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## **Report from the Chairman - Colin Hall**

### **Champion tree book**

I am delighted to tell you that we are planning to publish in the autumn a book recording the Champion Trees of Britain and Ireland. The Tree Register database is unique - there is no other similar record covering the whole of Britain and Ireland - and our Champion Tree list includes the biggest and the best of the great tree heritage of these Islands. For tree lovers and enthusiasts, the book will be one you must have in your library or bookcase or on your coffee table. We are very grateful to Dr. Owen Johnson who has taken on the huge task of editing the data and the book. Thanks are also due to David Alderman, our tree recorders and our supporters who have provided the data and the photographs for the book. We are also grateful to The Royal Horticultural Society and the Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum for their financial support and our publisher, Whittet Books.

### **A history of tree measuring**

I hope you find this, our 12th annual newsletter, interesting and inspiring. Vicky Schilling, the co-founder of The Tree Register with Alan Mitchell, has contributed a fascinating article on the history of tree measuring (re-printed with kind permission from the editor of Hortus). The Tree Register is continuing an ancient tradition!

### **The remnants of Europe's rainforests**

Ted Green, the founder of the Ancient Tree Forum, gave the 2003 Alan Mitchell Lecture at Windsor Great Park, where the talk preceded a walk, led by Ted, to see the goliath oaks in the park. Tickets for the event were again sold out fast.

The lecture was sponsored by the Woodland Trust with whom we are collaborating in their Ancient Tree Campaign.



### **Registrar's Report - David Alderman**

#### **Mapping a future for our veteran trees**

Collaborating with the Woodland Trust and Ancient Tree Forum on the Ancient Tree Campaign has provided new opportunities to help record our tree heritage. The Tree Register's role in this project is helping create and maintain the database of veteran trees, which in part will become publicly accessible via the Internet and an ancient and veteran tree web site. People will be able to locate their nearest publicly accessible veteran trees or become a recorder to add records. New records will await verification on the ground before appearing as confirmed to ensure the accuracy of this data. The technology behind this is led by the Woodland Trust team who evolved their highly successful phenology web site attracting thousands of local recorders.

#### **Mapping our veterans**

A number of local authorities and wildlife groups have already begun surveying and mapping their veteran trees. During 2002 the Suffolk Wildlife Trust ran a "Fattest Oak" competition to find the biggest and oldest oaks in the county. The exciting result was the reporting of many previously unrecorded veteran trees as well as confirming the survival of known specimens. The biggest oak in Suffolk remains a tree at Haughley Green, which despite surgery recently partially collapsed.



Haughley Green, Suffolk oak in 1952



and partially collapsed in 2002 (Tree Register)

### Hillier's champion tree trail

450 champion trees were updated or recorded as new during 2002 ensuring data in the forthcoming champion tree book is as up to date as possible. Our thanks go to Allen Coombes and volunteer recorders at the Sir Harold Hillier Arboretum for their enthusiasm in recording this important collection for inclusion on the Register. Currently they can boast more than 200 champion trees and a champion tree trail is being planned. This year, one of their students, Kim See-Yong, from Chollipo Arboretum, is carrying out a project on the champion trees. He will be looking for additional potential champions as well as producing interpretative literature on the champion trees. Due to the wealth of young arboreta and rapid growth of some species, Tree Register policy is to include a tree as champion when it has grown to a size where its stem diameter is 20cm or more, preferably on a good single stem at 1.5m above ground. To fit everything into our new book this has been increased to 25cm diameter.



### Kew protecting its champions

Other collections planning tree trails based on their champion trees are at Westonbirt (137 champions) and the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (340 champions). At Kew our detailed survey undertaken by Owen Johnson was sent to Roger Howard, Head Arborist - just in time! An Ernest Wilson plant *Malus yunnanensis* var. *veitchii* was planned for removal to make way for a new calor gas compound. The information received that this was a champion tree led to the plans being dramatically revised. Tony Kirkham, Curator of Collections, said "not only did we retain the tree, we de-compacted and mulched the ground around, protecting it further by placing bollards along the adjacent path to prevent accidental damage and further compaction by vehicles." Roger added "We were very excited to discover we had so many champions and have included a field on our management database to highlight any TROBI trees. If one of our arborists has to undertake work on such a tree further advice must be sought", thus showing further commitment in protecting Kew's champion trees.

### In search of monsters - Vicky Schilling

#### A history of tree measuring

It appears that man has been recording the existence of trees from biblical times - see Genesis, where there are at least three mentions of the terebinth trees of Mamre. However, as far as the measurement of trees in the British Isles is concerned, the story begins much later. The first records of any real substance start around 1651, when John Evelyn wrote his famous *Sylva*; the 17th century saw a great upsurge in the planting of exotic trees and shrubs in the grounds of big estates around the country, and the landscape began to undergo subtle changes. One of the great tree-planting pioneers was Bishop Compton of London, who planted the grounds of Fulham Palace with many exotics which were unknown in this country until his time.

In the eighteenth century rich landowners took to planting 'pleasure grounds' to enhance their great estates, and it became fashionable to have Pineta and Arboreta containing the new, rare and exotic, as stately landowners vied with one another in pursuit of the latest introductions. This pastime perhaps reached its apogee when the Duke of Argyll planted his estate at Whitton; his collection was later removed to Kew by the Princess Dowager of Wales to enhance her arboretum there.

### Intrepid dendrologists

This fascination with the rare and exotic brings us to the advent of tree measuring and recording in the British Isles. One could be forgiven for assuming the measurement of trees to be a purely modern phenomenon, but this is not the case: many intelligent gentlemen (plus a handful of equally intelligent

women) have succumbed to the obsession - for obsession it can easily become. A truly formidable list contains the names of famous plant hunters and great landowners, as well as a Victorian gentlewoman. Even the limitations of transport did not stop these intrepid dendrologists, who used every means of travel available to them to reach their destinations, both here and abroad.

One of the earliest enthusiasts, after John Evelyn, appears to have been Professor John Walker, a Scot born in Edinburgh in 1731. Between 1760 and 1790 he listed trees on many Scottish estates, but his chief works were published after his death (in 1803) by his friend Charles Stewart, under the title *Essays on Natural History and Taxonomy* (1812). Every one of the yew trees taped by Walker has survived to this day, and they have been located and measured by a latter-day Scot, Mr Jim Paterson of Nairn. Perhaps the most famous dendrologist at this time was Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, born at Fountainhall, Edinburgh in 1784. He lived for many years at Relugas House by the Findhorn river, where still stands a mighty fir (*Abies alba*) possibly planted by Sir Thomas after the great flood of 1829. In 1834 he edited William Gilpin's *Forest Scenery*.

### **JC Loudon & JG Strutt**

Of course, no record of trees would be complete without mention of the great John Claudius Loudon, another Scot, born at Cambuslang in Lanarkshire. His great work, *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* published in 1838, is a veritable treasure-house of information. Much has been written about this great man, who appears to have been an irascible, crotchety character in his dealings with people: it is said that one of his missions in life was to chasten noblemen who dared to think they were gardeners. He did suffer for many years from ill health, and eventually had to have an arm amputated. William Blackadder, described as a 'Land and Timber Surveyor' from Glamis in Forfarshire, contributed to Loudon's *Arboretum* and wrote numerous articles, one of which was entitled 'On measuring and growing timber'. The fine book *Sylva Britannica, or Portraits of Forest Trees* was produced by Jacob George Strutt, a shadowy figure of whom very little is known except that he contributed work to the Royal Academy and settled for several years in Italy. In 1873 he was visited there by Emily Birchall (Wedding Tour, 1873), who recorded that he 'lived at the top of a dark staircase, leading up from a dirty little stableyard having 134 steps'. He eventually returned to England to be lost in obscurity.

### **A roving disposition**

Next in historical sequence is Edward James Ravenscourt, who was also born in Edinburgh. In 1816 he wrote that great tome *Pinetum Britannicum* in conjunction with Charles Lawson, whose father had founded the renowned Lawson Seed and Nursery Company of Edinburgh in 1770. Charles succeeded to the family business in 1821 and was the first to raise the Lawson cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*) from seed from the Sacramento River, in 1854. Robert Hutchison of Carlowrie, Kirkliston, West Lothian was perhaps one of the most industrious of the Scottish tree-measurers. He was born in 1835 and married a local minister's daughter. She was apparently dour, with a strong character, whereas Roberts was intellectual - a mixture (inherited by their children) which apparently made them a rather ill-matched couple. Hutchison seems to have been a man of a roving disposition; in his later years he grew somewhat unbalanced, due perhaps to his excessive drinking habits. His weakness, not for whisky but for sherry, led him into such undue extravagance that his impoverished family had to sell their Carlowrie home. He died aged just 59. James Grigor, born in 1811 in Norwich, Norfolk, was a nurseryman of Old Lakenham. In 1841 he wrote the *Eastern Arboretum or Register of Remarkable Trees in Norfolk*, in which he states: 'We answer briefly that we have taken a craze for trees (as our friends have been telling us of late), that we consider them interesting objects.'

### **Measuring in the wild**

The seemingly endless dendrological list includes many famous plant hunters, such as David Douglas, who recorded a Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) 227 feet high and 48 feet in girth, Joseph Hooker, who in his *Himalayan Journals* records a *Toona sinensis* 30 feet in girth, a *Terminalia* species 30 feet in girth, and a Himalayan hemlock (*Tsuga dumosa*) 28 feet in girth. This practice of measuring outstanding trees in the wild is still being carried on by Roy Lancaster and other modern-day plant hunters. The three Conifer Conferences, of 1891, 1931 and 1967, helped to bring tree measuring into the limelight and encouraged foresters and landowners to send in data of their big trees. A competitive spirit over possession of the tallest or biggest of a particular species was thus initiated.

### **Elwes & Henry**

Of Henry Elwes and Augustine Henry much has been written. Their volumes on *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* are not likely to be surpassed. Henry Elwes was heard to describe this work more

than once as 'The millstone to which my neck is tethered', and one assumes that he must have felt a great sense of relief once the huge task was completed. He was born at the beautiful estate of Colesbourne in Gloucestershire in 1846 and distinguished himself throughout his life in many diverse fields, including lepidoptery, big-game hunting, ornithology and botany. Augustine Henry was born in Ireland, at Cookstown, in 1857; he studied medicine at Queen's University before going on to work as an officer in the Maritime Customs Service in China. It was there that he first became seriously interested in flora, sending many specimens to Kew. On his return to England in 1900 he started to study forestry, and in 1903 began working with Henry Elwes on *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland*. At all times both men kept their work separate, initialing their own work and criticising each other's. Henry Elwes in particular was a stickler for detail and precision and read the proofs of the first volume no fewer than twelve times. It is here we encounter our first lady tree measurer, a Miss Woolward who sent measurements to Elwes and Henry from various Spas, such as Tunbridge Wells and Eastbourne. Research suggests that this is probably the same Miss Florence Helen Woolward whose drawings of orchids, poplars and elms are housed at the Natural History Museum in London.

### **Hon. Maynard Greville**

The Hon. Maynard Greville started life as a crime reporter, but when some land that had been commandeered during the war was returned to him, he became interested in trees. Before planting this land he set out to photograph and measure trees in his area, realising he would not see his own new plantings during his lifetime. He traveled mainly by bicycle, and was known as 'the bearded gentleman on a bike' (although the beard came and went frequently, as his varying moods dictated). Maynard Greville visited many estates in Essex and a few further afield. In 1958 he began his massive planting programme but, unfortunately and somewhat ironically, he died in the first year.

### **Alan Mitchell**

Perhaps the most prolific dendrologist of our time must be Alan Mitchell who died in 1995 after a long career with the Forestry Commission. Alan must have measured more trees than anyone else in the long history of measuring. Travelling the country for more than 35 years he visited many of the trees mentioned in both J.C.Loudon and in Elwes and Henry's great works. Many were the times when he would work through until dusk, which in summer in Scotland can be very late and he was even known to measure a girth using the headlights of his car when darkness had descended. Contemporary tree-measurers carry on the great tradition that has been handed down through several generations. The Tree Register is an assurance that this work will continue and thrive. It is a sobering thought that many of the great trees surviving today have seen three or four, or more, generations come and go while maturing into the dignified giants we know and admire today. My thanks go to Jim Paterson, Tony Schilling, Ray Desmond, Nigel Hepper, H.W.G.Elwes and the staff of the RHS Lindley Library, for their help in research.

**In Search of Monsters was updated by Vicky Schilling 2003 from an article originally written for and reprinted with kind permission from the editor of HORTUS (<http://www.hortus.co.uk>)**