

Tree News from the Regions

April 2003

SHROPSHIRE

Andrew Morton

Champion rowan

In May 2001 I was showing some visitors around the town of Shrewsbury, when outside the 'Loggerheads' pub I met John Tucker from the Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT). John's reaction was that he was pleased to see me as he wanted me to 'adjudicate' in the 'battle of the Shropshire rowan trees!' The 'battle' referred to two Rowans both being claimed to be biggest and best. One was on a new SWT reserve and the other was in private ownership. We agreed to meet later in the summer, when we hoped that the Foot and Mouth restrictions would have eased. We eventually met on a very warm day at the end of August.

Brook Vessons



A lovely free standing rowan at Brook Vessons 8.5m tall 76cm dia (2.39m girth) and crown spread of 13m.

In 2000, and largely through the Heritage Lottery fund, the Shropshire Wildlife Trust had purchased a piece of land on the eastern side of the Stiperstones NNR. The land was between 280-350m alt., and had been owned by a local farmer, who had left the top part of his landholding pretty much alone apart from occasional pasture for sheep and cattle. Few people ventured there, although at one time a small community had lived on the land and had worked in the local mines on the side of the Stiperstones ridge. There is still evidence of that earlier occupancy, in the remains of rough stone walls, pathways, remnant planting of larch, hazel and one or two other species. There is also the skeleton of a small Methodist chapel, that some of the older locals remember being in use when the mining community had lived in the area. SWT had purchased Brook Vessons with the intention of putting the land into the 'Back to purple' campaign. This campaign involved, English Nature and local organisations and landowners in reclaiming the Stiperstones area into a state close to its heathland past.

Highlighting the biggest

An initial survey had shown some huge old hollies, birch, crab apples, hazels, and a remarkable collection of rowans, all growing on this damp, tussocky land. The rowans seem have a particular liking for the broken walls, and their roots cling to the large stones, finding good anchorage on this high landscape. There must be over twenty big old rowans on the reserve. On highlighting the biggest rowans in their magazine, the SWT received a letter from a reader near Clun, south Shropshire, who claimed that the rowan in his wood was bigger and better than the biggest of the Brook Vesson trees. Once clearance had been given to go on the land, our visit took place, and the trees were duly measured. The largest of the SWT trees measured 90cm.dia.at 1m. The Clun tree was 65cm.dia but taller. During the course of the day, I was chastised for not including rowan trees in the publication 'Trees of Shropshire'. My response was that I had no worthwhile measurements from historical records, nor any of my own. If that had stimulated the debate in Shropshire, that was fine.

Great atmosphere

After several visits to the Brook Vessons reserve before Christmas 2001, I grew to like the place more and more. It has great atmosphere, and is blessed with wonderful views out to the north and east, and over towards the Long Mynd. It is seldom visited as it requires a half hour walk from the nearest road, and it has an appealing semi derelict appearance. On a wild day, with driving rain clouds crossing the Stiperstones, putting me in mind of Wild Edric, a ghostly figure reputed to still roam these hills, I walked a different route to the reserve. In a damp piece of woodland, several woodcock flew from beneath my feet, and the female hollies were being raided by large flocks of fieldfares and redwings. I came to an overgrown stile at the edge of the piece of semi natural woodland. There in front of me, growing on a wall at the edge of the reserve and buffeted by the

gusty wind, was a rowan tree with a larger girth than any of the others I had seen so far on the reserve.

Creaked and groaned

When I searched in my bag for my tape, I realised that I had left it in the car! One hour later, after a return trip to the car, I was able to measure the tree. It recorded 317cm. (101dia.)at 68cm.Height 13.5m.Crown spread over 10m. The crown of the tree creaked and groaned as I measured. The growth of the tree is unusual. A younger, but still stout stem protrudes on the west side of the main bole, almost like an old layered hedgerow oak or ash. Mr Hughes, who has farmed Brook Vessons for fifty years, says that the tree has always looked the same. The vigour is now probably in the younger stem, and he would probably not detect small annual changes anyway.

Brook Vessons is one of 35 nature reserves managed by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust across the county Website www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk

DURHAM Den Gregson

In search of Durham's trees

Being a proud son of my native county and also a keen tree enthusiast I had spent time in the past visiting and informally recording trees I had thought interesting. Upon discovering the Tree Register and finding a small number of trees in the county had previously been measured (some by Alan Mitchell) my interest grew and so did the time I spent taping.

Laying down the gauntlet

The Durham county champion ash 226cm dia. (7.10m girth)



As my interest grew I spent more time trying to research individual trees and properties where trees may be located, one piece of text I came across was in the Victoria History of the County of Durham by Page (vol 2 1907) which stated 'in the way of noteworthy trees in parks or pleasure grounds Durham cannot compare favourably with many counties', however true this statement may have been then or is now, it was a challenge I could not refuse, the gauntlet had been lain down.

A Durham champion

Durham can lay claim to at least one national champion, a gnarled old Crab Apple (*Malus sylvestris*) 8m tall x 113cm dia at 1.2m (3.56m girth) to be found on the Croxdale estate, home of the Salvin family for many centuries. The tree is located in a field north of the house and has almost 'oak-like' qualities with a burred stem that has several cavities through which daylight can be seen.

DEVON Owen Johnson

Bicton Park Botanical Gardens



The Pinetum at Bickton

Bickton has long been celebrated for its trees - the New Red Sandstone soils create explosive growing conditions and the sheltered micro-climate of south-east Devon is notable for favouring both the moisture-loving conifers from the American west and the heat-demanding broadleaves of the east. The British champion Tupelo now grows a stone's throw from a Pinetum which in the middle years of the last century grew many of the country's most outstanding conifers, augmented by younger plantings from Ernest Wilson's Chinese expeditions. Gales and old age have taken their toll, and it is probably true to say that global warming is suddenly making southern England less and less suitable for these trees, but a number of veterans hang on, including a champion Grecian Fir which is uncommonly shapely and the tallest tree left in the park at 41m. 1969 Mexican 'originals' make up the cream of the younger conifers, with the Durango Pine's fireworks of 40-centimetre needles forming a very special backdrop to the Crazy Golf course.

Monkey Puzzle avenue

The Pinetum, and Le Notre's perfectly-preserved and immaculately maintained formal gardens, are in the part of the estate now open to the public year-round as Bickton Park Botanic Gardens. The house - now an Agricultural College - is approached along the 1844 Monkey Puzzle Avenue, and has its own extensive arboretum, also open to the public. This was built up in the 1960s so is just coming to its prime, and there is going to be some interesting competition between the two establishments soon in the Champion Tree stakes.

Reigned champion for three days

Devon's rich red soils are the original homeland of the Lucombe Oak and the College's parkland, appropriately, has one of the largest and grandest. Holm Oaks do well too, and a veteran in the grove of rare oaks at the top of the Botanic Gardens is as tall as any. Bickton is only two kilometres from the sea (albeit perfectly sheltered by rolling countryside), and tender trees do well too - look out for the graceful *Plagianthus regius* next to the Botanic Gardens' plant sales centre. Mimosas tend to be short-lived as champions, but a fine straight young tree above the Botanic Gardens' Italian Garden was particularly unlucky in reigning for only three days before my visit to the College's arboretum turned up a taller one - 18 metres of silver filigree.

New owners

Under its new owners, the Lister family, the restocking of rarities in the Botanic Gardens' arboretum is now well underway.

Bickton Park Botanical Gardens, East Budleigh, Budleigh Salterton, Devon EX9 7BJ
For more details www.bictongardens.co.uk

WEST GLAMORGAN

Owen Johnson

Notable public gardens of Swansea

The approach to Swansea from the east, through Port Talbot and Neath, is not prepossessing and certainly gives no hint that this city in fact has one of the most glorious traditions of public arboriculture in Britain. The climate is conducive: the warmth of the Gulf Stream combines with an urban 'heat island', the hills of the Gower provide shelter from the westerly gales, and visiting tapers should be prepared to get very wet indeed. In Brynmill Park - one of Swansea's several notable public gardens - on the site of a dismantled greenhouse, *Grevillea robusta* with its long ferny leaves has even survived to make a shapely nine-metre tree.

Singleton Abbey

The city owes its heritage partly to the enthusiasm of landowners whose great estates have been incorporated within the municipality. At Singleton Abbey, the Vivian family were responsible for a wealth of mature plantings, including a superb *Laurelia serrata* of 18x71 - one of my 'top ten' trees, with luxuriant evergreen foliage deliciously aromatic of oranges. Champions here include fine specimens of such rarities as *Photinia beauverdiana*, *Pterocarya rhoifolia* and *Hovenia dulcis*. The University of Swansea campus has also been established within the park, and its own botanic gardens include up-and-coming examples of rare trees such as *Euptelea polyandra*.

Clyne Gardens

As in most public parks, the upkeep at Singleton has come down to earth with a bit of a jolt; labelling is worse than non-existent, with all of the champion trees lurking incognito. But just west of the city, Clyne Gardens offer an exciting and perhaps unparalleled example of how unlimited public access and a municipal budget can be reconciled with standards of management worthy of the country's most famous gardens. (Vandalism has actually decreased after the removal of the security fencing, presumably because the gardens no longer provide a challenge.) Also private in origin, Clyne is notable above all for its rhododendrons and hosts the national collection of the *Falconeri* series; *falconeri* itself, in the microclimate of the dramatic central ravine, has made a sturdy tree of 10x40. Other champions in the gardens include *Malus x robusta* at 9x58@1m and a remarkably straight and shapely *Magnolia campbellii* var. *alba*, 22x50.

Brynmill

Of the city's smaller parks, Brynmill boasts a champion *X Crataemespilus* and one of the best *Athrotaxis laxifolia*; Cwmdonkin, beloved of Dylan Thomas, has a fine dove tree and Oregon maple; and Victoria Park, on the sea-front, includes a lovely *Prunus 'Ichiyo'* with a spread of 16m and a small example of the rare evergreen *Picconia excelsa*.