchard already planted as a direct result of attending Quantock Apple Heritage day, and perhaps community projects in the area may follow.

The variety of tasks involved in ORB set it apart from regular historical research activity. This posed challenges, such as maintaining communication and managing expectations of what could be achieved in the time available. I embraced the evolving nature of the project, working where I felt I was needed, and developing those relationships that were most productive. All of the skills I used here – oral history, archival research, effective public engagement approaches, and the experience of working with external partners – I value enormously, and will take forward to inform my future research.

Marianna Dudley,
Early Career Researcher

“...We bit into them and we just couldn’t believe the flavour, as kids, they tasted so lovely... We must have eaten a bruised apple because it tasted like cider... my Nan said that they were Morgan apples.”

Christine Powell’s childhood memories of apples, Quantock Apple Heritage Day
Branching out:

Reflections

A postcard to Japan. A paper at a conference in San Francisco. A report for the UK government. The word about ORB and its links with an orchard project in western Somerset is spreading.

The postcard image showed a merry band of apple jugglers. It featured on one of the postcards in the pack that accompanied a delegation from Bristol University to the University of Kyoto in January 2014, to display the range of research pursued in our Arts Faculty. The photographer was a member of HOCO in an historic orchard in the Quantocks. We were gathering apples to identify – and two other HOCO members were there to lend their expertise.

In a report I prepared for the UK National Ecosystem Assessment’s follow-on phase, I was delighted to include ORB and the Quantock project among the examples of research on landscape and environment from an arts and humanities perspective. And just a few weeks ago, in California, I talked about the projects as part of a panel on environmental history as public history.

Looking beyond these unanticipated outcomes, what are my thoughts on this project? I’ve worked with various external partners before. The two I’ve been most closely involved with are both well-established. The Quantock Hills AONB Service has managed its 98 square kilometre site since 1956 (Britain’s first designated AONB, and one of its most celebrated literary landscapes through its connection with Coleridge and Wordsworth). And the Bristol, Clifton and West of England Zoological Society has run the world’s oldest provincial zoo since 1836.

Not only is HOCO the first voluntary and community organization I’ve worked with. It’s also still relatively young, and occupies a site much smaller than Bristol Zoo’s 12 acres. So though I already knew a couple of HOCO members, this was a very different experience. Moreover, the Quantock orchard project was something I’d been involved in from day one. A few years ago, I’d asked the AONB Service’s acting manager a question along these lines: ‘If I could access a modest amount of cash to place a researcher at your disposal, what could we do for you that you really want to do but can’t because of staffing and resource constraints?’

But with ORB, it was more a question of ‘Over to you, HOCO’. Because you already know exactly what you want, and have secured HLF funding to achieve your goals, use the early career researchers that ‘Know your Bristol Stories’ subsequently made available to help achieve these pre-identified goals. My input was most meaningful in the area of enrichment activities. We used some of the additional capacity to explore potential connections between urban and rural orchard projects. It was such a shame that it was not possible for HOCO members to be at the Quantock Apple Heritage Day (a historic first) because it was held the day before HOCO’s own Apple Day. Both events needed to take place on either the Saturday or Sunday closest to National Apple Day (21 October, which also happens to be Coleridge’s birthday).

What is my most vivid memory of ORB? It has to be the happy moment captured in the larger of the two cover images for this half of the booklet. Marianna Dudley, myself and Nichola Penn of the AONB Service are attending closely while Shannon Smith tries to match one of the apples she’d gathered that day in old Quantock orchards with one of the varieties in Liz Copas’ definitive guide to the cider apples of Somerset: A Somerset Pomona. We were sitting on church wall in Crowcombe, munching our lunches in the warm afternoon sunshine of late September. Shannon fished out the apples she’d collected, lined them up on the wall, and opened the guide. This was not a planned activity. It happened because collaborative projects evolve and adjust, allowing fresh ideas to emerge from flexible minds and the process of working together.

Peter Coates, Strand Leader
HOCO map drawn by Dr Nick Nourse.