

The Montgomery Field Society Meeting, January 11th 2014

The Ancient Trees of Montgomeryshire – Alastair Hotchkiss

Just before the meeting Jenny Foulkes described The OPAL Tree Health Survey, and members were encouraged to take part in order to help monitor the health of our trees. She had brought information packs for those interested and details can also be found at:

www.OPALexplorenature.org/opalcode

Our guest speaker was Alistair Hotchkiss, formerly of CCW but, as of recently, now of the Woodland Trust, who gave a presentation on the Ancient Trees of Montgomeryshire.

The usual method of ageing ancient trees is by measuring their girth, and charts are available in an Ancient Tree Forum/Woodland Trust leaflet which gives guidance relating to several different tree species.

We learned about the life cycle of the tree, from young to mature, on to vintage and eventually to ancient status. As the tree ages, the trunk thickens, the crown retreats and the heartwood dies, leading to a hollow trunk. The rotting wood which is produced as a tree ages is a very important habitat and harbours many plants, ferns, fungi, lichens, beetles and larvae. These in turn feed birds and mammals.

Alistair first took us on a journey around the world to look at some ancient trees from foreign lands, explaining that in many cases it is hard to age ancient trees accurately. We were shown olive trees which were around 5000 years old – hollow grey relics which still bear fruit. Even older trees are to be found in South Utah, North America, where Quaking Aspens grow in large numbers from a single extensive rootstock. These are clones of a single plant which can be as old as 80,000 years, and are collectively estimated to be the world's heaviest tree.

The UK has probably the best heritage in Europe where ancient trees are concerned – largely as a result of the creation of park land for deer hunting etc in past centuries. However, although fewer in number, the ancient trees on the Continent are probably better protected than those in the UK.

Looking more locally we heard about the ancient oaks of Powis Castle. The famous Red Rock Oak died as recently as 2009, but is still a very valuable habitat, supporting lichens, mosses, fungi and invertebrates. The Champion Oak, felled in 1939, had a girth of 24 feet and stood 110 feet tall.

The nearby Buttington Oak has a girth of over 11 metres, and is thought to be the 3rd largest Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) in Wales.

The Pontfadog Oak, a Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*), which was reputed to be the oldest and largest tree in Britain (by girth), was blown over last year. It stood in the Ceiriog Valley west of Chirk, and Owain Gwynedd is said to have addressed his army beneath it. In 1996 its age was estimated to be between 1181 and 1628 years, and it was apparently referred to as Wales' national tree.

Close by is another famous oak - The Great Oak at the Gates of the Dead. This is thought to be the place where in 1165, during the Battle of Crogen, the forces of Henry II of England were ambushed by the Welsh under Owain Gwynedd, and later buried close by. It is said that Henry employed 2000 woodsmen to clear trees from areas of Wales where he felt they endangered his troops. Unfortunately, in 2010 this Great Oak split in two, probably because it was a very big, very old tree with a much decayed, hollow stem that was pulled apart by its long and extremely heavy limbs acting as levers, each limb pulling downwards and outwards in different directions. It may well be over 1200 years old, and is thought to date back to the reign of King Egbert in 802.

Oaks are not the only trees in Powys to reach a great age, and we heard of several yews, including The Patriarch Tree at Llanerfyl. This appears to comprise of four large fragments, three of which are female while the fourth is male. One theory for this is that the female parts once formed a single tree that long ago split and fell, and that the male is a second tree.

Four magnificent yew trees, the oldest thought to be up to 2,000 years old, stand in the graveyard of the church at Pennant Melangell. Apparently in the 10th century, consecrated yews were valued at £1 each, compared to only 15d for un-consecrated yews!

The Pollard ash at Berriew is a particularly large specimen with a girth of 6.6 metres..

The Black Poplar (*Populus nigra ssp betulifolia*) in Newtown is not only very old, but also Britain's rarest native tree. It merits two pages in Archie Miles' book *Heritage Trees of Wales*.

Pictures of the famous Leighton Redwoods were admired, particularly the Mother Tree.

Other notable species include some fine examples of wild cherries in the Llanrhaeadr area, several ancient birches around Lake Vyrnwy, and Sorbus varieties including *Sorbus stirtoniana*, the very rare Stirton's Whitebeam, which may not grow anywhere other than on the Breiddens.

However, one of Wales' largest and most important sites for ancient parkland, veteran trees and their associated wildlife is Gregynog, recently designated Wales' newest National Nature Reserve. In particular, its ancient oaks and pollarded hollies were mentioned. But it is not just the trees themselves that are important; rare lichens cover the bark of the gnarled ancient oak and ash trees. One of these, the lichen *Lecanora sublivescens*, can be found on the sunlit tree trunks at Gregynog. This species is scarce on a world scale – and is only known to be here in the UK and in Southern Sweden. Lichens need clean air and low nitrogen levels in order to thrive.

Another nationally rare species, this time a bumble-bee mimicking hoverfly, *Pocota personata*, is restricted to woodlands and parklands with ancient trees – and Powis Castle has the only known records in Montgomeryshire.

In conclusion, Alastair reaffirmed the importance of Montgomeryshire and the Marches for its concentrations of ancient trees. He explained the importance of registering and protecting them – he is a member of The Ancient Tree Forum, which produces informative literature, encourages research, promotes best conservation practice and aims to increase people's enjoyment of old trees.

The following two quotes are definitely food for thought:

“10,000 oaks of 100 years old are not a substitute for one 500 year old oak” – Oliver Rackham, conservation author and historian.

“The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago – the next best time is now” – a Chinese proverb.

Sue and Steve Southam