



SUFFOLK'S SEASIDE FRUIT TREES

Advice Note 14 (STOGAN 14) Part 1

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PLEASE NOTE

The map for the Seaside Fruit Trees Walk can be downloaded as a separate pdf document for printing in A3 size (Part 2).

PART 1

INTRODUCTION - APPLES AT THE SEASIDE!

Look at the Suffolk Biodiversity Information Service's (SBIS) map of the orchards present in the county in the early 1900s and you might think that the sandy Suffolk coast is a desert, but in fact, very close to the sea, are a number of almost certainly self-sown fruit trees (if we can call them trees). The SBIS map can be found at www.suffolkbis.org.uk/sites/default/files/biodiversity/STOG/2ndeditionOSOrchards.pdf

Suffolk may, or may not, be unique in the frequency of these seaside fruit trees, but locally they can be common, some very close to the sea, and some are even worth eating!

There are a number of alternative origins for the apple, pear and plum trees in open country and farmland. Some have undoubtedly been planted, but most seem to be feral seedlings. Some may originate from recently discarded cores, or could be many generations removed from the original discarded core.

Apples were originally introduced into Great Britain several thousand years ago, pears may have been later, and it is noticeable that the apples, in particular, are generally relatively modern in size, appearance and taste. This is quite unlike the small, old crab or feral apples found in old hedges and woodland inland in Suffolk, suggesting if they were not intentionally planted, they are likely to be seedlings from discarded cores.

However, exactly why the Suffolk coast has so many of these fruit trees isn't clear. Suggestions include generations of picnickers, traditional human untidiness, high salt soils contributing to breaking the natural dormancy of seed (which is very pronounced in apples and pears) or that no one has looked diligently enough on other coasts! Another suggestion is that many ancient hedges away from the coast once carried the same high numbers of feral fruit or crab trees, but hedge removal, or selective felling for timber use (pear wood was known for its high value, and apple wood for mill cogwheels) has reduced their frequency.

The Suffolk sandlings coast has many interesting fruit trees (and if any reader knows of any other such trees please tell Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group / Orchards East). Also, plums and gage trees have been discovered recently - and some have been propagated as potentially garden worthy. Two apples, at least, have been propagated for their crop, but outside Suffolk, as far as we know, only one fruit variety known to be from a salt sprayed site has been propagated. This is the excellent eating variety Bardsey, currently still growing on the side of the warden's house on Bardsey, an island off Wales.

Some trees have grown so close to the sea that they are vulnerable to being washed away by a high tide. Two are well documented: an apple tree at Covehithe which was washed away in about 2010 and a pear tree growing from a sea wall which was washed onto the beach near Minsmere sluice about 2015. It was there for several weeks before it was finally washed out to sea.

Minsmere and Dunwich

The highest known densities of these seaside fruit trees in Suffolk is at the National Trust's Dunwich Heath and south along the seawall of RSPB's Minsmere reserve marshes. A map and description of the Seaside Fruit Trees Walk can be found on p. 9. The footpath route takes the visitor past 14 apples and pears (and a few plum seedlings and a dense bullace *Prunus insititia*). A small sea-wind blasted pear tree about 3m (10ft) high is growing beside the Coast Guard Cottages road, but this has not been seen to fruit.

Apple Dunwich Heath

National Trust's Dunwich Heath has several apple trees, but the most well-known is close by the road to the Coast Guard Cottages. It bears high quality conical apples, ripens in September, and is best eaten soon after picking. It has been a source of apples for local eating and, it seems, has been propagated for local gardens in Dunwich, Southwold and Bramfield. Suffolk Traditional Orchard Group (STOG) has propagated the variety recently and distributed grafts to several community orchards.

The tree is only 150 m from the cliff edge and is probably well in excess of 70 years old (and could be very much older). As it overtops the brambles and gorse, the top branches are burnt by the sea winds and so it grows very slowly. Recently STOG members were told that an apple called Dunwich Pearmain grows locally and this may, or may not, be the same individual as the tree has not been indentified.



Fig. 1 Above left and right: the apple tree *Dunwich Heath*, close to the road leading to the Coastguard Cottages, National Trust Dunwich Heath Feb 2009

Below: the apples are conical in shape.

In 2018, samples of the leaves of this apple tree were DNA fingerprinted under the FruitID scheme (www.fruitid.com), affiliated to Orchards East (OE) and funded by the Heritage Fund. The results did not match any known apple cultivar in the National Fruit Collection, Brogdale, Kent (www.nationalfruitcollection.org.uk/) and no other match has since been found. In 2018, at a meeting of specialists, it was agreed that the tree met the criteria to use the name "*Dunwich Heath*", which had been proposed by STOG, and that it should be recorded as such in the Register of Local Cultivars.

Shingle Street

Only brought to the attention of STOG in 2012, but known to its owner for over 30 years, this stunted and straggly bush is within 50m of the landward side of the very extensive Shingle Street Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) shingle bank. The Martello tower looms in the mist in the background (for a description of Martello Towers see www.geograph.org.uk/article/Martello-Towers). The fruit is ripe in September and is similar to that of a Worcester Pearmain. As far as is known, this seaside tree has not been previously propagated and has not been DNA fingerprinted, but in winter 2012/13 several individuals were grafted by STOG volunteers for later planting in a sandlings fruit collection orchard in Sutton. There are several healthy cherry plums *Prunus cerasifera* planted nearby.



Fig. 2 The untidy stunted apple bush at Shingle Street. The Martello Tower can be seen in the background in the mist.

Walberswick Wonder

In about 2009, Gerald Fayers, apple enthusiast and specialist apple identifier from Gorleston, mentioned the existence of another seaside tree from Walberswick which had also been propagated for its fruit. His informant, a dentist living in Gorleston, owned a graft of the tree in his garden, but did not know the exact location of the original tree in Walberswick.

Gerald gave Paul Read some graftwood and he created a tree that flowered and fruited very precociously with delicious, but short-lived, highly coloured small striped apples in early-August, possibly earlier than the not dissimilar Beauty of Bath variety.

DNA fingerprinting in 2017 showed the variety to be unique. Further enquiries have resulted only in the information that the original tree was in a garden near the sea and that there are lots of them in Walberswick! Since then, about 10 grafts have been distributed to community and private orchards.



Fig. 3 Walberswick Wonder apples from Vale Farm Orchard, Broxtead Estate, Sutton, Suffolk, 12 August 2017. The variety has much of the rich flavour of Beauty of Bath but ripens even earlier. The flesh is white with a red flush just below the skin.

Thorpeness and Aldeburgh

But stranger seaside “trees”, if we can call them that, grow on the shingle beach between Aldeburgh and Thorpeness. There are at least three apple trees and a pear, and possibly others.

These “trees” are certainly tough, resistant to salt spray and probably to occasional inundation by salt water. Most are just small patches of scrub in the lea of the shingle bank, but the largest is near the dry mere a few yards from the sea, south of Thorpeness. It generally appears to be called *Apple Thorpeness*.



Fig. 4 Above left: Gerald Fayers with *Apple Thorpeness* early spring 2008.
 Top right: *Apple Thorpeness* in flower in May.
 Bottom right: the very tasty dessert apple in mid-August

Now almost 12m in diameter, but restricted to about 1m high by the salt winds, the branches of *Apple Thorpeness* snake out along the ground and are occasionally encroached upon by new shingle. It is well known locally and regularly scrumped in August for its very tasty early fruit. It was recently recorded on the Ancient Tree Hunt website, and it could possibly be very old indeed.

The variety has been propagated by STOG since 2009, and in the Suffolk collection orchards at Sutton, Dunwich, Debenham, Thrandeston and Freston. Examples also exist in several private garden orchards and in the scattered orchard project plantings at Waldringfield, Newbourne and Hemley. The variety has also been planted by the Suffolk Coastal AONB and Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project, where, free from the sea-wind, they are becoming large conventional trees. Recently a local nursery and arboretum near Woodbridge, Botanica, grafted new trees (sold under the name of *Aldeburgh Beach Apple*); it is thought most of the new trees are on MM106 root stock.

It is widely thought locally to have been the last tree of an orchard buried by shingle!

The oldest, and most well-known tree, an apple, has been scrumped for many years and made both famous and literary by inclusion in Roger Deakin's last book *Wildwood*. To many it has become "*Roger Deakin's apple*", to others it's "*Apple Thorpeness*", or even "*the tree-in-the-sea*". This is a nod to the famous "House in the Clouds", the water tower house in Thorpeness that can be seen from the tree!

The tree's origin has been the source of speculation for many years, perhaps from its extent, even centuries, and although it is by far the largest example, there are others between Aldeburgh and Thorpeness. Notably, these include one not far north of artist Maggie Hambling's scallop sculpture on the beach and maybe also the one mentioned by author Ronald Blyth in *The Time by the Sea - Aldeburgh 1955-1959*. Paul Read has counted at least four other small tangles of apple barely a metre across.

Around 2006, Gerald Fayers, galvanized by Roger's book, took up the challenge to find out how the "tree" came to be there. It would be nice to say that it is the last remaining apple tree from an orchard now drowned by sea gravel, just the top of the last tree remaining, prevented from growing above the shingle by the sweeping winds off the sea..... However, Gerald's research of old maps suggest that this shingle is very ancient and fairly stable and the source may have been a fisherman and his lunch one day of an apple.

The story doesn't end here. In May 2016, leaves from a young tree, grafted from the original *Apple Thorpeness* some six years earlier were sent to NIAB EMR (www.emr.ac.uk), a fruit research company in Kent, for DNA fingerprinting. These leaves were tested as they were in good condition, instead of the wind tattered leaves of the original tree. The DNA fingerprint was compared with those of over 2,000 trees in the National Fruit Collection in Brogdale, near Faversham, Kent. As with all the other apparently wild seedlings a match was not expected, but instead it turned out to be a tree in the NFC's observation plot that had no name, but was called temporarily Beach Seedling!

Table 1 shows the DNA fingerprint report (funded by Orchards East) from EMR NIAB to FruitID giving the source of the leaf samples and the results of the DNA sampling.

Table 1 The EMR NIAB fruit research company DNA fingerprinting report

Sample No.	Org.	Org. Seq. No	Site /Orchard Name	Tree position / row number	Cultivar known as	Ref tree Y/N	Participant Comments / Notes	Result Preliminary Finding: National Fruit Collection		Suggested follow-up action
A143	STOG	1	Malthouse Piece, Home Farm, Thrandeston, Suffolk	MHP, Nursery Bed	Thorpeness (syn Roger Deakin's Apple, Aldeburgh Beach)	Y	Sample is from tree propagated by grafting scion from original tree	DB Match	Beach Seedling (to be named)	Will be brought into scope for FruitID and picked in 2017. Local orchard group to advise on naming.

This required a visit to the National Fruit Collection's (NFC) archives to find out more.

A note in the archives called it "*Beach Seedling*" and the file states the apple was sent in by Richard Hesseltine of Willow Farm, Assington in 1984. The NFC staff requested some graft wood, which was sent, and from which two trees were propagated. They are still there!

A few years later the NFC staff wrote to Mr Heseltine and asked if he would like some graft wood for him to grow on the variety. Apparently he said yes and was sent some graft wood, but there seems to have been no further correspondence.

Armed with this information, it was easy to locate Willow Farm, Assington, then and now a fruit farm, but Richard had died in 2012. His son, Chris, who ran the fruit farm for many years now lives in Aldeburgh! He knew the apple on the beach and had known it from childhood, but wasn't aware his father had sent fruit and graft wood to the NFC. Chris does not think there are any old trees from that period still at Willow Farm that might have been grafted from the NFC's wood.

No more is known of the history of *Apple Thorpeness*, but if any readers know when it was first noticed, please contact STOG or Orchards East.

Several local gardens may have grafted trees, but unlike Dunwich Heath, STOG has not found any of these. Some of the Suffolk collection orchards contain the variety, at Sutton, Dunwich, Debenham and Shingle Street, and several individuals have been planted by the Waldringfield, Newbourne and Hemley scattered orchard project.

The variety needs a formal name and this will not be easy. Most people seem to call it just 'the apple on the beach'; local people who have grafted it certainly called it Thorpeness, the nearest village, and STOG has circulated it under that name for a decade or more.

Some people know it as Roger Deakin's Apple from reading his book; but although many have searched for the tree, few have been able to find it! Botanica Nursery and Arboretum call it *Aldeburgh Beach Apple*, others call it the *Tree-in-the-sea* and the National Fruit Collection call it '*unknown beach seedling*'.

However, there are many seeding apple trees on and near beaches in Suffolk, notably around Minsmere. Many apple varieties have synonyms. So going with the local flow STOG thinks it should be named THORPENESS synonyms Roger Deakin's Apple, Aldeburgh Beach Apple, (and if we really must... The Tree-in-the-Sea).

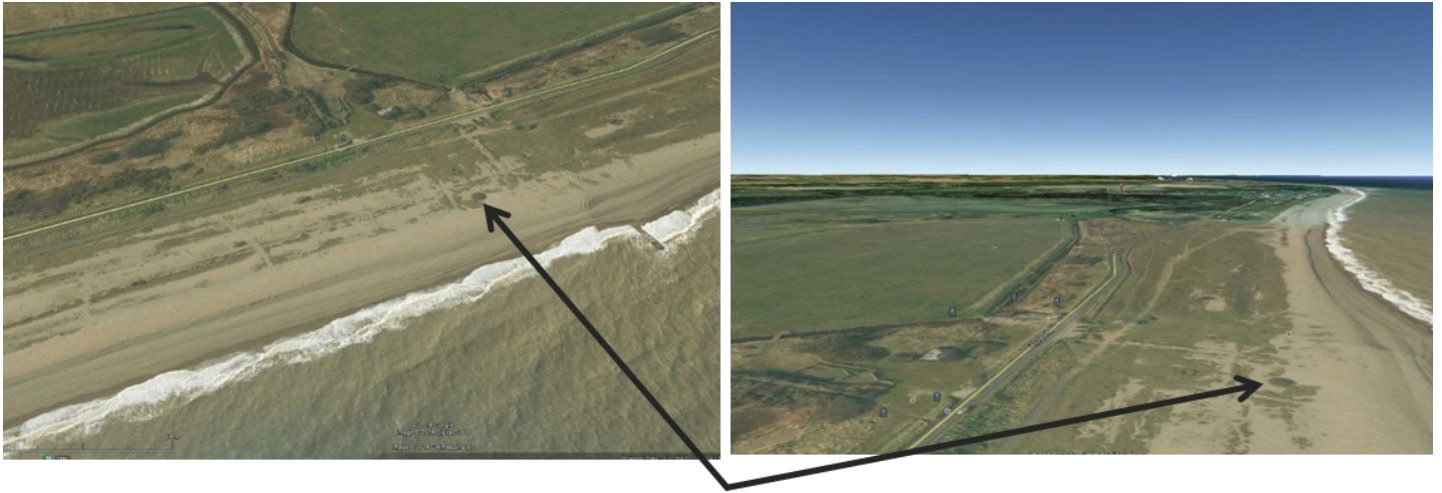


Fig. 5 *Apple Thorpeness* is not easy to find yet it can be seen from the air! Drive to IP16 4NR (using a SatNav), off Thorpe Road, about 800m south of the last Thorpeness house. There is a small pull-in on the seawood/east side of the road and on the opposite side of the road there is a derelict bungalow on the edge of the marshes. From the pull-in walk towards the sea, and slightly towards the south, and the tree is just below the shingle ridge on the landward side (location indicated above).



Fig. 6 *Apple Thorpeness* can be seen on the left in the foreground, Thorpeness village is in the background. The red House-in-the-Clouds is on the skyline in the centre. Several very high spring tides have washed over the ridge and through the apple!

Paul Read

May 2020

Suffolk traditional Orchard Group: www.suffolkbis.org.uk/biodiversity/projects/stog

Orchards East: www.uea.ac.uk/orchards-east

Seaside Fruit Trees Walk



KEY

Tree 1 Pear, 5m tree, bears sweet, quite firm fruit, possibly a seedling from a discarded core. Not identified.

Tree 2 Pear, 4.5m tree, very similar but not the same, possibly a seedling from a discarded core. Not identified.

Tree 3 Apple, 2m, very poorly grown but may be much older than it appears because of the woolly aphid infection at the base. No fruit seen.

Tree 4 Apple, 5m+ substantial tree, bears medium/small red flushed apple with red tinged flesh that do not appear to be a known variety and does not appear to be grafted. Just possibly planted (perhaps as a crab apple, but isn't - pink flowers, too large & red fruit etc).

Tree 5 Apple, small shrub, partly buried in rose and brambles. No fruit seen.

Tree 6 Apple, probably an old tree with two separate recumbent trunks. No fruit seen.

Tree 7 Pear, a small tree washed out in Dec 2013, may now be gone. No fruit remembered.

Bullace scrub, recognized by its fruit in late autumn, some years very little.

Tree 8 Apple, small, possibly young tree, flowered but no fruit in 2013.

Tree 9 Apple, small, possibly young tree, flowered but no fruit in 2013.

Tree 10 Pear, 3m high, scrubby, here for many years. No fruit remembered. (Immediately to the north, also on the verge, is a large Holme Oak!)

Tree 11 Apple, "Dunwich Heath", large dessert apples on a large tree, well known and has been propagated, not identified as any previously known variety. Age uncertain, hence the relatively recent cultivar name. Some fruit almost every year. Makes a good garden or orchard tree.

Seaside Fruit Trees Walk

Starting from the car park at the National Trust's Dunwich Heath Coast Guard cottages (pay and display all year) pass through the barrier and walk down the gravel track towards the beach. After only 20m, on your right, you will see two pear trees (**TREES 1 and 2**) which were beginning to show flower buds in late March 2014. These trees are above the path on the higher ground with well-worn paths to them in fruiting times. They both produce an interesting small dessert fruit suggesting that they are seedlings of relatively modern dessert pears, possibly from discarded cores. Trees in this situation are very difficult to age as they grow slowly and with many set-backs and recoveries.



TREE 1 Pear March 2014
From the deep path between the coastguard cottages to the beach



TREE 2 Pear March 2014
From the cliff top, above the path and looking out to sea

Just beyond these pear trees take a small path to your right going steeply downhill to a pond and another path. Alternatively, you can continue to the bottom of the hill before turning right, then immediately right again using some steps over the sea bank. This path, beside Docwra's Ditch, leads inland away from the sea and takes you to a pond with a dipping platform. Take this westerly path along the base of the heath for about 75m where you will find two apple trees.

On the left hand side of the path is a small, thin apple tree (**TREE 3**), leaning and with a thick, distorted trunk base, the result of years of woolly aphid infestation. This tree did not bear fruit in 2013 and is clearly suffering. (*Some apples are genetically prone to severe woolly aphid infection and some seem not to suffer at all.*)

In another 10m there is a much larger apple tree (**TREE 4**) on the right side of the path, which had lots of small apples in 2013. The tree is completely unaffected by woolly aphid. The fruit is small and red-flushed on a green background, with faintly red tinged flesh, suggesting a summer-ripe dessert apple. It is unlike the common hedgerow feral apples, usually small green-yellow and of very ancient origin.



TREE 4 Apple March 2014
From the path alongside Docwra's Ditch

As far as is known. this tree hasn't been propagated, suggesting the crop isn't very exciting to eat! It is just possible that this was intentionally planted years ago as a crab apple. There are oaks nearby that could have been planted.

There are no further fruit trees beyond Tree 4, so return to the dipping pond and continue over the sea wall steps to the sea wall path. Then turn south towards Sizewell. Two more apple trees are growing on the inside edge of this bank after about 150m, both on the landward side.



TREE 5 Apple August 2013. From the sea wall looking inland over the reed beds.

The first (**TREE 5**) is at the base of the slope behind some wild roses and brambles which can make it hard to find. It is almost on the edge of the reed beds and some of the surrounding vegetation has been cut down.

The height of the tree is governed in part by the wind and salt spray so it is fairly short, rising almost to the top of the bank.

Another apple (**TREE 6**) is a short way further south on the same side, again behind wild roses and other vegetation. The tree, partly recumbent and with two main stems, one of which is moss covered, is behind a fence with signs saying "National Trust No entry. Keep to the path". **Please do not approach the tree without the permission of the National Trust!**

If you continue south down the coast there **was** a small pear tree growing in the dunes (**TREE 7**) but the tidal surge of December 2013 washed it out of the sand and it lies dead on the remnant of the dune. This pear tree did put out leaves in 2013, but did not fruit, probably due to the summer drought .

At this point you can continue south to the Eastbridge footpath, or return to Dunwich Heath.

If you continue south to the Minsmere sluice, there are some bushes just south of the sluice where there are a few suckering **bullace** *Prunus insititia*. This was possibly once a garden.

In the RSPB Minsmere reserve, especially near the south hide, there are thickets of bullace which turn a range of pink and golden colours in autumn. These are very interesting; bullace are considered native to Britain, and in East Anglia grow in two forms: the red-flushed green-fruited Shepherds Bullace and the less common yellow fruited Essex Bullace.

Bullace reproduce from seedlings, but many large clumps and long lengths in hedges are single sucker clonal shrubs. Around Minsmere both these two characteristic forms often exist together...



TREE 9 Apple March 2014
From the Minsmere sluice to Eastbridge path

At the sluice turn right on the marked footpath to Eastbridge. There are the remains of a chapel after about 250m and a further similar distance will bring you to two more apple trees (**TREES 8 and 9**) both on the right hand side of the path, near the ditch, about 70m apart. These two trees did not seem to bear fruit in 2013 although they did flower in May.

The path continues into Eastbridge, where you meet the road. Turn right through the village past the Eel's Foot pub. Continue walking north crossing over Minsmere New Cut (dredged in 2013) and follow the road towards RSPB Minsmere turning right by a large house behind a high brick wall.

Follow the road towards RSPB Minsmere, then turn off left up a hill on a bridleway. This opens out into grassland on the left, fenced and usually with sheep grazing much of the year. When you reach a tarmac road cross over and walk through trees until the path forks. Take the right hand path (the left path takes you on a longer walk around the edge of Dunwich Heath). This path leads you to a gate and a bench in a low spot near some temporary standing water. At this point you can walk straight on up a short hill to cross the heath back to the car park, or turn right and walk around Docwra's Ditch, the benches and the ponds with their dipping platforms to the track leading to the National Trust car park.

The longer walk takes about 2.5 to 3 hours and is about 8.5 km. The walk takes in two live pear trees (and one dead) and six apple trees.

*Finally, as you drive out of the car park down the road to the exit (about 60 m from the car park), notice on the verge on your left a small multi-stemmed pear tree (**TREE 10**) that has never been observed to fruit. It is opposite a clump of willows on the right hand side.*

*Then, just before the National Trust exit from the Heath, you can see probably the largest of the seaside fruit trees in Suffolk (**TREE 11**). It stands in brambles on the left hand road bank immediately north of an disused car park, its upper branches regularly seared by the salt spray.*

*The tree is difficult to age, but has been known for at least 40 years. It fruits every year, producing a few excellent large oval eating apples, ripe in late September/ early October (and regularly scrumped). It is a seedling, as are probably all these seaside apples (and therefore unique). It has been propagated, perhaps many times, and exists as grafted trees in gardens locally. STOG too has propagated it and has made it available to several Suffolk collection orchards under the name **Dunwich Heath** as, for perhaps decades, it has been known as the Dunwich Heath Apple.*