

How to research your own parish for orchards.

First step is to visit the County History Centre in Dorchester. The next step is to know what you are looking for. Records of individual orchards are rare unless they are left in a surviving will or land agent's survey for a particular estate or when a farm is sold at auction. Some of these estate maps or maps drawn up for the sale of a farm can be very useful documents and well illustrated. The problem in West Dorset is that there were so many orchards and so widespread that they could largely be taken for granted so that few actual records remain. Orchards were valuable items and rarely changed hands. Cider and apples were important currency in the local economy.

By far the best line of enquiry is to consult the Series One 6" Ordnance Survey maps, which date from the 1880's. These will give an accurate view of orchards within a given parish but will tell you nothing about the ownership or the orchard names. These maps can be digitally photographed through the History Centre's own Photo-reprographics department. You can then colour in the orchards on your own copy and get a good visual idea of the extent. The 1/25,000 OS map (1902) records field areas on the map making it simple to count up the acreage.

Plotting orchards on later issues of these Ordnance Survey maps will give the diminishing numbers of orchards in any one parish. Today there is global and satellite plotting which can also be used.

Historically however the most detailed research information comes from the Tithe maps. Tithes, tithe maps and apportionments may seem antiquated and in a sense they are, but because of the 1836 Tithe Commutation Act, all tithes in all parishes were standardised into hard currency by Act of Parliament. This meant that all parishes had to be researched and their tithes recorded and commuted into pounds shillings and pence. No more cockerels at Lady Day or Michaelmas geese, at least not officially.

This was a massive standardisation project equivalent to the Domesday book but far more accurate and wide ranging. All parishes in the country were mapped out down to the last square perch. Land measurement in those days was in acres, which, as you all should know, is a **furlong by a chain**.

What is a furlong?

A furlong is a furrow long using a furrow length on a big medieval open field had some sense. An acre is also a rough standard of measurement for a day's plough with an ox. A furlong equals 220 yards.

And a chain?

A chain is simply a tenth of a furlong or 22 yards.

So an acre is 220 x 22 sq yards or 4840 yards.

Take the perch : The perch is a linear measurement. Perch comes from latin *pertica* meaning pole or measuring rod.

1 perch (5.5 yards)
4 perches (22 yards) equals **1 chain**
10 chains (220 yards) equals **1 furlong** ,
8 furlongs (1760 yards) equal **1 mile**.

Area is just as simple

1 square perch (30.25 sq yards)
40 square perches (1210 sq yards) equals **1 rood**
4 roods (4840 sq yards) equals **1 acre**

These measurements are crucial to understand the tithe system and in understanding land areas. Forget metric for a moment there is a deep logic to all this. The reason for this in depth analysis of medieval land measurements is that without it the apportionments are meaningless. The apportionments are the hard data that accompanies the tithe map. These are usually in a parchment scroll, written in a copper plate hand. The linking of the apportionments to the tithe map is the key to the whole operation.

Some apportionments have been transcribed by volunteers and can be read as typescripts. Once you have the apportionments simply go through the records page by page line by line logging all the orchards and the appropriate tithe numbers you can find. Some are listed as House and Orchard, others are simply listed as Orchard, others as the orchard name itself. The landowners' name and the occupier's name also appear along with a record of the tithe payment in (pounds, shillings pence) or £ /s /d. The figures you need to record represent the area of the orchard in Acres Roods and Perches, A/R/P. Simply write them down, add them all up and then look at the tithe map to see where they are.

On some tithe maps the orchards have small trees drawn on them but more often than not they are left blank with only the number on them. It is long tedious work, but the overall sense of achievement at working out the area of orchards say in 1842 is well worth the effort. The names of owners and occupiers can of course be linked to the 1841 and 1851 census returns. So occupations and places of abode can also be determined. In this way orchard research can be very useful to reconstruct the social make up of a village in the 1840's.

A further set of documents that can provide invaluable information for your research, are estate and manorial records. These include maps, plans, surveys, rentals, court rolls and correspondence produced by estate administrations.

The other end of the research is to work out what has happened to all those orchards today . How many are still in existence, which have been grubbed out and which have been built on. If you are thinking of replanting an orchard it is always useful to see where orchards were traditionally grown. They understood a thing or two in the past, slopes, soil, wind, frost, drainage etc. And then there is the cider and that is another matter again. Tithes were often paid in cider so the orchards were taxed at source by the church. Also don't forget that orchards can be pear orchards and cherry orchards as well.

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