

Mapping the surviving 19th century orchards of Clonakilty to locate, graft and conserve the Heritage varieties and their stories

From a young age I was inspired by the work of Irish Seed Savers and was given encouragement to explore the landscape in search of old apple trees. I've always valued the important work that they do and it's always exciting to see young, grafted trees growing, using scion that has been collected from ancient trees. The scion of those young trees holds its history but also hope for the future. From surveying different regions and old orchards over the past number of years, I've been surprised how many ancient trees still exist and how precarious they can be. Often you happen to save it just in time. The best man at my wedding described me as "the only person who would drag themselves backwards through brambles in pursuit of an old apple tree". Over the years I realised that to save and conserve these trees, it would take a community effort. Also, it is just as important to record the stories, history and folklore of the trees. I've wanted to engage more people in what I do, but to initiate a Community Project.

While I was down at the Clonakilty Apple Festival in September 2024 (jointly organised by Voice Ireland

and Clonakilty Tidy Towns), I identified apples people brought along for the day.



Enjoying the Clonakilty Apple Festival

Considering the interest and great bunch of people, I proposed a Community Apple Mapping project to the group and explained that I'd love to engage a group to get out to find old trees, with the hope of grafting them and to plant a local Community Orchard when they become large enough. The idea is that each young tree

would be traced back to an old tree that was collected locally. This conserves what is local but preserved by the community. It was intended that the Clonakilty Apple Mapping Project be a trial as a concept for a pilot project that has the potential to be replicated across other regions in Ireland. Apart from saving old trees, the habitat of a veteran orchard has huge value for wildlife.



Pear trees on wall in Clonakilty

I've got great inspiration from some of the articles that Bernwode trees have written in relation to the lifespan of trees and how long trees can live. I've encountered many trees in similar circumstances, and this article highlights the value of what is still surviving in Ireland. Visit <https://www.bernwodefruittrees.co.uk/oldesttree.htm> for more information.

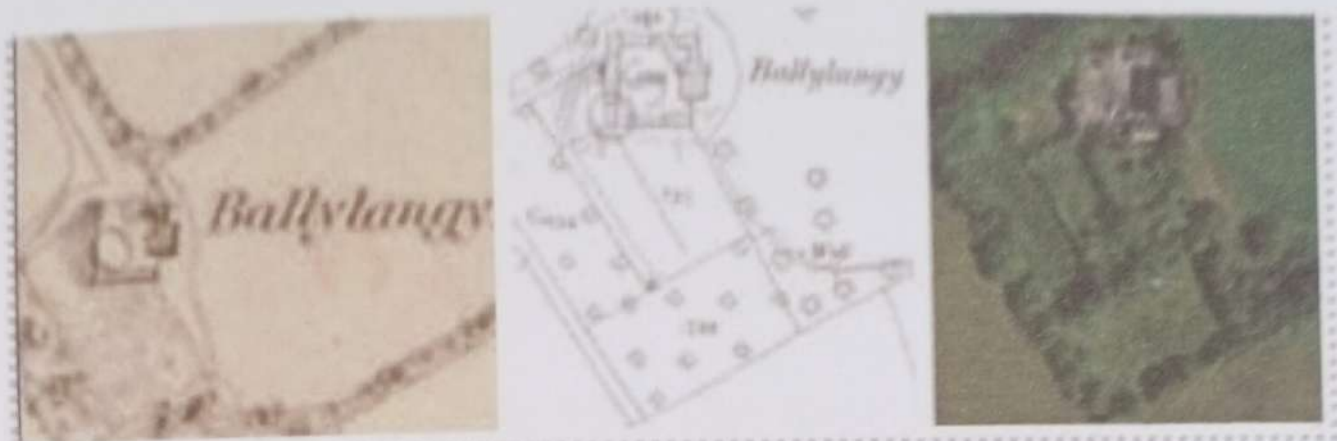
While in Clonakilty, I was also privileged to meet Joy Larkcom and graft two trees from her place. She had created an apple espalier tunnel in her garden and gave me great encouragement. Her house is an archive of diaries, publications, and photographs from her travels. She has diaries from her "Vegetable Tour of Europe" and photos from her trip collecting oriental vegetables in Asia. She's a real inspiration.

Clonakilty Orchard Project

Objectives of Project: (Initiated in October 2024)

- To locate and document old orchards. Orchards will be located through Ordnance survey Ireland (OSI) Townlands viewer. The map viewer contains 1840's maps, 1880's maps and current satellite imagery. It is possible to map regions and locate surviving orchards from that era.
- Cillian used two sources to survey maps
 1. OSI (Ordnance Survey Ireland). Contains 1840's, 1880's and current satellite imagery. It is possible to locate and see old trees in walled gardens and fields through comparing satellite imagery to earlier maps. Accessible at: <https://osi.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=bc56a1cf08844a2aa2609aa92e89497e>

2. Historic houses and landed estates. Many landed estates contain walled gardens. This site helps locate old houses of note, many which have surviving orchards and trees
<https://landedestates.ie/map>



Example of Clonakilty area walled garden that may contain an orchard. Maps are from 1840's, 1880's, and current satellite imagery. The orchard was found through surveying maps and satellite imagery

Project to date (May 2025)

In February 2024, I visited the group to share orchard locations I had discovered using historic maps, and encouraged participants to keep an eye out for old apple trees in places they knew. During that visit, I demonstrated how to select and cut graft wood, and over the following month, participants collected graft wood from various sites in preparation for a grafting workshop in late March. At the March workshop, we grafted around 30 trees using the samples brought in—many have already begun to grow, including some grafted from scions nearly two inches thick! The original trees were carefully documented through photographs, interviews, and video. Graft wood came from diverse sites including a local convent, old farms, landed estates, and a historic abbey, with

some very old trees still yielding viable material despite having fallen. Most of the grafted trees are thriving, and I plan to return during Heritage Week to help identify the original varieties they came from.



Lady's Finger

Over the next few years in Clonakilty we hope to plant the trees and create a Conservation Community Orchard, one that the locals can connect with and to further graft and add old trees to in time. Each tree has a story and a connection back to a particular ancient tree, and in the future when those original trees are gone, they will be safely preserved within the community, through living specimens and archive recordings like video and photography. It takes inspiration from Irish Seed Savers concept of a living local museum. We would be delighted to contribute anything unique or of interest to the Irish Seed Savers collection.

Cillian Boyd, May 2025