

## Report from the Chairman

Colin Hall

# The Tree Register reaches maturity

2009 gives us cause for celebration since it is the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the conception of The Tree Register. We celebrated with a fine day at Kew, where we were pleased to see so many supporters for the Alan Mitchell Lecture and Tony Kirkham spoke enthusiastically on the history of 250 years of Trees at Kew. The Silent Auction of rare and unusual trees was again a great success, raising over £1,000. Many thanks are due to Tony for organising everything for us at Kew as well as to Chris Carnaghan, Harry Hay, Maurice Foster, Rupert Eley, Roy Lancaster, David Millais and others for providing the plants for the auction.

Once again thanks are due to all our supporters during 2008 and to David Alderman, our registrar, Owen Johnson and Aubrey Fennell and all our other tree recorders and Pamela Stevenson, our hard working honorary secretary.



Some of the Silent Auction plants: *Aesculus sylvatica*; *Aesculus turbinata*; *Sorbus hupehensis* and *Sorbus glabrescens*.

It was in 1988 that Alan Mitchell and Vicky Schilling (then Vicky Hallett) took the necessary steps to establish The Tree Register as a registered charity, securing the support of many who knew them well to get the charity up and running. The records were then all hand written and not easy to access, but computerisation followed, with the result that today we have some 170,000 records, with the Champion Tree data easily accessible through our website.

Our objective continues to be to maintain, update and expand our unique tree database, to high professional standards, with partnerships and relationships with others (such as The Woodland Trust, RBG Kew and the Ancient Yew Group) to enable all to use our records.



A Kew guide leads supporters beneath the *Acer cappadocicum* 'Aureum'. on a champion tree trail.



*Xanthoceras sorbifolium* from NE China. One of many spectacular trees seen in full flower at Kew.

## Registrars Report

Owen Johnson

# A register of tree collections

I often claim (and no-one has yet corrected me) that Britain has the richest heritage of garden trees in the world. Everywhere, the landed gentry collected them, with the same mania as they collected paintings, butterflies, or the shorter-lived garden plants. But there is a heroic perversity in collecting trees. The planter is usually dead before the trees come into their own. Nor can you readily sell a tree, or move it and re-establish the collection anywhere else.

### Wondrous trees

The consequence is that tree-hunters are continually stumbling across rare and wondrous trees, stranded in new housing estates or overgrown copses, without anything to show who planted them, when or why – or even what they are. When I visited Falmouth in 2006, I knew that Penmere Manor had been a home of the Bolitho family until the Second World War, and that the same family had created the famous gardens of Trewidden and Greenway. But nothing in the literature prepared me for the cornucopia of superb trees that survive on small suburban lawns around this site, including *Castanopsis cuspidata*, *Laurelia serrata*, a new champion *Tetracentron* and the only mature Madeiran *Myrica faya* yet found on mainland Britain.

### Destruction

Historic sites like this are at the mercy of the new owners. Until 1930, Aldenham Park near Elstree rivalled Kew as the grandest plant collection in Britain. Today, little remains to tell of this heyday except for strange foliage types scattering the woodland canopy. Westonbirt Arboretum came within a whisker of destruction for agriculture in the 1950s.



*Quercus crassifolia* (Bryan Roebuck)

Great tree collections don't even have to be big. At Beauport Park outside Hastings, which first got me interested in trees as a teenager, the Victorian rarities survive in bewildering randomness across several kilometres of rolling wooded country. But the veteran plantsman Nigel Muir grows some marvellous trees, included *Quercus salicina* and the champion Taiwanese *Eriobotrya deflexa*, in his front garden which is scarcely four metres across.

### RHS bursary

The Tree Register, which includes data drawn from old books and conference reports, already serves as the only catalogue we have to the trees in many historic collections. With an RHS bursary to help fund my research and travel this season, I aim to formalise this role and to begin to develop a checklist of tree-collections, safeguarding as much information as possible on the provenance, planting dates and exact locations of significant trees as a resource for future generations. As such I am keen to make new contacts with people who may be developing the next generation of arboreta. (Information in the Register can always remain confidential, at least in the medium term.)

### Majesty Loses Large Limb

During the weekend of 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> August 2009 one of the nations favourite champion trees "Majesty" on the Fredville Estate, Nonington, Kent, lost a very large limb. The tree was being visited by Dutch big tree enthusiast Jeroen Phillippona who discovered this talking to Park Keeper Mr. Peter Clarke. Jeroen reported to the Tree Register "The very largest branch has fallen, the one over a metre in diameter which arose at about 8 metre height and which soon divided into two heavy branches, in total about 14 m long. Very sad because it was the most beautiful branch and represented over one fourth or even one third of the total canopy."



Majesty (Jeroen Phillippona)

Jeroen Phillippona is the contact person of de "Bomenstichting" (the Dutch Tree Society)

See their website (with part in English): [www.bomeninfo.nl](http://www.bomeninfo.nl)

## Tall trees project 2009

Michael Spraggon

# Climbers confirm tallest trees

In February 2009 a team of professional climbers climbed and measured three of the main contenders for the UK's tallest tree. The team was comprised of; Mark Tansley and Steve Woollard, lecturers at Sparsholt College Hampshire; Lukasz Warzecha, an internationally renowned rock climber and photographer; Justin Palmer, an arboricultural assessor and instructor and Chris Hunter - Lead climber for Urban Forestry in Suffolk.

### The Hermitage

First tree to be climbed was the Hermitage Douglas Fir in Dunkeld, Perthshire. This tree grows out of the side of the river bank at a steep incline before turning vertically upwards for the next 200ft or so. As such it is possibly the tallest tree if measured from the lowest exposed roots. However, from the high side of the bank the team recorded a definitive tape measurement of **61.31m**.

### Stronardron

The second tree to be measured was the Stronardron Douglas Fir near Dunans Castle in Argyll. This tree was considered to be joint tallest for several years. Mark Tansley reported a height of **63.79m** putting it within 20cm of Dughall Mor, recorded as 64m by the Forestry Commission in 2006 (62.5m by TROBI 2003).



The Stronardron Douglas (Lukasz Warzecha LWimages.co.uk)

### Blair Castle

The third and final tree on the itinerary was a fast growing Grand Fir at Blair Castle, Perthshire. By pure coincidence my climbing partner Dave and I

were due to be driving past Blair Atholl on our way to the mountains on Saturday, the very same day

that the team would be measuring the Grand Fir! This opportunity was too good to miss and Mark very kindly invited us along to witness the event.

### Dawn twilight

By another coincidence it turned out that both parties had booked into the same Youth Hostel at nearby Pitlochry and we arrived to find the team standing outside the front entrance discussing the previous two days' events. We chatted for a few moments before we all retired to our rooms - we needed to be up at 05:30 to leave enough time to get a line into the tree before the grounds were opened to the public. The Tree Register had recently measured this tree by laser recording 63m. The previous two trees measured by the team had turned out to be taller than previously thought and as our small convoy of vehicles headed off in the dawn twilight towards Blair Castle I wondered whether this tree would turn out to be the tallest of them all. When we arrived at Diana's Grove, where the former Dukes of Atholl had planted many specimens that were now amongst the tallest trees in Perthshire (sometimes by firing seeds at the hillside from a canon) a full risk assessment was carried out and the area around the tree was cordoned off while Justin loaded up the Big Shot.



The Big Shot catapult (Lukasz Warzecha LWimages.co.uk)

### Big Shot catapult

Getting a rope over a branch up to 100ft off the ground is no mean feat and involves firing a lead-filled leather pouch from a 10ft catapult called a Big Shot. The pouch has a thin cord attached to it and if all goes well it should fly over the desired branch, trailing the cord behind it and return to the ground. The climbing rope is then attached to the cord and pulled over the branch. It sounds easy

but with other branches and foliage all around it can be very hard to isolate the branch you want and even Justin had to make several unsuccessful attempts before the perfect placement was found. The actual climb was fairly straightforward. Visible as an increasingly tiny orange dot, Justin made his way towards the top of the thinly tapering spire. Lukasz took numerous photos from the ground and from the neighbouring Douglas Fir, Chris and Steve assisted with the climb and Mark took laser readings from various positions from the ground. The expected crowds of spectators never materialised but by the time Mark announced the result a few interested people had turned up. And the height? **62.70m** - not as tall as expected but still the tallest tree in Perthshire.

### Hard life!

At this point Dave and I had to leave because we were planning to climb to the summit of Ben Lawers before nightfall. (As it turned out we had to turn back before the summit ridge due to dangerously high winds and ended up having to suffer the ordeal of sitting in the bar at the Killin Hotel 'till the wee small hours drinking Lagavulin 16yr old whisky with some friends who had driven up from Edinburgh to meet us. It's a hard life!

### Dughall Mor

Mark and the team travelled the following day to Reelig Glen Wood near Inverness, where the now famous Douglas Fir named Dughall Mor stands. Unfortunately the Forestry Commission had not granted permission for it to be climbed, so the team resorted to measuring it from several positions by laser, recording an average height of only **62.02m**. Until Dughall Mor is climbed and measured in the same way, the Stronardron Douglas Fir, at **63.79m**, is the tallest of the climbed trees in Scotland.

### Lake Vyrnwy

This left the main challenger to title of tallest tree to be the Welsh Douglas Fir at lake Vyrnwy, Powys. The tree should have grown in the four years since last measured by laser and so I felt that the tree should be close to 63.5m. So in May 2009, Dave and I drove to Lake Vyrnwy and at dawn, installed a rope (with friction saver) over a branch at 110ft. I ascended this and then climbed delicately, using a split tail lanyard, to the top. I measured from a point 5.50m below the top to the very tip of the tree (using a customised telescopic rod, off-set for reaching the tip of the highest most branch) and then lowered the 61m tape to Dave who was waiting below at 130ft in case it got snagged. He then descended with the end of the tape to the ground and radioed up the measurement at the marker we had placed the previous evening at exactly 1m from the highest

point on the ground. There was no wind that morning so the tape was completely straight.



At the bottom and top of the tallest tree in Wales (Michael Spraggon)

### Joint champions

I was getting quite excited as the unwinding tape passed 57m. Dave said "stop" when the tape was reading 57.29m at the top marker. Adding the three measurements together (5.50m + 57.29m + 1.00m) I couldn't believe the result: **63.79m**, EXACTLY the same height as the Sparsholt team measured the Stronardron Fir to be! My first thought was "oh no, they're going to think I'm making this up!" but that was the result. If I'd wanted to make it up I would have made it taller wouldn't I? About 5m from the top I found a bottle containing a piece of paper with the names of 3 people who climbed this tree on March 9th 2007. I signed and dated the sheet and wrote the height of the tree.

So there it is: We have two trees at exactly the same height to the centimetre that are the joint tallest living things in the UK and Northern Europe.

## A county profile

Mark W Hanson

# Tree recording in Essex

Essex, in some ways, could be regarded as the spiritual home of the Tree Register. The Hon. Maynard Greville, youngest son of the famous socialite the Duchess of Warwick, was born in 1898 at Easton Lodge near Great Dunmow. The 300ha medieval deer-park here became an airbase in the Second World War; it is said that over 10,000 trees were destroyed, and this was what prompted Maynard to start recording trees. After a career in journalism with the Daily Mail, Morning Post and as motoring correspondent for Country Life, Maynard retired to a devastated estate and pursued a full-time interest in trees, becoming chairman of the Royal Forestry Society's Home Counties division 1954-56.

### Maynard's legacy

His aim was to census every tree of interest in the UK, often travelling by bicycle. He left a formidable legacy of tree records, many of which were incorporated by Alan Mitchell into the Tree Register. Importantly Maynard recorded a number of the stupendous elm trees that were so characteristic of the Essex landscape before their eventual destruction by Dutch Elm Disease (DED). He also named the 'Burry Maiden Oak', one of only half-a-dozen survivors from the medieval park at Easton, which still survives near one of the blister hangers of the former air-base – a standard oak with a massive burr at the base and a girth of 985cm. Alan Mitchell, who measured the Burry Maiden in 1987, was himself born in 1922 in Ilford, then part of Essex.



White willow near Ulting, Essex (M. Hanson)

### Ancient countryside

Essex is too dry for conifers to make record trees. Giant sequoias are very common but I doubt if they will ever compete with the green rockets in the west of the country. Although Essex had some exceptionally tall elms before DED, generally the county does not provide the Tree Register with record heights. The 31m Black walnut in Hatfield Forest is one however that comes to mind. Essex is 'Ancient Countryside' and it is here that the county makes its contribution to Britain's tree heritage. Its historic and often very ancient wood-pasture sites are home to what is probably the biggest population

of veteran pollard trees in north-west Europe. Essex is known to have had one of the densest concentrations of medieval parks in England – I now have records of at least 133, and although sadly very few of these survive, many ancient trees hang on in parkland fragments. Essex is however exceptional in that it has the substantial remains of four of its five ancient Royal Forests, and because these Forests had common grazing rights pollard trees were prevalent.

### Veteran coppice

Essex also has a good survival rate for its ancient coppice-with-standards woodland and many coppice stools are quite rightly regarded as veteran trees in their own right. Chalkney Wood in the north of the county, which also spent some time as a park for wild swine in the medieval times, is dominated by Small-leaved lime and in recent years has benefited from the removal of forestry plantings.



Sweet chestnut, Stansted Hall (M. Hanson)

### Unique in the UK

In the old Forests (and don't forget this is in its legal sense as an area over which Forest Law applied – it does not necessarily mean an area of land with trees) there have been attempts to census the old pollards. Kingswood (Colchester) was deforested nearly 500 years ago and virtually nothing survives of its ancient landscape. Writtle Forest with its associated Park is known to have had some fine beech pollards, a huge Sweet chestnut (measured at nearly 14m in girth by Lord Petre in 1758), and giant oak pollards including the Northfield Oak (950cm girth in the 1830s according to Burnet).

### Wood pasture

Hatfield Forest, now owned by the National Trust, has probably around 900 old pollards (plus some very fine old stools in the wood compartments), mostly oak, hornbeam, thorn and field maple. Hatfield may be unique in the UK in that it has been a wooded Common, an ancient Royal Forest, a Chase and lastly and arguably a Park (with landscaped woods, rides, a lake and an ornamental 'Shell House'), thus running the complete wood-pasture spectrum.

### Surviving fragment

With Hainault and Epping Forests, together constituent parts of the old Forest of Waltham, we come to sites with old pollards in their thousands. Hainault, largely destroyed after 1851, still has in the surviving fragment some 6000 pollards, mainly of hornbeam and oak. Part of the site – including the old pollards – is currently managed by the Woodland Trust.

### Epping Forest

Epping Forest is the big unknown: covering some 2500ha (excluding the buffer lands) it is known to have tens of thousands of ancient and veteran pollards, for which I have seen estimates between 50,000 and 140,000! It is difficult anyway to count trees in dense woodland, and there are not only pollards but 'coppards' (coppice stools with their poles pollarded) and quite good numbers of stools, some of great size now (a beech that I believe is one tree appears to be a stool over 9m across). A number of the very oldest beech pollards, particularly in the High Beach area, have girths over 6m. Hornbeam is common as a pollard tree but none are huge; nor are the oaks. Rare pollards in the Forest include Field maple (I only know one good maiden tree), Common hawthorn (much commoner as a pollard in Hatfield Forest) and Wild service, common enough in Essex usually on boundary-banks of ancient woods, with probably only a dozen scattered here and there in the Forest.

### Barrington Hall Oak

Essex Forests have lost all their signature pollard oaks – the Fairlop Oak in Hainault Forest (11m girth at 1m in 1820 when it collapsed), the Fairmead Oak in Epping (830cm girth at its death in 1911), the Doodle Oak in Hatfield (1270cm girth; dead in 1858), the Broad Oak in Kingswood, and the Writtle Oak. Turpin's Oak, one of two huge pollards near Great Dawkins Farm, Hempstead, was 1080cm girth at 1m in the 1830s and collapsed around 1870. Currently the largest-girthed oak in Essex is the Barrington Hall Oak in private grounds not far from Hatfield Forest, in the top 20 oaks in the UK at just under 11.5m girth (around sprouts and burrs).



The Barrington Hall oak (M. Hanson)

I have to mention here a hornbeam that was found at Maynard Greville's Easton Lodge, a pollard

930cm girth in 1949 which survived the destruction of World War Two but burned down in 1956, a sad loss to the Essex tree scene.



Ancient hornbeam pollard at Danbury Park (Tree Register)

### Wollemi pine

Essex does not have a Westonbirt or a Bedgebury, and although we do have a variety of arboreta both public and private, none is of an age to give rise to significant numbers of record trees. Marks Hall near Coggeshall will become significant but planting only started in the 1990s. In 2008 some 50 Monkey Puzzles and 24 Wollemi pines were planted in a themed area, 'Gondwanaland', with 40 more Wollemis expected to go in.

### Champion trees

After Maynard Greville's work in the 1950s there were few trees measured in Essex. For the 2003 edition of *Champion Trees in Britain and Ireland* Owen Johnson had to include very old records in the absence of recent material. I started to submit records from 2004 and to date I have added nearly 900 measurements to the Register. My main interest was recording veteran trees but since I was working in many parkland sites increasing numbers of introduced trees were recorded as well. In 2003 only 14 national champions were known from Essex (including the five London Boroughs once part of the county); in 2008, thanks mainly to the work of Owen Johnson, that list now stands at 59. A quarter of these come from two collections – Writtle Agricultural

# Tree recording in Essex

College (11 champions) and Daws Hall, Lamarsh (6 champions). About a third belong to the Rosaceae (thorns, apples, cherries, whitebeams, etc) and of these I would pick out the hybrid thorn *Crataegus x lavallei*: the tallest is at Valentines Park, Ilford (11m) and the largest in girth at Waltham Abbey (207cm), a magnificent propped tree in the Abbey precinct. The champion Great White Cherry (*Prunus* 'Tai Haku') in Harlow Town Park, 220cm girth, is a fine example of a tree once considered extinct.



*Crataegus x lavallei*, Waltham Abbey (M. Hanson)

A few other champions really stand out: the Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*) at Halstead Cemetery (182cm girth), the Bolle's poplar (*Populus alba* f. *pyramidalis*) on the green by Chigwell station (363cm), and the huge hornbeam pollard at Weald Park near Brentwood (583cm at 1m) are particular favourites.



*Populus alba* f. *pyramidalis*, Chigwell (M. Hanson)

Tree hunting has turned up some, to my eyes at least, wonderful sites. Halstead Cemetery, already mentioned, has an attractive mix of mature trees, some dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Colchester Cemetery is an outstanding tree site with a very diverse planting scheme including fine cedars, Giant sequoias, Monkey Puzzles and Irish yews; it also has a stunning Austrian pine with a girth of 530cm at 65cm. Great Burstead parish churchyard is an oddity with scarce trees including two species of Southern beech and one of only two ancient yews in Essex (477cm at 30-50cm). Audley End in the north-west of the county has the famous Audley End Oak, a champion by dint of the fact that it is unique, except for a few recent scions. It has a girth of 470cm and was first recognised as a probable hybrid of Holm and Sessile oaks by Augustine Henry in 1901.



Holm oak at St. Osyth's (M. Hanson)

## Worthy pilgrimage

Essex with regard to trees never ceases to surprise, amaze or intrigue – it still has numbers of sizeable elms (including at least two champions), it still has probably uncountable numbers of veteran pollards and occasionally produces gems like the champion box (145cm girth) noted in a small garden by the church at White Notley or the Chilean plum yew (*Prumnopitys andina*), girthing 180cm - a native of South American montane rain-forest found in an old garden in Springfield, Chelmsford. I also have to add here the garden at 57, Gatehope Drive, in a non-descript council estate at South Ockendon and no I'm not going to tell you what's there but for any veteran tree enthusiast it's a worthy place of pilgrimage; I know I was green with envy when I saw the trees!

## County Champions

To find details of more than 550 Essex champions go to the Champion Tree Database Search in the members area of [www.treeregister.org](http://www.treeregister.org) and select Champions by County and then the county name from the list.

## Photos

We can show your photos of champion trees on the web site. Please email images to [info@treeregister.org](mailto:info@treeregister.org)

## An ancient avenue

David Alderman

# The Scots pine of Monnington Walk

The plaque at the beginning of Monnington Walk in Herefordshire states “This one mile long avenue of Scots pines and yews was created by Sir Thomas Tomkyns, owner of Monnington Court, to celebrate becoming a member of parliament in 1641.”



The plaque and avenue at Monnington Walk (Tree Register)

This makes these Scots pine some of the oldest surviving outside of Scotland and the Caledonian pine woods. At first sight it seems incredible that such aged pine could still be in reasonable health. Their girth and appearance is similar to many trees planted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century but a closer look discovers the biggest and presumably the oldest, are considerably decayed, some sounding hollow.

### The Woolhope Club

The largest 16 trees range from 2.28m – 3.77m in girth (Alderman&Owen 2009). The most compelling evidence that these are original trees is recorded by the Woolhope Naturalist's Field Club (Founded Hereford 1851) in 1870 who counted 240 rings on a recently windblown tree. The trunk was presumably sound enough to enable such a ring count and suggests, reasonably, that the trees were c.11 years old when planted. A later visit by the Woolhope Club in 1933 found that “many of the Scotch firs had died where they stood”. Those that remain have decayed sufficiently, it would seem, to prevent any future conclusive dendrochronology.



North side of the avenue at Monnington (Tree Register)



A typical Scots pine in the avenue at Monnington (Tree Register)

### Historically important

An avenue of yew and Scots pine stands out as being unusual and historically important. Various references are made of Scots pine being planted to show support for the Stuart cause and may have been the reason for Sir Thomas Tomkyns choosing these at a time when King Charles I was in a struggle with parliament over Scotland. Later the diarist Francis Kilvert described the trees (1870-1879) in such a colourful way as to suggest, to some, that the original trees may have been Maritime pines (*Pinus pinaster*). But Kilvert's description of the pattern and colour of the trunks can be seen today on these Scots pine. It would be interesting to discover their origin as they do have a unique character, standing out as being rather special and unlikely to be equaled by any of their replacements.

### Wye Valley Walk

The avenue leads from Monnington Court towards Scar Rock, a sandstone cliff on the River Wye, about a mile away and is well worth a visit. Take the Wye Valley Walk from Monnington or Brobury. The Scots pine now peter out amongst Monnington Copse but on the Scar some fine veteran Sweet Chestnut can be discovered which may date from 1775 plantings by new owner Sir George Cornwall of the neighbouring Moccas estate.



# The Ancient Trees of Offa's Dyke

Rob McBride – Volunteer Verifier for the Ancient Tree Hunt

In this day and age, there are very few, if any original challenges left to attempt, but as part of the Woodland Trusts Ancient Tree Hunt (ATH), I have embarked on a unique challenge never attempted before. To complete an ancient tree survey of the Offa's Dyke Path.

The challenge is to walk the Offas Dyke Path from end to end (north to south) to find, measure, photograph and record fantastic ancient hidden gems of our countryside. Offas Dyke Path is a 182 mile National Trail that follows loosely the border between England and Wales. It is, I think, the most scenic walk in Britain.



The route of the Offa's Dyke Path ([www.offasydykewalk.co.uk](http://www.offasydykewalk.co.uk))

## Survey

I began at Prestatyn in North Wales on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2008, St. Georges Day, an appropriate day to be venturing from my Shropshire home in England over the border into North Wales. And I have been slowly making my way south towards Chepstow at the southern end of the Dyke path. During my journey I will be stopping to survey any old trees that I think should be recorded. This means rather slow progress as it entails measuring the tree, photographing and recording particular features for the ATH, such as looking for signs of hollowing, fungi, deadwood, epiphytes and invertebrates. I am also filming my progress for a video diary.

## First tree of many

After arriving at Prestatyn on the train from Chester, I hurriedly walked the ½ mile or so to the beach and the starting point of the walk, Offas Dyke Path Visitor Centre. As is custom I paddled in the sea and the next time I will touch salt water will be in the Severn Estuary at Sedbury Cliffs near Chepstow. Then it was off, but not far before I was distracted by the first notable tree of the walk, a nice yew at Christ Church, by the gate.



Yew tree at Christ Church, Prestatyn (Rob McBride)

## Awkward ash

As I climbed the path through scrubby vegetation, I reached a point where I could turn around to get a panoramic view over Prestatyn and the sea, to the west was Rhyl. In the distance was Llandudno and the snow-topped Snowdonia mountains. It was a pretty site (even Rhyl looked sort of nice!) I was just glad to stop to catch breath before coming to my first Offas Dyke Path stile, stile no 1 of 700! Over a road into fields I spotted my first veteran tree. An ash: It was situated next to a stream on a slope, and as usual very awkward to get at!



The ash tree with a Barn Owl (Rob McBride)

At 4.6m in girth the ash was not monstrous but worth recording as it had hollowing and dead branches and locally an important landscape feature. But became more memorable when I looked up and I saw a beautiful Barn Owl taking flight just a couple of feet above my head. Flying off it looked fantastic! My good friend in Ellesmere,

John Lightfoot, has done excellent work with the Barn Owl Trust and we have a system. If John, being a postman covering a large area of the countryside, spots a big tree, he will text to tell me where it is and its grid reference and vice versa, if I see a barn owl. It works well and helps us both.



The stump of huge Black poplar on Offas Dyke Walk (Rob McBride)

### Oak at the Gate of the Dead

Hearing of my expedition, the BBC contacted me, via Bob Hockenull of BBC Midlands, to do some filming on the Offas Dyke. We met up and did a take on the Dyke at Chirk Castle and they put it out on BBC Midlands Today. We filmed the 'Oak at the Gate of the Dead' and other trees and finally, with me crawling out of an ancient oak on the Dyke! You can see this by going to this link;

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/7451852.stm>



Oak at the Gate of the Dead, Chirk (Rob McBride)

### Dinas Bran to Garth

Despite relying on public transport and hitching lifts, I have always managed to get back home after covering 12 miles or so. As I get further from home it will become more difficult. One day from Dinas Bran, with its stunning scenery, I found some really nice old hedgerow trees before negotiating the Pontcystlle aqueduct. It is always really exciting crossing this aqueduct! Later, finishing for the day, I walked out onto a country road and there was a bus to Llangollen, fantastic luck! When I returned to start the next section of the walk I visited a tree that I had spotted previously and met the owner, a Mrs Williams at Tynois Farm. Her tree turned out to be a really nice 5m girthed oak that had lost a limb with sudden limb drop a year or two ago. It looks like an old pollard. Mrs Williams has a photograph from 1910 showing the tree and another sadly gone. It's a great place as I measured lots of old hedgerow

trees before going down to Garth where I came across some really lovely Silver birches.



A large and unexpected county champion hornbeam at Chirk (Tree Register)

### Countryfile

Later in November BBC Countryfile contacted me, again via Bob as he had moved over to work on this programme. I did a piece for the programme at Trefonen, where Offas's Dyke cuts through Shropshire and featured the splendid Cae Du Oak.



Cae Du Oak (Rob McBride)

I am looking forward to finding many more ancient trees such as this on the Offa's Dyke.

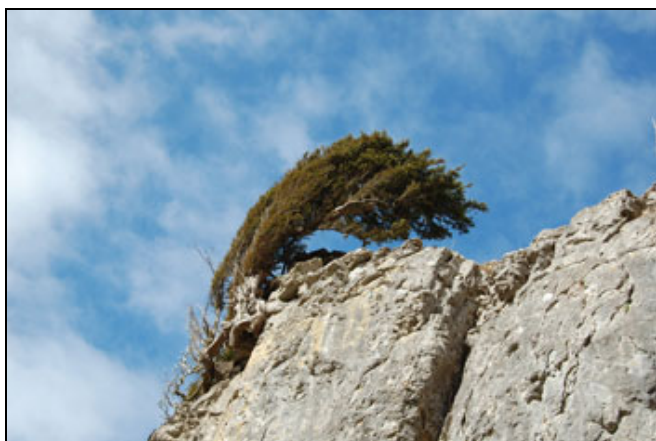
See more of Rob's adventures by going to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) searching for 'trehunter' and then look for the Offas Dyke video clips.

## Ancient cliff trees

David Alderman

# Xtreme tree hunting

A cliff face appears a hostile environment for any plant to survive and yet can be home to unique old growth ecosystems and some of our most ancient trees. Finding old trees growing on cliffs is not unknown throughout the world, but is rarely mentioned when discussing populations of ancient trees amongst British and Irish tree experts. Thomas Pennant provided us with an early reference, describing the significance of the old yew trees on the cliffs above Llangollen in his book *A Tour in Wales (1778-1783)* "...parallel strata of white limestone, often giving birth to vast yew-trees".



Ancient yew on the limestone cliffs above Llangollen (Tree Register)

As is found throughout the world, it is our evergreen trees that survive best in these extreme locations. In Britain we must look towards yew, juniper and holly as being our only native evergreens for potential cliff face rocky ancients. Long lived broadleaved species, such as oak, are unable to maintain slow growth long enough to survive much more than 250 years on extreme sites. And yet rowan, the mountain ash, appears to be able to reach 200 years in a rocky soil-less environment, well beyond its normally expected age. Whitebeam and its various limestone cliff face growing sub species, may reach a similar age.



Roots searching for support and nutrients between the rock strata. (Tree Register)

Longevity of a cliff face tree is dependent upon the tree maintaining unusually small annual ring widths and only those species such as yew and juniper with fine

cell structures appear able to sustain such slow growth and survive to a great age on cliffs in Britain. Two 1,000 year old yew were cored by Canadian cliff ecologist Doug Larson above Llangollen, north Wales, where the petrified wood of roots, exposed to the weather following erosion of the limestone, is a key indicator of old age.



Recreational tree hunter Michael Spraggon navigates to an ancient yew estimated to be 750-1000 years old. (Tree Register)

So, the next time you gaze up at some wee trees growing on a limestone cliff, spare a thought, they may be the oldest trees you have ever seen!



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