

Sorbus vagensis

Sorbus vagensis is a natural but rare hybrid of the Wild Service (*Sorbus torminalis*) and the Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*). A hybrid of these two parent trees was first recognised as such at Fontainebleau in the early part of the 18th century. Local forms native to the British Isles have been found in the Avon Gorge, the Wye Valley and Exmoor. Initially these were thought to be distinct species. Thus the type found in the Avon Gorge was named *Sorbus bristoliensis* and that found in north Exmoor was labelled *Sorbus subcuneata*. The hybrids found in the Wye Valley received the designation, *Sorbus vagensis*. The understanding now is that the various types are one and the same and the latter name, *Sorbus vagensis*, has been adopted to cover them all.

A mature Wild Service Tree may attain a height of some 40 feet. Its flowers and fruits resemble those of Rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*, whilst its bark is similar to that of Hawthorn. Its leaves are unlike any other *Sorbus*; indeed its foliage is often mistaken for that of a maple. Tormina is a term used to describe griping pains in the bowels. The Wild Service Tree justifies its name, *Sorbus torminalis*, for in times past a concoction of its berries was used for the relief of colic. Its wood is tough. The sapwood is light in colour but the heartwood is a lovely red-brown. Understandably this heartwood is highly prized for carving and cabinet making. In France the Wild Service Tree is grown commercially for the high quality furniture industry.

In The Blean *Sorbus torminalis* is widely but thinly spread. It is most likely to be seen as a rather fragile understorey plant and in these circumstances it tends to sucker vigorously. If it is to achieve the status of a timber tree it needs an abundance of light and thus is most likely to be discovered on the edge of a woodland ride. In 2003 I noted with great sadness that a specimen of some six inches in diameter at its base was felled in order to satisfy the current obsession for “opening up” the woods. It is a pity that some of those with a chain-saw in their hands have no idea what they are cutting down! This is particularly relevant in relation to the hybrids since the implication is that the parent trees must reach reproductive age. In Kent the Wild Service Tree is known as the chequers (or checkers) tree. You may know a pub of the same name with a sign featuring the tree itself or else a chequered board. The pattern of the chequered board was made of wooden squares with alternating colours, often yellow and red-brown. Was the red-brown wood that of the service? (The Court of Exchequer originally used a chequered board for accounting purposes.)

The Whitebeam is usually a small tree and it prefers calcareous soils. Consequently it is not widely found on the acid clays of The Blean. However, it coppices well and it does feature as an occasional component of the underwood. Uncoppiced it may appear on the edges of rides and on woodland fringes. The leaves are elliptic and shallow-toothed, but they are best characterised by their white underside. *Beam* was the Saxon word for tree; hence white-beam.

The hybrids found in The Blean are remarkable. When the leaves first come out they most closely resemble those of Whitebeam. Later in the year the leaves are much more akin to Service. In middle or late May you may be lucky and find both shapes of leaf on the same tree! (See the photograph)

