

Britain's woodland wonders: protecting our natural heritage

While Britain's most important buildings are awarded blue plaques, its historic trees are left to wither and die. Jack Watkins reports on a new campaign to protect our natural heritage, and Simon Usborne tells the tales of ten national treasures

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The Major Oak in Sherwood Forest must be one of the best-loved trees in the country. No one knows quite how old it is - 800 years at least, probably more. But its association with Robin Hood means it is accorded all the respect due such a battle-scarred veteran. Its gnarled trunk is sealed to ward off the effects of decay and frost. The boughs are propped up with wooden poles. No passer-by can be in any doubt that this incredible old survivor is the star of the vicinity.

Few other trees of similar vintage are so lucky. Barely a stone's throw away, King John is said to have sat under the Parliament Oak when he convened an emergency council in 1212. Yet hardly anyone knows it is there. "It is not far from the main road and it would be so easy for it to be damaged," says Jill Butler, a conservation officer for the Woodland Trust. "They did put a small fence around it, but this has been broken and the area has become a dumping ground."

The neglect of the Parliament Oak and other ancient trees is one of the biggest failings of our heritage protection laws. You may not think this a serious matter. A tree is an organism. It lives, it dies, and when it dies it can be replaced with another. The truth is, we have put a cheap price on our ancient trees for too long. By contrast, younger buildings and archaeological sites are listed or scheduled, with funds for management and advice for owners. Since the only protection for a tree is a preservation order, easily rescindable if a tree is claimed to be dead, dying or dangerous, the Tree Council is lobbying for the creation of a National List of Trees of Special Interest.

The failing in our laws would be less serious if Britain were not the European stronghold of ancient trees. Dr Oliver Rackham, the countryside historian, has written that you can travel from Athens to Bologna without seeing a tree more than a century old. In Britain, trees aged over 500 are not unusual. They are the unsung glories of our countryside, enriching the royal hunting grounds of the New Forest, Windsor Great Park and Sherwood Forest, and lending depth to the parkland created by gardeners such as Capability Brown.

Ted Green, one of the founders of the Ancient Tree Forum, describes them as "Europe's rainforest". Ted's initial brief, when he became a tree consultant in the Eighties, was to speak up for their ecological value, but he quickly became aware of another argument in their favour. "When you talk to people, it quickly becomes clear that the tree is important in its own right. We must raise awareness of the place of trees in history and culture, and as subjects of fascination."

In Windsor Great Park, some trees are more than 1,000 years old. One he calls the William the Conqueror Oak is now merely an atmospheric monolith, its huge trunk rearing above us like a gaping whale jaw. Green believes that surgery of the type envisaged under a system of statutory recognition would have saved it.

Pauline Buchanan-Black is the director-general of the Tree Council. She claims the one department that could bring about a change of policy, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), has been unresponsive. "When the department embarked on its review of the UK's heritage designation, we saw this as an opportunity. We already have a database of suitable candidates for listing, but we have not even had a formal response."

What we are left with is unofficial lists compiled by enthusiasts such as the Ancient Yew Group, or inventories created by wildlife trusts. This mirrors the slow growth of the building preservation movement, when the likes of William Morris's Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was flying the flag for vernacular structures long before listing kicked in.

Buchanan-Black adds: "Because trees are not lived in, they are regarded as almost incidental. It is only when people hear about their stories that they understand the need for listing."

Time, though, is not on the side of many of our veterans. The Tree Council has produced a new book, *The Heritage Trees of Scotland*, but just as it was going to press, the "cover girl", the Strathleven Oak in the Vale of Leven, was destroyed by a fire that might have been avoided with protective fencing. Similarly, one of the Borrowdale Yews of Cumbria, celebrated in Wordsworth's poetry, lost its canopy in a storm last year, when timely, intelligent tree surgery could have saved it.

Compiling an official list could prove a sensitive issue, admits Butler, given the need to retain the goodwill of many private owners who have already proven willing, sensitive guardians. Yet there is little national understanding of old trees at present, whether a creaking yew in a churchyard or a chestnut on the village green.

"There is no designation for a 'Mona Lisa' in someone's stately home, but no one would destroy the family heritage," says Jill. "Trees are equally part of that heritage. When Capability Brown and Humphry Repton were landscaping the estates, they sometimes took down the hedgerows, but not the trees, which they recognised for the immediate sense of grandeur, age and heritage they conveyed."

She argues that not only would a conservation list raise the profile of trees, it would release funds to help people look after them and receive sound advice. "Much of the problem is with people not understanding how trees age, and feeling remedial action

is expensive. It seems simplest and cheapest to chop it down. But if you had a broken Chippendale chair, you wouldn't throw it out and buy a new one. You'd hang on to it and repair it as much as you possibly could."

The Office of Communities and Local Government is conducting an "informal" review of Tree Protection Order policy. As it is, Britain lags shamefully behind our poorer European neighbours. The Czech Republic and Poland have official registers of ancient trees. Sweden, with a population of just 9 million, has recently stumped up £35m for a similar programme, and sends 25 of its tree experts each year to study some of the most important sites in the UK. Sadly, the British Government at present doesn't seem to be able to see either the wood - or the trees.

Spanish Chesnuts at Croft Castle, Herefordshire

Stretching for a kilometre through the grounds of Croft Castle in Herefordshire is an avenue of pollarded sweet chestnuts that date back to the Anglo-Spanish war of the late 16th century. When the English naval squadrons defeated the 131 ships of the Spanish Armada in 1592, dozens of ships were wrecked off the coast of England. Among the riches looted from the stricken vessels by British sailors were a crop of Spanish chestnuts. The story goes that some of the nuts found their way to Herefordshire, where Herbert Croft, formerly the Bishop of Hereford, seeing an opportunity to spruce up his grounds, planted them along his drive. The trees still stand strong on the Croft Estate, which dates back to the 11th century. The house and grounds, as well as the chestnuts are now cared for by the National Trusts and remain home to Herbert Croft's descendants.

Newton's Apple Tree, Lincolnshire

Woolsthorpe Manor, an unassuming 17th-century manor house in rural Lincolnshire, was the birthplace and home of Sir Isaac Newton, making it one of Britain's most significant buildings. But lying outside, barely clinging to life, is an apple tree whose place in history will persist long after it stops bearing fruit. The rare Flower of Kent apple tree has stood for more than 300 years and is believed to have inspired Newton's 1665 Law of Universal Gravitation. The story of the apple falling on his head, popularised in countless cartoons and films, is an enduring urban myth, but the tree's role in his thinking is well documented. William Stukeley recorded in his *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton's Life* a conversation with the scientist in 1726, in which he recalled "when formerly, the notion of gravitation came into his mind, it was occasioned by the fall of an apple, as he sat in contemplative mood. Why should that apple always descend perpendicularly to the ground? thought he to himself. Why should it not go sideways or upwards, but constantly to the earth's centre?"

Brighton Elms

When Dutch elm disease spread across Britain on the backs of beetles in the 1970s, it ravaged Britain's woodlands and millions of the country's once-ubiquitous elms perished. But tree specialists were surprised - and delighted - to find a small group of elms that survived the onslaught. Still standing in Brighton, the trees now include one of the most extensive lists of elm species in prime condition to be seen anywhere. The trees survived because they were protected by the bare South Downs on one side and

the sea on the other, and by the vigilance of the city's gardeners; a strict control programme spotted fading trees and cut out the infection before it could spread. Last summer, the hardy elms faced a renewed outbreak of the disease, which had broken out in nearby Southwick and Shoreham. They were rescued by a group of experts and enthusiasts who removed dozens of the infected trees.

Burnham Beeches, Buckinghamshire

This 540-acre wood, near Farnham Common, in Buckinghamshire, is considered one of the best examples of ancient woodland in Britain. Many of its beeches are 500 years old and attract half a million visitors a year, as well as film crews looking for an "ancient Britain" backdrop. Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves was filmed here. The trees faced the chop in 1880 as residential developers looked to move in, but the City of London Corporation bought the wood. Tree surgeons have revived the art of pollarding, which involves removing upper branches. The technique lets trees provides a regular crop of wood while staying alive. It also prevents weary trunks buckling under the weight of unchecked branches. The forest continues to be a haven for woodpeckers, tawny owls and some of Britain's rarest invertebrates. The area is a National Nature Reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Tolpuddle Martyrs' Tree, Dorset

The lonely sycamore in the tiny village of Tolpuddle, Dorset, started life more than 300 years ago and for decades stood as an unremarkable tree. That all changed in the 1830s when a group of disgruntled farm hands chose it as the site to found what became the precursor to the modern trade union movement.

The 1832 Reform Act had made trade unions legal at a time when wages for labourers had plummeted and working conditions for many were intolerable. Despite the change in the law, the Establishment frowned upon any attempts at unionisation. In 1834 a group of farm hands led by George Loveless, a Methodist preacher, decided to do something about it. They formed the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers and held meetings in the shade of the Tolpuddle sycamore tree. Among their demands were wages of 10 shillings a week, higher than the six shillings many were being paid. But landowners took exception to the movement and in 1834 the men were arrested and transported to Australia. Two years later they were pardoned and received a heroes' welcome as the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

Mottisfont Abbey Plane, Hampshire

The grounds of the 12th Century Mottisfont Abbey are home to one of England's most impressive trees. The branches of the "Great Plane", reputed to be the largest of its kind in the country, cover an area of some 1,500 square metres. Other ancient specimens that dominate the abbey grounds near Romsey include oak, sweet chestnut, beech and hornbeam. Nestled in the Test Valley, the site is thought to date back to Saxon times, when meetings of Freemen were reportedly held among the trees. The Augustinian Priory on the site was built by William Briwere, trusted advisor to Richard the Lionheart, in 1201. Later monks used the site to entertain visiting pilgrims but more recently it was the more glamorous setting for society dinners,

where guests including George Bernard Shaw strolled along the grounds by the ancient plane.

Ankerwycke Yew, Berkshire

When King John left Windsor Castle to negotiate with a group rebellious barons in the early 13th century, he travelled a few miles east to Runnymede, a meadow on the banks of the Thames. Also present were seven bishops, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and most of England's nobility.

After days of intense negotiations surrounded by the ancient trees, the men signed the Article of the Barons, which formed the basis for the Magna Carta.

The exact location for the deal was never recorded but a likely candidate is the ground around the Ankerwycke Yew on the opposite bank of the Thames. The tree had already stood for a thousand years when King John agreed to the barons' demands, and it is now thought to be well over 2,000 years old.

It has survived the 12th-century St Mary's Priory, the ruins of which lie at the site, and centuries after the Magna Carta was sealed, the yew had a second brush with history when it played host to the first meeting of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn in the 1530s.

Lime Tree Avenue, Clumber Park, Nottinghamshire

Until it was destroyed by fire in 1938, Clumber House, the seat of the Duke of Newcastle from the early 18th century, was the centrepiece of the 3,800-acre Clumber Park in Nottingham. Now owned by the National Trust, the Capability Brown-designed park still features rolling farmland, a huge serpentine lake, an impressive Gothic revival church - and a magnificent avenue of lime trees. The longest of its kind in Europe, it was planted by the 5th Duke of Newcastle in the 19th century. The double row of 1,296 common limes stretches for almost two miles along the park's drive. They stand tall and healthy today but in 1906 they suffered an insect attack. In a successful attempt to trap the destructive insects, tree surgeons painted bands of black grease around the trunks of the trees. Marks left by the grease remain visible today.

The Major Oak, Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire

Standing at the heart of Sherwood Forest, the Major Oak could stake a claim as Britain's most famous tree. According to local lore, the giant oak's hollow trunk served as a hideout for Robin Hood and his merry men, who supposedly stalked the woodland in the 12th or 13th century. The oak's name is thought to date back to 1790 when Major Hayman Rooke, a noted antiquarian from Mansfield Woodhouse, included the tree in his popular book about the ancient oaks of Sherwood. It then became known as the Major's Oak, and later simply the Major Oak. Earlier names include the Cockpen Tree, a reference to the use of its hollow trunk as a cock-fighting ring.

The 23-ton giant is about 1,000 years old and although it has suffered over the centuries, it has been scrupulously cared for. Victorian tree surgeons began supporting

its limbs with a system of scaffolding. Today a series of steel poles remains to keep the tree upright.

Such is the lure of the Major Oak, in 1998 an enterprising local man began selling its acorns to unsuspecting Americans via the internet. He was cautioned by Nottinghamshire Police.

Three principles behind a potential National List of Trees of Special Interest:

1. Recognition of ancient trees for their heritage and cultural value
2. Access to resources for custodians to enable them to care properly for trees, and to erect fences or explanatory signage
3. Access to proper advice on care or preservation. Currently many trees are brutalised by unqualified 'chainsaw cowboys', and even many county council tree officers lack arboricultural qualifications

Ancient tree contacts:

www.treecouncil.org.uk, www.woodland-trust.org.uk, www.woodland-trust.org.uk/ancient-tree-forum