

THE ANCIENT TREE COLUMN

Each month we feature an ancient British tree. This month the Ancient Tree Forum introduces us to...

CROMWELL'S OAK, MELKSHAM, WILTSHIRE

Cromwell's Oak can be found within the corner of an old agricultural field adjacent to the town of Melksham. This tree is one of few remaining glimpses of the historic landscape that covered the local area; the region in which Cromwell's Oak sits was once a vast medieval forest, and a favoured hunting ground of Tudor kings.

The tree has a girth of 7.1m and is thought to be around 700 years old. Its hollow trunk bears the scars of historic fire damage, unfortunately all too common in such important trees. While it shares some common features with other ancient oaks, the tree's history is not just locked up in its annual rings; it also features in the history books.

This ancient oak is thought to have played a part in a nationally significant event: the first English Civil War. According to legend, Oliver Cromwell stayed at a nearby farm in 1643. After the Parliamentary army faced a crushing defeat at the hands of the Royalist cavalry at the Battle of Roundway Down, this mighty oak played a gruesome part in the aftermath of the battle when, on the orders of Cromwell, some of his unruly soldiers were hanged from its boughs.

Through conversion to agriculture, the historic landscape has been lost; the land was enclosed, and until 2006 managed as dairy farm.

Due to the large size of the tree, the cattle would congregate under its crown for shelter. As is common in such circumstances, the tree suffered from the effects of livestock damage, with compaction of its rooting environment and damage to lower part of the trunk through rubbing.

In 2006 the farm was sold to enable the construction of a secondary school. Thanks to the valiant efforts of a local tree officer, the importance of this tree was recognised; the school, Melksham Oak Community School, even takes its name from the tree. Alarmingly, the tree report that was prepared to support the development of the school recommended that all of the deadwood be removed – an unfortunate example of a risk-averse consultant not understanding the habitat and aesthetic importance of deadwood in veteran trees. Again, thanks to the tree officer, the deadwood was left intact. The rooting environment was also protected by mulching and installing a fence.

Despite this tree's long and hard life, and its brushes with history, it stands as a living monument, reminding us of historic land use and acting as an education resource for school pupils.



The Ancient Tree Forum champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain's ancient and veteran trees, and provides advice on their value and management at www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk
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