

## ALDER BUCKTHORN and WILD SERVICE

Alder Buckthorn, *Frangula alnus*, occurs locally in certain parts of Blean Woods. It is more shrub than tree and is found in the understorey. After coppicing a flush of Alder Buckthorn may appear as a response to increased light. Consequently it is doing well along some of those rides recently widened for the benefit of the heath fritillary butterfly. An example is the ride that runs roughly parallel to the *Radfall Road* to the west of the Canterbury-Whitstable road as it passes through Blean village.

Alder Buckthorn does not have thorns neither is it related to the Alder! However, *Frangula alnus* prefers damp woods and thus it may inhabit the same territory as the Alder. There is indirect evidence to suppose that Alder Buckthorn was planted in The Blean for it was an important charcoal species. Charcoal from its wood was highly prized as an ingredient for a gunpowder used to make reliable fuses. The gunpowder mills at Faversham once supplied the naval dockyard at Chatham with such fuses; indeed they were employed as late as WW2. A purgative can be extracted from the dried bark of Alder Buckthorn. The bark was also utilised as a source of natural yellow/brown dyes. The berries turn from green through red to purple-black as they ripen and this fruit yields green and blue/grey dyes. The green fruits (or *sappe-berries*), when added to alum or lime-water and gum Arabic, formed the paints such as artists once used. Later they were superseded by the use of aniline dyes derived from coal-tar distillates. The wood is easily sharpened to fashion the skewers once favoured by butchers. The butcher's skewer was called a "dog" and in some parts of the country Alder Buckthorn is known as "black dogwood". The heartwood is orange and the narrow sapwood a paler yellow. "Black dogwood" probably represented the fact that the main use of the wood was for making charcoal. In conservation terms Alder Buckthorn is a most important tree or shrub for the larvae of the lovely Brimstone Butterfly feed upon its leaves.



*Frangula alnus* prefers clay (or wet alluvial soils) and consequently it grows well in The Blean. The shrub is seen to best advantage in autumn when the hanging yellow leaves and dark berries combine to make it particularly attractive. The species should not be confused with our other buckthorn, *Rhamnus catharticus*, which is chalk-loving and carries a genuine spine. John Gerard, the apothecary, wrote in his "Herball" (~1600) that both buckthorns were found in "Kent and sundrie places". The berries of both species were noted for their purgative properties, in particular those of *Rhamnus catharticus*. Indeed, *R. catharticus* was known as the "common purging thorne". Syrup of Buckthorn was once prescribed as a purging medicine but its effects were often too violent and its use has long been discontinued.

Mystery surrounds the name "Buckthorn"; it may have come about as a corruption of the German name "Buxdorn" which might have been better transcribed as Box-thorn.

Unlike Alder Buckthorn, the Wild Service (or *Sorbus torminalis*) is a genuine tree species. However, examples of a reasonably mature specimen of good size are relatively uncommon in The Blean. It grows very slowly, does not germinate at all freely and only colonises primary woodland - normally oak or ash woodland. Indeed, in this part of the country it is considered to be an ancient woodland indicator species. One of the rarest of British native species, it was once more widespread and more abundant. Its charcoal has been found in settlements dating back to over two thousand years ago and the decline of Wild Service may in part be explained by the activity of the ancient wood colliers. However, other factors have been at work. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Service was the preferred wood for gun-stocks and this practice may have its origin in the fact that in earlier centuries cross-bow stocks were fashioned from the same material. Indeed a 1260 archive makes reference to two Wild Service trees being taken from Havering Park in Essex to make cross-bows for the King. To this day Havering remains an area where Wild Service still flourishes.

In Kent service wood was used for the striking portion of the flails once used to thresh corn. In the woods of The Blean a good tree may be found at the side of a ride or on the woodland fringe where it receives more light; in the depths of the wood it tends to sucker producing long spindly stems with a weeping habit. Research undertaken in Epping Forest suggests that the majority of Wild Service trees there today originated from suckers rather than from seed and in many cases the mother tree had long since rotted away. Some groups of trees may be genetically identical having all been derived from a single seed many centuries ago. This phenomenon is most likely to occur where woodland conditions have been relatively unchanged over a period of time. In Blean Woods it is clear that reproduction can also take place by layering; an old service hedge has been noted on an important wood-bank. It is also clear that thin trees have fallen over and taken root again along their length. Straight lines of seedlings can be observed with the parent stem rotting between each “new” tree.

In 1913 Lord Rothschild, an early conservationist, exhorted the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves to take steps to preserve the service (and other specified trees) in Government forests. Thus, through the direction of the Board of Agriculture, tree nurseries began cultivating *Sorbus torminalis* and this proved difficult to do from seed. Exposure to prolonged hard frost was necessary if germination was to take place. Clearly refrigeration can now be used but, with our warmer winters, this may explain why sexual reproduction appears not to be occurring in the wild. Long term, this loss of variety does not bode well for the species but we can still enjoy the Wild Service in The Blean. It is distinguished by its maple-like leaf, but it is unrelated to representatives of the *Acer* genus. Further confusion with the maples may arise because, like them, its leaves turn a wonderful golden brown in early autumn. In fact Wild Service is a relative of the Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) with which it hybridises in one of our local woods.

Wild Service



and

the hybrid leaves



In Kent the Wild Service is known as the chequer tree. The bark tends to peel off in rectangular strips to give a chequered effect; some speculate that this may be the origin of the name. I have never seen a local tree displaying this particular property and the explanation of the name seems improbable to me. Many argue that the word “service” is derived from the Latin word *cerevisia*, a kind of beer. Indeed Spanish folk drink *cerveza* today. Wild Service fruit have been used to make alcoholic drinks over thousands of years. Virgil records that the Scythians of southern Russia made an intoxicating drink from service berries and not from grapes. (*Sorbus torminalis* thrives in south Russia today.) The chequer board was an emblem for a drinking house that originated in ancient Egypt; similarly in Britain a sign was used to suggest the nature of such an establishment to people who could not read. In Kent, as elsewhere, the chequer board has been used as an inn sign and many such places became known as “The Chequers”. Wild Service trees grown locally for use in beer making may thus have come to be known as chequer trees. The chequers (or chess) board consists of squares of wood of light and dark hue. Wood carvers have enjoyed working with service and some of these boards have their paler pinkish squares made from this wood.

Chaucer’s writings are well known but he was also a forester who listed the fruiting trees of his day as apple, bullace, cherry, hazel, medlar, pear, plum, quince and service. Culpeper in his *Complete Herbal* (1653) wrote “It (service) is so well-known in the place where it grows that it needs no description”. Earlier in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Thomas Tusser was recommending it as a good fruit tree in one of his *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century the fruits of the service were treated with disdain. Rich in Vitamin C, the berries had helped poor families through winter complaints for many centuries. In those times children of Kent had collected the berries and threaded them by their stalks onto sticks. They were hung outside in the frost to soften and then brought indoors for the rest of the winter. Thus treated, they were much more palatable than would otherwise have been the case. One wonders whether this technique been forgotten by the 19<sup>th</sup> century! Dried and powdered, the speckled rust coloured berries found an additional medicinal use in former times; they had a binding effect as a cure for colic and dysentery.

*Acknowledgement: Much of the folklore surrounding Wild Service comes from Patrick Roper. He works for the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre.*

*Researched by David Shire & Ken Martin of Blean Heritage & Community Group ©*