

**MINUTES OF THE 78th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY IN CONJUNCTION WITH
AYNHO GARDENING CLUB HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 13th
MAY 2015**

Present: - Annabel Bellamy - Joint Chairman
Rupert Clark - Joint Chairman
Peter Cole - Secretary.

**1. Extracts from Ted Humphris' Books "Garden Glory" and "Apricot Village"
Read by Keith McClellan.**

Keith read three extracts from Ted's books, in character with a good accent, which caused great amusement. The first told of when Ted was furious that the outbreak of the First World War meant that the engraved watch, given for good attendance at Aynho School was withdrawn. His seven years unblemished school attendance went unrewarded. He resolved to leave school and secure a job as Aynhoe Park's assistant gardener. The second was about the first time Ted used a pony mower to cut lawns. The last extract was after Ted had been engaged as head gardener. It describes practical jokes played by a young boy employed there on Ted's assistant, "Old George". Think James Herriot meets Alan Titchmarsh, we really do recommend reading Ted's books, they are readily available through online book sellers.

2. "A Talk on Apricots - How to Grow and Prune them" by David Pratt

David has pruned and cared for many of Aynho's apricot trees, his planting and care advise was well received by this combined audience,

3. "Aynho's Apricots - the Legend - and the Reality" by Rupert Clark

Aynho's apricot legend is that the tenants of the Cartwright Estate paid their rent with fruit from the apricot trees on their houses.

Could be really be true? This investigation was in response to a TV production company's enquiry. World famous chef, Raymond Blanc was to be the star of the show: ultimately cooking Aynho apricots. Unfortunately they realised that this was not practical so rather than touring the country, they based the series in Kew Gardens.

Depending on your source the word apricot derives from the Arabic via Latin meaning "early ripe" or "apricot" is derived from the Latin word praecocia which means "precious." Horticulturally part of the Plum genus of the family Rosaceae (rose family) apricots are classified in the division Magnoliophyta, class Magnoliopsida, order Rosales. The trees are native to temperate Asia.

From China, apricots were carried by silk traders into ancient India and Persia and on to the region of ancient Armenia. Alexander the Great found apricots in ancient Armenia and introduced apricots to the western world. They reached Italy in 100 B.C. The ancient Romans cultivated apricots but were not successful in introducing them to northern Europe. Albeit, the climate was better than today so it begs the question why not? The apricot variety 'Bredase' may be the oldest variety in cultivation having been described by the Romans. Presumably trade in the dried fruit allowed for traditional Roman dishes to be made in this Roman outpost. Could the first apricots seen in Aynho have been used at Rainsborough camp? Could they have come up the Portway?

Apricot trees were reintroduced to Britain in the C13th but did not catch on until the C16th.

So is it realistic that rents would be paid in fruit? Let us consider crop reliability, length of harvest

and shelf life. In a good year 60lbs of fruit could be produced by a mature tree but typically cropping is biennial to that level. Late frosts can destroy the fruiting buds and thus the crop. The picking season is about 2 weeks and the fruit's shelf life is approximately a week. For the volume of fruit the Estate would have received storage would have been a real issue. There is no evidence of a local canning industry nor bottling (the Kilner jar was not invented until the 1840's). Neither is there evidence of a pickling, jam or brewing/distilling industry and in our climate the traditional drying method is not an option. Many of you will have tried apricot schnapps or brandy but there is also wine, liqueur, vodka and wheat beer.

Sending the raw fruit to market is an option but I could only find one reference. In the late 1850's Kidlington village "yearly sent up to Covent Garden Market 6,000 dozen apricots", along with many other types of fruit, veg and meat via the newly opened GWR. {Oxford Chronicle}

Ted Humphris recalls Aynhoe Park had its own trees as many as 23 so presumably they had enough of their own fruit to process. In the Northants record Office there are plenty of Estate rent books and certainly the Cartwright always needed cash once so much had been spent rebuilding Aynhoe Park and its parkland in the C18th. I am convinced they would have preferred coin to fruit.

J. Wilson wrote for the RHS "A Guide to the Cultivation of Apricots..." 1965 all about Apricots. Aynho is featured as the exemplar. "The trees grown in the Estate gardens last 30 years, some grown on the cottage walls lasted twice that. This is put down to the poorer soil next to the cottages being more suitable than the better soils of the Estate gardens." "Up to 100 trees are recorded to have been growing on the village walls. He does say that rents used to be paid for with fruit but again there is no source given albeit he does quote Ted. However this could be the origin of the legend "In recent times, if the trees were maintained by the estate then they had the fruit." This makes some sense as there are no village elders who recall any family tales of apricot rent payment in fact quite the opposite. The fruit was their fruit.

Wilson also wrote." The number of trees has declined as the cottagers seemed less interested....possibly due to pilfering of the fruit by the increasing number of cars. Pollination is not a problem but there does appear to be fewer bees. The trees are not thriving as they did due to the footpaths being concreted or tarmacked and roofs having gutters"

At least 70 new trees have been introduced into the village over the last 20 years so the decline has been reversed. Aynho's trees are usually the "Moor Park" variety but "Breda" is also recorded. Previously, wild plum suckers have been used to graft. Other root stock such as Brompton plum and suckers from original trees have been tried. All the modern trees are grafted onto damson root stock. Most of the apricot trees will survive 30 years before suffering from "die-back" but some examples are certainly older. In the 1920's specially trained stock was purchased, the apricot being grafted onto a six foot leg by Messrs Dickson of Chester. Other similar restocking was overseen by Mr H.J. Phillips of the Northamptonshire institute of Agriculture. A little surprisingly, a new variety was launched in the 1970's by the name of "Croughton!"

When might apricots have been introduced to Aynho's cottage walls? The earliest apricots were introduced to Henry VIII's England from Italy. He had espaliered apricot trees in the garden of Nonsuch Palace in Surrey. Ben Jonson quoted a play acted in 1598, as "numbering over his green apricots on the North-west wall" (J -M Hakluyt's "Patriotic"). There are documents of Instructions to the Turkey Company's Agents, a circumstantial account of the introduction of many plants to England. The damaske rose he gives to Dr. Linacre; the musk rose, and many kinds of plums, are owed, he writes, to Lord Cromwell; the apricot to a French gardener of Henry VIII.

While Aynho was owned by nationally important families in the Tudor and Stuart periods, Aynhoe Park was not their major seat. The chance of some of these new trees finding their way to Aynho is improbable. The

first possibility is that once cultivation of significant numbers was achieved in the late 1780's the village could have seen the white blossom for the first time. Lord Anson's "Moor Park" variety became the first commercially available variety. Possibly, introduced by William Ralph Cartwright, the instigator of the rebuilding of Aynhoe Park. But we have no evidence in the paintings of the village by John Claude Nattes or Lili Cartwright. Perhaps his son, Sir Thomas, a well-travelled diplomat?

Or my best bet, the apricots were introduced as a romantic gesture, to make the Italian Donna Maria dei Marchesi Chigi-Zondadari, daughter of an Italian senator feel more at home when she married Sir Fairfax Leighton Cartwright in 1898. Certainly she was used to the beautiful gardens of her family estates in native Sienna. We have a photograph of established trees on the Roundtown cottages from the turn of the century. To this day the early flowering trees lift the village from what can be in this part of the world a gloomy winter. It was not untypical of the charitable nature of the Cartwrights to in effect, gift the fruit to their tenants. A token of fruit being returned for their care by the Estate as a thank you.

We know the name of at least one of the Estate workers assigned to plant and tend the trees if the tenant was unable or unwilling. His name, Pocket Stayton, photographed in 1936. Note the traditional tree guard, protecting the trunk; they were painted Estate green.



In the future we may see villagers plant new hybrids apricots - the "aprium" that is 75% apricot and 25% plum; the "pluot" that is 75% plum and 25% apricot or the "plumcot" that is 50% of each parent. Alternatively, the new flowering apricot trees, *Prunus mume*.

While eating the fruits has many health benefits, a word of warning. The processing of the pits of apricots has become a controversial topic in national health debates and law enforcement circles. Various groups have promoted an extract, laetrile, as being a cancer cure; however, a number of people have died from a side effect, elements of the deadly poison, cyanide are in the product.

If Aynho's legend seems to be based on a misunderstanding of paying for tree maintenance rather than property rent; a final thought. "For centuries, apricots were considered an aphrodisiac in Europe. Its luscious curves, juicy flesh and sweet taste led people to believe that eating the seductive fruit would unleash the powers of love." De Kuyper

Why not raise a glass or take a bite in thanks to the Cartwrights who brought the beautiful blossom and delicious fruits to our "Apricot village".

4. Secretary's Report

Peter will arrange an evening visit to the Ice House for any members who have not seen one of this country's earliest and best preserved examples.

The meeting closed with the audience enjoying apricot cakes and beverages, thank you to the Gardening club.

5. Forthcoming meetings

Wednesday 24th June 7.30pm "**Waterloo 200 ~ the crucial defence of Chateau Hougoumont** .
Expert Speaker : Dick Ferguson assisted by Rupert Clark

(Please note that this meeting will be held at **The Windmill Centre, Deddington** in conjunction with *Deddington and Adderbury History Societies*.) Invitations to attend have been sent far and wide so members of many other local societies are invited.

This will be a gala evening with Cole's book store attending with an excellent selection of Waterloo books. Also themed cheese and wine will be available just like last year's War of the Roses event. Period weaponry will be on display. William Cartwright's involvement will be fully explained. There will be plenty to see so please come early.

The proceeds are in aid of SSAFA, the military family support charity

For ease of administration on the night, **all attendees will be charged £3**. Please remember this is a joint event and we will using members of other societies to help run the evening. I will happily refund our Aynho fully paid up members on a subsequent evening, as in effect this is an additional charge.

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Wednesday 29th July "The History of the Oxford Canal" by Mark Davies