

Ask any Flackwell Heath school child what their village was once famed for and they will tell you that it was cherries. Though many may never have tasted the cherries that made this Chiltern hilltop famous, the poems, the stories and the early photographs will tell them all they really need to discover.

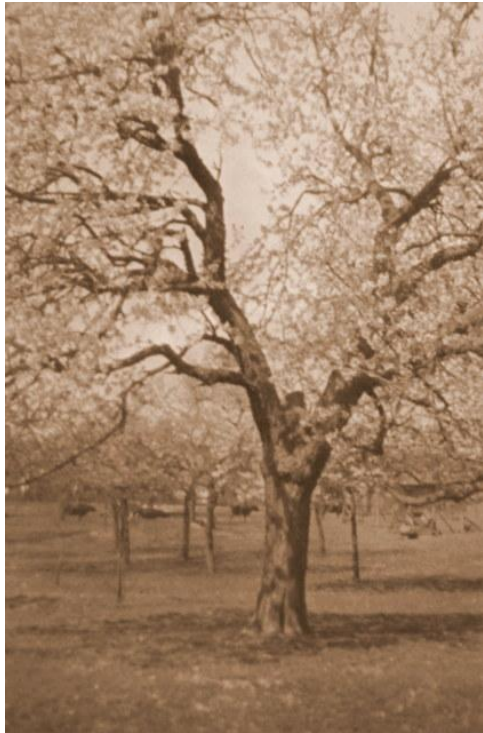


Cherry pickers courtesy of Edward Smethurst Christ Church Flackwell Heath

No one really knows for sure when the first cherry tree was planted in this area but the soil here, which is primarily flint and chalk with some areas of sand, proved to be of little use for most arable farming. The name of one of our principal routes to the village, Sheepridge Lane, which links us to the River Thames, suggests that this ridge of the Chilterns was suitable for rearing sheep and there are sheep still grazing here today. The lack of a ready supply of water, until it was piped from the valley below, meant that keeping cattle proved problematic. Some of the land here was fed by springs that dried up in a hot summer, or left the ground too marshy in a wet winter.

It would appear that the villagers, few though there were at this early time, eked out a living doing a 'bit of this and a bit of that'. The early womenfolk of the village supplemented their income with lace making, and along Chopstick Alley, now Fairview Lane, they chopped sticks for charcoal making in the nearby kilns, hence the name Charcoal Bottom. When the village population grew they also sought out work in the paper mills in the Wye valley below.

By looking at the land use of the area there were evidently sheep, some cows, mainly for milk, and also pigs. Stan Smith's orchard, circa 1940s, one of the last village orchards (behind the Three Horseshoes public house and Stan's old house, Dairy Cottage) not only had fruit trees but dairy cows as well.



Smith's orchard courtesy of Reg Wilks family

Although the village orchards grew apples, pears and plums, one of the more successful fruits was the cherry. These were primarily black cherries and although the odd cherry tree does still grow within the village, in a front or back garden, the ones that were grown commercially no longer exist, the orchards being grubbed up for the 1950s and 1960s post-war housing boom. So there are now very few villagers who can remember the orchards, the blossom or the cherry picking. But we all know that it was once the Queen of the Chilterns cherry villages because old poems, past memories and early newspapers tell us so.

Bucks Herald – Saturday 11 May 1901

“No one who has ever seen Flackwell Heath in all the glorious luxuriance of cherry blossom will wonder that the inhabitants are proud of the peculiar beauty of their hamlet. For above half-a-mile you walk along a narrow lane bordered on either side by orchards and gardens planted with cherry trees, whose over-hanging branches are one exquisite mass of lovely bloom, filling the air with a faint odour, and giving promise of an abundant crop.”

On April 14th 1882 an article appeared in the South Bucks Free Press that covered the sights seen on a ramble from Wycombe to Flackwell Heath. It begins with the words: “As a great many persons about this time of year pay a visit to Flackwell Heath in order to see the far-famed cherry orchards in bloom...” Thus proving that we were already well known by this time for our spectacular show of spring cherry blossom which lasted all too briefly before the wind blew the petals to the ground and the more serious work of the cherry tree began – the cherry itself.

It has been documented that the last cherry orchard in the village was planted in 1889, and one of the first orchards is believed to have been Weedon's Orchard on the corner of Straight Bit and Chapman Lane and now sadly covered with housing. This is reputed to have been planted in the 17th Century. In fact cherry and fruit orchards lined the way all down Chapman Lane, spreading across into Northern Woods (North End Woods in the early days) and into Sedgmoor (now only Sedgmoor Lane reminds us of this earlier hamlet of farm, farm cottages and house). We have the photographs to prove it.



Photo courtesy of SWOP

This is about the closest we can get to confirming which land was used for what as the whole village was devoted to farming in one way or another and as the tenants changed hands, so did the produce that they grew. But cherries remained uppermost in the list of our commercial products and elderly farmers and farm labourers to this day still call the fields by the names of long ago.

The Smith fruit-growing family of Chapel Road (their old flint-stoned farmhouse still exists, hidden behind newer houses) have memories from earlier times when they would take their produce up to the London markets; when they would go to orchards in the surrounding area and as far as Slough to pick the fruit; and when the orchard beside their house was one of the best plum orchards known in the village.

The Gibson family also had a large orchard, now part of Juniper Hill School, which adjoined the farmland of Norland Farm owned by William Jennings. The Jennings family had also farmed Juniper Hill Farm at the top of Whitepit Lane and a generation before that members of the same family had also farmed at Abbey Barn Farm which, in turn, had once been farmed by Ebenezer Timms who also farmed at Cobbles Farm on the border of Wycombe Marsh. All except Cobbles are now under housing. Almost all these farms would have had an orchard to support their income.

Bucks Chronicle and Bucks Gazette – Saturday 08 June 1861
FIVE PROMISING ORCHARDS OF FRUIT,
At FLACKWELL HEATH & HEATH END,
In the parish of High Wycombe, Bucks,

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION, BY
MR. WESTFIELD,
AT THE “HORSE SHOE” PUBLIC-HOUSE,
FLACKWELL HEATH, on MONDAY, JUNE
17, 1861, at Three for Four, p.m., by direction of
The Executor under the Will of the late Mr. Jas. Lee.

Another Smith family, part of the Smiths who farmed at Dairy Farm, also farmed at Pigeon House Farm and Winchbottom Farm. All of them had orchards, as indeed did Glory Mill in Loudwater where many of the village men found work in the mill. But even these mill workers, when the cherry harvest demanded pickers, would leave their mill work for a refreshing ‘holiday’ picking fruit. Their children opted out of school to do likewise. This paid well but was short-lived, and was just for the picking season.

In fact most houses in this area had a large garden with fruit trees. You only have to look at the early sale particulars to see that the addition of an orchard was a valuable asset when it came to enticing a new buyer to purchase property here.

South Bucks Standard – Friday 18 September 1908

NORTHERN WOODS, FLACKWELL HEATH,

About 1 mile from Loudwater, and 4 miles
from High Wycombe, Bucks.

Messrs. WILLIAMS & BROWN,
WILL SELL BY AUCTION,
At the White Hart Hotel, High Wycombe
ON FRIDAY, 18. SEPTEMBER, 1908,
at 4.pm precisely.
A FREEHOLD DWELLING HOUSE,
with Outbuildings, Garden, and a close of
Orchard Land, now in the occupation of Mr.
James West.

Old newspapers are also full of tales of scrumping, stealing, and other bad habits of the Flackwell locals who spent a good deal of their free time in the local public houses, of which there were many. This led to brawls between the men of Flackwell Heath and those in the valleys below, for example in Loudwater, Wooburn and Little Marlow (Bourne End, as we now know it, not then really in existence). Flackwell men were nicknamed Kaffirs and it is reputed that this was because of the cherries which were grown here. Roger Parkes, in his book *Alice Ray Morton's Cookham*, suggests that the name derived from a particular black and juicy cherry seedling imported from

Russia, the Circassia cherry, shortened by the locals to Cassia/Cassir.

British imperialism and the Victorian expansion of the British Empire may have added confusion to the development of the name, with people mistakenly hearing Kaffir for Cassir. Whatever the origins of the name Treadaway Hill became an important route to 'Kaffir land' for 'furreners' (ie anyone not from Flackwell Heath) who visited us from the chair factories and paper mills in the valley below and later still, for those travelling from farther afield by railway. All of them primarily came for Cherry Blossom Sunday to see the orchards in full bloom, and later in the year for our Cherry Fair or Fayre that was held annually at the end of July when the cherry pies would be distributed. These were so juicy that they were traditionally made as turnovers where one of the corners would be bitten into first, allowing the thick dark cherry juice to be supped before biting into the turnover itself. 'Little Blacks' were the cherries that were the best ones for turnovers according to the memories from Mrs Kathleen Nash née Clark, sadly no longer with us, who remembered the cherry turnover tea parties with family and friends in the garden of their house Clay Cottage, now the land of Clay Close.

Cherry fairs have come and gone within the village, depending on the willingness of village volunteers in various later eras to work their magic, and have occasionally been resurrected in the guise of Flackwell fayres, fetes and carnivals. Since the 1960s Carrington School, Juniper Hill School and the Flackwell Heath Cherry Fayre Committee have all, intermittently, had a go at organising such events. The location for these activities has also varied depending on the availability of land. The last Cherry Fayre was held in 2013 at the recreation ground on Straight Bit.



Photo courtesy of Sally Scagell

Ornamental cherry trees now dot the village landscape wherever there are still green spaces but these tend to be of pink blossom as opposed to the traditional white and, although pretty, they can never replace the splendour seen on Cherry Blossom Sunday.

Bucks Herald – Saturday 03 May 1890

“One of the prettiest sights to be witnessed anywhere in this district at the present time is the cherry orchards of Flackwell Heath. A goodly number of visitors wended their way thither on Sunday last to get a glimpse of these far-famed orchards in all the glory of full bloom.”

To learn more about the village of the past we have the poems written by Nat Bowler, the memoirs of Reg Wilks, the research by village residents such as Miss Austin, Beryl Fabel (all twentieth century residents) and more recently of Gwenda Grange and Denis Barber, in addition to the stories written by villagers for the 2000 Millennium folder now in the Community Library.

Flackwell Cherries by Nat Bowler in ‘Frackle Mosaic’

“The Frognoors and the Bigaroos
The Blackhearts and Mirellas too
The Hunies all small birds attack
The Rivers and the Bastard Blacks
The Reynolds Hearts they fill the sieves,
The Buds, the cherry pies do give,
The Casher which is red and black,
But my favourite cherry is the Nap.”

The Flackwell Local Area History Group came into existence in 2012 and they have gathered together everything they can find. This has included audio recordings from residents happy to supply their memories of the past when the village was still a hamlet of fields, woods and cherry orchards on the top of this stony ridge of the Chilterns – and when we were still one of the foremost Chiltern cherry villages.



Photo courtesy of Sally Scagell