

The Ancient Tree Hunt - Putting ancient trees on the map

Your questions answered

What is the Ancient Tree Hunt and who's behind it?

The Ancient Tree Hunt is a five year project to find and map all the fat, old trees across the UK. The project is led by the Woodland Trust, the Ancient Tree Forum and the Tree Register of the British Isles working with many other partners to and the general public to put the UK's ancient trees on the map. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, SNH, WCVA and supported by the Forestry Commission Scotland. At the heart of the Hunt is an interactive online map (ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk). Not only can people record trees with the click of a mouse, as well as upload photos and stories, but they can find out where they can go to visit trees in their neighbourhoods or when they are on holiday.

Why do we need a map?

For centuries people have been fascinated by big old trees. John Evelyn in his book 'Sylva' was the first to publish a list of some of the largest and oldest trees in the UK in 1664. Box: picture of an 18xx engraving shows a group of miners visiting the Major Oak in Sherwood and today over 70,000 people visit this tree a week.

However our project goes further than updating the records of giants that others have recorded in the past. The target is to record every ancient tree in the UK. In the past few years many 1000 year old oaks have been discovered to add to our knowledge of how important our lost tree heritage can be. Through involving people in the hunt we hope it will also inspire people to wonder at these amazing trees, which are amongst the oldest living things on the planet, as a first step towards caring for them and securing their future.

Why are ancient trees special?

Ancient trees are special in many different ways. Sometimes their sheer size and extraordinary shape means they have an amazing 'wow' factor. They may be a landmark of a special place e.g. an old pollard that marked a boundary or yew that was planted to mark a religious place that pre-dates the coming of Christianity to these shores. They were often symbols of important events such as the Parliament Oak where both King John and Edward I held 'parlies' or early parliaments or the Tolpuddle Martyr's Tree.

Many 'ordinary' ancients in the countryside are a living relict of times past when they were pollarded to provide the everyday necessities of life – food, fodder, fuel, timber. This practice is still alive today in some parts of the UK but has tended to die out with the arrival of coal and then electricity.

They also represent great wealth and status and are still a valuable asset to parks and landscape gardens. It is these trees especially that give the British landscape its unique character and were used by famous landscape designers to give the romantic 'air of antiquity' to famous estates.

Ancient trees are also very important for the special wildlife that they support. As they age, old trees add value by providing increasingly diverse habitats which are important for more and more specialised species especially fungi, insects and lichens. The more hollow and aged they become the more important they can be for birds, bats and other animals as places of sanctuary to roost or nest.

Why do you need my help?

As an owner you can really make a difference. Every tree is important and establishing new trees to become the ancient trees of the future is vital if this precious legacy is to be passed on to future generations.

This is a Domesday Anniversary Project, a truly millennium project, linking the great survey of William the Conqueror and his Norman lords undertaken in 1085 to a modern day Domesday for ancient trees and setting a standard for future millennium reviews.

What's in it for me?

Through this project we want to help you by

- Telling people about your custodianship of these internationally valuable assets.
- Bringing you the very latest in tree knowledge and advice in the care of ancient and veteran trees.
- Lobbying on your behalf for better financial incentives for the care of ancient trees
- Giving you advice on sources of funding to help you care of these special trees
- Giving additional publicity to trees that are in publicly accessible places and also those in parks and gardens where owners charge a fee for entry.

In return you may be able to help us by

- Implementing good practice in managing your trees
- Recording your trees and their history on our Ancient Tree Hunt database
- Raising the profile of trees that are on publicly accessible land.
- Using your influence with policy makers to ensure the best outcomes for ancient trees
- Planting more trees to become the ancients in centuries to come.
- Becoming an Ancient Tree Guardian

What is an ancient tree?

An ancient tree is a tree which because of its great age, size or condition is of exceptional value culturally, in the landscape or for wildlife.

This is not a very specific definition as every tree species and each individual tree will have its own life expectancy. An oak tree may live for 1000 years or more, yews for 6000 and a birch tree will be ancient by 100 years old. Also as trees naturally become hollow as they grow old, the tree rings in the heart of the tree, by which we would normally age trees, disappear, so even if we did cut old trees down to age them we would still be unable to count any of the oldest rings.

Up to now the terms ancient and veteran have been used interchangeably. However a veteran tree is a tree which shows most of the characteristics of ancient trees but as a mature tree. These trees have often had long hard working lives, or have lived in difficult conditions and hence the analogy with veteran soldiers.

What information will be collected?

We are keen to keep the information we collect as simple as possible because this is a huge project. In some parts of the UK such as Herefordshire and Essex there are many ancient trees in hedgerows. Our aim is to map every tree and collect girth measurements which will help us estimate the age of the trees. What we must record for each tree are three things: the species of tree, the grid reference and the girth measurement, or a good estimate.

There will also be opportunities for people to tell us about stories about the tree and take photos at different times of the year. This will help to raise the profile of these trees and show how important they are culturally.

What species of trees will you record?

We are very keen to find all the ancient trees and shrubs of those species which are native to the British Isles. They will have the greatest importance historically and for wildlife. However other species are of great interest and we will record those as well. The exceptions will be very unusual and exotic species in people's gardens and arboreta

I don't want any of my trees recorded unless I give permission, can you guarantee this?

Before any tree is verified on the website we will ask our team of volunteer verifiers to look at all the details recorded for that tree. They will be able to check the information regarding the location and accessibility of a tree and communicate with the recorder about how they obtained the information about that tree. We will ask them to ensure that any trees that are not visible from a public place have the owner's permission to go on the website. There are different accessibility criteria for trees that in public places compared with on private land. We can also differentiate trees that are very close to public rights of way and roads and those that can be seen from a right of way but are not near enough to gain access to the tree itself. Our most private option is that trees can be recorded on the database but be hidden from all but ATH staff.

Trees that are on private land will be very clearly distinguished from trees that are on public land by a different colour on the interactive map and through the written record that accompanies each tree. *Could list the five headings here in a separate box or screen shot?* We make it very clear to recorders that we are not encouraging them to go onto private land without the owner's permission.

What does it mean if my tree is recorded on the database?

Our website provides information on each tree that is recorded. The minimum information is the location girth and species of the tree however it is possible to add photographs, stories and comments about each tree.

The amount of information collected for each tree will vary enormously. We are hoping that lots will be added for some famous, celebrity trees such as the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest and trees that are locally notable too, including details of why they are so important historically, biologically or aesthetically. This will help to raise awareness of how important they are. However for many trees we anticipate that there will be very little – just the least amount of information to make a record and perhaps a photo. A picture helps us to verify records and so we are keen for each tree to be photographed at least once. Information about what we are asking people to record is available on-line or in the Ancient Tree Hunt Recording Form

All the details of each tree will be checked by our volunteer verifiers before they go live to ensure the information is as robust as possible. In some cases the verifier may go out to visit and check the tree personally.

Any information about the tree's condition, threats and protection will not be available for anyone other than verifiers to see.

What will you do with the information? Who will be able to see it?

The aim of the project is to make everyone much more aware of the significance of ancient and veteran trees. We want these historic trees to stand out from the fabric of our towns and countryside and start to be counted.

The trees that have survived in the landscape have done so through the goodwill of their owners. The aim of this project is to celebrate their foresight and care. It is also to help us as charities lobby for greater support for landowners to take care of the trees. The number of ancient trees is believed to be in decline and we need to take extra care of the remaining trees if they are to survive long enough for other younger trees to take over their role.

Trees may be very vulnerable as they can be cut down so easily before anyone has had a chance to explain how important they are. For the great majority of trees a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) would be unnecessary and would not help in any way. However, where a tree is at risk from an imminent threat e.g. from development proposals, we may approach a local authority to ask them to place a Tree Preservation Order on the tree.

I can't afford to have more liabilities to look after; will you be offering any help?

The Woodland Trust, the Ancient Tree Forum and the Tree Register are three charities working together. We do not have funds to help owners manage their trees. However we can give advice on sources of funding and have done so to local communities. For example, we have given advice to a parish council which wanted to save the mighty Mitre Oak in Worcestershire. We have also worked with landowners such as the Duke of Marlborough.

We have also successfully lobbied for changes in agricultural subsidies so that in some parts of the UK ancient trees may be an asset that can attract funding. Further details are available on our website www.ancient-tree-forum.org.uk We are currently developing a series of guidance notes on how to care for ancient trees called Ancient Tree Guides and these are available to download from the Ancient Tree Forum website or by post from the Woodland Trust.

We are also able to give specialist advice to individual owners of parks or estates with exceptional numbers of ancient trees.

How can I stop people trespassing?

We are making it very clear to anyone who wants to participate in the Ancient Tree Hunt that we do not wish them to go onto private land or record trees that are not visible from a public place without permission. We do not know of any problems caused by trespassing tree tourists.

My house/grounds are open to the public. How can I make the most of the trees? Can you help me attract more visitors?

We do hope that the project will encourage people to look for the nearest ancient tree to their home that is on publicly accessible property. The more that we can feature celebrity trees and why they are famous the more likely it will be that people will be attracted to see them. Many properties are open to the public on a fee paying basis e.g. Chatsworth, Blenheim Palace, and we believe that visitors will be further encouraged to visit such sites through this project.

Box: In recent years there has been considerable publicity for many celebrity, high profile trees e.g. the Bowthorpe Oak which is a top UK tree and highlighted in Thomas Pakenham's Meetings with Remarkable Trees. The owners make a small charge to see this tree and are pleased to allow access to it.

As people add stories to the website these will be freely available and you might like to take the information to create materials to enhance your visitors' experience. You will also be able to see which properties close to you also have ancient trees and you could consider collaborating to create ancient tree trails for people to follow. We would be happy to promote such opportunities where we can.

The Tree Council, another charity, has published books about individual heritage trees across the UK with the permission of owners. This sort of publicity encourages people to visit trees where access has already been agreed.

Someone came and measured the trees years ago - do you want my records?

Yes please! There has been a long history of big tree hunters starting as far back as the 17th Century. The first written records of the largest trees in the country were by John Evelyn in his famous book 'Silva or a discourse on forest trees' published in 1664. Since then many great hunters have sought out the champion trees in the country. It was the work of Alan Mitchell that started the Tree Register of Britain and Ireland with whom the Woodland Trust and Ancient

Tree Forum work in partnership. Please send them to... or make use of our excel spreadsheet which can be downloaded from www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/recording which enables you to upload multiple records.

Who else is involved?

We are working with partners as diverse as the Tree Council, The Caravan Club, The National Trust, English Heritage, Forestry Commission and HM Prison Service - to capture even those ancient trees that are behind bars, as well as over 100 regional and local groups. We also have a growing network of landowners who are custodians of the most wonderful ancient trees including Charlie Burrell at Knepp Castle and Lord Blakenham.

Many individual ancient trees on many estates are already recorded and are already famous. Here are a few:

- The Queen Elizabeth Oak in Cowdray Park,
- the Royal Oak at Boscobel,
- the Sidney Oak at Penshurst,
- champion trees in Kew Gardens,
- Ely's London Plane in the grounds of a Sue Ryder Care Home,
- the Bowthorpe Oak – one of the largest oaks in the country, on a private farm in Lincolnshire,
- the Great Lime at Holker Hall
- the Umbrella Tree at Levens Hall
- the Douglas Fir at Scone Palace
- the Pontfadog Oak, North Wales

Can I get to meet others with similar trees to share ideas?

We seek to bring owners together to share good practice and to help raise awareness of our internationally important inheritance of ancient trees. Our Ancient Tree Guardian scheme provides Guardians with regular information about the fascinating world of ancient trees and invitations to special events with some of the best ancient tree experts in the world. For more information please contact....

So how will I know which trees are truly ancient?

We want to find all the trees which are truly ancient; the ones that are large in girth by comparison with other trees of the same species... So we will ask people to measure trees of a certain size girth and above depending on species. We also want to find the next generation of ancient trees. An oak tree over 3m girth is of interest but one over 4.5m girth is very likely to be an ancient. We will set the guide size somewhere in between although the database will be able to record trees of smaller girth than the guide size. This will help us find the oldest trees in any parish or town in the country even if they are not ancient.

How will I know how to survey and measure the trees?

Simple, clear instructions are provided. The Woodland Trust has very good experience of working with the general public to measure and study the timing of natural, seasonal events particularly in relation to climate change known as phenology. Our phenology website (www.naturescalendar.org.uk) now has over 12,000 active on-line recorders. A number of county based ancient tree surveys have already been undertaken and we have built on the experiences of these. The Tree Register of the British Isles with whom we are working very closely has a great deal of experience of measuring and recording a wide variety of trees.

A grid reference is often very tricky – how will you be sure they are accurate?

For ancient trees where there are many of them close together it is important that we can identify each tree and identify it in some way for the future. The only identification we can safely use is the tree's grid reference so accuracy is very important.

We have a team of voluntary verifiers to help us ensure that our records are as accurate as possible. This team will also advise recorders on how to record trees and encourage good practice in finding and surveying trees.

Our new website allows people to put records onto a map without requiring a grid reference. As long as people can translate where they are onto a good map then they can just visually mark the same location on the map on the website. We are encouraging people to put information onto the website direct rather than send in paper records so that they do generate the right grid reference.

Foresters measure the diameter of tree trunks, why have you chosen to measure the girth?

For members of the public, even keen tree people, it is not easy to measure the diameter of a tree without a specialised DBH (diameter at breast height) tape, but anyone can easily obtain a tape measure that can be taken out into the countryside. In one survey in Bristol people were encouraged to take a bit of string or wool with them to measure a tree and then measure the string or wool when back at home.

For simplicity we will be asking members of the public to measure the girth of trees by hugs and this figure can be recorded in the web site until we can obtain a more accurate measurement.

How will the girth of a tree be measured if it is on private land?

Where a tree is not on land which has open or public access, but is visible from a road or a footpath we will ask for an estimate of the girth. We will, however, encourage recorders to ask the owner's permission to record the tree. This will help the owner to be aware of the importance of the tree on his/her land, and its value to the local environment.

If an owner does not want a tree or trees to be visible on the web site maps we can limit the information to the database only. It is essential, however, that for the purposes of analysing the information and demonstrating the numbers of ancient trees in the UK that we record as many trees as possible.

There will be plenty of information on the website where people can go to see ancient trees – at Windsor Great Park, the New Forest, on National Trust and Woodland Trust properties for example. Most of the largest trees are already widely known and details of where to go and see them have been published for many years.

Those trees that are not visible from publicly accessible places will not be recorded unless permission has been given by the owner.

What does the Woodland Trust mean by securing the future of ancient trees?

Ancient trees – Securing their Future is the title of our campaign to help safeguard our internationally important heritage of old trees and to encourage people to plant trees to become ancient trees of the future. A leaflet which outlines our campaign asks is available to download from ancient-tree-forum.org.uk or by post from the Woodland Trust.

Putting ancient trees on the map is just one of a number of actions we need to take if our important inheritance of ancient trees has a chance to be a legacy for to future generations.