

Heritage Orchard Mapping; Preserving local apple varieties through creating a network of Conservation Orchards

May 21st 2026, Muighinis, Carna

Green leaves are starting to emerge from young trees grafted this spring. It is fascinating, while also humbling to realise that the success and life of a new tree is dependent on the hope that one bud will survive whatever challenges it may face over the next month or so. If the graft takes, it may produce a young tree, which in time could supply graft wood for other young trees. Most of the varieties I have grafted three samples of, in the hope that at least two will take. Some I could only graft one of on account of the age of the tree.

The selection of trees were grafted as part of three regional orchard mapping projects that I set up in Clonakilty, Headford, and Clontuskert. The graftwood was collected at various old orchard sites found in these regions during springtime, some were grafted at workshops, while more were grafted at home. I intended to finish grafting in early April, however there was always “one more tree” or one I didn’t have time to do yet. I officially finished on Sunday April 26th, Apple Blossom Day! There was a huge display of blossom on the trees that day.



26th April, Old apple tree in blossom Muighinis

When trying to visualise the process of grafting, I think of an ogham stone with horizontal slits though a vertical line. The vertical line represents the past and future lifeline of a variety, while the horizontal marks represent at what point a tree would have been grafted during the history of the variety. Each marks a new generation, which occurs when an individual grafts that variety at a particular moment in time. Past and future fuse at the grafting union. Interestingly, the apple is represented in Ogham as Quert.

(Below) Yellow Sheep's Snout from Clonakilty orchard



The concept for the orchard mapping projects developed over the past number of years, and came from various sources and influences, concepts and experiences I had. Primarily it was driven by an urgency and passion to save ancient trees before they are gone.

I have been lucky to meet great people who have helped me to realise this ambition through various mapping projects, and sourcing funding.

As an artist and researcher, I had been surveying regions as part of a project to document heritage orchards, and to graft and preserve samples of varieties that I discovered. However, I realised that there were so many ancient trees and orchards that time would run out to save them, so I decided that I would set up a community engaged project.

The first project was Clonakilty Orchard mapping project which has been a success thanks to dedicated volunteers and friends I have made.

The idea of creating a Community Conservation Orchard came from “Peadar’s Orchard” also known as “The Conservation Orchard” at Irish Seed Savers Association in honour of Peadar McNeice. I reflected on the idea of creating “Conservation Orchards” to preserve varieties grafted from local orchards, but conserved within their locality by a dedicated group of custodians. The concept is as simple as engaging a community to find the oldest trees and orchards, grafting them, recording their stories and documenting the original trees, and pinning them on to an interactive map. Most importantly however, is community engagement. I had the opportunity to give talks at Clonakilty, Headford and Clontuskert and proposed this idea, which generated great interest, and quite a few people offered to visit areas of interest, inquire, and introduce me to individuals who had orchards. From those visits, the orchard mapping project developed. I was influenced by Burrenbeo’s approach to engagement which is to foster community led conservation and stewardship¹

On reflection, my experience has been similar to Anita Hayes, who wrote in an article that there were individuals within localities who possessed knowledge of orchards and that it was valuable to meet such people.

This is an example of our “Intangible cultural Heritage”², inherent knowledge that exists within communities.

(Below) Anita Hayes extract from Report of a Working Group on Malus/Pyrus (1997)³

What struck me most deeply, doing the field research, was that the people who held this precious local knowledge were mostly very elderly and very surprised that anyone would travel far to listen to their stories of how life used to be long ago. It took many many hours, cups of teas and rainy afternoons to locate perhaps the last tree of its kind, long neglected in the back garden. Many older people were embarrassed to even show me these old trees, because of their state of decline. If I had not come to them without an introduction from a respected local neighbour, there would have been very little chance that I would have been invited into their homes and lives. This very fine thread between preservation and extinction was demonstrated to me again and again.

Another lesson that was demonstrated to me time and time again was the pool of knowledge that goes untapped among the elders of our communities. Horticultural and cultural knowledge of great depth was revealed to me in the simplest of settings. I also was reminded that we forget to ask the elders in our scientific communities as well as lay communities for their experience, advice and support, all to the detriment of our efforts at conservation.

Below is an overview of the three Orchard Mapping Projects.

Clonakilty Orchard Mapping Project

I was fortunate to be invited by Alison Roberts and Diarmuid Cregan to give a talk at Clonakilty Apple Festival in 2024, and proposed an orchard mapping project.

In preparation, I surveyed 1840's maps to find the oldest surviving orchards from the 19th Century, and pinned locations on google maps.

Locals volunteered to visit the locations to see what trees were surviving. I visited orchards in spring 2025 and guided by instinct grafted the oldest trees. Because the orchards were found during the winter, I had to wait until Autumn to identify the varieties. It was fascinating to discover what varieties were found. Very old trees of heritage varieties such as Ard Cairn Russet, Irish Molly, Greasy Pippin, and Yellow Sheep's Snout, were found.

Currently we have two-year old trees, and more grafted this year, we plan to plant the trees during Autumn 2026.

(Below) Yellow Sheep's Snout



Headford Orchard Mapping

Mags Sheehan and Venitia McEllin of Headford Environmental Group invited me to give a talk during Heritage Week 2025. I proposed the idea of orchard mapping to the group, and they were very enthusiastic. I had great help from Ger Henry Hassett and Selma Makela in locating orchards and arranging site visits. We grafted about 30 trees from ancient specimens. Ger wrote an article for the local newspaper outlining the project.

<https://www.tuamherald.ie/2026/04/23/saving-apple-trees-to-grow-for-the-future>



(small apple found in hollowed trunk of apple tree, March 27th Headford)

Clontuskert Orchard Project

Maria Brennan and Brid Lyons of Clontuskert Heritage Group contacted me to give a talk during March 2026. I offered to initiate an orchard mapping project. Conveniently, the group had a lot of research done.

One of the most fascinating discoveries made by the Heritage group was of gardening diary dated 1860's from Bernard Mc Laughlin, the diary recorded details of gardening activities and plants grown. Bernard was the head gardener at Somerset house Clontuskert during the 1860's, while his homeplace was Coolbeg nearby.

I visited Coolbeg on March 19th 2026. and met his great grandniece Sheila. There were about five trees at Coolbeg. The trees were some of the oldest I've ever seen, easily over 120 years old, and free from disease. We grafted 30 trees or so from the locality.



(above) old tree at Coolbeg, Clontuskert

I am currently living in Carna, Connemara, and there are many old apple trees surviving around “seanbhaile” clachan settlements, some of which have probably never been documented. Brendan Devane of Ardmore, Carna, has brought me to many trees in isolated areas. There are also some lovely samples of very old self-rooting apple varieties that grow well in boggy soil.

(Below) self-rooting apple at Glinsk, Carna



(Below) Molloy’s apple tree at Ardmore, Carna. Tree growing at gable end of house facing out on to sea



Michael Keaney, Custodian of Castle Ellen House Athenry, when describing his embarkment on the restoration of Castle Ellen in 1975 expressed; “all you need is one step in the right direction”.

Cillian Boyd