

Orchard is now blossoming after years of hard work



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When David Wheatley took over as the custodian at Willock Farm in Wisbech St Mary, 13 years ago, its apple orchard was little more than a collection of overgrown trees and brambles.

Today, it is a thriving orchard set within 313 acres of woodland and arable land which boasts the finest apples, pears, plums and cherries and has become a site of environmental significance.

"When we came here it had an orchard which had been neglected because it was not commercially viable," Mr Wheatley said.

"It was mainly brambles and trees which had just been left to grow. It was all scrubland. You couldn't even walk in most of it.

"It is now looking brilliant and just about where we want it to be."

The story of the Cambridgeshire County Council-held orchard's decade-long turnaround started in 2003, when Willock Farm, in

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David Wheatley, custodian at Willock Farm

Rummers Lane, successfully applied to be part of a government-funded countryside stewardship scheme to restore the area, which is more than 100-years-old.

"The main objective was orchard restoration, to stop the trees dying and to let much more air and light through," Mr Wheatley said, as the overgrown trees had blocked the sunlight needed for growth.

Although he said he could have not have undertaken the project without outside funding because of the orchard's lack of commercial viability, it still took a lot of hard



work. Mr Wheatley and a team of between three and four workers spent about eight hours per day pruning branches in the winter months - the best season to do it, as cutting a tree while it is dormant helps increase its growth during the summer.

They had to do that for between three and five years before their efforts started to pay off.

Sheep were also brought in to graze the grass around the trees for six to eight months of the year, so that the grass would be constantly cut and have a chance to regrow.

"We could have used a machine, but sheep are much more effective," Mr Wheatley said.

Although not everything is picked from the 22-acre orchard, which boasts 2,700 trees, Mr Wheatley estimates there are 100 tonnes of apples up for grabs on the site, with 28 different varieties which have been identified.

Previously, the only edible apples were right at the top of the trees.

However, Mr Wheatley said: "The main benefit is for the wildlife."

He is hopeful funding for the countryside stewardship scheme will be renewed for another 10 years to enable him to maintain the orchard in the future, which he said is particularly important given the threat to apple orchards at present.

"There are lots of old apple orchards around here that have just been lost," he said.

"There used to be hundreds of orchards, but now they are getting few and far between because people have found a better use for the land

to make more money. They are an important historical link which we don't want to lose. The main reason their existence is under threat is that they don't produce a lot of income. It takes a lot of work to sort them out.

years of hard work

Do you know your apples?

Can you name these apple varieties in our fun quiz? The answers are printed below.



- 1) Bramley
- 2) Michalmas Red
- 3) Allington Pippin
- 4) Newton Wonder
- 5) Grenadier Discovery

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Above, the film crew at Willock Farm, Wisbech. Left, Mary Dimambro, from Natural England, taking a look at the orchard. Pictures: STEVE WILLIAMS

smaller trees which require much less labour to pick. "You can produce cheaper apples faster on small trees, but you don't get the other benefits," Mr Wheatley said.

The farmer is now hoping to show people all the joys of his orchard at Willock Farm's apple day between 10am and 4pm tomorrow, where people will be able to visit the orchard for free and pick their own apples.

Representatives from the East of England Apples and Orchards Project will also be present to help people identify their own fruits and there will be homemade cakes made with fruits from the orchard, as well as apple juice and honey made by Willock Farm.

Willock Farm is also participating in a Japanese television documentary designed to show how the orchard progresses at different stages of the year. Mr Wheatley said: "We are proud to be custodians of the Willock Farm orchard and are delighted to share it each year at the apple day."

"The event is a great chance to come and learn about the diversity of orchards and their benefits for wildlife, to buy apples and speak to the farmers who grow them."

Steve Count, Cambridgeshire County Council's cabinet member for resources and performance, added: "I am delighted that one of our tenants is taking a leading role in this celebration of traditional native apple varieties, many of which are in danger of dying out as they are no longer commercial crops."

For more information about the apple day, please telephone Willock Farm on 01945 419035.

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