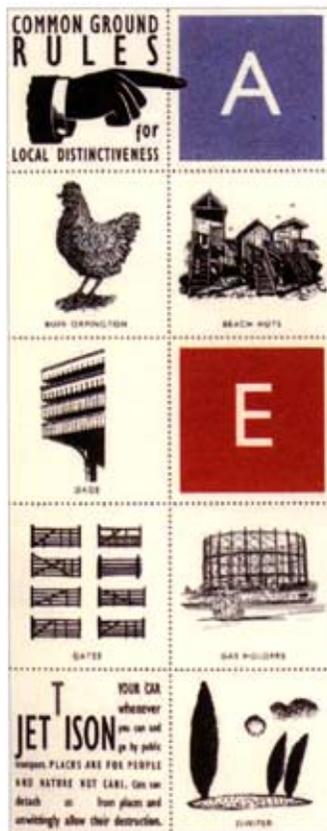


Clive Fewins explores why it's worth championing the rich diversity of the everyday commonplace

Proud to be distinctly common



ON A patch of land only two short miles from the heart of Heathrow Airport lies a little orchard. It was planted on Apple Day 1992 and at its centre are 29 apple trees. They are Ribston Pippins, Blenheims, Cox's Orange Pippins and Cox's Pomona. They surround three specially-made curved metal seats that together form the letters COX. Richard Cox, a retired brewer from East London, did not expect to become the 'father' of the most famous apple in the world, and he died in 1845 aged 79 without witnessing the full fruits of his horticultural experiment. He had settled on his retirement, in a large Georgian house at Colnbrook End called The Lawns. In those days Colnbrook, and much of the area covered by Heathrow, was surrounded by orchards and market gardens.

Today, about 170 years after Richard Cox's experimenting, about 70 per cent of all dessert apples grown in the UK are Cox's Orange Pippins, or a Cox's clone known as Queen Cox. The research into all this, and the design and installation of the commemorative seats on a spot near where Cox propagated the first two seeds from a Ribston Pippin, which he is thought to have pollinated with a Blenheim Orange, is a potent example of the work of Common Ground. Since 1983 this small organisation

England A-Z ...celebrating the common place, the vernacular and the distinctive. Top, x marks the spot where Richard Cox introduced his famous dessert apples



has been devoted to championing the distinctiveness of places and customs, and the qualities of diversity and meaning in the ordinary things around us, and it is probably best known for Apple Day, an idea that sprang from the fertile mind of co-founder and director Angela King in 1990.

“The apple represents diversity and local identity, something at the heart of our thinking at Common Ground,” says fellow founder and director Sue Clifford. “It also reaches right back to the beginning of time; it represents fertility, continuity, health; it grows on trees, and in this country alone we are capable of growing 2,500 varieties – many of them particular to the village they take their name from. The apple is an even

more interesting symbol when you consider that it does not even originate from these islands but from Kazakhstan, whence it came via the Silk Road via a few slight deviations to Europe and these shores. So the apple also represents the continuity of history and the links and connections between places that Common Ground stands for, as well as the localism that we have been championing ever since we started.”

Apple Day is now celebrated every October in towns and villages throughout the land. At the Royal Horticultural society gardens at Rosemoor, near Great Torrington, Devon, more than 1,500 visitors attended Apple Day celebrations last October. There were some 200 Apple Day events last

year known to Common Ground, and doubtless a lot more that they did not hear about. Common Ground is not solely concerned with rural matters. Bus shelters, they point out, can help make a place meaningful. So can cobbles, cooling towers, customs, dags, dialects, factories, front doors, foods, gasholders, ganseys, garages, kerbstones, legends, manhole covers, mosques, pillboxes, prefabs, slag heaps, spoil heaps, stories, quarries, and terraced housing.

These are just a few of the topics covered in the 600 essays on aspects of the commonplace, the local, the vernacular and the distinctive that add up to the latest massive Common Ground achievement – *England in Particular* (Hodder £30 ISBN 0340826169), a 512 page compendium that is in effect a huge encyclopaedia of Englishness. It is a book for the reference shelves of all who like delving into the huge diversity that goes into making English culture at its best so rich.

Organised from A-Z the essays are on topics as diverse and ‘English’ as alleys, ancient trees, battlefields, bells and bellringing, bus shelters, boundary stones, cakes, carnivals, castles, cheeses, cliffs, deserted villages, dewponds, dialects, downland, Exmoor ponies, floods, follies, ganseys, gates, greetings, hill forts, hound trailing, islands, kerbstones, landslips, lighthouses, Martello towers, Midsummer Day, Northumbrian smallpipes, orchards, pele towers, place names, quarries, round towered churches, sand dunes, standing stones, stiles, springs, tar barrel rolling, tides, unlucky words, watercress beds, white horses, winterbournes, woods, yews, yawns and zigzags. It has been described by one reviewer as a book that should be at

every curious Englishman’s bedside.

If you like the idea of ‘the book of the website’ then you will also enjoy taking a look at www.England-in-particular.info, a website which King and Clifford pioneered in 2002, or the original website, www.commonground.org.uk. Both book and websites promote the Common Ground concept of ‘Particularity’ – outlined at length in the first King and Clifford book, *Holding Your Ground*, a Guide to Local Conservation, first published in 1985.



The Common Ground view is that all these everyday surroundings, things and happenings are remarkable and worthy of recollection, recording and celebration. “Everywhere is somewhere,” says Sue Clifford. “But we need the nourishment of knowledge and detail to stimulate our senses. We are aiming to get under the surface of places: to excite people, whether locals or visitors, about landscapes, settlements, buildings, histories and stories – always on the move – that intertwine to give us the rich and variegated pattern that we take for granted.”

Taking it for granted is something that we should never be complacent about, according to King and Clifford, who between them have won a string of awards. In 1994 Sue Clifford received an MBE for her services to the environment. The same year Angela King received one of the first Schumacher awards, given by the society of that name to celebrate the 21st anniversary of the publication of the late Prof. E F Schumacher’s seminal book *Small is Beautiful*. Also in 2000 Common Ground won a nomination for BBC Radio 4 Food Programme Campaigner of the Year for writing and broadcasting work on orchards and

Apple Day. They have also received awards for individual projects. Over the years one of the most successful of these was the Parish Maps project, which has inspired thousands of communities throughout the country to produce these excellent examples of local distinctiveness. Today they can be seen in churches, church halls, community centres and other public buildings in many towns and villages.

The sculpture-based New Milestones project was designed to 'help people crystallise their feelings about a place in a public and permanent way', while in their Field Names project King and Clifford have created a network of local groups – 'Field Marshals' – who work to inform and attract groups and individuals to the riches present in many old fields. Their latest undertaking is the Corrugated Iron Club, which has its own website, www.corrugated-iron-club.info and forms part of the organisation's campaign for Local Distinctiveness.

If, like me, you are a supporter of the Common Ground philosophy (there is no membership scheme and no organised network of regional supporters but the term that has gained general acceptance is a 'Common Ground') you can lend a hand by encouraging friends and contacts to spread the Common Ground philosophy by encouraging and organising activities that help establish a sense of place. There is also a large number of publications and posters designed to help you with this.

King and Clifford also welcome feedback about 'Particularity' – local stories, details, and observations that excite you. "Our localities need constant attention," Angela King says. "The task of Common Ground is to encourage people with ways to get beneath the surface of places. 'Local Distinctiveness' consists of all the little details that make a place meaningful. We are Champions of the Commonplace." 

Contacts

Common Ground, Gold Hill House, 21 High St., Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 8JE. 01747 850820. Info@commonground.org.uk

England in Particular: a celebration of the commonplace, the local, the vernacular and the distinctive is published by Hodder & Stoughton – 528 pages, nearly 600 essays, over 450 illustrations

www.England-in-particular.info – the website of the book of the place

www.commonground.org.uk – archive and arts

www.corrugated-iron-club.info – worldwide sheds

