

Mulberry Trees and Wokingham's Silk Industry

You have only to visit Wikipedia on Mulberries (*Morus*), Silk and the History of Silk to see what a wealth of fascinating information and research there is about the ancient and worldwide silk industry. It includes sericulture (the farming of silk worms for raw silk) and silk manufacturing (such as throwing, dyeing, weaving, knitting for the production of silk cloth and artefacts).

There is a tradition that the silk industry in Wokingham was started in about 1585 by refugee weavers from Flanders. However, Dennis Ayres, a local historian, found no evidence for this, the earliest reference being to the knitting of silk stockings, which was a growth industry across England from the late 16th century onwards (Ayres D, *The Wokingham Silk Industry*, 1989). As to the growing of mulberry trees locally for the production of raw silk he wrote:

"Although mulberry trees are said to have been planted in Wokingham to provide food for silk worms there is no evidence as to the date when this was done. They may of course have not been planted as an aid to raise silkworms; mulberry trees were grown not far away as early as the 14th century. In the country as a whole the main attempts to cultivate them took place in the late 16th - early 17th centuries. Elizabeth I and James I distributed mulberry trees; (James I alone distributed over 100,000). All attempts to produce silk on a commercial scale failed mainly because of the weather (it was the period of the Little Ice Age), which made it difficult to have leaves available when the silkworms needed them. An additional factor was that the natural food of the silk worm is the White Mulberry, while the tree distributed and grown in England was the Black Mulberry. Silkworms fed on the leaves of the Black Mulberry produce silk of poor quality, of uneven thickness and liable to break when wound. Such silk was suitable for spinning the very coarse thread used by the early silk knitters, but difficult to use for making the fine thread that fashion demanded in the 17th century".

Ayres suggested that some mulberry trees planted in the Elizabethan or Stuart periods would have survived into the 19th century, and this may have given rise to the tradition of there having been a local sericulture. However, by the 19th century the majority of raw silk used in the larger silk manufacturing centres in the north in Stockport, Macclesfield and Congleton, as well as smaller silk mills around the country, such as those in Wokingham and Twyford, would have been imported. The Twyford mill stopped manufacturing silk in the 1820s and the last silk mill closed in Wokingham in 1832.

No Black Mulberry trees from 16th or early 17th century survive in Wokingham, but one claimed to be planted in 1608 is still to be found growing in the garden of Charlton House, Greenwich, London. Although the leaves of Black Mulberries may not have been as useful as those from White Mulberries for feeding silkworms, Black Mulberries are superior in giving delicious fruit, widely used in pies, tarts, wines, cordials and tea. Undoubtedly popular trees to have in a large garden for this reason alone!

One of the older Black Mulberries recorded in the WDVTA database once grew in the garden of The Elms, Wokingham. It is recorded on the Wokingham District Veteran Tree database as MRN 2039 and was included in a Tree Preservation Order by Wokingham Borough Council. Although it fell over in the 2007, it went on fruiting and neighbours campaigned to preserve it by banking up the exposed roots. Sadly, in April 2015, the tree was cut down on instructions from the managers of the Elms Road and Ellison Way flats, John Mortimer

Property Management Limited, because it obstructed a footpath and prevented access for waste disposal. We understand this company had been advised by the Borough Council that the tree was not covered by a TPO. The matter is being followed up by members of WDVTA in their capacity as Tree Wardens. It is to be hoped that a new mulberry tree will be planted on the site.

Another black mulberry was planted in the town in 1985 by the Town Council to commemorate the centenary of the Mayoralty. Planting mulberries for commemorative purposes is very well worth establishing as a tradition in its own right.

Barbara Stagles - May 2015