



Chairman's Comments

Dear Members,

The gardeners at Spetchley Park were spending five hours a day watering these last few weeks, and my overriding memory of our excellent tour there by our own expert John Tuer, was of a wheelbarrow by their thankfully extensive lake, with a pump to get the water into the 'barrow and take it off round the gardens. Obviously a few small trees had died but the 100 odd trees we visited were well worth it, although my outstanding favourite was the Cork Oak, but then I am a bit of a nut for oaks!! We had a lovely tea and cake at the tea room afterwards, so thanks to those members who came. We have at least had some rain now and I hope you manage to enjoy this somewhat overheated summer.

David (Chairman)

Editorial.

Thanks to those who have sent photographs taken on our visits. Due to the length of this month's reports, there was little space to include them. Also with the new Data Protection laws, they cannot be published without the subjects' permissions. For the future please obtain the permission to publish from the subjects at the time. But please do not stop sending me photos!

Due to an unexpected family commitment I will not personally be leading the visit to Cholmondeley Castle Gardens, on Sunday 12th August, but Peter Aspin, who has visited there many times, has kindly agreed to lead the visit. I made a recce there recently and can assure members that they are well worth a visit. Unfortunately only newly planted trees, some of which are very rare, have labels so there will be plenty scope for our experts!

Visits to Mill House Arboretum, Ruyton XI Towns and the Aspin project farm on Saturday June 30th

Unassumingly situated at the end of a long narrow lane on the eastern edge of Ruyton XI Towns is the home, garden and arboretum of two of our members, Richard and Anne Mayall, who moved there almost a quarter century ago when they retired from the family farm at Harmer Hill. On a glorious Saturday afternoon we were joined by five volunteers from the noted Priestfield Arboretum in the Chilterns who were in Shropshire for the weekend (Priestfield was established in 1917 and after a period of neglect resurrected in the 1980's-the website is well worth viewing).

The only clue to the jewels within are a National Collection sign on an old farm gate with a footpath dividing the garden from the arboretum. And what jewels! We were all given a comprehensive list of trees together with their situation, source, origin and so on. Have STT members ever been so well informed before? The Collection is of birches, well over 100 different examples in total, some with the most exquisite barks. But there are also large numbers of Liquidambar, *Quercus*, *Sorbus* and *Euonymus* to delight the senses. Some of us who thought we possessed good samples of recently flowered Chinese dogwoods had to reassess when we saw one that Anne had purchased from a tiny nursery on the edge of Woore (which I have had numerous recommendations about over many years) which was at its floriferous peak. A tall and straight *Toona sinensis* attracted attention,

a tree that has tremendous potential for timber in this country its common name being Chinese Mahogany. Richard was not too keen and regarded it as a bit of a thug but I think he might come around in time.

The redesigning never ends of course, certainly not with our intrepid hosts. What is known as the Sitka Bank had all the spruces cut down a few years ago and has since been completely replanted. The Ash Bank close to the house has been replanted only this year. Last winter's heavy snowfalls caused some damage to branches but only one fatality, an oak which hopefully might shoot from the base again- some of us crawled around in the dust looking for signs of life, just like the tree enthusiasts we aspire to be. Mill House is the special sort of place everyone should visit at least once a year and the welcome we received from Anne and Richard was beyond compare. I think the folks from Priestfield might have fallen in love with this bit of Shropshire, at least a little.

In the evening they, along with a few STT members, visited the **Shropshire Agroforestry Project** at Soulton, near Wem. It was especially pertinent that we were enjoying a heatwave on the last day of June as remarkably the first combines were harvesting the ripened winter barley in North Shropshire and the cattle were on winter rations to maintain required live weight gains (the former extremely rare in June, the latter unheard of so early in the year) in that one of the main purposes of the project is how to use trees to control and modulate climate in an agricultural setting. 2018 so far has been arguably the most continental style climate ever, over much of the UK with a long drawn out winter, intensely compressed spring and hot and dry early summer. Other main ideas behind the work are to use tree litter to create soil which is, after all, the most important crop any farm, or for that matter any garden, can produce and we have all seen or heard stories about how increasingly soil is being degraded, and also to create a tree scape and landscape relevant to the future based on the principle that the two most important food crops (for mankind at least, directly and indirectly) are tree seed (ie nuts) and honey. And so a large number of tree species are grown in pastureland for a wide variety of purposes, some of which are proving worthwhile, others less so. The visitors noted a wide divergence in growth rates of Common Ash with some specimens having a girth several times that of others of the same age. So it was with Walnuts although the mass of Carpathian Walnuts was significantly greater than other varieties. Wych Elms were the most variable of all. A call was made for much more emphasis on isolating specimens for seed selection in the UK. The state of timber availability is starting to become serious as recent visits to builders' merchants and timber suppliers have proven.

Our host was especially keen on concentrating on the failures- a well established Monkey Puzzle that had succumbed to the winter (the clue was an orange-brown hue), an experimental French hybrid walnut which had attained almost a metre in almost 20 years (the similarity with the overbreeding of livestock was noted) and a Wych Elm recently deceased though the curator from Priestfield who'd probably not partaken of too much of the allegedly non-alcoholic cordial noted that it had shot from the base (Stop Press, the drought has now done its worst).

We had a quick look around the gardens, the orchard using evergreen *Elaeagnus* to fix nitrogen for the fruit trees and we were assured that the perfume when these flowered in September/October was almost as intoxicating as the cordial. Then we saw the forest garden which had not been developed as well as it could have been, though the hazel and walnut crops were impressive. We were rather intrigued that a red hazel seedling had sprouted from the end of a huge log where some forgetful jay had jammed it last autumn. Our host's infatuation with Alder Buckthorn is well-known regarding it as the most important tree for anyone at all interested in species survival, flowering and providing nectar for all manner of creatures from May through September. Finally we came to what is now known as this new-fangled dynamic gardening whereby the whole structure of a garden is changed annually by the rotational heavy pruning (the terms pollarding and coppicing are too narrow) of certain trees and shrubs. Nothing is sacred with everything from a *Liriodendron* to a *Davidia* being cut back to within an inch of their lives. It was all a bit much. We await the return of the flower-bed. Apart from that the day went pretty well.

Peter Aspin

PLEASE NOTE a change to our visit date for September....Our visit to Oteley Hall gardens near Ellesmere will now be on **Sunday, 9th September, NOT Saturday, 8th September**. Sorry about that. The fault is mine entirely and is bound up with me having to go into hospital at the end of last year. I am so sorry and hope you are still able to come along.....
John Tuer

Our last visit: To Spetchley Hall Gardens, near Worcester on Saturday, 14th July

These gardens do fall into the “highest level of special” category (sorry Donald) for rare and unusual trees. The owners of this hall near Worcester have, for generations, been avid arboricultural enthusiasts and have planted large numbers of trees over a long period of time and what a superb collection they now have.

I made a list of 95 trees worthy of our study and those were only the ones along the route we took through the gardens. There were many more beyond this. Time for another visit another year perhaps, And this number was far too many for us to look at closely and spend time over. I shall mention just a few of those that took our interest.

Near the entrance was a large Caucasian Wingnut (*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*), full of fruit hanging so low that we could handle the two-winged seeds easily. Not a particularly rare tree this, but certainly one that we don't see every day. As we neared the walled garden, there was a very old Walnut with a number of propped-up branches but this was no ordinary walnut, the leaves were deeply incised. This was the cut-leaved walnut (*Juglans regia* 'Laciniata'), and, from my personal perspective, one of the gems of the garden worth travelling all the way to see.

We entered the walled garden and, over to the right, the limbs of a most interesting tree specimen were hanging over the wall from beyond. We just had to go around the wall to see it to try to identify it. We thought it was the Varnish Tree (*Rhus verniciflua*) but were not entirely sure. It certainly had ash-like leaves and small green pea-sized fruit in great profusion. Our tree book said that the leaves should smell, without crushing, like balsam.

“What does balsam smell like ?” asked one of us.

“It's medicinal, isn't it ?” asked another.

“Oh I can smell it,” said David, our chairman.

“So can I,” said Jenny.

We'd got there ! It was a varnish tree and its features corresponded with all that the book told us about it. Now this really was something special to this tree collection and it was a large specimen too.

A river flowed through the garden and widened as it entered a lake. On its banks at this point was a large Swamp Cypress (*Taxodium disticum*). In their native habitat, the southern states of the USA, these are the trees of the swamps and where their roots are immersed in water, lacking in oxygen, they push up “knees” called “pneumatophores” above the level of the water to obtain air. There are many many swamp cypresses planted in arboreta all over Britain but I, personally, have never seen these pneumatophores anywhere other than at Spetchley. So here is something else worth travelling some distance to see.

There are plenty of oaks in these gardens but one of the most unusual was a specimen of *Quercus imbricaria*. It just didn't look like an oak. Its leaves had no lobes, were glossy, their edges were entire and they looked more like the leaves of a camelia perhaps. But the give-away, the tell-tale feature that we eventually found was its acorns. It truly was an oak. I had to look up this species when I returned home. It's the “Shingle Oak” and we know that shingles, besides the illness, are wooden roofing tiles, but perhaps we don't know that the word “imbrex” is Latin for “a tile”. The wood of this tree was, apparently, used for roofing tiles. So there you are. It's surprising what you learn on a trip with the Severn Tree Trust !

There was even a Cork Oak (*Quercus suber*) in the grounds and one of our party had never seen a cork oak before. So that was a valuable experience for someone.

There was a fascinating range of birches. Besides the Swedish Birch with its cut leaves near the tea rooms (*Betula pendula* 'Dalecarlica'), we saw *Betula utilis* 'Silver Shadow', *Betula utilis* 'Jermyns', both varieties of Himalayan Birch, *Betula lutea*, *Betula tauschii*, *Betula albosinensis* 'Fasciniata' and *Betula pendula* 'Royal Frost' with its purplish-silvery bark. I'm sure there were more but we just didn't have time to cover all the garden.

I could go on. There were so many interesting trees – as I keep saying ! But I'll mention one more. This was the

very large-leaved Acer, *Acer macrophyllum*, the Oregon Maple. Oh, and did I say “one more”..... I could go on, and on. I hope I've whetted the appetite of those of you who didn't manage to join us, to go to these gardens yourselves. As a tree enthusiast, you will not be disappointed.

Sadly the last owner of Spetchley, John Berkeley, died last November. His son is now about to take ownership of the hall and these gardens. Let us hope that he is as keen an arborist as his father and we can, eventually, see more and more rare and fascinating trees added to this collection.

Our next visit to Cholmondeley Castle Gardens Sunday 12th August

Peter Aspin has asked me to remind members that those of you who have the Gardeners' World two for one entry cards, can get in on them, ie at half price. (The card is viable for the majority of gardens in UK except on special entry days and comes with the spring edition of the magazine).

The Gardens are located half a mile to the west of the A49 about five miles north of Whitchurch, Shropshire.. The entrance drive is signposted and entry fees of £7 (but see above) are collected at a small wooden hut along the drive. After crossing the bridge over a river between two large lakes, on your right is a very large mown grass area where cars can be parked. On a Sunday, parking might be organised but on a Thursday it was random with the limited shade in great demand. There are several ways of getting into the gardens over a ha-ha **but please meet at the small metal “bridge” over the ha-ha, closest to the group of cedars at 2pm.**

There is a smallish Tea Room on the far side of the gardens from the Car Park and if you intend to have lunch there before the walk please let Peter Aspin know (01948 840073) as it is some 500 yards from the Car Park and you would not want to have to retrace your footsteps un-necessarily.

The Gardens operate a one-way drive system and the exit is through impressive iron gates which **do** open automatically if you get close enough to them!