

A magnificent mulberry

The Scholars are planting beneath a mulberry tree – a tree with a long and very interesting history! Let's look at an article about mulberries from *Planters' World Magazine* to find out more. Read the article then complete the activities.

Let's look at **MULBERRY TREES**

- Mulberries (*Morus nigra*) are large deciduous trees.
- In late summer, they produce fruit that looks like blackberries and taste delicious.
- As the trees age, they develop lovely gnarled bark.
- Mulberries were brought to Britain by the Romans and have been popular ever since.



**Did you
know**

Shakespeare's New Place Mulberry

The mulberry at New Place is very special because it was grown from a cutting of Shakespeare's own tree!

What happened to his tree?
In the 1750s, the owner of New Place had the tree chopped down because so many people asked to see it! The wood from the tree was made into souvenirs for Shakespeare's many fans.



LEFT: the historic New Place mulberry

ABOVE: gnarled mulberry bark



Mulberries in Tudor & Stuart Times

Mulberry trees could be found in every royal garden in the Tudor period. Henry VIII and Elizabeth I both had mulberry trees planted so they could enjoy the fruits at royal feasts.

When Shakespeare was 39, Elizabeth I died and the Tudor period ended. James VI of Scotland became King James I of England and the Stuart period began.

James I liked mulberries, but he didn't just want them for fruit. He wanted to grow them to make silk! Silk was a very expensive and desirable fibre, used to make a beautiful, lustrous silk fabric. It was expensive because it is made by a special caterpillar called a silkworm. Silkworms spin silk thread into cocoons, which they live in while they grow into adult silk moths!

James I knew that silkworms only ate mulberry leaves, so he had a huge mulberry garden planted in London. 10,000 mulberries were brought from Europe and looked after by the 'King's Mulberry Men'. He even ordered other people to plant mulberries in their gardens! Now all he had to do was to sit back and wait for the silkworms to spin some royal silk. So he did – he waited and waited and waited...

Poor James I would have waited for a very long time indeed had someone not told him that he planted the wrong type of tree! It is the white mulberry (*Morus alba*) not the black one that silkworms like to eat. The leaves of the black mulberry are far too tough and leathery for little silkworms to sink their teeth into. To make things worse, white mulberries do not grow well in England because the climate is too cold for them. So there was no hope for James I. His plans for an English silk industry were abandoned.



LEFT TO RIGHT: silk fabric; black mulberries; James I; white mulberries; silkworms on mulberry leaves