Arboretum
A history of the trees grown in Britain and Ireland
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Owen Johnson
The Tree Register

A unique record of notable and ancient trees in Britain and Ireland

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The Tree Register of the British Isles (TROBI) was founded in 1988 by Alan F. Mitchell and Victoria Schilling.

The Tree Register is a partner in the Ancient Tree Hunt (www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk) and in the Ancient Yew website (www.ancient-yew.org).

The Tree Register offers guidance and advice for, and can cover the expenses of, volunteer tree recorders, and also incorporates details on trees from every available source. Its website provides information on 55,000 national and local 'champion trees', while nearly all the information on the database is available on request. The Tree Register is a partner in the Ancient Tree Hunt (www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk) and in the Ancient Yew website (www.ancient-yew.org).

Membership of The Tree Register is open to all, either annually or for life – you can join by visiting www.treeregister.org or by phoning or writing to the Secretary.

An independent charity funded entirely by donations and membership subscriptions, The Tree Register maintains a database of information on 210,000 notable trees growing in Britain and Ireland. Its aim is to include every tree which is exceptional for its size, age, historical associations, or rarity. This unique resource is regularly consulted by scientists, the media, research students and others. The Tree Register offers guidance and advice for, and can cover the expenses of, volunteer tree recorders, and also incorporates details on trees from every available source. Its website provides information on 55,000 national and local 'champion trees', while nearly all the information on the database is available on request. The Tree Register is a partner in the Ancient Tree Hunt (www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk) and in the Ancient Yew website (www.ancient-yew.org).

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The measurements throughout this book take a standard form. They are a compact way of defining a tree's habit and stature.

18 m × 175 cm in 2007

This tree was 18 m tall. Most of the measurements featured here were recorded with simple hypsometers, which in experienced hands can be accurate to the nearest metre. The very tallest have nearly all been measured with modern laser rangefinders, which should be accurate to within 50 cm. A few have been measured by climbing and dropping a tape, providing figures accurate to within 5 cm.

Its trunk was 175 cm thick. Unless stated, this measurement was not grossly inflated by low forking or branching; further details are in each case available at www.treeregister.org. The trunk's thickness is derived from the girth, which is recorded by stretching a flexible tape around the trunk at its narrowest point and allowing for ivy or other climbers; this figure needs to be divided by Pi. The trunk's thickness is sometimes called its diameter, although this term should be restricted to perfect circles, which cross sections of tree trunks never are. Experienced tree recorders end up thinking in terms of girth, but the thickness is really much easier to visualise: you would describe a pillar box as being about 40 cm thick, rather than as having a girth of 130 cm.

These measurements were made in 2007. In the intervening years before I included it in this book – and before you read about it – the tree will have continued to add to its trunk thickness (unless it is a palm), and have either grown taller or lost some of its top; there is also a possibility that it will have blown down, or been removed. In this book I have adopted the convention of describing each tree in the present tense, whenever the chances of its long-term survival seem reasonably good.

A botanical name has at least two main parts: the genus’ (abbreviated to its first letter when confusion is not possible), followed by the species’. *Quercus* is the genus which includes the oaks (which have acorns, although the leaves are multifarious): *Q. robur* is the specific name for Pedunculate Oak.

Wild forms too closely linked to be separate species are defined, using a third, extra part of the botanical name, as varieties (var.), or subspecies (subsp.). (Generally, variety implies a difference in appearance, and subspecies in natural range.) Formae (f.) are ‘sports’ of a species – for example with purple leaves – while cultivars (their names in single quotation marks) are individual clones which nurseries have distributed. Clones too alike to be distinguishable may be lumped as Groups (e.g. *Quercus robur* Fastigiata Group, the Cypress Oak).

Sometimes, species cross to form viable offspring. A hybrid's specific name is preceded with an *x* (if the cross was sexual), or a + (if the fusion was chimaeric). In cultivation, different genera may cross, and the *x* or + then precedes the generic name.

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In several Italian city-states in the Middle Ages, everyone who could afford it and who wanted to be noticed built a tower. There were no rules: you started, and you built upwards until death, financial embarrassment or common sense dictated it was time to stop. The results, centuries later, are the unlikely skylines of towns like San Gimignano – petrified Manhattan graphs of one-time prosperity.

A tree can be very like one of those towers: a feature of the largest of scales and the longest of lifespans which you can set in train to transform the scenery for miles, and for generations. People have long planted trees for ornament with more enthusiasm in Britain and Ireland than anywhere else in the world – every kind they could obtain, wherever they were able. Now, almost every town and many rural vistas are graced with their very own skyline of cedars, towering redwoods or poplars.

From 1835 to 1838, the Scottish horticulturalist John Claudius Loudon published Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum in 63 monthly parts and then in eight volumes; this was the first attempt to describe every variety of tree and shrub which to his knowledge was grown in Britain (and Ireland). The book is in English; but the Latin title means ‘On the Trees and Shrubs of Britain’, and it was Loudon who introduced the word ‘arboretum’ to the English language: ‘collecting trees from a distance… to assemble them in one plantation.’

Nowadays we use this word for gardens like Westonbirt and Castlewellan whose main glory is in their trees. But here I want to show how the whole country can be appreciated as an arboretum, in exactly this sense. Our ‘champion trees’ – the largest of their kind – exist not in half a dozen famous collections but scattered across 1,400 parks, woods and gardens, from the Scilly Isles to Ullapool, and from 350 metres high in the Cairngorms to the streets of central London.

Go to an arboretum like Westonbirt, and you can buy a guidebook which will lead you to the most remarkable species, and explain how they came to grow there. This book is your guide to the Arboretum of Britain.

Champion Trees of Great Britain and Ireland, which I compiled for the Tree Register in 2011, brought together up-to-date figures on the biggest and best known specimens but was also the first concerted effort since Loudon’s to print in one book a complete national tree flora – although additions to this list are still being made each year. It did not emulate Loudon by detailing the cultural history and garden merit of each plant. Arboretum is its companion volume: instead
of a route-march to reconnoitre the length and breadth of the Arboretum of Britain, this is a relaxed exploration which will discover some rare trees with fascinating tales to tell, and others of astounding beauty which should be better known. All the widespread and conspicuous species get at least a mention, as do all the most important tree collections; many other kinds of tree that look rather similar, even though their ecology is quite different, have had to be passed by, however unkind this is. This is also probably the first book to study in detail the changing fashions of gardening with trees in Britain.¹

The research for Champion Trees proved that more than 3,000 species of tree grow successfully in Britain and Ireland; include varieties and cultivars, and you will more than double that number.² When we have learnt to recognise a hundred or so kinds and are almost ready to consider ourselves an expert, the total sounds daunting, but it should serve as an inspiration to keep looking: each of these species is of distinctive interest, just as a Human differs from a Chimpanzee. (Genetically, nearly all of them actually differ much more widely.)

¹The inclusion of Ireland alongside Great Britain in surveys of our trees has become a convention, informed by the two countries’ shared arboricultural traditions and comparable climates. Though I have travelled all across England, Scotland and Wales in search of fine trees, I have left the exploration of Ireland to colleagues from that country, most notably Aubrey Fennell. Consequently, I was able to include up-to-date statistics from both nations in Champion Trees with equal confidence, but in this book, which is inspired by personal observations and reflections, I have limited the proportion of references to Irish trees. The preponderance of trees from south-eastern England is not so much because I have always lived in Sussex as because so many of our best trees are found here. Northwards, variety – though not quality – decreases quickly, so that Scottish specimens are sometimes featured to indicate the limits at which a species is likely to thrive.

²Unlike ‘fern’ or ‘palm’ or ‘foxglove’, ‘tree’ does not define a particular group of plants; each of those groups, indeed, contains species that are trees and others that clearly aren’t. A good working definition is that a tree is a plant living long enough and growing big enough, generally on a single trunk, to become individually remarkable.

grow all across the northern hemisphere; some are confined to a single Welsh crag. Some were brought to Britain by travelling merchants four hundred years ago; some were discovered and named in the last two decades. Some species are known in cultivation by a single massive or beautiful specimen; others, which could have been familiar to our gardening great-great-grandparents, teeter on the verge of local extinction. Some trees have grown the height of Nelson’s Column in fifty years; others may have persisted for a hundred times this length of time. Some kinds transform the landscape, transfixing a Scottish glen with jagged spires or flooding the farm hedges of Warwickshire in milk-white blossom; others lurk, unidentified, uncelebrated and possibly unloved, in village greens, industrial estates, or suburban back gardens.

We know a great deal about birds in Britain: a Siberian vagrant, the weight of a pound coin, can scarcely land without some expert spotting and identifying it, and the news can spread in minutes across a wide network of enthusiasts. About Britain’s spiders, in contrast, we know little: amateur arachnophiles still discover new species. Our understanding of our trees stands between these extremes. As trees are typically the largest and most conspicuous objects in our

Plants of all kinds can become trees. This plant Rhododendron arboreum ‘Album’ grows near Teignmouth, Devon.

Autumn brilliance of Japanese Maple (Acer palmatum ‘Osakazuki’), St Leonards, East Sussex.
everyday environment, it always seemed strange to me that the effort to map and catalogue them did not gain momentum sooner. Nevertheless, as somebody who has been lucky enough to have spent much of his life so far walking the length and breadth of Britain and visiting public and private gardens in search of big and rare specimens, I feel especially privileged that so much awaited discovery. The Yews in many English and Welsh churchyards, frequently older than the church itself, may be the world’s most remarkable population of ancient, holy trees; each will have been familiar to generation upon generation of parishioners, but has fallen to contemporary tree hunters and to myself to register and measure many for the first time. Very many English parishes, again, have trees so big, so old, and so rich in associated wildlife that, if they grew in Belgium or even France, each would be a national marvel worth detouring many miles to see. Here, hundreds of such trees continue to be ‘discovered’ every year. Cataloguing and protecting these veterans may be the biggest single contribution that British people can make to international nature conservation.

My own blood started to turn into sap at a tender age. I was lucky in parents who encouraged an interest in natural history, and also in growing up opposite a public park – Alexandra Park in Hastings – which has turned out to have the finest population of rare and champion trees of any municipal garden in England. Each time we walked into town, new leaves or flowers or fruit would distract us; at the time we assumed that most parks were full of such botanical frissons, but they were an inspiration to buy the best available tree guides and to try to name them. And just outside Hastings was a large overgrown estate called Beauport Park, which a hundred years earlier had been one England’s most ambitious tree collections. My father had been acquainted with the owner at the time, the actor Mark Singleton, so we got permission to scramble around a mile or more of unmanaged woods and rhododendron thickets and come abruptly face-to-face with the monstrous Sequoias which Mark’s Victorian ancestors had planted, or with the white lily-like blooms of the Yulan, or the foilscape leaves of American Lime. Though I was not to know it at the time, these were genuine discoveries: there was no one else in the country in a position both to identify and to record all the noteworthy trees in Alexandra and Beauport Parks.

Before my sixteenth birthday, I had found enough good trees to entice the national expert, Alan Mitchell, to stay with us for three days and check them out for himself. One of the sites we revisited was Chilham Castle near...
Canterbury: in part of the grounds at this time was a small zoo. Inside one compound, we spotted what seemed likely to be a new champion for the giant-leaved Hybrid Bean Tree (*Catalpa x erubescens*). What impressed me even more than the tree was that Alan did not even pause to check what the cage’s official occupant might be: he simply vaulted over the safety barrier, tape-measure in hand. The Bean Tree was, and still is, the largest, although returning in 1999 to remeasure it I had nothing more alarming to combat than a fieldful of head-high nettles.

While working as a geneticist at the Forestry Commission in the three decades from 1954, Alan had been able to compile a card-index of 107,000 notable trees. Most of these he had found and measured himself during research trips to gardens from St Helier to Stornoway, Norfolk to Co. Kerry; others were historic records from Loudon’s *magnum opus*, or from Henry Elwes and Augustine Henry, who in *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* managed a comprehensive survey of trees of timber size in two volumes – but one volume fewer than Loudon’s eight – but only hints to the landscape’s history. By the 1970s, the adjacent village of Liss had been completely lost. In Falmouth in 2006 I decided to track down the site of Penmere Manor, as I knew this had been a home of the Bolitho family, who had created the notable gardens at Greenway in Devon and Trewidden near Penzance; but there were no records to prepare me for the wealth of trees which I found preserved in the small back gardens of the twentieth-century development here, and which turned out to include a new champion of the curious Chinese Spur-leaf (*Tetracentron sinense*) and the only mature example yet found in mainland Britain of a tree from the cloud-forests of the Azores, Canaries and Madeira called *Myrica faya*. Fortuitously I had studied the known example at Tresco on the Scillies a couple of days earlier; otherwise this slightly anonymous laurel would have got stowed away in the Tree Register’s basement of all huggable.

Gamble’s oak has been independently revisited and measured at least six times during its 110-year life-story, although to locate it in 2009 I needed a street map to find the promisingly named ‘Highfield Gardens’, sufficient experience to spot the right crown among the various commoner trees surviving from Gamble’s estate, and the luck to find a friendly owner at home. Very often, the knowledge of the existence of rare trees gets completely lost. In Falmouth in 2006 I decided to track down the site of Pennmere Manor, as I knew this had been a home of the Bolitho family, who had created the notable gardens at Greenway in Devon and Trewidden near Penzance; but there were no records to prepare me for the wealth of trees which I found preserved in the small back gardens of the twentieth-century development here, and which turned out to include a new champion of the curious Chinese Spur-leaf (*Tetracentron sinense*) and the only mature example yet found in mainland Britain of a tree from the cloud-forests of the Azores, Canaries and Madeira called *Myrica faya*. Fortuitously I had studied the known example at Tresco on the Scillies a couple of days earlier; otherwise this slightly anonymous laurel would have got stowed away in the Tree Register’s basement of ‘unidentified species’. Also, it is easy to walk straight past a plant you don’t recognise: the brain subconsciously edits out information that may be too laborious to assimilate, which is how we come to live our lives surrounded by...
several thousand variants of a life form which is far larger and more conspicuous than any animal, and yet remain in general ignorance.

Alan Mitchell’s original shoebox-full of index cards is now computerised, making it much easier to research and collate the information and to maintain the definitive list of champions. The register has also doubled again to include details of 220,000 individually noteworthy trees. *Alan Mitchell’s Trees of Britain* was published posthumously in 1996 as the culmination of his life’s work and an introduction to the history and the best-known examples of 150 of the most illustrious species. This book is altogether different, not least because I have vastly more information to hand than was available twenty years ago, let alone in 1906 or 1835. On top of my own researches and those of friends and colleagues, 140,000 further records have been generated over the last seven years by the Ancient Tree Hunt, during which The Tree Register has collaborated with the Woodland Trust to enable the public to record notable and veteran trees online, successfully tapping into an immense reservoir of local knowledge.

There are, unquestionably, many more great trees still awaiting discovery. Perhaps I can inspire you to find a few of them.
This is a book about trees and people – about the trees that people have chosen to plant and the people who discovered the trees or brought them home – but first it needs to reconnoitre the species that were already here before our ancestors created the Arboretum of Britain, and whose presence has remained constant. Travel from London to Brighton by train, and the panorama of the upper Ouse valley from the right-hand window as you cross the Balcombe Viaduct is taken up by the Borde Hill estate, which in the decades from 1893 was developed by Col. Stephenson Robert Clarke into the most extensive arboretum of its time. Many of the trees ‘SRC’ planted still survive, but the scenery is dominated by the Pedunculate Oaks and Ashes in the hedgerow-shaws and copses which he retained to shelter his rarities. Now, at maturity, most of the planted trees are still less tall than the wild ones; only intermittently do golden foliage, frothy pink blossom or the church towers and spires of Grand Firs and Giant Sequoias interrupt Sussex’s universal billowing greens to indicate that here is something altogether out-of-the-ordinary. For the designer of any arboretum, European broadleaves remain the obvious framework trees, growing readily, generally living long and seldom needing much management. It is only in Highland Scotland and the western fringes of Ireland that the mild winters, massive rainfall totals and the shelter of high mountains are so far from the ‘average’ European conditions which these species have evolved to exploit that the largest and most conspicuous trees can all be exotics, such as the giant conifers of the Pacific northwest or salt-tolerant New Zealanders.

It is not always helpful to describe a tree in Britain as ‘wild’. Nearly every one is there because somebody planted it, or decided to protect it when it was a seedling, or else introduced unnatural numbers of grazing animals which prevented other and stronger trees from outgrowing and killing it. Nearly all the older trees have also been shaped by generations of the people with whom their lives intertwined and who pollarded our deer-park Hornbeams, coppiced our woodland Ashes, pleached our hedgerow Hawthorns, clipped our churchyard Yews, or grew our Beeches in close plantations to form long straight trunks. The old hollow Sessile Oak in the field in front of a Georgian mansion is just as much a consequence of the national obsession for gardening with trees as is the Box topiary in the parterre or the Chinese Ginkgo in the shrubbery: oak timber is valuable, not least because England has been so chronically overpopulated and so short of woodland for much of its history, and to let his oaks grow

Beech in spring, Glentress Forest, Scottish Borders.

1: Native trees
old and hollow was the Lord of the Manor’s method of showing society that his family was so well-set they never needed to convert their timber into cash.

Trees from all around the temperate world thrive when we plant them in British or Irish gardens, but only about 70 tree species and microspecies grow here naturally. This paradox is quite readily explained. Three million years ago – not so very long, in terms of the lifespans of some trees – European forests seem to have been nearly as biodiverse as any. The fossil record shows that just like the Californian Sierras or the forest of the Himalayas, Europe once had its redwoods, tulip trees and sweet gums, hickories, magnolias, incense cedars, swamp cypresses, and a hundred others. Biodiversity on this scale is natural: it is proof against epidemics, and against the usual run of floods and droughts, and given vast spans of time, it is bound to develop.

But the earth’s climate, as any tree would have told you, had been deteriorating for most of the 65 million years of the Cenozoic Era. The continents grew colder, and drier; bushfires swept across lands which in the time of the dinosaurs had been dense rainforest. There were also evolutionary newcomers, the grasses, which unlike most trees could survive the fires and also the constant nibbling of the horses, bison, elephants and rhinos – in parallel with which they were evolving.

Then in the northern hemisphere the Ice Ages started, and Britain’s climate began to lurch between subtropical warmth and cold too intense for any trees to survive, all in a few decades. Animals, and herbs which grow and set seed in the space of a season, were generally able to keep pace with the advance and retreat of the ice. But trees, whose generations may span centuries and which cannot uproot themselves and decamp, were specially disadvantaged. Sooner or later, in Europe, an insurmountable obstacle would block their ponderous migrations: the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Carpathians – all of these mountain ranges running east-west across the line of retreat – followed ultimately by the Mediterranean Sea. A few tree species found refuges out of which they could spread north again when the ice retreated; but in a geological timescale, humans arrived a heartbeat too late to enjoy the European forest in the splendour of its original diversity.

‘Wilderness’, ‘natural’ and even ‘native’ are concepts which have stemmed from ecological thinking over the last century and a half, and primarily so in North America, where European explorers felt that a clear line could be drawn between the pristine ecosystem and the chaotic arrival of modern humans. (They underestimated the impact on the landscape of the farming, herding and fire-raising activities of the native Americans; conversely, they did not at first appreciate that these people, too, were relatively newcomers.) In the Old World by contrast, deep into geological time, humans and humanoid creatures have been one player among many. They may not have planted trees, but they hunted the mastodons and bison that would have knocked down the trees and browsed their seedlings. Eventually – a last-minute reprieve, perhaps, for some of Europe’s beleaguered tree species – their hunting activities drove most of these giant creatures to extinction.

If I could go back in time, it might be to the British Mesolithic, more than 6,000 years ago. We know so little about the countryside, before the first farmers – and the first gardeners – arrived to transform it. Was there a dense forest or ‘Wildwood’, packed with towering trees like those whose vast straight waterlogged trunks are still sometimes dug from the bogs of Yorkshire or Norfolk? Or were there great open plains, grazed by extinct wild horses and the huge wild cattle called Aurochsen, and scattered here and there with wide-spreading, baobab-trunked oaks? Most probably there was a complex, shifting pattern,
on a huge scale, of glades, and thickets, and dense groves of tall trees.

The True Service (*Sorbus domestica*) is now considered a British native, although just thirty years ago any botanist would have told you this tree was introduced. Tiny and vulnerable wild populations have been discovered since the 1980s on two cliffs in the Gower Peninsula, and along the Severn Estuary. Did they originally arrive from seeds carried north in some migrating thrush’s stomach? Did their palatability make this one of the first plants which Neolithic farmers were keen to cultivate? Did they appear again and again, sometimes perpetuating themselves if summers were warm enough and grazing pressures not too intense, but sometimes failing to reproduce; or have they maintained a continuous, tenuous existence for eight or nine millennia? The answers matter more than perhaps they should: a peculiar kind of sublimated fascism dictates that the ‘natives’ will be generally recommended as the trees to plant, even in towns, while ‘aliens’ and ‘exotics’ are always liable to be removed.

The handful of trees that did find their way back to Britain after the latest retreat of the
ice had adapted themselves to survive almost anything the climate could throw at them. We think of Pedunculate Oak as the quintessential English tree; it is just as much a home in the mountains of north Africa and northern Iran. None of these species were tailored for the British climate at its mildest and wettest. In equivalent ecosystems – the mountains of Tasmania, the Himalaya, the Pacific north-west – it is still forms of tree that dominate, and they grow taller in these places than anywhere else in the world. A Sitka Spruce is certainly not a British native, being separated by a hundred million years’ evolution from whatever conifer cousins were more recently exterminated in Europe by the ice, but it is more perfectly adapted to Argyllshire or Snowdonia than any tree growing wild in Europe today. Species very similar to today’s *Rhododendron ponticum* and Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) were here in previous interglacials, representing a broadleaved evergreen European tree flora whose closest cousins now hang on in variety only in Macaronesia: planted again in an ideal climate and with no surviving insect pests, it is no wonder these evergreens run rings around the native oaks and birches.

Furthermore, to say that a tree is native to northern Europe is not quite the same as to say that it is native to Britain. As the Ice Ages waxed and waned, sea levels rose and fell by 120 metres as seawater became locked into the ice sheets then melted out again. Eight thousand years ago, just as the climate warmed and Europe’s last remaining kinds of trees staggered back north, Ireland and then Great Britain became islands: the Norway Maple and Norway Spruce, the Grey Alder, the European Silver Fir, the White Elm, the Violet Willow and the Tamarisk all got close to the opening North Sea, but may have got no further.

The ice last retreated 11,000 years ago; 5,000 years later, the first seafaring farmers, or at least their technologies, reached Britain, via the west coast of Ireland and the Northern Isles, bringing new plants as weeds or crops, and shepherding dense populations of animals whose grazing pressure would prevent new tree seedlings from growing and which in a few centuries could transform continuous forest into open pasture. (They did not need to cut the great trees down, as desk-bound historians once imagined. And I have spent enough time cutting down smaller trees, with modern tools, to be entirely convinced they will not have done so out of choice.)

Today, only tiny fragments remain in Britain which are likely to resemble in the least a prehistoric forest. In the lower Wye Valley, the precipitous slopes of woods like Lady Park Wood are some of the most species-rich in Britain, and most of our surviving wild tree species grow in close proximity: this diversity hints at a long history of very limited disturbance. Fairlight Glen, in the Hastings Country Park, is one of few valleys in England so steep, remote and soggy that extracting timber is impracticable: though only a few hundred yards from the fierce winds of the Channel coast, the trees here have always grown precariously tall, racing each other towards the light and lying where they fall to rot gently for decades, feeding miniature fungus gardens.

In a brief account of our wild trees it seems appropriate to begin with the oaks, whose impact on most lowland landscapes is the greatest. No trees look more solid or permanent: blobs of blackish oil paint through summer and into November, when the rest have faded and shed their leaves; then burnished and glowing richly, like new bronze statues, in the darkest days of the year; massively limbed through winter, with sinewy crooked hands; and then bronzed again as their new leaves unfold, amid all the frivolity of the blooms and the watercolour greens of spring. Only the least fertile sands of heath and mountain are too harsh for oaks to thrive, along with the most actively alkaline soils – such as downland chalk when the characteristic capping of acidic clay has been eroded. The appearance of permanence is appropriate, as these are indeed the longest-lived of our large deciduous trees, and manage in most parishes to become the biggest.

The wild flora contains two oaks which differ rather subtly: something that also happens to be true of native birches, hawthorns, willows...
and limes. The Pedunculate or English Oak (Quercus robur) is the common tree of the clay lowlands, while the Sessile or Durmast (Q. petraea) takes over on the lighter soils of the west and north – although most English counties have some wild Sessile Oaks while some oak woods in extreme upland conditions, such as Wistman’s Wood high on Dartmoor, are Pedunculate. The oak seedlings you may be weeding in their hundreds from your flowerbeds will be Pedunculate: Sessile Oak is only inclined to reproduce in glades in ancient woodland and around undisturbed parklands and heaths. The Sessile has rather bigger and shinier leaves, which come on longer stalks and so seem lightly and evenly spread across the crown. Exceptionally graceful oaks, with cartwheel heads of clean straight limbs, are also likely to be Sessile. Both species are home to an astonishing array of insect life. Obvious, first-generation hybrids seem rare. Culturally, the interesting difference is that Pedunculate Oak has long been planted everywhere: its current ubiquity is thanks to the usefulness of its timber, and not to any natural propensity to proliferate at the expense of rival species. Sessile Oaks by contrast have occasionally been planted in forestry plantations but very seldom for amenity purposes, even in those regions such as the Greensand of Kent where they are the more characteristic as a wild species. The seven oaks planted in Sevenoaks alongside the Vine in 1902 for the coronation of Edward VII were Pedunculate, although when five of them blew down in the 1987 ‘hurricane’ the seven chosen to replace the group were Sessile. To many eyes Sessile Oak can make marginally the more handsome tree, and often grows faster and taller when both species are planted side-by-side. Instances include the pair of 1897 Jubilee plantings in Wolverhampton’s West Park – on a heavy soil – and the three memorial oaks planted in 1908 by the drive to Highclere Castle – with Hampshire chalk not far under the surface. As well as being generally the biggest and oldest of organisms, trees are the most individual. In the shapes of each are written the accidents of their history and management and the particulars of the site and the soil; no two specimens can ever look the same, or be exactly as big. And, just like a person, as an oak tree ages it gets more and more crabbed and peculiar. Once fungal decay hollows the bole, the main limbs will sheer off under their own weight but the oak is generally happy to sprout a new and less ambitious crown: signs of decrepitude seldom imply its life is near its end. Congregations of very ancient oaks, as in the Arboretum and the parkland immediately surrounding Blenheim Palace, become endlessly engaging sculpture parks of twisted, shattered and slanting relics. At Blenheim there are more than sixty such, with another big group in the woods north-east of High Lodge; several thousand of similar antiquity are now known around England, while very many more oaks, in the next-oldest stage of their life cycles, are ready to take on their mantle. The best concentrations of the really ancient trees are in former deer parks with histories stretching back to the Middle Ages or earlier – among them Windsor Great Park, Richmond Park in the suburbs of south-west London, Calke Park and Chatsworth Park in Derbyshire, Moccas Park in the Welsh Marches, Hatfield Great Park in Hertfordshire, Lullingstone Park in Kent, Staverton Park in Suffolk, Bradgate Park in Leicestershire, Ashton Court Park just outside Bristol, Stoneleigh Abbey Park in Warwickshire and Cowdray Park in West Sussex – most

Sessile Oak woodland, characteristic of poor upland soils, in the Quantock Hills, Somerset.

This Sessile Oak in Knole Park, Kent, 39 m tall, is typical of the best in its great height and shapely growth.
A range of ancient Pedunculate Oaks at Blenheim, Oxfordshire.