

Regional News

2005

WILTSHIRE
Jack Oliver

Remarkable Wiltshire White Willows

The first photograph shows a fine White Willow at East Kennett, over 5m in girth, and probably 30 or more metres high.



The East Kennett White Willow (J. Oliver)

Living bridge

The second, a past pollard with a girth of over 6m bridges the River Marden, well rooted on both opposite banks.



The living Willow-bridge over the River Marden (J. Oliver)

Ancestral root

The third tree illustrated is much more complex. The top of the tree on the north bank of the River Kennet at Clatford was toppled over more than 120 degrees by gales many decades ago, over and down into the river bed, where its pollarded head formed a secondary root system several feet below the primary root! The ancestral root now forms a huge living spreading green bankside mound 1.2m high, the original trunk (6.9m girth at 0.3m, 3.0m at 1.5m) angled 30° downward towards the river bed.

Complex layered trunk

The new trunk has layered in the north side of the riverbed, but is kept trimmed by the River Authority, forming a fringe of young verticals. This is shown in the third photo with the three little girls, a complex split "S" shaped trunk in the River Kennet, girth 3.65m at 0.3m, the usual winter water level – but much splayed above. From this secondarily layered tree, a branch bridges to the east forming a tertiarily layered young tree eastward again at the north edge of the riverbed.



Part of the Clatford Willow (J. Oliver)

Fallen living giants

There is no doubt a place for pollarding, but some Willows should be left to develop naturally; and some fallen living giants should be freed from the threat of chainsaws.

References

Oliver J E 2002A. The Natural History of a White Willow. BSBI News 91, ps 25, 26.
Oliver J E 2002B. Natural Rejuvenation of Flood Plain Willows. British Wildlife 14 (2), p. 152.
Oliver J E 2003. Fluctuating River Levels & Complex Layering by an Ancient White Willow. BSBI News 94, ps 24,25.

Acknowledgement

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DEVON

Countess Arran

Castlehill historic Sitka

With the greatest sadness our Sitka spruce is to be felled this winter (2004).
The dreaded Spruce bark Beetle has done its worst. It will be a hugely challenging job to remove without damaging other mature trees.
I am considering a memorial to this wonderful specimen, perhaps a wooden sculpture?
Any thoughts or ideas will be very welcome.



The original Sitka surrounded by its layered branches creating a small woodland (Castle Hill)

CARMARTHENSHIRE

Greg Howes

The Giants of Gelli Aur and Dinefwr

The trees of our county have long been the inspiration of artists and naturalists alike. But what is not readily known is that there are some very remarkable specimens indeed lurking in Carmarthenshire.

The Romans brought a wave of change to Carmarthenshire clearing great swathes of woodland along the roads and byways in order to make attack through ambush by the ancient Britons a less likely occurrence. These strategic military clearances have carried on right the way through Carmarthenshire's history. In the mid 18th century and again in the time of the Napoleonic wars with France, many thousands of Oaks were cut down and stacked up along the banks of Towy River. When flooding came to the valley, the trunks were pushed into the Towy and guided with the help of local coracle men to Carmarthen, and from this busy sea port they were transported to ship makers around Britain.

Highly sort after

Tannin for hides to make leather was one of the heaviest users of the Oak tree in Carmarthenshire. The Oak bark was harvested from coppices every 25 years in site rotations. Welsh grown oaks on hill sides were highly sort after because it was thought that they had very high tannin content and large

quantities of bark was shipped from Carmarthen quay. Not all of the Oak bark left the county though; much was used in tanneries up the length and breadth of Carmarthenshire. Ash was another valuable coppice crop providing handles for tools and growing very well on limestone sites. The largest Ash in Carmarthenshire as far as I know is the "Monster Ash" at Talley, this huge giant measures up at 7.3m (24 feet) girth, though it is difficult to measure with complete accuracy. Another Ash of interest and possibly the oldest tree of its species in Wales is the Weeping Ash in Llandeilo churchyard, which is also the venue for other grand veterans and notable specimen trees.



The Talley Ash (G. Howes)

Legendary Oak

Carmarthen town was the home of the "Merlin's Oak" or the "Priory Oak" which up until 1978 still featured in the town, even though it had been dead for many years, despite the legend warning of floods if the "Oak" should fall, it was finally removed and fragments of it are still on show at the counties museum. Another point of view on the original planting of this oak was it was planted in celebration of the reinstatement of the monarchy in the form of Charles II in 1660.

Rich in veterans

The Towy valley is rich in its abundance of large Pendunculate Oaks (*Quercus robur*), often now seen as solitary giants guarding the floodplain. The native species of the uplands is Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*) and this dominates some of the large upland estates, the area surrounding the Doula-cothi gold mines is especially rich in large veterans of this species.



Thujaopsis dolabrata 'Variegata' Golden Grove (G. Howes)

The Golden Grove

As a hunter of veteran and champion trees, two sites stick out more than most, the first is Gelli Aur (golden grove) which is situated on the South side of the Towy, 3 miles west of the picturesque town of Llandeilo. On approach to the site there is a splendid avenue of Limes thought to have been planted before 1860. The country deer park on the north part of the site has many veteran Oaks, and other large trees of interest. The site is home to a large manor house once occupied by the Vaughans, who were great planters and guardians of their trees. John Vaughan planted 5,000 trees in 1731 and Lady Anne Vaughan doggedly refused to have her beloved trees cut down and ruin her ancestral seat. Sadly the manor and arboretum at Gelli Aur have at present an uncertain future.

Fascinating arboretum

The jewel in the crown of Gelli Aur, in my opinion, is the arboretum, open to the public seven days a week and free of charge except for parking. The arboretum is thought to have been planted in the 1860s and according to one source the Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*) was planted in 1863, Western Hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) 1866 and two Hiba (*Thujaopsis dolabrata*) 1869. The arboretum was superimposed over an existing parkland site, which already had some large veteran Sweet Chestnuts (6.09m, 5.37m girth), and Oaks. The arboretum has a great deal of charm and interest for young and old alike. One of the fascinating things about this arboretum is not only the size

of the trees, but the occurrence of many layered and bundle plantings, providing an unusually large number of multi-stemmed giants, which give Gelli Aur a real sense of grandeur, style and uniqueness all of its own.



Champion Juniperus chinensis 'Aurea' Golden Grove (G. Howes)

Champions

It can boast of some nationally verified champions, the Fern-leaved Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* "Heterophylla") has the widest girth registered in Britain for this species, as does the yellow Juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* "Aurea"). Other top national trees of note are the Sawara Cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera*), Swamp cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) and *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans'. Impressive multi-stemmed monsters such as the Monterey Pine (*Pinus radiata*) and a huge Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) are just some of the arboreal delights offered by this unique collection. Just outside the arboretum is the famous Gelli Aur Oak, which unfortunately has shown no evidence of life for over two years, this massive hulk, is thought to be approximately 1000 years old. The old Oak is still majestic in its decline and is the host for a huge range of other life forms, root compression by forestry vehicles is thought to have finally ended the last chapter in this old warrior's life.

Dinefwr Country Park

The other site of major arboreal interest for me is Dinefwr Country Park, situated on the edge of Llandeilo town. The country park itself is only open from April-October, but there are some public footpaths open all year. According to legend, this is the site of Rhodri Mawr Castle, King of Wales in 877, and the site also has Roman connections. Now owned by the National Trust it has a former stately home in Newton Hall, white cattle, a deer park and boasts a 12th century castle with panoramic views of the Towy. Capability Brown visited the site in 1775, although apart from clumps of Beech it is difficult to ascertain just how great an influence he had over tree planting. Sir Richard Colt Hoare described Dinefwr woods in the 1790s and said the oaks had been "persevered with a parent eye from the axe" and so presumably were quite old then. There are a few Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) dotted around the site, one with a girth of 2.4m. According to legend Scots Pine were planted as a show of support or in remembrance of the final Jacobean revolt headed by Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. That apparently is how they came by the nickname "Charley trees", and it is interesting to note that Lord Dinefwr in his book on the trees of Dinefwr estate (Spurrell 1934) reckoned the Scots Pine on his estate were planted in 1745, whether he had evidence for this or was just influenced by the legend is difficult to say!

There are many veteran and ancient Oaks here of tremendous size. The girth of the largest is the "Castle Oak" with a girth of 8.68m, from which experts estimate the approximate planting date to be c.1170. The largest Ash tree (*Fraxinus excelsior*) has a girth of 6.24m.

Churchyard Yews

There are in Carmarthenshire, as elsewhere in Wales, some very large churchyard Yew (*Taxus baccata*). The largest in the county to my knowledge are at CilyCwm 7.3m girth and the lonely Yew at the tiny St Paulinus church, Ysradaffin, estimated to be 7.6m girth. This tree is very difficult to measure due to epicormic growth but is a very good specimen indeed. This particular church/chapel was founded in 1117 and begs the question, is this Yew a memento of its founder, or perhaps a mark left by a returning pilgrim from the Holy Land, the scope for conjecture is massive! Other notable Carmarthenshire churchyard Yews are at Llangunnor, Llangathen and a single giant at Llandybie.

Sacred groves

Woodlands and trees in Welsh history have always been a place of refuge and places of worship. The sacred Oak groves of the ancient druids, the reverent Yews at our Churchyards and Holy Wells have always instilled the onlooker with a sense of mystery and awe. I have inevitably left many notable local trees out of this article, but if anybody would like to forward me information on these or any other potential champion trees in Carmarthenshire, I would be very grateful.

YORKSHIRE

Richard Goodrick

Roadside champions

Above the vale of York, within East Yorkshire, is somewhat surprisingly an area home to some enormous hardwoods. These include a new champion Crack Willow (*Salix fragilis*) with a good roadside location in the village of Skerne, along with the second biggest Crack Willow just 6 miles away at Lund. The 6.24m @1m girthed Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) in Kirkburn churchyard is a cathedral of a tree and only 1 mile from this specimen stands a superlative Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) which at 37m is one of the tallest anywhere. Located in a woodland near Bainton it is visible from the A163. The elegant bole goes for 21.5m before throwing a single branch proving that Ash along with Beech, Black Italian Poplar and Turkey Oaks are the finest for long hardwood boles.

Tallest alder

One of the tallest Common Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) in the British Isles at 28m grows a few miles west at Warter Priory. Visible from the B1246 it is overshadowed by another superb Common Ash which at 34m is one of Yorkshires tallest. A further mile west is a big old Ash with a girth of 6.01m @1m.

Convenient

Back in Bainton stands a pair of majestic Horse Chestnuts (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) one of which has a girth of 6.01m and is again conveniently roadside. A little less than 20 miles North across the border into North Yorkshire stands what is probably the biggest Common Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) in Yorkshire at Deerpark Farm near Wintringham. This is the only tree mentioned here that is not quite visible from a public point but still certainly worth a mention due to its 6.51m girth measured @0.8m.

Crack Willow

Some of the biggest trees in East Yorkshire are definitely the Crack Willows with many hovering around the 6m mark in girth and endless others almost as big. Hawthorns thrive too, especially on the chalky slopes with several of the countries best developed and largest specimens.



Yorkshire's champion Walnut (*Juglans regia* 7.6m girth) with John Wilson who was born in the farm house behind and has lived in its shade all his life. (Andrew Clive 2005)