

### Closing the loopholes to protect ancients

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The UK has a very rich legacy of ancient trees – nowhere else in Northern Europe is the medieval countryside revealed by the trees so clearly. Often they are the living landmarks of Royal hunting forests (Sherwood Forest, Belvoir Forest in the heart of Belfast), deer parks (Richmond Park), ancient wooded commons (Burnham Beeches) or ancient boundaries and hedges; as small groups and individuals on farms, in village greens, churchyards; some survive within urban development. Individual ancient trees, such as the Rabbie Burns' Sycamore or the Llangernyw Yew are important in their own right and are irreplaceable records of the nation's history and culture. Their various species and aesthetic forms such as riparian, pollarded black poplars, upland commons of holly, alder or rowan pollards, large coppiced lime stools of the Derbyshire Dales or granny pines of the Caledonian forests are key elements of distinctive regional landscape character.

Ancient trees provide habitat for a huge array of other organisms, including exceptionally rare and largely unprotected species-rich communities associated with wood decay, the bare surfaces of trunk and boughs, and their roots. Localised concentrations of ancient trees or 'old-growth' where there has been a continuity of old trees into the past, are supremely important reservoirs of biodiversity but even isolated trees in old, highly fragmented landscapes can be of high conservation priority for their associated decaying wood habitat. In addition the genetic variability of proven longevity may prove invaluable in the search for disease resistance and adaptability to climate change.

The Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Hunt (ATH), in partnership with two charities with minimal resources – the Ancient Tree Forum and the Tree Register of the British Isles has started drawing together a map of ancient and other special trees across the UK found by armies of volunteer recorders. Analysis of the data collected on over 100,000 hand-picked trees has identified concentrations, some of which were previously unknown. The project has helped to raise the profile of these icons of the natural world and captured the imagination and support of the public who recognise their value and their plight.

Ancient wood pastures and parkland may have outstanding collections of ancient trees but are rarely included on inventories of ancient woodland even where historic records show them well before 1600, so they do not receive the level of protection afforded to ancient woods through agricultural and forestry policy and miss out on targeted financial incentives. Some are included in the Registers of historic parks and landscape gardens, but the trees have no specific protection. Unlike other priority habitats, lack of survey information means there is no land-use data against which to measure changes to the extent and quality of the resource and what we see as a continuing catalogue of widespread losses, small in number but cumulatively of increasing significance for sustainability. The ATH has begun to collect the data but it has significant geographical gaps in information which need to be addressed.

It is imperative that stakeholders work together now, led by government, to secure the protection of special trees and old growth habitats. This means promoting the value of this legacy passed to us often by beneficent and foresighted tree owners; protection from damage; guidance on appropriate management; closing of the legal loopholes that allow special trees to fall through the protection and policy net; and that through planting and regeneration appropriate successors are in place to provide for ancient trees for the future.