



I can't remember hearing a cuckoo sing from Hartford's cuckoo tree.

Chapter 1

The Cuckoo Tree

"1688: April, snowed 3 days. The cuckoo did sing before hawthorns were green."

from a memorandum book of John Ryle of High Greave, Cheadle.

When I was a child, all the best trees for climbing and conkering had names, names we learned from older kids who, of course, had done the same when they were younger. But one tree, a tall, dead one, had a name I didn't understand: the Cuckoo Tree. In its prime, it must have been a local landmark but, by my day, it was just a gaunt, leafless skeleton. Why was it called the Cuckoo Tree? That question never troubled me as a boy but, thirty years later, it popped up in my head and I appealed for information through the local press. The answer came promptly enough, from the local naturalist and writer, Eric Hardy. This, he explained, was the tree where local people would listen out for the first cuckoo each spring, hoping to be the first to hear it and so enjoy good luck for the rest of the year. But can the bird really find its way to the traditional tree year after year? According to many bird-watchers, yes, and often on a traditional day (in Cheshire, April 15th). To receive the good luck, you have to be abroad early and have coins in your pocket, ready to turn them over as you hear the sound. An old Eaton estate worker from

Aldford once told me that there used to be great rivalry among the labourers to be the first to hear the first cuckoo as he approached along Aldford Brook. They called him *The Welsh Ambassador* since, like most of our summer visitors, he enters the county from the west, giving Cestrians the good luck a day or two before Maxonians.

It's difficult, nowadays, to picture the impact that the cuckoos' arrival had in the days when they were common. Geoffrey Egerton-Warburton, in his book *In a Cheshire Garden* (1912), wrote: "*The coming of the cuckoo seems to be of more interest to people here [the village of Warburton, near Lymm] than any event in natural history, and cuckoos are, I should say, more plentiful with us than in many places, and are nearly as often seen as heard. I must have seen a dozen one day in May from the high road during a short drive of a few miles, and, generally speaking, in May not a day (I should not be far out if I said not an hour of the day) goes by without our knowing by sight as well as sound that there are cuckoos in the garden*". Hence the old Cheshire saying: *As hoarse as a cuckoo!* In Egerton-Warburton's day, almost every village must once have had its own cuckoo tree, but they are hard to find on the map: Cranage has a field called *Cuckoo Oak*, Gawsworth a *Cuckoo Thorn*, and there are a few *Cuckoo Fields* and *Cuckoo Lanes*, but not much more. Only the oral historian, it seems, can hope to find cuckoo trees.

In the days when bird migration was poorly understood, the cuckoo's disappearance in August must have been just as puzzling. One of my classmates at Hartford Primary School told me that it spent the colder months as a sparrowhawk, turning back into a cuckoo in spring and, looking through Boyd's *Country Diary*, I see the same thing was believed in the 1930s: "*A local poacher, an observant man who knows a lot about birds, once asked me if I realised that they made this startling change. When I asked for proof he replied, 'Well, there's the field', and clearly thought such evidence proof enough for anybody. I had to agree that the field certainly was there, and we left it at that.*"

A newly-fledged cuckoo, can look uncannily like a sparrowhawk and may even have evolved this disguise as a protection during the vulnerable weeks before it begins its long, unaided migration to Africa. Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect on gamekeepers, who used to shoot cuckoos before they had a chance to metamorphose.

There are strange beliefs surrounding the female cuckoo's bubbling note, also. In some parts of Cheshire, it was thought that the fledgling made this sound as it devoured its foster-parent while, in other areas, they thought it was sucking the other eggs, as in this Cheshire version of the well-known folk song:

*The cuckoo is a pretty bird, he calls as he flies,
He brings us good tidings and tells us no lies.
He takes other birds' eggs to make his voice clear,
And he calls "cuckoo" three months of the year.*

The *good tidings*, of course, means the promise of summer and that, I suppose, explains the good luck as well. But is that all there is to it? Boyd found evidence of a more practical, agricultural reason for hearing the first cuckoo. Before the days of weather forecasts, farmers looked to the natural world for guidance on when to sow and reap their crops. Oats, for example, were once by far the most important cereal in Cheshire, grown to feed both horses and people. But the sowing of oats was a ticklish matter. Put them in too early and the seedlings might get backened by a cold snap; too late and they would still be *fast at one end* in late August, when a *dumberdash* might *croodle them down* and ruin the entire crop. Thus, in the absence of meteorological help, the first shout of the cuckoo, a sound already saturated in folklore, was taken as the signal that all oats should now have been planted. Any sown after this time were called '*cuckoo-wuts*' and their prospects written off. As an old Cheshire saying puts it: *Cuckoo wuts and woodcock hay, make the farmer run away*. Boyd noted this example from his own district (Frandle): "*A farmer was seriously worried by the early arrival of the cuckoo, and asked anxiously how far distant was the bird I had just heard and seen. He was greatly relieved to hear that it was almost two miles away and nowhere within earshot of the field in which he still had to sow his oats... There was no more delay; the field was sown immediately and the farmer's mind set at rest.*" (Country Diary, 20/4/1944). A similar stigma was attached to lambs that were born late: *cuckoo-lambs* were not expected to live long.

The planting of other crops was signalled by other birds. The yellow wagtail, which reaches us at about the same time as the cuckoo (and used to be one of its favourite foster parents) prompted the farmer to plant his potatoes. Cheshire's great tradition of tater-growing dates back to the Napoleonic wars when fears of hunger led to widespread planting and, even today, they are among the best grown anywhere. Yellow wagtails like to raise their young in potato fields, where the large, floppy leaves hide the nest from predators. Like the cuckoos, they like to return to their roots, and yearling birds are thought to drop into the very fields where they were raised, just as the next crop is being set. This association has earned it the folk-names *potato-dropper* and *tater-setter* (in other parts of the country it is the *barley bird* or the *oatseed bird*). Boyd again: "*On April 11th my first yellow wagtail of the year rose from under the heels of the mare as she grazed in the paddock. It then flew straight across three fields and settled on one of the potato drills worked by a neighbouring farmer, who took it as a good sign, for he was taught as a boy to call this bird a 'potato-setter' and to take its arrival as a sign to begin. Within three miles other more daring farmers have potato plants already well above ground, and the night frosts of this week have cost them dear.*" (16/4/1938)

Like cuckoos, these summer visitors were supposed to spend the winter as another species, in this case, the closely-related grey wagtail. Until recently, large gatherings of yellow wagtails were a common sight, not just in potato fields but in marshy pastures and damp meadows where the brilliant plumage of the males outshone the newly-opened kingcups. Guy Farrar, one of Cheshire's best bird-writers called them "*the golden harbingers of spring*". They fed among the cattle, waiting for insects to be disturbed, then catching them on the wing with aerobatic panache. A 1950 monograph on the

species declared that Cheshire was "*the county for the yellow wagtail*" and noted that they seemed to be increasing. So where are they now? We still have plenty of potato fields, but nowadays they contain little more than well-sprayed potato plants. The golden harbingers of spring can still be spotted on mizzicky ground along the Gowy, Dee and Mersey valleys, but now they must be sought out with a good pair of binoculars. A succession of droughts in the Sahara desert may have made migration more perilous for them.

In the back-end, when the potatoes had all been got and the summer visitors have vanished from the fields, farmers have to think about planting winter wheat. Now there are new invaders winging in from the north; squadrons of chattering fieldfares and redwings flashing across the wintry sky. These Vikings are bred in the forests of Scandinavia and, after a long sea-crossing, make their way overland from east to west, pillaging the hedgerows as they go. The first raiders reach Cheshire towards the end of October, to be followed by the main army in November. These birds are the third traditional planting signal, as Boyd again tells us: "*There has been some delay in ploughing for winter wheat; a farmer told me he was glad he had not seen any "bluebacks" (fieldfares) yet, as he always reckoned to finish sowing his wheat before they came.*" (4/11/1943) However, this may not be just another superstition, as a farmer's daughter from Ashton Hayes explained to me. Her father was equally anxious to get his wheat sown before the bluebacks appeared, but with good reason - he knew that, if he delayed, the huge flocks would descend on his fields and eat up all the seed!

In the case of the promiscuous, cuckolding cuckoo, however, there is little doubt that its connection with seed-sowing is due to ancient notions of fertility. While he sings, his erect pintle, or cuckoo pint, pops up in the hedgebanks and his frothy love-juice is skittered over the grass (today we call it *cuckoo spit*, but our forefathers used a ruder name). Is this why the oat seeds must be in the soil, awaiting its arrival?

So, do you have a local cuckoo tree? If so, when did you last hear a cuckoo shout from it? Like yellow wagtails, they are now spread much more thinly, so many of those forgotten cuckoo trees must stand idle every April. As Lenna Bickerton, of Lostock Gralam, wrote in her *Memories of a Cheshire Childhood*: "*The cuckoo visited us bang on time in early spring, and from then on his plaintive call could be heard for the rest of the spring and summer until his voice became croaked and muffled and he was ready to fly away. As the oaks and hedgerows have disappeared, so has he.*"

Now that I think of it, I can't remember hearing a cuckoo sing from Hartford's cuckoo tree. Those fields are lost under houses now and, in any case, the residents have no time to listen out for bird calls as they drive off to work every morning.