

# *Dendrology Ho!*

## REMARKABLE TREES IN KENT

— OWEN JOHNSON —

*We are deeply indebted to Dr Johnson and to the Editor of the 'International Dendronology Yearbook' for 1996 for permission to reprint this captivating article.*

THE FASCINATION OF TRAVELLING the countryside and visiting gardens and stately homes searching for and measuring spectacular specimen trees, needs no elaborating. Among the benefits can be counted the opportunity to protect trees by alerting their owners as to how big or unusual they are. Britain's trees too – not only wild ones but everyday street or garden trees, or the big conifers of Victorian parks – make an impact on the landscape out of all proportion to the research which has not yet been conducted into their abundance or variety. The atmosphere of dignity and peacefulness, for instance, in a scene with many trees thirty metres tall, is quite different to the impact of one where, owing to exposure or poor soil, the trees are only fifteen to twenty metres in height.

### *Tree Register of the British Isles:*

The process of discovering where and how big different trees can and do grow in Britain, which was the life work of the late Alan Mitchell, is now being pursued by the Tree Register of the British Isles, for which I am one of a number of volunteer recorders. In the summer of 1995, thanks to funding from the Merlin Trust, I found myself in Kent – scouring the horizon through binoculars for tell-tale foliage and promising crown shapes, marching onwards through cemeteries and sleepy hamlets, peering through hedges and probably alerting numerous

Neighbourhood Watch schemes, and knocking everywhere on the front doors of the good and the great. In the case of the better-known collections, the process was one of updating existing records of growth-rates and likely lifespan. Everywhere else, it was also one of discovery.

Kent, like much of the British Isles, is remarkable for its variety of soils and landforms, packed into a small area. Climatically, too, it is a battleground between the mild, moist air off the Atlantic which penetrates up the Channel, and the influence of the adjacent Continent with its hot dry summers and harsh winters... One product of the Kentish survey has been a clearer picture of just how much these variations are mirrored in the pattern of tree growths within the county. Kent's tallest tree, a grand fir of 46 x 126<sup>1</sup> at Bedgebury National Pinetum, grows among other conifers from the western seaboard of North America, such as douglas fir and sitka spruce, which find the conditions here, in the intricate valleys of the High Weald, just cool, moist and sheltered enough to thrive and reach dimensions exceptional for south-east England. This well-watered sandstone country in the south western fringes of Kent, with its rash of Victorian mansions and their well-treed parks, provides generally the most rewarding conditions for tree-hunting.

<sup>1</sup> Measurements are of the height in metres x the bole diameter in centimetres at, unless stated, 1.5m. All are 1995.

## Bedgebury, Mote Park, Wateringbury

A few miles north of the narrow clay plain of the Low Weald, the Lower Greensand forms another sandstone ridge. Here, however, the soils tend to be richer, sometimes alkaline, the rainfall is ten to twenty per cent lower and the summers are marginally hotter and sunnier. Suddenly the giant American conifers cease to play any part in the landscape. Instead, heat-loving trees thrive, such as the east-coast American black walnut, which after fifty years at Bedgebury remains thin and stunted. Mote Park, Maidstone, has one 190cm in bole diameter planted around 1910 and dead above twenty-seven metres, and all seven others are ten times the size of the largest at Bedgebury. A few miles away, in a private garden at Wateringbury, the largest example found in Britain of the heat-loving American honey locust is 25 x 75. So fertile is the ragstone of this part of the ridge that the small garden contains the tallest recorded "Prinz Handjery" sycamore, 12 x 42, possibly the best *Acer negundo*, 15 x 75, and a number of other outstanding trees.

## North Downs

North and east of the greensand again, the chalk of the North Downs forms a third range of hills. The demanding conditions offered by raw chalk are ameliorated over much of the downs by cappings of acidic clay, particularly south of Canterbury where heat-loving trees also grow well and nearly every isolated village – Elmstead, Stowting, Nackington, Upper Hardres, Bossingham, Waltham – has its huge old churchyard yew, but where parks and gardens are generally far-flung. Some of the most notable trees in this region are totally unexpected: the tender red beech *Nothofagus fusca* of 21 x 75 at Goodnestone Park, almost within sight of the North Sea, or the clean-boled Monterey cypress at Waldershare Park, 28 x 194: Monterey cypress thrives in the rain of the western

seaboard but is too tender to be grown at Bedgebury. Sweet chestnuts, again, hate chalk, but the clay is deep enough for most of the Kentish giants to be clustered in this patch of the Downs. The biggest is at Howlett's Zoo, east of Canterbury, 23 x 327 at 0.5m under massive boughs – a youthful tree which has increased in diameter by nine per cent in the space of fifteen years

## Named Trees in Nonington

But the most astonishing of the trees here are the English oaks on the site of the old house at Fredville Park, Nonington no other big oaks being reported from these Downs. By the eighteenth century, the largest of these maiden oaks had been given individual aims. "Beauty", 20 x 197, was commended in 1821 for "the regularity of its bark" being beautiful beyond conception – a notable feature still on its long cylindrical trunk, which bears only light branches, many of which have now died back. "Stately" is larger though far less shapely, at 17 x 241. "Majesty", at 19 x 384, is probably the finest though not quite the largest English oak in Britain, having a trunk hollow but entire which runs for 6m with very little taper and still bears high boughs larger than most mature trees. Measurements made since 1821 suggest that all three trees are in the range of 500 years old. "Majesty" in particular continues to increase its diameter at the standard rate for healthy trees in their prime – a little under 1cm per annum.

## Tunbridge Wells, Kent's Tree Capital

As nine trees out of ten measured on any recording trip are likely to be planted ornamentals, it is inevitable that record specimens will cluster around centres of population. In old settlements, nutrient accumulation and the constant shelter of tall buildings also sponsor good growth. Kent's tree capital is Tunbridge Wells, ideally situated on the northern fringe of

- 34 the High Weald. Because of the moist and sheltered microclimate, several of the outstanding trees here are conifers which generally are too pollution-sensitive to be at their best in town air. A bushy but gigantic Grecian fir in the small garden of "Creggans", is 28 x 233 at 0.4 between the boughs. An example of the rare larch *Larix x pendula*, growing in front of the Spa Hotel at Manor Park, is much the largest found, at 24 x 88, whilst a weeping wellingtonia in a back garden in Birling Road, at 9 x 82, is second only to one at Bodnant in Wales and has thrown out monstrously snaking branches as far as the house. Other Tunbridge Wells "Champion Trees" include *Acer cappadocicum* "Aureum" in a Warwick Park back garden, 13 x 76 at 1m and *Prunus avium* "Plena" in the Grosvenor and Hilbert Recreation Ground, 15 x 79.

## Miracles in Maidstone and Canterbury

One of the biggest wellingtonias in Kent, 35 x 226, grows, most unexpectedly, only a kilometre from the heart of Maidstone in the grounds of Turkey Court. What has overridden the crippling effects of town air in this case is the high water-table in this remarkable "secret garden" behind the Ashford Road, with its series of lakes and cascades.

In the pocket-handkerchief front garden of Vernon Grange in the Old Dover Road, Canterbury, a judas tree was planted in 1927. Fortuitously, this did not, as do most judas trees, grow in a largely horizontal fashion, but has remained tall and straight and is now the finest in the country at 11 x 64. The discovery of this tree was capped almost immediately by recording the largest *Prunus sargentii* in Britain in front of the Kent County Constabulary Nationality Department office opposite, 9 x 85. This cherry is dwarfed, however, by the larger of two *Prunus x yedoensis* on the golf course at Mote Park, 9 x 109 and still growing with wild abandon.

## Knole Park, Sevenoaks

The tallest native trees in any county are found as likely as not in deer parks, where over many centuries trees have been left to grow to their full stature and draw the next generation ever taller, without this being simply due to unfarmably poor soil. Half of the trees over thirty-seven metres tall in Kent (the other half being nearly all Victorian wellingtonias) still grow in the greensand at Knole Park, Sevenoaks, despite all the losses sustained here in the storm of 1987. Among these trees are the tallest sessile oak currently recorded in Britain, 40 x 188 with 10m of clean bole, and the tallest and finest hornbeam, a tree like a forest beech which, despite the loss of its central crown, is 29 x 130.

## Elms: Maidstone, Rolvenden, Benenden, Petham, Cranbrook

The Dutch elm's close relative, the Huntingdon elm, is a much tougher tree, and specimens still grace many town parks, particularly near the east. The best, at Chaucer House, Maidstone, was 25 x 112.

The eastern North Downs is one of the heartlands of the smooth-leaved elm, *Ulmis minor*, a variable species of which some examples can be guaranteed to survive. The biggest noted was not on the generally windswept Downs but near Rolvenden - a large-leaved form of 17 x 114. The variety *subarosa*, a corky-twiggged tree was grown by Collingwood Ingram at Benenden Grange from seed collected in France, and a tree of 12 x 46 survives there, with a scion making good progress at Hemsted Tbl nearby. The golden "Wredei" is another resident clone, with the finest tree at 23 Warwick Park, Tunbridge Wells, 15 x 47, and at Kenfield Court, Petham, 15 x 48. "Sarniensis", the Wheatley elm, was noted only at Cranbrook and at Chaucer House, 23 x 79.

## Elms: Sandwich, Saltwood, Wateringbury, Canterbury, Maidstone

Little research has been conducted into the varieties of elm growing wild in East Kent before Dutch elm disease struck. Some trees seen last summer appeared to be *Ulmus minor plotii*, a nominally Midlands form – the largest, 18 x 77, in a hedge near Knowlton Park, west of Sandwich.

Like *Ulmus minor*, the wych-elm is genetically variable enough for the occasional resistant survivor to be found. Being the elm of more acidic soils, these are mainly in the Weald, with the best being on the greensand at Saltwood, 24 x 93. The weeping cultivar "Camperdown" is disease resistant and still planted: the biggest, at Wateringbury, is 6 x 66. Much rarer now is the less weeping and more elegant "Horizontalis", which has survived at the Dane John Gardens, Canterbury, 13 x 83.

The largest surviving example of a rarer elm grows at Mote Park. This is the Siberian elm, *Ulmus pumila arborea*, 22 x 66.

## Oak, Ash, Wingnut, Bean, Crack Willow.

Let me end by mentioning a few other favourite finds. Much the largest scarlet oak yet found in Britain grows in a lane-side hedge opposite Kenfield Court, 24 x 118, with a fine bole. At Bedgebury School, the biggest recorded weeping ash

is 12 x 136. The largest known *Betula lenta*, among some outstanding trees at the Red House, Crockham Hill, measures 12 x 57. The wild service tree makes particularly good growth on Kentish clay, and an exceptional tree at Hall Place, Leigh, with a long columnar bole, is outstanding at 19 x 124. Other remarkable trees at this lovely garden include the biggest example of the normally tiny *Pyrus salicifolia* in the country, 9 x 69.

The hybrid wingnut, *Pterocarya x rehderiana*, is one of the most vigorous trees known. How long it can keep up this vigour has been shown by a tree at Frensham Manor, Rolvenden, a spontaneous cross which was planted in 1928 and has grown to 21 x 148. Another tree showing hybrid vigour is the bean tree, *Catalpa x erubescens*, of which the largest in Britain is a tree of 17 x 123 below Chilham Castle.

*Salix x Meyeriana* is an exceedingly rare hybrid between the native crack and bay willow, combining the latter's glossy foliage with the vigorous growth of the crack willow. A grove of apparently spontaneous trees found near Hunton includes one which has reached the previously unsuspected size of 20 x 70.

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Tree Register's huge fund of information about large, rare and historic trees is accessible to anyone interested in the subject: donations welcome. Please contact the Secretary, Mrs P.A. Stevenson, 77A Hall End, WOOTTON, Bedford, MK43 9HP

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## Spotted by Margery Wright in a recent issue of the *Dover Express*:

### CLOSURE OF

#### WELLARDS WAY FOOTBRIDGE

Notice is hereby given that Railtrack Southern will be carrying out essential maintenance works to Wellards Way Footbridge which carries the footpath over the Dover to Folkestone railway lines and on to Dover West (sic) Beach. In the interests of public safety it will

be necessary to close the footbridge for the period of 29 November 1997 to 29 March 1998.

WS Atkins Rail Ltd are managing the works in (sic) behalf of Railtrack and any queries relating to the closure should be addressed to Mr A Dean, WS Atkins Rail Ltd, Floor 18, Network Centre, Wellesley Grove, Croydon (sic) CR9 1DA.

*Editorial comment:* Does work on the footbridge portend the permanent closure, after the completion of the adjacent sewage pumping station works, of the now 'temporarily' closed but much more convenient Pilot's Crossing, near the foot of the Admiralty Pier?

And have you ever heard of "Wellards Way"?