



WOKINGHAM DISTRICT VETERAN TREE ASSOCIATION (WDVTA)

VETERAN TREE SURVEY COMPLETION REPORT

Surveyors' Questionnaire Responses (2025-26)

The Survey

In 2025 surveyors who had taken part in the WDVTA survey of veteran trees across the District/Borough of Wokingham (2006-2024) were invited to complete an open-ended questionnaire about their experiences of surveying veteran trees for the project. Some 140 surveyors took part in this project over 18 years. Inevitably many were not, for various reasons, still living in the area and some, sadly had passed away. However 19 volunteers responded to the questionnaire which invited them to comment on their observations and reflections on their tree surveying activities. The report below summarises their responses.



Surveying a crack willow in Earley

Questionnaire responses

1.The value of surveying veteran trees

1.1. Finding fun, enjoyment and satisfaction

Many surveyors described the fun and enjoyment they had experienced of being outdoors with others, exercising and socialising with friends, as well as meeting like-minded others. They enjoyed the companionship, conversation and exchange of opinions. One reported how satisfying it was as she and her friend made progress in gathering information. They felt useful, with a real purpose.

One said that she found surveying a stimulus for new ideas and ways of thinking about the environment and 'life' more generally. *'It was a very interesting survey to be involved in'* and *'It was a wonderful experience which helped me in so many ways'*. Another reported that she now had her favourite tree which she visited from time to time *'to hug – if she could battle through the brambles'!*

1.2. Getting to know the geography of Wokingham Borough

Many surveyors valued exploring local green spaces, countryside and woodlands, including in areas they had not visited before. It was very satisfying to become more familiar with the geography of Wokingham Borough. One said *'It has been a pleasure working with the Committee and especially a 'newbee' to the area, exploring the Wokingham countryside'*. Another reported that they now walked new routes they had discovered through tree surveying and had introduced friends and groups to these areas.

1.3. Becoming aware of the location of veteran trees in the borough

Several surveyors reported that they had become increasingly aware of the location veteran trees across the borough and of their all-round contribution to a 'sense of wellbeing' in the neighbourhood. Many were surprised at what a large number and wide range of veteran and notable trees there were. One observed in particular how many were English oaks (*Quercus robur*) and noted that, within this species, considerable genetic variation was shown. Another was interested to see on a map how many veteran trees there were along the green routes such as in Wokingham Town and Finchampstead.

2. What people learned as they surveyed veteran trees

2.1. How to identify and appreciate veteran trees.

Tree surveying enabled people to learn more about veteran trees and several were surprised *'how very old the large ones were'*. Many increased their knowledge of how to identify tree species, especially in winter. One surveyor said she was helped *'to gain insights into tree morphology (the form and structure of trees)'*. Another described *'the beauty of some tree shapes and in particular the pleasure of seeing unusual tree forms where branches rooted or merged'*.

Surveyors became much more aware of the presence of veteran trees, even in generally built up suburban areas. One was surprised to discover the huge variety of tree species – and hence the difficulty of identification. *'I'm still not good with conifers!'* she exclaimed.

2.2. The ecological and social importance of veteran trees

Several surveyors commented on the ecological value of veteran trees, their importance for biodiversity and wildlife conservation and their vulnerability in built up areas to development and works by utility companies. *'An urban environment is softened, civilised, humanised (oddly) by its treescape'*. They noted how important they were for their health and well-being benefits to the local population as well as the contribution they made to the mitigation of the effects of climate change

One respondent wrote that the trees were *'vital and without them not only would our lives be poorer but the vast ecosystems they support ... would suffer and CO2 emissions would be higher'*. Another wrote how interesting it was that *'people can develop an attachment that can amount to a love for certain trees local to them'*.

It was noted what a great teaching resource veteran trees can be *'right on our doorstep'* and one person commented on how valuable surveying can be when it was linked to other tree surveys across the country, Europe or even worldwide.

2.3. How to survey veteran trees.

Some surveyors were surprised to find that such a 'professional, technical recording system' was available for recording individual tree data. The survey enabled people to acquire tree surveying techniques and how to organise tree records. One surveyor was pleased to have learned how to take photographs in difficult lighting conditions

2.4. The variety of threats to trees

It was surprising to some to discover the huge variety of pests, diseases and threats to tree health.

2.5. Tree Protection regulations and education

One surveyor reported on the value of learning about Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) and becoming the 'go to person' in the parish on these procedures. In Finchampstead a detailed health survey of the Wellingtonia trees (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) in Wellingtonia Avenue was aimed at educating residents of the avenue and trying to ensure they protect the trees in their gardens. This took a long time unfortunately with apparent limited success.

2.6. Learning about the local history across the borough.

Surveyors reported becoming much more aware of the history of the landscape over centuries. *'These beautiful veteran trees should be revered as part of the history and evolution of our natural surroundings'*. Another commented *'how precious they are as a unique historical record'* of a town or parish.

One surveyor was fascinated to see the lines of trees along the sides and backs of houses, showing old field boundaries where the hedge trees had been retained. Several were surprised to find so many veteran trees located in old hedgerows marking these boundaries.

One respondent noticed mature trees growing in verges which had persisted from before the area was developed. Another was interested to observe how trees had adapted to changes, for example, historic hedge-laid trees or where trees that had fallen in a storm had regrown to a 'new' vertical.

The historic reasons for certain species of tree growing in certain areas was noted, for example, pollarded willows by the streams and tributaries of the Thames and multi-stem sweet chestnuts in Fox Hill Woods and the Coombes. One respondent opined that the history of an area such as Charvil, which was just a '*handful of farms*', could be told through its trees. She referenced '*The avenue of limes that once went to East Farm Park House*'. Another acknowledged '*the debt we owe to Victorian and Edwardian (and earlier) landowners planting specimen trees that we are now enjoying in their maturity*'.

2.7. Interest among local residents

Several surveyors enjoyed friendly discussions with local residents who were interested in what they were doing and thought the project very worthwhile. They often found that measuring trees in public made passers-by curious about what was being done and it inspired an interest in trees. Some were surprised how willing people were to let them on to their properties. On the other hand one surveyor regretted how '*some people disregard trees, treat them whimsically and harm them*'.

3. Problems and difficulties for surveyors

3.1. The difficulty of access to land to measure trees.

The identification and measurement of a tree was difficult when it was not possible to get close up to it. Brambles, holly, nettles and other dense undergrowth challenged access to many trees. Awkward locations such as steep banks, trees overhanging water, overgrown hedges, leaf litter, water-filled ditches, barbed wire and dog poo also made measuring trees difficult. In these cases girths had often to be estimated. Some surveyors felt they were not young or agile enough to climb fences, scramble over ditches and through undergrowth although others found these obstacles no problem.

3.2. Problems in obtaining permission to survey on private land

Several recorders reported problems in getting permission to survey trees on private land, even when the trees could be seen from outside. This may, in some cases, have been because landowners and householders were afraid this could lead to the application of TPOs on the trees. One was troubled by a lack of responses to numerous requests to complete survey. It felt very frustrating when those who 'owned' significant veteran trees on their land refused access for recording.

3.3. Technical problems for volunteers when surveying

Several surveyors found it technically difficult, especially in the early stages, to use GPS devices to record the location of trees. This included the variability of satnav positioning information.

Surveying was often problematic in woodlands where GPS measurements were less accurate and paths were not visible on maps or satellite images. Sometimes this required multiple visits to trees when trying to get as accurate readings as possible. This became easier when GPS was accessible on mobile phones and when satellite images were good enough to zoom in and see the crowns of individual trees.

It was not always easy to see how to measure the girth of trees with complex trunks. Surveyors needed *'to keep in mind the definition of a single tree'*. When photographing avenues or woodlands of the same species, it was difficult to ensure each tree was photographed and each tree record had the right photograph assigned to it.

3.4. Security issues for surveyors

Some places were lonely so it was not safe, particularly for women, to record trees on their own. It was best to work in pairs or groups.

3.5. Disturbing interruptions.

These included energetic dogs running off with pencils and pens put down on ground while measuring/photographing trees – or just losing writing equipment in the undergrowth!

4. Problems and Difficulties for Data Managers

The data manager said *'I'd do things differently if starting the survey now, partly based in experience and partly because other tools are available now'*.

Some trees were problematic to photograph, especially when surrounded by other trees, making it difficult to get a more representative image. When updating records it was often difficult to find a particular tree where there were several in the vicinity, particularly when the original record had no photo.

Some surveyors included trees that did not meet the criteria for inclusion e.g. girth too small resulting in too many trees in the database that weren't interesting. The criteria for inclusion in survey were also not tight enough and more allowance for variation amongst species should have been allowed.

The data manager found it was very time consuming to obtain grid references from official arboricultural surveys. She also reported that *'Towns/parishes varied in their ability to recruit and retain surveyors. In some areas, in particular, this proved especially difficult'*.

5. Recommendations for the better protection of veteran trees.

5.1. Mature trees that will be veterans of future need to be recognised and valued

Several respondents observed that *'the mature trees of today will be the veterans of the future'*. It is important that people realise this so these trees can be recognised and protected. Veteran and ancient trees cannot be replaced by planting a few new young saplings. Tree planting is valuable but it takes several centuries before any new trees become veteran. Mature, sub-veteran trees need special identification and protection.

Other comments included *'The veteran trees WDVTA surveyors have already recorded should be monitored'*. *'We need to ensure that WDVTA survives as an organisation for the protection of veteran trees and that surveying gives way to the monitoring of the trees, so that they are still here for future generations.'*

5.2 More publicity needed about the value of trees – and veterans in particular

Observations included the opinion that *'an increased appreciation of trees in general would lead to a greater understanding of the special value of veteran trees'*. It was thought local authorities at borough, town and parish should do more to promote the special trees and treescapes in their area along with relevant information and maps. These should include ancient and veteran trees, hedgerow trees, commemorative trees, community orchards, avenues and wooded areas.

Publicity about the value of trees might include photo or painting competitions, asking the public to name their favourite trees, putting plaques on or near special trees, producing tree walk leaflets, displaying tree posters in their office and other public areas, having webpage featuring a map of special trees and articles about trees. This should all be widely available and easy to find.

5.3. Systems for tree protection, including TPOs, should be improved

Respondents were concerned that there was a continuing loss of veteran and significant trees in the borough due to natural causes and development. They argued this issue should be taken more seriously. One respondent observed that people can assume that *'losing a few old trees'* is fine as there are plenty left. *'Obviously this is not the case and it takes a very long time for a tree to reach maturity'*.

One argued that *'Special trees (especially ancient ones) should be given (stronger) protected status in the same way that (historic) buildings are'*. It was thought that legal changes need to be made so that healthy, but veteran, trees are not cut down to make way for new houses. If a healthy tree is felled or killed, it should be treated as alive and healthy for a fixed period of time (e.g. 10 years) when considering a planning application on the site.

Other opinions included that developers should not be allowed to build too close to trees. There should be much stricter rules for builders to follow with increased fines for breaking the rules and more resources should be available for the enforcement of existing protections. It should be possible to put a TPO on any tree for its intrinsic value (eg veteran or ancient status, cultural or visual significance) without it having to be demonstrably at risk or visible from a public place. Thus many more TPOs should be put in place.

One observed though that it should be easier and less expensive for local authorities to take anyone to court over tree protection issues. Wokingham Borough Council often found it too expensive to take anyone to court over these matters. *'The TPO fine, however high, is just added to the cost of the houses being built, rather than punishing the culprit.'*

6. General Observations and Conclusions

6.1. Some respondents argued that the survey should have continued longer

Although, for various organisational reasons the survey had to be brought to a close, some sadness was expressed that it could not have continued longer.

'I think that the Survey has been closed too soon, and consideration should be given to keeping it open for updates. In travelling around one sees trees that have been missed. We did not record trees on private lands/estates for example in Hurst.'

'I am sad that we don't have the resources to keep the database up to date on an ongoing basis, particularly when it comes to trees that have been lost.'

6.2. Many reported on lasting impact of the experience tree surveying – some quotes

'I guess it's a surprise that I am still a member of WDVTS after so many years and that I'm still keen to continue'.

'It is very pleasing that we have managed to record so many trees, and that WDVTA has become the 'go to' organisation within the borough on tree matters'.

'It has been very encouraging that our activities have led to more tree planting, for example in Finchampstead and especially the avenue in Burnmoor Meadow'.

'I learned to notice the trees around me and especially those veterans. These days whenever I'm out and about I have an awareness that wasn't with me before WDVTA. I delight in driving down Wellingtonia Avenue and keeping an eye on those magnificent trees'.

'Trees, for a variety of reasons, can be a proper and fine way of memorialising events and persons'.

'We need to ensure that WDVTA survives as an organisation for the protection of veteran trees and that surveying gives way to the monitoring of the trees, so that they are still here for future generations'.

6.3. Appreciation and thanks

'The survey is a practical achievement of which WDVTA can be proud'.

'Thanks to everyone in WDVTA, including especially the officers and co-ordinators, for their help with my education about veteran and other tree types'. 'Well done 2 you!'

'Huge thanks are due to our data managers for their setting up and maintenance of the database: a very professional effort'.

'I was pleasantly surprised by the support we got from Wokingham District/Borough Council'.

'The activities of WDVTA have been wonderfully enjoyable, companionable, intellectually stimulating and always enlightening'.

BKS April 2026