

The mystery of Prunus 'Tsubame'

A Japanese bird and a forgotten index are two clues that set **Chris Sanders** on the chase to uncover the origins of a choice cherry

Prunus x yedoensis
'Tsubame' is a
beautiful, spreading
tree, but where
did it come from?

HE SUBJECT OF this article is a distinctive and beautiful flowering cherry which appears to be rather rare in UK cultivation. Despite its Japanese name (which means swallow in allusion to its characteristically wide-spreading branches) it is apparently unknown in Japan and is probably very rare or absent in Europe and North America. Since the inception of RHS Plant Finder in 1987 this cultivar has only been offered for sale by one commercial grower, namely Bridgemere Nurseies Ltd, Nantwich, Cheshire, who listed it from 1993 to 2001

consecutively. During this period, I was Production Director at Bridgemere and recall that our original stock was received from the Hillier Arboretum as grafting scions. It was only distributed in small numbers and it is probable that the few specimens around today derive directly or indirectly from that source. The two trees that used to grow at Hilliers are both now dead. A 30-year-old specimen growing in the Dorothy Clive Garden in North Staffordshire, just a few miles east of Bridgemere, flowers more or less simultaneously with *P. x yedoensis* 'Someiyoshino' (Tokyo cherry), usually in late March to early April.

A puzzle presents itself

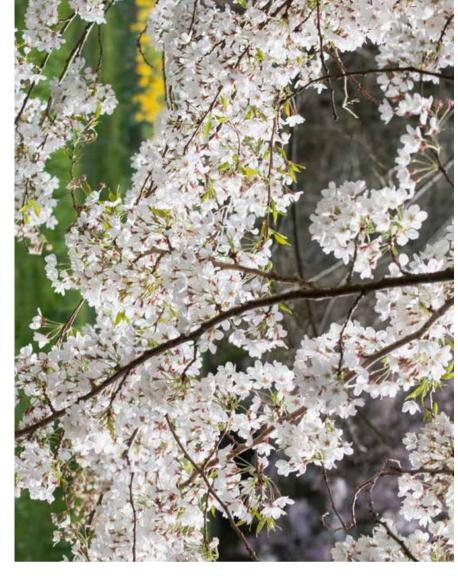
Until recently, I had never given any thought to the origin of this tree, no doubt assuming it to be another Japanese cultivar because of its name. But once it had been confirmed by several Japanese contacts that it was not known there, I began to investigate its history. At first, the earliest reference in the literature I could find was in Geoffrey Chadbund's Flowering Cherries (1972), where it was described as "a little-known variety" but with no indication of its origin. The only other source was The Hillier Manual of Trees and Shrubs, where it first appeared in the fifth edition (1981) with the briefest of descriptions and no mention of origin. These apart, I failed to trace the name in any other printed source.

compelling. Firstly, Ingram was also an ornithologist as the Japanese name of his favourite bird. - it was his interest in birds that first took him to celebrated UK authority on flowering cherries of Colingwood (Cherry) Ingram (1880-1981), the suspicion pointed in only one direction - that of used the bird's Japanese name. The finger of obtained a secondhand copy hoping to find some about them (The Migration of the Swallow, 1974). I ornithological journals. In addition, he had a special cherries. However, he always retained his love of Japan in 1907, after which began his obsession with the 20th century. The circumstantial evidence is named a flowering cherry after a bird and moreover that as early as page 4 the word *Tsubame* appeared reference to the cherry, but with no luck except interest in the swallow and even wrote a small book birds and wrote a number of scientific articles for The question then arose as to who might have

A second point in favour of the Ingram theory was that he had previously named a cherry of his own raising after the Japanese black-winged gull, 'Umeneko' sometime prior to 1928. But here is the

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in late March or borne in profusion 'Tsubame' are early April flowers of Prunus The cascading

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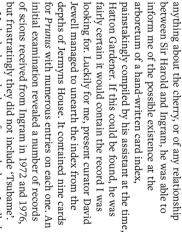
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any of Ingram's diaries or cherry notebooks. or articles. Further, of Prunus x yedoensis name does not appear in has confirmed that the holds the Ingram archive grandson-in law who Ernest Pollard, his Ingram's published books 'Tsubame' in any of this there is no mention mystery, in spite of all

No cherry stone

that no one other than but so convinced was For a time I was stuck

not go back far enough to provide original trees, fully expecting that 1970s. Although Roy could not recall with the late Sir Harold Hillier in the that he would have been working Roy Lancaster for help, for I knew the information. I then turned to their modern computer records did the response was not encouraging directly from Ingram himself. At first they must have been received enquire about the origin of their back to the Hillier Arboretum to to a flowering cherry that I went Ingram could have given this name



scion material, this time in 1974, but much to my at the card index and this time discovered the at the arboretum to see David and we looked agair surprise the donor was not Ingram as I had missing record. Again it involved the receipt of My luck changed when a few weeks later I called



Japanese cherries birds as well as fascination with Ingram had a Collingwood



Rowland Jackman

growing 'Tsubame' in 1974 or at Jackman, he must have been once, I guessed that this could only considered it important enough to shrubs and other hardy plants. who also grew a wide range of trees, Woking, best known for clematis but of five generations of Jackmans of 1976), the last of the famous dynasty be George Rowland Jackman VMH (always known as Rowland) (1902–

order to conserve it. However, I knew that the pass on to the Hillier Arboretum in least had access to it and obviously So, if I was right about Rowland

did they obtain it? afterwards. But did this mean that Jackmans although it is known that Rowland acted as a The evidence of the Planters Handbook did they raise it themselves or, if not, from where consultant to the new owner for several years Jackman family business had been sold in 1967, Nursery grew the tree commercially and, if so,

is none other than Prunus x yedoensis 'Tsubame' On page 59 is a list of 33 plants introduced by entitled Jackmans of Woking (1995) by the late This was both exciting and perplexing news Jackmans during this period. Number 13 in the list of reminiscences of her father's time in charge of Pamela Gauntlett (née Jackman). Pamela was In my library I have a copy of a scarce little book the family business (1934–1967 and up to 1972). Rowland's daughter and her book consists mainly

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made that they had actually raised it. Frustratingly many other (but not all) Jackmans introductions Standards only were offered at 47/6 (£2.375) each the subsequent issues of the Planters Handbook. Exactly the same description was repeated in all no indication of its actual origin was included. when listed for the first time, and no claim was Strangely, it was not described as NEW as were and are festooned with single white flowers". branches are held like the spread wings of a bird lovely lawn-tree. Its horizontal, undulating edition with the following description: "A very 'Tsubame' (Swallow) first appeared in the 1961/2 Jackmans catalogue was called. Prunus × yedoensis holds a complete set of the *Planters Handbook*, as Fortunately, the Library at RHS Garden Wisley

The balance of probability

This is where the trail finally goes cold. I cannot find evidence that any other nursery ever listed it for sale until Bridgemere did so for a few years in the late 1990s. The following conclusion to this mystery is conjecture on my part but is based on the few facts that I have discovered with circumstantial evidence and a bit of guesswork thrown in. It is probably not far off what actually happened.

and P. x dawyckensis, both brought to the attention and 'Okame', in a Supplementary List of Choice and was only ever listed by Jackmans. as a student. The only difference was that 'Tsubame spent a period of training under Rowland Jackman interesting to note that the late Charles Notcutt Notcutts of Woodbridge, Suffolk, and it is almost exactly this same group of cherries was other major nursery to simultaneously include of horticulturists by Ingram. Possibly the only such as P. conradinae (now P. hirtipes) 'Semiplena' lists which probably came from the same source, its origin. There are other cherries in Jackmans' described as NEW, but again with no reference to seedling, 'Umeneko', in 1956/57. This was also Handbook. They were joined by another Ingram cultivars appeared in every edition of the Planters the breeder. From that point onwards these two and in neither case was Ingram mentioned as described as NEW, but oddly, 'Okame' wasn't Unusual Trees, Shrubs and Climbers. 'Kursar' was better known flowering cherry cultivars, 'Kursar' Jackmans first listed two of Collingwood Ingram's It may be significant that from as early as 1953/4



All this suggests that Rowland and Ingram knew each other well or at least had some sort of contact According to Ernest Pollard there is nothing in the former's notebooks or diaries to corroborate this, but it is conceivable that Rowland visited Ingram at his home in Benenden, Kent, perhaps to collect scions or budwood.

erect shape and heavy fruiting, dug it up and to the east of Woking. They admired its compact, land along the Basingstoke canal near Sheerwater husband had found the tree growing on common Woking. The owner told him that she and her a private garden in the village of Horsell, near crosses. A prime example is the still popular Sorbus discovered while out walking or driving rather of his introductions were of plants that he had reference was made to its origin. when it appeared in the Planters Handbook, no aucuparia 'Sheerwater Seedling' that he spotted in than having deliberately raised from his own planted it in their front garden, where Rowland had a very good "eye" for a plant – in fact most later saw it and was given some budwood. Again, Now it was well-known that Rowland Jackman

In the chapter entitled Hybridising in his book A Garden of Memories (1974), Ingram mentioned



Prunus 'Tsubame'

'Umeneko' and 'Okame' are cultivars raised by Collingwood Ingram and appeared in Jackmans catalogues as new but without reference to their origin.

eye for garden potential, might have persuaded while visiting Benenden and with his plantsman's his own seedlings and was usually quick to consigr name - Prunus x yedoensis, so it is reasonable to the Japanese name of his favourite bird. name, he might have casually suggested 'Tsubame' no use to me". Later, when asked to suggest a imagine him shrugging and saying, "Take it, it's ugly, prostrate seedling from its fate. One can However, it is conceivable that Rowland Jackman. anything he considered inferior to the bonfire. clear from his writings that he was very critical of assume that he raised seedlings from it. Now, it is for breeding purposes. He only mentioned one by in a cold glasshouse during the flowering period cherry mother plants that he grew in pots and kept what he referred to as his "brood mares", flowering Ingram to spare what the latter judged to be an

Case not closed

As I said earlier, the above scenario is all conjecture on my part. There could be other less likely, but still possible explanations. For instance, Jackmans had a separate small nursery in the village of Worplesdon, near Guildford, Surrey, where they

only grew hardy trees and shrubs from seed (Liquidambar styraciflua 'Worplesdon' for instance). Perhaps 'Tsubame' occurred there too as a chance seedling and Rowland asked Ingram to name it for him. If that were the case, though, I would have expected him to have claimed the credit for raising it in his catalogue description.

If there is anyone out there who can add anything to this mystery, I would be delighted to hear from them.

Prunus × yedoensis 'Tsubame' is present in both the UK National Collections of Prunus: Mr CG Lane, Witch Hazel Nursery, Newington, Nr Sittingbourne, Kent ME9 7LU; Keele University Arboretum, Keele, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire ST5 SBG. O

Chris Sanders VMH is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee and is involved in several RHS woody plant trials as a forum member.

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