

The Verdun Chestnuts

The two horse chestnut trees in this small field were bought at an auction in aid of the nearby Rural Life Centre (RLC) by Jo Baker and planted in 2003, three years before Jo very generously gave Pierrepont Farm to the Countryside Restoration Trust.

Three or four clones (accounts vary) were created for the RLC at the Redleaf Nursery in Tilford by taking grafts from a tree which was itself descended from a seed presented to Queen Elizabeth II in 1969. In a letter dated 19th November 1996, the late Henry Jackson, founder of the RLC, wrote:

"I have a Horse Chestnut which is a descendant of the only tree to survive the battle of Verdun. The seeds were given to the Queen some 27 years ago on a visit to France. That year the parent tree shed many 'conkers'. It is interesting to see that the Verdun tree in my arboretum has a different form from the spreading Horse Chestnut that we normally see. The Verdun Chestnut is a *vergo* form. The seedling was given to me by the Director of Forestry at Windsor."

The First World War battle for the French town of Verdun was protracted and very bloody but was entirely a Franco-German affair, with no British or Empire troops involved. It might therefore seem odd that a British monarch should be given a memento of the battle.

However, the plight of Verdun had struck a chord with the British people, who raised money in 1921 for the town's reconstruction. There is a riverside terrace in Verdun named Le Quai de Londres (London Quay) in recognition of this and Huddersfield's Beaumont Park has (or had, one died in 2010) four chestnuts grown from saplings sent in November 1921 in thanks for funds given by the Yorkshire town.

Graham Bish, a retired Windsor forester, remembers collecting conkers from "The Verdun Avenue" in the Home Park around Windsor Castle, which were then planted in an Ascot nursery (now a housing estate). Perhaps the RLC's tree came from there.

In 2011, a French CRT volunteer at Pierrepont went to Verdun to research her grandfather's involvement in the battle but was unable to find out more about the chestnuts. She did discover that her grandfather had not in fact served there but somewhere else, which perhaps explains how he survived the war — there are thought to have been some 700,000 casualties in the 300-day battle for Verdun, of whom maybe 230,000 died (some estimates are higher).

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Pierrepont Farm

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NB the trees are to the left of the bridle path, just after the CRT sign and where the fields give way to woodland as you head uphill from the old farmyard. When you reach the gate to the permissive path, you have gone past them.