



# Tree Watch

Issue 11

November 2011

On 1<sup>st</sup> November 2011 we had **5288** trees in our database and **5413** photographs

Welcome to the November issue of Tree Watch. Once again the autumn colours are fantastic and remind us just how wonderful trees are! WDVTA continues to go from strength to strength. In the August issue I told you about our 5000<sup>th</sup> tree. I hope you all saw the piece about it in the Wokingham Times. If you missed it - follow the link on the home page of our website. The photo here shows Barbara and Ray being photographed in front of the oak for the Wokingham Times article.

We haven't rested on our laurels either, recording has continued and as you can see we've added another 288 trees to our database.



The big news this time is the launch of our tree warden group and an exciting project to mark the Diamond Jubilee next year. Stephen Loyd will be telling us all about this new project at the Tree Warden launch on Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> November. John Stokes from the Tree Council will be there to give more details about the project and tell us about the Tree Warden scheme in general. This is an important extension of our activities and hopefully will appeal to members who don't particularly want to go out and measure trees. Do come along and discover what we are planning and see whether you'd like to be involved.

The next issue of Tree Watch will be February 2012 and the copy deadline is 31<sup>st</sup> January. All comments and contributions please to: Elaine Butler [datamanager@wdvta.org.uk](mailto:datamanager@wdvta.org.uk)

**Main items in this issue:-**

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**Just one more event this year**

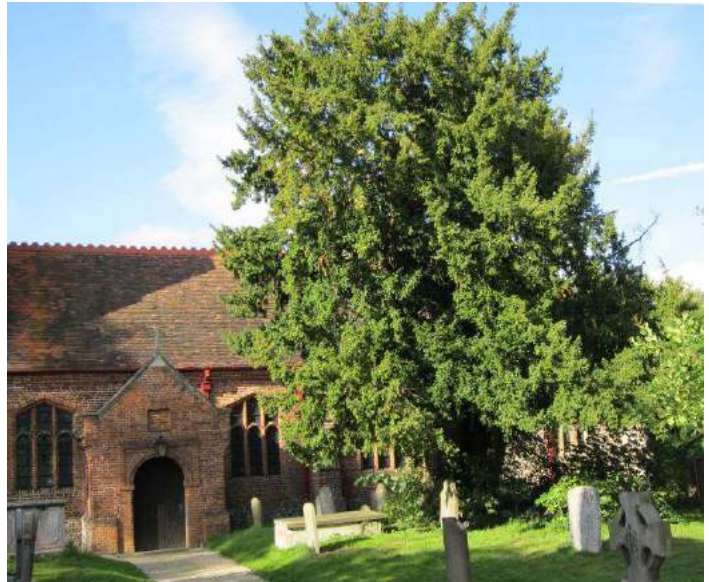
① Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> November - Tree Warden scheme launch and Queen's Diamond Jubilee project.  
19:30 Loddon Room, Dinton Pastures

For details and updates see the events page on our website - [wdvta.org.uk/events.php](http://wdvta.org.uk/events.php)

## A CHAMPION TREE – THE RUSCOMBE YEW

The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew have just published a book called "*Champion Trees of Britain and Ireland*". The author is Owen Johnson, who is Registrar of the Tree Register of the British Isles. The TROBI maintains a database of the most notable trees in Britain and Ireland, trees which are exceptional for their size, age, historical associations or rarity. This new handbook contains a guide to the finest specimens; and it includes the great yew in Ruscombe Churchyard (pictured below).

All the oldest trees in the TROBI database are yews. And many are found in churchyards. The association with religion and ritual predates Christianity. Sometimes, it seems, churches might have been built on sites where yews already existed but, most often, it is likely the trees were planted alongside the church. Although the reasons are not entirely clear, the spiritual associations are obviously a factor. More prosaic considerations have also been put forward: for example, that yews, being poisonous, deterred parishioners from letting their animals stray into the churchyard! On the other hand, it also appears that the foliage was regarded as an acceptable substitute for palm fronds on Palm Sunday.



It would be interesting to know the age of the Ruscombe yew. Its position in relation to the church porch looks quite apposite; which implies it was planted after the early 17<sup>th</sup> century building, rather than with the much earlier Norman church, of which the chancel still remains. But that is mere surmise. Does anyone have more information on the history of Ruscombe's "Champion Tree"?

*Graham Hook*

This is MRN 2277 with a girth of 4.57m. Yews are notoriously difficult to age from girth measurements, but a yew of this size, growing in a churchyard would be about 750 years old. So perhaps it was planted in the 1260s in association with the Norman Church.

### EXCEL TIP FOR RECORDERS – feature combiner

This is a very useful feature on our recording sheet, but it seems that not all recorders realise it's there!

When you complete the WDVTS-Recording Sheet (incidentally we are on version 2.3 now) you have a selection of features under the two Notable Features columns. Quite frequently you want more than one of these, but the drop-down list allows you to select just one. To solve this problem there is a "Feature Combiner" worksheet (click on the appropriate tab at the bottom of the screen) where you can select up to 5 features in each category and then copy the combined list onto the recording sheet. Full instructions are given on the sheet. If you aren't familiar with it, do have a look.

Remember if you want your data passed on to the Woodland Trust, and for more efficient analysis of our own data, it is important to use the agreed terms. When our data is passed on to the Woodland Trust, a program is used to separate out the data they want and it looks for specific terms. For instance we can't just search for ivy because someone could enter "no ivy" or "lots of ivy", so it searches for just "ivy". You can enter several items, whether they are in the list or not, with each item separated by a comma. "Ivy, lots of ivy," will ensure that the Woodland Trust is told about the ivy and we know there is a lot of it! If you are unsure about what to enter, put a note in the notes field, so that I know what your intentions are.

## WHY NOT VISIT WHIPSNADE TREE CATHEDRAL?

If you happen to be taking someone to Luton Airport (as I did recently) why not drop into Whipsnade Tree Cathedral. Although it's not worth a special visit from here, if you're in the vicinity, it's certainly worth a look. It was conceived by Edmund Blyth as a way of combining the beauty of nature and the majesty of a great cathedral, in memory of comrades who served alongside him in WW1. Two men, Edmund Blyth and Albert Bransom, planted all the trees over a nine-year period in the 1930s. The Nave comprises lime trees (below right) and the cloister walk is ash. There are three chapels: a Christmas Chapel of Norwegian spruce, and an Easter one of cherry, with whitebeam forming the Summer Chapel. Silver Birch feature in the Towers and the Chancel (below left).



The Tree Cathedral has not been consecrated, but it is used for wedding blessings as well as interdenominational worship.

It's just up the road from the Ashridge estate, with its beech and bluebell woods. Both are National Trust properties with free entrance and free car parking. A combined visit is well worth it.

Whilst out and about we often come across interesting trees. On holiday abroad you may see species that don't grow in Britain or familiar introduced ones in their natural habitat. In issue 6 Gill told us about Cedars of Lebanon in their native land. Closer to home Linda has described the Crowhurst Yew in Surrey and Ray waxed poetical about a Turner's Oak at Kew. On the next page Patricia describes the Cashmir Cypress in Italy. So if you've come across a notable tree on your travels, whether it's in Wiltshire or Washington, do tell us about it; and don't forget that we'd also like to hear about your favourite tree in the database, especially if it has a story attached to it. We're also planning a members' social evening in February featuring "My favourite tree" so you could start preparing for that. Any accounts relating to trees in the database can be attached to the relevant tree records. The article Barbara wrote on "*Mulberry Trees and Wokingham's Silk Industry*" for the last issue of Tree Watch is now a supplementary document attached to the records of trees 81, 2039, 3029, 4258, 4781, 4790, 5378, 5474 and 5476.

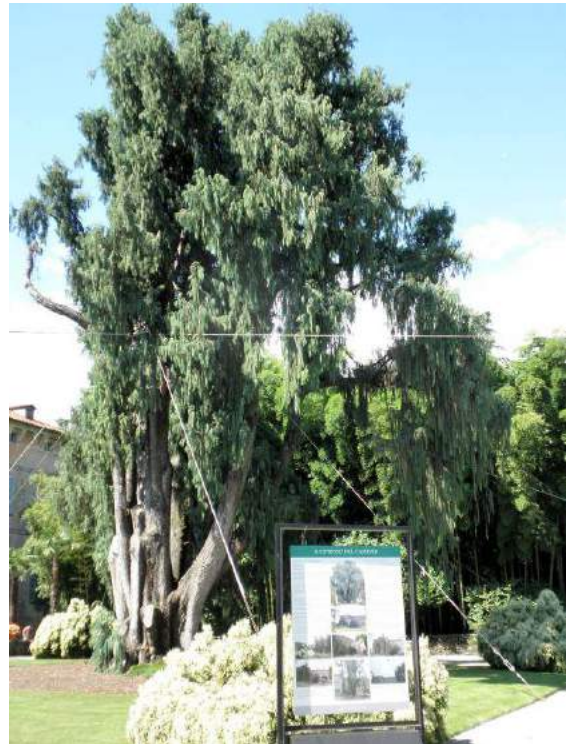
## THE CASHMIR CYPRESS

This tree was brought to the island of Isola Madre on Lake Maggiore as a bag of seeds in June 1882. Clearly the island climate suits it, and it has been cherished as a fantastic specimen of a tree that is disappearing in its natural Himalayan habitat.

On 28th June 2006 a tornado swept across the island, and the tree was uprooted and left lying on its side. Botanical and engineering specialists were summoned to plan a rescue. Cranes and special equipment were brought in by helicopter and this tree, weighing 70 tons and with a trunk diameter of 8 metres, was slowly winched upright, secured by cables tied back into concrete blocks.

It has been very carefully tended through a planned 'convalescence' to resume its place at the heart of this English-style garden.

*Patricia Green*



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### *Why wasn't that tree protected by a TPO?*

When a tree is felled it frequently evokes protest and this inevitable question. We've had two rather sad examples recently. In Earley an oak (MRN 1175) was felled, possibly because it was diseased, but we have no way of knowing. When questioned, the owner was hardly sympathetic. Certainly there was no attempt to retain any of the trunk for its wildlife value



In Three Mile Cross two healthy oaks (future veterans with girths of 1.9m and 2.5m) were killed. Three 3cm holes were drilled into the base of the trunks and presumably something poured into them to kill the trees. They are in

the middle of a small piece of land recently sold. When I visited the site a neighbour said how much he liked the trees and that he'd wondered about getting TPOs on them.

In both cases we suspect the trees were in the wrong place for proposed building projects.

In both cases the trees were visible from the road and a significant part of the landscape.

In both cases they were on private land and so there was nothing that the council could do. If you have a tree on your land and it is not protected by a TPO, you can cut it down whenever you want to.



The moral is very simple. If you see a nice tree that is visible from public land, then complete a TPO request form (available via our website, the Yahoo Group and WBC website). It's easy to complete and you can use our web map to show its location. It doesn't matter whether you are sure it qualifies or not. Your request will be rejected if it doesn't qualify, but it won't be approved if you don't submit it!!!

*"In landscapes impoverished of ancient trees shouldn't all trees over 200 years be protected to generate future veterans and dead wood for rare species?"* Ted Green - in Sylva/Tree News Autumn 2003

## **PROFILE - JANET FIRTH**

*Janet is the coordinator for Barkham, and a well know local archaeologist. She co-authored "Barkham - A History", which I thoroughly recommend. You should find it in local libraries and bookshops and it is also available from Amazon marketplace.*

When Elaine asked if I would write this profile at first I hesitated, wondering whether or not trees have been such an influence in my life that I could write about it for Tree Watch. Quickly I realised that of course they have.

I was brought up in an Elms Road. When we moved there in 1947 the elms were invisible, so presumably had been cut down between then and the naming of the road around the 1880s. We did however have a magnificent horse chestnut at the bottom of our garden, cut down only two years ago thanks to an unknown disease. This had a climbing rope attached and the four of us children were modestly successful at getting into its lower branches. We camped close to its shade in a tent which we thoughtfully gave our Mother for one of her birthdays (!). We also had a smaller sycamore tree which supported a trapeze where our friends could show off, being more agile than us. I also learnt to climb up and was slowly directed down, from those magnificent oaks in Bradgate Park in Charnwood. These were reputed to have been pollarded at the time of the execution, in 1554, of Lady Jane Grey (aged just 16) whose family lived at adjacent Bradgate Hall.



Later, whilst training as a nurse at St Thomas' Hospital, in Lambeth (at the same time as a certain medical student, Richard Firth) we would occasionally, in the summer, take patients out in their beds on the Thames-side terrace to enjoy the view over to the Houses of Parliament under the shade of those famous scaly-barked London plane trees. We were also allocated six months' training at the country branch in Hydestile, Surrey where trees and pleasant country walks beckoned to nurses at the back door.

After marriage Richard and I moved to Alberta on the rolling mostly treeless Canadian prairies and I realised just how precious trees were as I walked to the hospital to run the Emergency Department, under silver birches and aspens whose leaves shivered and sang in the wind. Each prairie farm house always had a copse of trees planted around it as protection from the hot summer sun as well as from the deep winter snow. From those tree-sheltered farming communities some of our patients drove 100 miles in all weathers to the Emergency Department for treatment 'after hours' and then back home with a starter dose of pills, subsequently returning in the morning when the Pharmacy was open in town.

Once back in England and then in Barkham (*Beorcham*: the settlement amongst birches), I enjoyed planting a small 'orchard' in the hayfield which was then our front garden. Only to discover that, rather dismally for someone who subsequently read archaeology at Reading, there had been a large brick barn, the foundations of which were close to where some of the fruit trees were planted. Thanks to shallow roots no doubt, some blew over in the 'hurricane' of October 1987. Later I saw the evidence of the barn on a late nineteenth century estate map of Barkham Mansion House, now Barkham Manor. Subsequent excavation of some of the barn's foundations by the Berkshire Archaeology Research Group, of which I am currently Chairman, proved its existence.

Working as a WDVTA coordinator for Barkham is not only very enjoyable but has supplemented what I had learned from archaeological field-walking and hedgerow-surveying in the parish. I have gained further possible information about earlier settlement and understanding on how the landscape was used in the past.

Our survey has found at least three examples: there are many hedgerow oaks along the bridle path BA14/FI46 at the Commonfield Lane end; on the opposite, Finchampstead, side, the birches and other trees are particularly tall yet immature. This was the fuel allotment (and turf ground) where fuel was cut as named on the Tithe Commutation Map and Award (1839).

The four-line lime avenue we surveyed was planted in the winter of 1885/6 and may have been meant as a grand drive to Wellington College for the sons of John Walter III of Bearwood, proprietor of The Times, who bought up the whole parish and altered the course of more than one roadway.

The long line of elderly plum trees, within a field boundary adjacent to Pope's Cottage, could have been planted by the owner of the land to supplement his labourers' limited diet. Eighteenth century research on inhabitants of the parish of Barkham by the Rev. David Davies, the Rector, published in 1795: *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Considered* indicated that farm labourers and their families in this parish (amongst other communities) in 1787 were living well below the poverty line; this only slightly improved later on. Gathering from hedgerows and fruit trees would have supplemented their very limited diet of bread, bacon or other meat, 'cheese seldom any' as 'the dearest article they can buy'<sup>1</sup> well into the twentieth century. Had we not surveyed the plum trees for the WDVTA I would not have known of their existence.

Janet Firth

<sup>1</sup> Fairfield edition 1977 (pp136-7)

## ODD LOCATIONS



Trees germinate in some odd places. We've got several examples in our database of trees growing on other trees, where seeds have been deposited in crevices and taken root. Holly on old oak trees is probably the most frequent, but I was surprised to see this oak (*Quercus robur*) growing in the

bifurcation of a non-veteran False Acacia (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). It's just outside the café in California Country Park.

**Did you know?** *The oldest wooden door was made from poplar.*

The remains of three wooden doors over 5000 years old have been found in the Lake Zurich area of Switzerland. They were part of the wooden stilt houses that you may remember from school history lessons. One of these doors has been dated by tree-ring analysis to 3063BC (approximately contemporary with the earliest stages of Stonehenge). It is 5'x2'10" and described as "solid and elegant", using a "remarkable design for holding the boards together" with well-preserved hinges. It was made from poplar wood.

### Survey snapshot

**58%**

of trees recorded are oaks

**8.85m**

largest oak girth in database

**9**

recorded oak species

**13%**

of recorded oaks are in hedgerows

## **SADLY DEPARTED**

In the last issue I featured MRN 2398. Unfortunately there was a large pocket of decay extending into the heartwood, making the tree unsafe; but thanks to the very caring owner and the WBC Trees and Landscape Department, it has not been felled, but pruned so it can be managed as a veteran pollard.

To quote from the WBC report: *".... hopefully if the tree can respond well to the extensive reduction we could have an excellently placed veteran pollard that can be managed safely for many years to come."*



So it's not really "Sadly Departed", unlike the Earley oak on page 4, but is a sad sight when compared with its former glory, as these before and after photos show.

Some recommendations from the Yahoo Group:

**WEBSITES:** - Some local societies with monthly talks and events, some of which are tree related in **Links > Websites of local natural history groups and other organisations**

- ① [www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk](http://www.earleyenvironmentalgroup.co.uk) - Earley Environmental Group
- ① [www.cnhg.org.uk](http://www.cnhg.org.uk) - Crowthorne Natural History Society
- ① [www.rdnhs.org.uk](http://www.rdnhs.org.uk) - Reading and District Natural History Society

**READING:** in **Files > Useful Files**

- ① Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Guide № 5 - Trees and Climate Change
- ① Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Guide № 6 - The Special Wildlife of Trees
- ① Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Guide № 7 - Trees for the Future

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Don't forget: The latest database and all the latest files relating to the survey are on the Yahoo site:

[groups.yahoo.com/group/WDVTA](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WDVTA)

Details of all trees in our database are available via the web map pages: [wdvta.org.uk/WDVTS](http://wdvta.org.uk/WDVTS)

Finally, and most importantly,  
**THANK YOU** to everyone who is out there recording our trees.  
We wouldn't have a database without you.