

Veteran trees and wood pasture – a Herefordshire perspective

David Lovelace

In 1217 Henry III granted 100 oaks to the manor Kilpeck from the royal 'Forest of Aconbury', probably for Kilpeck Castle. The core of this 'forest' is Aconbury Wood just south of Hereford and it is still growing fine oak timber today.

Despite the importance of timber to the county's medieval infrastructure and buildings, which included a new bridge over the River Wye and replacing the shaft of Hereford's main water mill, documents (in Latin at this time) concerning 'foresta' and 'boscus' show that timber trees were a minor and occasional product. Translation and analysis of the surviving manuscripts concerning the use of forests and woods demonstrate that they were quite different from what we understand the terms to mean today. The main activities were typically grazing, hunting, coppicing,

gathering branch and wind-blown wood, quarrying, bark stripping and collecting honey. A survey of 1325 records that the 'Forest of Deerfold' in north-west Herefordshire contained '200 acres of great trees and pasture with common rights all year and underwood valued at 6s 8d and pannage 5s [swine grazing on acorns]'. An account of 1260 indicates that the royal forest of Hay (formerly occupying a 2,000ha tract of countryside just south of Hereford) was mostly open and that only the central part had a continuous canopy. As elsewhere in England and Wales, medieval and Tudor Herefordshire 'forest' and 'woods' were multi-purpose, structurally diverse land-use systems for which the term 'wood pasture' would be the nearest approximation. These often extensive areas of more marginal land were augmented by many enclosed private parks.

This article is provided by the Ancient Tree Forum, which champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain's ancient and veteran trees, and gives advice on their management at www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk.

The regular production of wood in the presence of grazing and browsing animals required the temporary enclosing of areas for regeneration, and cutting the branches of mature trees just above the 'browse line' produced squat 'pollards' which can grow to a great size and longevity. These pollards produced a regular crop of branch wood for diverse uses including feeding leaves to livestock. Apart from their obvious utility, such pollards endured for centuries because their hollowing trunks made them unsuitable for timber and their great girth awkward to fell with axe and saw.

The more frequent and detailed Tudor accounts give a clearer picture of trees and their uses in the Herefordshire countryside, describing pollard trees as 'shells', 'dotards', 'stubbs' or 'burr trees'. A Latin manuscript account from 1585 of a former wood pasture in my own parish of Norton Canon refers to its trees as 'arbores veterens'.

With the passing of the manorial feudal era, much of Herefordshire's extensive wood pasture had become enclosed farmland or coppice woodland by the 17th century. However, mature trees and traditional ways of managing them remained an integral part of the general



A 1577 map of Bringewood Chase, north Herefordshire, showing the deer, cut and uncut pollards and some enclosures being taken out of the chase.

countryside. A 1754 timber valuation with maps of Bidney Farm near Dilwyn (which has no known history of association with forest, wood or park) described 435 out of its total of 1,111 trees (oak, ash, elm, aspen and one beech) as being 'lopped' or 'cropped'. Timber sale notices in the local press also give an idea of the prevalence of mature trees. In 1797, for example, the Croft Estate advertised in the *Hereford Journal* that it had 'a large quantity of remarkable fine oak and other timber, now growing, consisting of about 4,000 oaks a considerable part of immense size, 800 ash some very large and capital, 1,000 elm, beech, asp and birch', although these would have included the trees in the parkland and coppice woodland as well as the farms.

The most accurate and detailed evidence we have about mature trees in the countryside comes a little late in history, but nonetheless the first-edition 25-inches-to-the-mile Ordnance Survey series of maps of Britain published around 1880 plotted every mature non-woodland tree. These maps, now available online, represented the pinnacle of British cartography (the second edition produced around 1905 removed field trees apart from in parkland). Comparing our present-day tree-scapes with this first edition shows just how much we have lost. Nonetheless these maps are an essential



Historic tree locations through digital mapping: geo-referenced 1885 map overlaying modern vertical aerial photography, Middleton-on-the-Hill parish.

This ancient yew tree is accurately depicted on the 1840 tithe map and marks the parish boundary between Garway and Kentchurch.



guide to landscape restoration plans and vital for identifying surviving groups of previously unknown ancient trees, which are often found flourishing in the corner of a Herefordshire field.

Trees have been documented as boundary markers since Saxon times so it is no surprise to find them on parish boundaries. The parish 'tithe maps' for Herefordshire, created around 1840, frequently mark trees on parish boundaries along with their species. The yew at the bottom of page 50, for example, defines the Garway parish boundary with Kentchurch, and its location is accurately depicted on the tithe map. All such surviving parish boundary trees deserve statutory protection.

There can be an impression that ancient trees tend to occur in royal forests or parks, yet the evidence, for Herefordshire at least, is that well-known ancient tree populations, such as in Moccas or Kentchurch parks, were not that unusual throughout the



It is not only in designated parks or royal forests that veteran trees and wood pasture occur: oaks in pasture at Moor Abbey Farm, Middleton on the Hill, whose owner values his heritage of field trees.

county as late as Victorian times. We are still discovering ancient trees singly and in clusters throughout the county. Those currently mapped on the Ancient Tree Hunt website are probably less than half of the total resource of ancient trees in Herefordshire. Ancient trees are comparatively rare in continental Europe so the UK population is a significant fraction of the total for all Europe, and since Herefordshire may have one of the highest numbers for any UK county, we have an international responsibility to record and look after them.

As well as their historical, cultural and aesthetic value, ancient trees are unique island ecosystems by virtue of the long continuity of assemblages of organisms from fungi to bat roosts. The evolved decay processes that characterise a tree's longevity are symbiotic with a wide range of species, many highly specialised and endangered.

The 'stag headed' oak which is celebrated in the works of artists such as the engraver Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) is the natural consequence of 'retrenchment' as the tree concentrates its resources away from the extremities.

A healthy 'bottle-shaped' ancient oak pollard in pasture at Moor Abbey Farm, with its main vertical branches dying off naturally. Such an oak will carry on living for many centuries more. It is being used here as a spiritual backdrop to yoga practice.



Before and after: unnecessary destruction of an ancient oak pollard on the road into Hereford. City and road-side trees are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the whims of local authorities and their contractors.



Most current farming practice is hostile to ancient trees. All the side limbs of this ancient chestnut have been lopped off for the convenience of arable machinery and the land ploughed close to its roots. Moccas Park (not within that part designated National Nature Reserve).



A rare example of oak trees allowed to spread their branches far and wide so that they are able to lie on the ground. This reduces the shear forces on the trunk, avoiding limb loss. National Trust, Brockhampton estate.

Using digital mapping methods, past landscapes can be analysed by creating sequences of geo-referenced historic maps – aerial photographs along with recently released LIDAR (light detection and ranging) scans. These are giving us unprecedented insights into the history and archaeology of woods, wood pasture and trees. One example is the comparison of 1880 maps with the RAF aerial photographs of the late 1940s which show that the combined impact of the Kaiser and Hitler upon our countryside and its ancient trees was negligible compared with the wholesale destruction wreaked by subsidised agriculture and forestry since the 1950s. Herefordshire suffered no less than other counties, although we probably had more in the first place. Examples are numerous and comparison with modern aerial photography too depressing to dwell upon, but, for example, in Mynde Park in the 1960s grants were given by the Ministry of Agriculture to place explosives under the root plates of felled ancient oaks so the land could be converted to arable, and it was standard forestry practice to ring bark trees too large to remove in new conifer plantations such as at Croft and in Haugh Wood.

Unlike ancient woodland, archaeological sites or historical buildings, most ancient trees remain unrecognised and unprotected and are threatened from many directions. Society's obsession with 'tidiness' and 'health and safety' are ever-present dangers, along with poor

farming practice, urban and transport development and of late tree diseases such as ash dieback and acute oak decline. Probably the greatest threat remains ignorance – ignorance of the irreplaceable value of these extraordinary examples of living history, ignorance of the way they can be managed without being destroyed and ignorance about their extent and locations.

The tide is, however, turning thanks to organisations such as the Woodland Trust, the Ancient Tree Forum and county Wildlife Trusts and the increasing numbers of volunteer tree spotters, surveyors and campaigners. Here in Herefordshire we have set up a parish tree warden network to work at local level to identify and monitor tree populations. Private landowners in the county have been pro-active in using agri-environment schemes to survey, plan and restore parklands, and the National Trust and the Woodland Trust are embarking upon ambitious multi-century restoration projects at Croft Castle and Moccas Hill respectively.

With the retrenchment of state involvement in environmental protection, it is increasingly up to us to raise the hue and cry, to engage as citizen scientists in discovering, monitoring and acting in partnership with what remains of our environmental service sectors as well as with NGOs. Education is also vital to inspire the next generations. Contractor organisations and agricultural

colleges need to become more aware of the value and needs of ancient trees and promote understanding of them. People in the expanding tree warden network can inform and liaise with local authority officers and politicians on tree issues. Of increasing concern is the outsourcing of tree works and the associated responsibility to transnational companies through opaque contracts.

Current technology is our friend in these endeavours with the free availability of high-resolution aerial photography, historic maps online and open source Geographic Information Systems (GIS) such as QGIS to record, store and analyse tree data. Most smartphones and many digital cameras enable GPS location data on photographs which can be imported into GIS, shared with relevant organisations and uploaded onto mapping websites such as the Ancient Tree Hunt and/or shared via platforms such as Flickr. The Ancient Tree Forum website has links to much useful information and many resources: www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk. 

David Lovelace is a landscape historian and ecologist, with a particular interest in ancient trees, wood pasture and digital mapping, who lives and works in Herefordshire. He is a co-opted supporter of the Ancient Tree Forum, and will be giving a presentation at their summer conference in Epping Forest.

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News update



ATF summer conference in Epping Forest

The Ancient Tree Forum's summer conference in 2017 will be held at Epping Forest, London's largest open space, on Thursday 13 and Friday 14 July. Themes will include beech management and wood pasture and pollarding restoration. For more details and to book a place, see our website.

Influencing decision makers

The ATF's volunteers have been busy lobbying for the protection of veteran trees, and responding to consultations, in order to ensure that the value of ancient trees is fully recognised, and that their protection and management in sympathetic and sustainable ways are promoted and supported. A recent example was the ATF's provision of written evidence to the government's Future of the Natural Environment after the EU Referendum inquiry. Our comments on legislation, support and incentive systems, which are available to view on the Parliament.uk website, include the key point that healthy soil is essential for the conservation of trees.

ATF at The ARB Show

Sessions start at the ATF stand unless otherwise indicated.

Friday 12 May

10.30am: Veteranisation techniques and background: Reg Harris

11am: Assessing the stability of hollow trees and ARBOTOM demonstration: Paul Melarange

12pm: Veteran tree walk: Ted Green and Jill Butler

1pm: A certification scheme for arborists working on veteran trees (VETcert): Jim Mullholland – Arborists Workshop

2pm: Root radar demonstration and Q&A session: Sharon Hosegood

Saturday 13 May

10.30am: Tree physiology and health, considerations when undertaking tree work: Luke Steer – Arborists Workshop

11am: Root radar demonstration and Q&A session: Sharon Hosegood

12pm: Veteran tree walk: Ted Green and Jill Butler

1pm: A certification scheme for arborists working on veteran trees (VETcert): Helen Read – Arborists Workshop

1.30pm: Veteranisation techniques and background: Reg Harris

2pm: The application and use of ARBOTOM with demonstration: Frank Rinn