

## SPECIAL TREES THE WORK OF PRESTWOOD NATURE

Prestwood Nature is a local conservation group whose catchment area is centred on Prestwood Parish Church with a radius of about 4km. It includes Prestwood, Kingshill, Great Missenden, Hampden, Speen and Hughenden Valley.

Several members are registered tree wardens for the county. One of their activities is to document old or noteworthy trees in the area, which are being systematically measured, recorded, photographed and monitored. When the landowner is known we endeavour to tell them about the importance of trees listed on their land. Landowners are also assisted with respect to woodland and tree management and tree-planting. In addition to this work PN is creating a new copse on a local-authority-owned site at Great Missenden, gradually replacing the overgrown elder with mixed native trees and shrubs. It also has plans to plant a new community orchard on the site of a former orchard that was known to have existed from at least 1840 until the 1950s. This orchard would be dedicated to the preservation of rare old varieties of fruit tree associated with the area. One PN member is working with Bernwode Plants in identifying surviving old fruit trees in this area and preserving them through propagating cuttings. Surveys of the flora and fauna of many local ancient woodlands have been carried out and PN is helping to manage Angling Spring Wood and Lodge Wood.

Our tree surveying was started in the late 1990s, when all the accessible old trees in the Prestwood Parish (which forms the centre of our area) were measured and recorded. The survey is now gradually being extended to the rest of the area, although this will take a number of years. The trees recorded in Prestwood Parish are also being re-visited to check on their condition and survival. All trees are recorded if they measure at least 2.25m in girth or are of rare species or are the largest known specimens of shorter-living trees like holly or cherry. We have started photographing all these trees, although this is a major task, as we have already logged 257 trees.

The following selection of trees is subjective, although it takes into account the survey findings so far.

### *Beech*

There was a King's Beech marked on OS maps from 1822 to 1965 at the junction of Kings Lane and Rignall Road SP872022. Nothing remains of this tree, which may have once marked the far boundary of the Hampden Estate. I have not encountered anyone who remembers this tree, but it is worth persisting, as this is the only named tree that has occurred in this area.

The most impressive and probably oldest beeches (we have not yet measured them) are on Little Hampden Common, land belonging to Lord Figg, about SP858038. We intend to organise a field-trip to assess this grove, which has large boughs sweeping to the ground amid masses of bluebells.

As beech was used for timber in the furniture industry, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, very few old standards remain. The largest measured by us so far is at the edge of the wood on the south side of Great Hampden cricket pitch SP846014. This is 3.6m in girth. It has a large Giant Polypore growing from its base, which may mean its days are numbered. Only six others over 3m girth have so far been measured.

### *Oak*

By far the most frequently encountered old trees in the area are oaks, which seemed to have been left in many places in boundary hedges to grow into substantial trees. While the oldest all have some dead boughs they are still very healthy and look like surviving for much longer yet. The largest encountered was one that was estimated at about 6m in girth and likely to have been 600 years old on top of Denner Hill at Rickyard Cottage SP856000. Unfortunately half split off and fell in storms a few years ago and the remaining half fell, again in storms, the next year. Some other oaks nearby, however, are still among our oldest trees.

The oldest surviving oak we have measured so far is 5.46m in girth, on the west edge of the copse north of The Glade (a vista from Hampden House) at SP862023. Another 5m specimen in a field hedge on Hampden Bottom Farm at SP853029 is in excellent condition and, with the help of our work, is covered, along with all the other old trees on this farm, by an Environmental Stewardship agreement. Altogether we have measured 17 oaks of at least 4m girth, eight of them on Hampden Bottom Farm. One of these (4.4m girth) at SP859015, close to Honor End, has the lichen *Pseudevernia furfuracea*, uncommon in this area, growing on it. Another 4m oak on the farm is large enough to have a badger sett underneath it (SP855026). None of them yet have hollowed bases, although a few of the 51 we have measured between 3m and 4m do have. All the large oaks are in hedgerows or very rarely wood-edges - none are within woods themselves.

### *Sweet chestnut*

The largest surviving tree we have measured is a sweet chestnut at 5.85m girth. This specimen is at SP862023 on the north side of The Glade mentioned above. It is part of a series of sweet chestnuts and limes planted in a row to border the vista from Hampden House. The tale is told locally that these trees were planted when Queen Elizabeth I came to stay at the House and complained there was no view of anything but boring trees, so while she slept that night the foresters cleared an

avenue through the woods to give her a view from her bedroom when she awoke. We were able to age the trees marking the avenue because one had been cut down recently and we were able to count the rings. As a result we can estimate that the oldest trees along here were planted 400 years ago, ie towards the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. So at least one aspect of the legend, the timing of the creation of the Glade, has some foundation. We have found three other sweet chestnuts here of 5m girth or more. These are younger than oaks of the same size, as the chestnut grows rather faster. Even so they are splendid trees with their bark deep-fissured in lines that twist around the trunk, and they still bear abundant fruit. One at 5.75m lies just away from The Glade and marks the junction of Hampden Bottom Road and the road to Little Hampden SP863024. It stands at the corner of a copse and is extremely imposing, a real landmark impressing anyone using the footpath that passes right beside it. There also some good examples on Hampden Bottom farm, including one of 5.7m and another of 4.9m.

#### *Common lime*

Some of the limes planted by The Glade are as large as the sweet chestnuts and obviously were planted at the same time. Unfortunately it is not possible to measure them as, like most specimens of this tree, they sprout innumerable little branches at the base that prevent any access with a tape-measure. Only occasionally have we been able to measure limes, the largest of these being one of 3.4m in Prestwood Park SU874994, which we know by historical records is only just over 150 years, which demonstrates their speed of growth. Most of the present trees in Prestwood Park (apart from a few oaks that are a remnant of a former hedgerow that used to bisect it) were planted by the first vicar of Prestwood's parish church Holy Trinity, John Evetts, in 1850 to mark the foundation of the parish. They lie on former Glebeland to the west of the churchyard and are mostly common exotics of the Victorian age (lime, Turkey oak, chestnuts), plus some beech. It is useful to have this marker for estimating the ages of trees in the area, as we can see the range of girths attained by various types of tree in 150 years on our soils and in parkland conditions. The field is now under private ownership (Wren Davis farm), but with the help of Prestwood Nature the owner has planted some new trees in a couple of groves here to replace some lost over time.

#### *Lucombe oak*

The rarest specimen planted by Revd. Evetts was a Lucombe oak on the north side of the Park, near a large old chalk-pit, at SU873997. This is now 3m in girth. It is a hybrid between cork and Turkey oaks developed at Lucombe in Devon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, clones of which were planted quite widely in Victorian times, although not so many remain to this day.

It is remarkable in keeping its green leaves throughout the winter and dropping them when spring arrives! This is one of the few older trees in the area that as a TPO on it. TPOs seem to have been applied rather haphazardly and idiosyncratically, mostly to trees of no great stature and including some species that cannot be expected to survive very long anyway, eg willow! It would be more helpful if trees could be selected for TPOs on more scientific grounds, such as their age, although younger ones would also need to be protected to provide the veterans of the future.

### *Turkey oak*

There are two fine specimens in Prestwood Park of 3.4 and 2.75 metres (demonstrating the variability in growth rates even for trees in the same situation).

### *Ash*

The largest native tree aside from oak among those measured in our area is an ash of 4.1m. This is on land belonging to Nanfans Grange SP865010, a private residence at Prestwood, and used to be part of a hedgerow, now demolished, that once separated two small fields. The next largest ash at 3.9m stands at the corner of the entrance to Peterley Manor Farm SU882994. Ash does not seem to have been favoured as a marker tree, unlike oak - and, strangely, hornbeam - and so few have ever attained any great age, with only 11 measured so far of 3m or more girth.

### *Hornbeam*

While hornbeam is a popular boundary tree in the area, seemingly enjoying the clays over the chalk, it seldom grows to a very large tree. They were traditionally laid to create hedges and wood-edges, and old examples of these are abundant, creating grotesque gnarled shapes as they grow thick boughs. They are not long-lasting and the only notable specimens we have measured are both small by the standards of many trees, 2.6 and 2.55m respectively, at SP842025 and SU865995. The first of these on Hampden Bottom Farm, a relic of former parkland, is still in good condition. The other, marking the corner of a wood, is quite decrepit.

### *Sycamore*

These trees are capable of surviving long. The oldest measured so far is 3.6m in girth and looking still in the prime of life. It stands near Stony Green Cottage on Hampden Road SU863997. One of 2.8m stands near the John Hampden Monument at Honor End SP862020 and was planted just over a hundred years ago. Unfortunately the trees planted beside the monument, which is no great height, have now reached such stature that they obscure it from view! They may provide a longer-lasting monument than the stone spire.

### *Field maple*

This familiar hedgerow tree seldom survives to any great age, but there is a splendid large one of just over 3m at the corner of a field just east of the River Misbourne north of Great Missenden SP894017. This far exceeds any other example of this species we have found.

### *Rowan*

This is another tree that seldom reaches great proportions, but an incredibly large twin-trunked example at 3.75m grows in a hedge on private land at SU884987. Unfortunately it is no longer accessible, having become surrounded by horse paddocks.

### *Horse chestnut*

Like the sycamore this introduced, but now well-established and familiar tree, seems capable of remaining to a substantial age. We have measured six of 3m girth or more, the largest two being 3.7m, in or beside Prestwood Park, so presumably only just over 150 years (SU872997 & SU874994).

### *Yew*

These can be our most impressive and oldest trees, but we have few old examples in the area, at least as far as we have so far ventured. Those planted at the Prestwood parish church in 1849 have largely been kept very clipped and quite small, but one on the west side of the church at SU874997 has been left to grow naturally and is 2.9m in girth.

### *Exotic conifers*

Some of these trees can grow very rapidly and achieve impressive mien in a short time, thus becoming a valued part of the local scenery. An Atlas cedar on a relatively new housing estate (1960s) at Nairdwood Way in Prestwood presumably survives from the former grounds of the house called Frognal nearby, as it is already 2.45m in girth (SP882000). A larger cedar of 3.7m grows in the grounds of the former vicarage at Prestwood and is certainly 150 years old. A 2m larch near the Prestwood parish church is unusual, as these trees are usually planted for an early harvest (SU874997). Even larger is a 2.6m Scots pine, one of an avenue of pines on Ninneywood Farm SU879988. The most impressive, however, is a Wellingtonia of 5m girth that lies in Prestwood Park (SU873996) but was not part of the original planting, known to have been placed there only about 50 years ago!

### *Orchard trees*

Prestwood used to be famous for its cherry orchards and there are still many old varieties of cherry, apple and pear surviving in remnants of these, many now in people's gardens. They are important as being

sometimes virtually the sole known remaining examples of particular varieties, and many have had cuttings taken to be propagated at Bernwode Nurseries. Fruit trees, however, never attain any great stature before they die. The largest we have found is a pair of apple trees of 1.57 and 1.48m girth in the remains of an old orchard attached to The Polecat in Prestwood SU876993. They still bear an abundant harvest.

#### *Wild cherry*

There are some large old cherries, however, surviving in the area. They soon reach a decrepit-looking state, but are then capable of hanging on for many more decades, despite commonly bearing the bright yellow fungal bodies of Chicken-of-the-Woods. The largest measured so far is 3.6m girth beside a pond at SP863008 near Hangings Lane in Prestwood. It is hollow and looks ancient, although it is probably less than 200 years. Nevertheless, it is a good age for a cherry. Another of 3.25m lies at a corner of Prestwood Park SU872995 and is probably 150 years. They usually deteriorate and die well before such an age.

#### *Silver birch*

This is a common tree in the area and soon reaches an impressive height, but they do not reach any great age. The largest measured so far is 1.8m girth at the corner of Nairdwood Lane and Lodge Lane in Prestwood SP879003, but this has been so lopped back and crudely pruned by Highways Department that it is no longer worth preserving. Absurdly, it has a TPO on it.

#### *Holly*

This is another common hedgerow and woodland shrub, but it only attains the size of a small tree at best, although the largest of these are well valued locally, especially when covered with red berries. The largest measured is 1.6m girth near the Prestwood parish church SU874997. Another of 1.3m girth had the top half cut off by its owner despite protests from neighbours and Prestwood Nature, and involvement of the CDC Trees Officer. This was carried out during the summer despite the presence of a wren's nest, which was destroyed.

#### *Black walnut*

This is worth mentioning because it is a rarely planted tree, mostly in large collections, but there is an example in the grounds of Nanfans Grange, Prestwood, SP865010, of no great size but worth valuing for its rarity and probably 50 years old. I have seen no other specimen in this area, although there are several common walnuts.