



Our President, Tunstall Bates, has given me his recollections of the growing of cherries in Kent, based on his experiences as an auctioneer. In addition, a colleague of his, another auctioneer, has given him an account of underwood sales in the past (selling wood for cutting down as a form of forest management). Together they give a fascinating insight into aspects of life in rural Kent. In addition, he would like to bring the attention of our Society's members to a forthcoming talk he will be giving in St Mildreds Church on Saturday 9th April 2005 on the church itself, starting at 2.30 p.m. The talk will be followed by a tour of the church and then refreshments. The cost will be £4 per head, all proceeds to go to the MacMillan Nurses organisation.

Alec Laurence

Kentish Cherries

Kent as a county has always been associated with the growing of fruit and hops, although both activities are now on a reduced scale. It is reported that during World War II, American servicemen were reputed as saying that all cherries came from Kent, but this claim would probably be disputed by other fruit growing counties. But there is no doubt that cherry orchards were a feature in the county for generations, and the resultant crops were frequently sold at auction, on the understanding that subsequent picking would be done by the purchasers. The dates of auction varied for obvious reasons, according to the season, the variation being as much as ten days or even a fortnight. As regards the cherries themselves, there were dessert ones which were black in colour when ripe, and others classed as white cherries, although red in colour when ripe.

Prior to their sale by auction, the cherry orchards required a certain amount of nurturing to bring forth good crops. They were particularly demanding on the soil, and on occasions, for no apparent reason, a simple tree would literally curl up and die, irrespective of the time of year. Tunstall can recall one instance of this feature when the fruit had formed. Some growers frowned on the replacement of dead trees in existing orchards, considering it to be unwise and poor husbandry, but nevertheless in practice it occurred. In earlier years the cherry tree grew to a considerable height; in one instance, Tunstall recalls where the farmer removed the centre of his trees, which were then allowed to grow on. The result was the need for a 50-stave ladder (in those days not reinforced with metal rods) to reach the topmost fruit. Moving such heavy ladders was an art in itself, as damage to the fruit had to be avoided, but the positioning had to be such that the ladders were sufficiently stable for the pickers to reach the highest points. Not all pickers would be that venturesome but there was an instance of a 20-year-old girl from a family traditionally adept at cherry picking who would reach the highest fruit, perhaps on a 60-stave ladder.

Bird nuisance was a problem as the cherries began to ripen. To combat this annoyance, men or boys were employed as bird scarers who would rig up a system of bells or other items to frighten the birds from the crop. Patrols were undertaken by these men who would make loud noises themselves, in addition to pulling ropes or strings to set off the bells. A long day was required from them, from about 5 a.m. to dark. However, on the idyllic side, the tall orchards could be grazed by ewes and lambs, both the grass and any low branches within reach. Cherries were also grown by farmers who would pick their own fruit to despatch to Covent Garden. In the recession era between the wars, there were instances of the cherries being looked over individually to ensure a sure sale. After World War II, cherry orchards were grubbed out and sales decreased, but some 20-25 years ago, replanting occurred, using the more manageable dwarf rooting stock, and sales have risen accordingly. In the Tenterden area, one does not have to go far to find cherries for sale at the roadside, but very few orchards.

Annual Underwood Sales (Late 1960s)

Although there were some small private sales in for example the Woodchurch and Rolvenden areas, the larger sales were organised by Burrows, the Auctioneers (formerly of 39-41 Bank Street, Ashford). The Annual Underwood Sales were always in the first week of November, with all cants (a recognised piece of land of an unspecified acreage) being inspected by the auctioneer the previous week, to fix reserves with the vendors or their agents. There were three auctioneers who regularly conducted these sales, Sydney Clements, Richard Tuttle and Bill Betts, all Senior Partners of Burrows. The week consisted of 3 days of selling, namely:-

Hothfield Sale, at the Woolpack, Hothfield on the Wednesday, when 50-60 acres of chestnut would be offered. The main vendors were Lord Hothfield (Potters Corner Woods), Godington Park (Major Wyndham Green, Lodge Wood, Potters Corner), Tom Hills (Little Chart), Hatch Park Estate and Joe Fagg (Sandyhurst Lane). Most of the cants were about 15 years old, except for Tom Hills who offered 13 year-old chestnuts.

Eastwell Sale, at the Chequers Inn, Challock on either Thursday or Friday, 90-100 acres for sale. The main vendors were The Forestry Commission (Kings Wood, Challock, 60-80 acres), Sir Charles Jessel and Alex Gordon (Waddenhall Woods, Petham) and Captain Brodrick (Eastwell Park Estate). Ages of the cants ranged from 15 to 18 years, with the heavy wood coming from Kings Wood, where in good years several cants would make £1000 per acre.

Ulcombe Sale, at the Harrow Inn, Ulcombe, on the Saturday, when 30-40 acres were offered. As Burrows fixed the reserves, the cants were not inspected before the day of the sale. The main vendor was the Marquess of Ormonde, with the Hollingbourne Estate participating on occasions.

All sales commenced at 1.00 p.m. and were for ready money. All purchasers had to sign Conditions of Sale, i.e. time limits for cutting and clearing, care with fires, etc. On payment for their purchases, each purchaser was given a "beer ticket" which at one time was 2s 6d but over the years gradually rose to £1. Except for buying the landlords a drink, there was no charge for the use of the bars because of the trade the sales brought to the inns.

Purchasers remembered were Joe Holmes, Jim Packman, Jackson fencing, Bob Mairs, "Old Man Spiers and his son", Frank Spears, Reg London, Fred Town, Harrison's, Charlie Scamp, Harold Feakins, Orlestone Sawmills and Dave Ransley.

Originally all sales were in Acres, Rods and Perches but eventually measurement became decimals of acres. All cants were sold at "per acre", with possibly some "rubbish" cants being sold "all at".

The underwood sales generated other work for Burrows such as the sale of freehold and leasehold woodland for the Forestry Commission, and sales of timber and areas of pulpwood for many of the vendors.

THOUGHTS ON TENTERDEN

Fair Tenterden, so calm, so bright!
In that placid town I dwell;
The charming views are my delight,
Being what I love so well.

The peaceful aspect of the town
Trends the weary heart to cheer;
It is a place of some renown,
And to many hearts is dear.

The lengthy street, so broad and clean,
Is a sight that charms the eye;
It is indeed a pleasant scene –
Pleasant to the passers-by.

The tranquil shops on either side,
Seem to breathe a calm content;
While those who serve – perhaps with pride –
Are on active business bent.

The lovely country, far and near,
Rich in pasture, fresh and green,
Presents a picture, here and there,
Full of beauty, gladly seen.

The tempting walks, replete with charm,
Gladden all who taste possess;
The joy they bring should be a balm,
E'en to some who feel distress.

Long be my stay at Tenterden,
'Mid its quiet joys, so rife;
And glad am I to use my pen
To depict a happy life!

Newcome R Raven (Colonel)
Westbourne House
Tenterden
May 21st 1901

"Health without wealth,
Wealth without health
Wealth with health."

"Naughty Ashford, surly
Wye,
And Poor Kennington
Hard by!"

"Deal savages, Canterbury
parrots,
Dover sharks, Sandwich
carrots."