

In Praise of Stamps Orchard – Andy Ball (March 2019)



In my humble opinion Stamps Orchard is one of the finest landscapes in Colwall. Located on the convergence of two local footpaths CW13 and CW12 and sited between Mathon Road and Old Church Road it provides an easily assessable remnant and reminder of part of Colwall's rich fruit growing heritage.

Granted, it is perhaps a shadow of its' former glorious past. Many of the orchard trees are dead or decaying, and a surprising number are literally on their knees – although in many cases still stubbornly and fruitfully alive – and hence the name that this field is known colloquially as in my household – *The Orchard of The Fallen Down Trees...*



What we now know as one continuous orchard was at the time of production of the 1842 Tithe Map two separate parcels of land. The westernmost area immediately behind Stamps Cottage was field number 580 - *Stamps Field* – identified as arable orchard. To the east, with a separating boundary now only defined by a slight rise in the land within modern day Stamps Orchard, lay a large area of arable land – Field 585 called *Ganders*. This included other land to both the north and east now outside of the current orchard boundary and reaching as far east as Mathon Road.

Stamps Field and the two semi-detached cottages called Stamps (tithe map land reference 579) formed part of the acquisition of the Upper and Lower Grovesend Farms estate by Thomas Brassey and Stephen Ballard from Charles King in 1853. The entire estate was valued at £4,527 and Stamps Field was 4 acres, zero perches and 24 roods in area whilst Stamps Cottages and their associated garden was 1 perch and 30 roods in area. The cottages were occupied by Mr Field and Susan King and remained as part of the Ballard family landholding until their sale in 1986 for £45,750, after which time they became a single dwelling.

Stamps Field as an arable orchard would have been a mix of both fruit trees with other crops grown underneath.

Grovesend House, in Old Church Road, was built by the Ballard family in 1894 and the original site was extended by the addition of two and a half acres of pasture land purchased in 1918 from the sale of land that made up Barton Court and the Colwall Park Estate. Part of this land became garden land, but the northernmost part became the east part of Stamps Orchard that we know today. The large concrete wall, still in existence, dividing the garden land from the orchard (and also enclosing other parts of the Grovesend House garden) was built in 1920. The entire structure cost £400 and used 20 tons of cement and 168 tons of aggregate. On the garden side pear trees were grown against the wall as espaliers.

Intriguingly an undated Ballard sketch map - *Grovesend Fruit Farms Showing Underground Spray Mains* (possibly dating from the 1920s or 1930s) - shows the extension to Stamps Orchard as being called Wall Orchard with Stamps (Orchard) to the west, so maybe that was its name for a while.

As part of the Grovesend Fruit Farms estate Stamps Orchard contributed a mix of apples and pears to the fruit growing business during the first half of the twentieth century. Alec Berry a former employee of Stephen Ballard III on the Grovesend Fruit Farms estate visited Stamps Orchard in 2008 with a member of Colwall Orchard Group. Fruit varieties that he recalled growing there included apples such as 'Annie Elizabeth', 'Warner King' and 'Queens', and the Compton pear.



Some of the fruit trees in the orchard are of considerable age and there is one large old pear tree that may be well over a hundred years old. It is likely that the majority of trees in the original part of the orchard are older than those in the east half of the orchard which are no more than 100 years old.

So what of Stamps Orchard now? The current Land Registry entry for the orchard shows it as being in the joint private ownership. The orchard fruit is no longer harvested commercially and instead the land is mainly used as pasture for grazing of sheep. In recent years some gapping up of the orchard has been undertaken with new fruit trees having been planted and providing hope that succession and further longevity can be brought to the fruit tree community.

As an amenity site Stamps Orchard has considerable benefit to the community. Much loved by locals and visiting walkers alike the orchard is still a joy to behold at most times of the year with spring blossom and autumnal fruits standing out as obvious highlights. In the winter the stark contrast of the old weathered wood against pristine white snow presents a memorable sight on a chilly day.



For wildlife, especially birds, the veteran, hollowed trunks of trees provide both a home to woodpeckers and little owls alike whilst for woodpeckers the tree trunks are also the site of rich food source in the form of insects. In autumn visiting fieldfares and redwings feast on the fallen fruit. The noble chafer beetle, a rare native insect, lives in the decaying heart of the older trees, emerging briefly after several years to reproduce then die.

Mistletoe grows strongly on the apple trees, but notably avoids the pear trees. This is harvested annually by Colwall Orchard Group, not only to help protect the trees from this invasive, hemi-parasite but also to sell the attractive, female, berried plants at the annual Colwall Mistletoe Fair held in December.

Stamps Orchard is a valued and beautiful site, rich in history and wildlife. A corner of Colwall to be visited, appreciated and treasured.