

Hearts of Oak

Some years ago (Oct. 2007) we discussed the historical significance of the different trees and shrubs growing in our local hedgerows. We pointed out that the most ancient hedges, marking the parish and township boundaries, contained hazel and field maples as relics of ancient woodland. In between, newer hedges, laid out over the former medieval open fields and also the heath were dominated by elm and blackthorn, both propagated by root suckers, which would continue to spread long after initial planting. By contrast, the most recent hedges were planted purely with hawthorn, raised by seed and available from nurseries since the nineteenth century. Older hedges had also been repaired with thorns, while those of all ages had been invaded by species easily spread by the wind or through birds eating berries: ash, sycamore, holly, elder, leading to a rich mixture over time, although total number present should not offer a quick and easy guide to actual date. The tree story we left until later.

While all these contributed to the stock-proof boundary function of a hedge, 'standard' trees were also either allowed to grow or deliberately planted. For instance, small-holders typically grew damsons, both for home consumption and the sale of fruit for the dye trade. Along farm hedges the main choice was the English Oak (*Quercus robur*), which, even in winter, make a bold contribution to our landscape. Some have even been left standing alone after the removal of the original hedge.

Oaks were an obvious choice, since they were such an important source of building materials of all kinds. While straight timber was valuable, so were numerous forked branches needed to make 'knees' and brackets in both houses and ships. The importance of the navy and merchant fleet in the history of Britain goes without saying. In addition, the bark contained tannin used for the production of leather (hence Barker Street in Shrewsbury). In farm leases such trees were normally retained by the landlord.

In the Middle Ages acorns in oak woodlands fed herds of pigs, while the 'galls' caused by a parasitic wasp could be ground down for ink pigment. Oaks in particular also became an important component in the mythology and folklore of Northern Europe. It is no wonder that the National Trust adopted the oak leaf as its symbol, while today; Kew Gardens are carrying out a national survey of ancient specimens.

Being long lived, several grew to become prominent 'monuments' worthy of wonder and respect. Locally, the 'Shelton Oak' was being well documented in the sixteenth century, although since replaced. Nearby, one on Mytton property around Copthorne gave rise to the 'Mytton Oak' road name. A replacement at the Mytton Oak surgery is, unfortunately, not getting the space it deserves. Also in this general area, some oaks have been caught up with housing development. While preservation orders may protect their tops, trenches for drains and cables can damage roots and upset local hydrology. Trees in full leaf are thirsty beasts!

Oaks are an important component of the natural world by playing host to a multitude of other life, which use them for shelter, food and support at different stages of their life cycles. Oaks significantly put out a second flush of leaves in August, when the 'coast is clear' from hungry caterpillars.

The output of edible acorns seems quite generous, but is important for ensuring at least some will form a new generation. They contain tannins which discourage small mammals and large birds from eating too much at once, but which also help them survive when hidden for later use. Such stores can sometimes be forgotten, allowing these acorns to successfully germinate well away from the parent tree. If this happens in your own garden, please pot them on for replanting, rather than chopping them out. Better still, gather up fresh acorns and propagate them. A quick glance around our landscape will reveal how important oaks are to our familiar environment, but there are so few youngsters in the present population. So, while appreciating this special part of our heritage, we must do something for the future.



Oaks before and after development

Shelton



Kingswood Oak