



### Chairman's Comments

It was a delight to have Aljos Farjon talk to us last month and we welcome all those new members who have joined the Severn Tree Trust as a result. We look forward to seeing you at one of our forthcoming visits throughout the summer. John Tuer has fully written up Aljos' talk which will act as a reminder of the facts he presented to us but will also be useful for those members who were unable to attend. John has also given details of our first visit of the year which he himself is leading to look at the ancient limes and holloways on Wenlock Edge.

### Our last talk of the season: Aljos Farjon on "Oaks in the English Countryside" (Tuesday, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2019)

We were delighted to be able to host Aljos Farjon in Shrewsbury and, particularly in our new-found venue for celebrity talks, the hall of the University College. We saw its advantages last November when we hosted Tony Russell there but, this time, we managed to sell tickets to capacity and host an audience that just seemed to grow and grow despite what our ticket sales told us. Fortunately we managed without having to turn anyone away, but only just. My thoughts went back a few years to when, as a branch of the International Tree Foundation, we hosted Roy Lancaster at Shrewsbury School's Ashworth Theatre. There, again, we had a queue that seemed endless but we did manage to fit everyone in.

Before his retirement, Aljos was the conifer specialist at Kew Gardens. After 35 years of research mainly into conifers, his retirement allowed him to have time to pursue another interest, that of oak trees and, particularly, of ancient oaks and, again since retirement, he has written a book on the subject. This was available for purchase during the evening but his talk was certainly not a promotion of the book. In fact, he suggested that people might like to buy a copy but that proceeds would go to Kew Gardens, not himself personally.

He told us that in England – he specialised in England, not the U.K. - we had the largest number of ancient oak trees of any European country. By 2016, 3,312 ancient or veteran oaks had been recorded in the Ancient Tree Inventory which he analysed for his book. These were of a girth over 6 metres but, of these, there were 115 living ancient oaks in England of over 9 metres girth. He had even seen a new one recently in Herefordshire of over 11 metres. With the use of superb photographs throughout his talk, Aljos showed us many of these wonderful trees and many of them were concentrated, here, in the Welsh Marches.

In answering the question of "why so many ancient oaks in England ?" he referred to their locations:

In Royal Forests	7.3%
On Chases	4.7%
In Mediaeval Deer Parks	34.5%
In Tudor Deer Parks	13.0%

On Wooded Commons	6.5%
In Manor grounds	19.9%
Other	14.1%

and, because of their historical significance, most of these are protected sites. From the above, we see that the Mediaeval Deer Parks were the most important locations. Every nobleman had at least one and there may have been 1,900 deer parks during the Middle Ages. The parks needed trees to feed the deer, we were told, a clear threat to our much needed trees today where they co-exist with deer. So the Normans introduced Roe Deer, which were smaller and which would reduce the size needed for deer parks to a norm of 25 to 50 hectares. A couple of years ago, the Severn Tree Trust visited one such deer park in Herefordshire, Moccas Park. Many many ancient oaks are still standing there today, very much showing their age, but with it, their immense girths and great character.

Aljos summarised for us, all those factors which have allowed us to keep so many ancient oaks:

- a desire amongst the nobility to own a deer park.
- continuous ownership of royal and private forests.
- conservation among landed gentry.
- England was late into commercially-driven plantation forestry.
- Britain imported most of its timber up to World War I.
- a near absence of repeated and very destructive wars employing scorched earth tactics.

We were shown so many excellent photographs of these oaks that it really did stir one to get out and find them for ourselves. I wrote a few names down that seemed to be well worth visiting: Jack of Kent's Oak; Pot Belly Oak, Spye Park, Wiltshire; Billy Wilkin's Oak, Melbury Park, Dorset; Wyndham's oak, Stilton, Dorset; Bowthorpe Oak, Lincolnshire (with 13m circumference !); Lydham Manor Oak, Shropshire (an easy one to get out to); Marton Oak, Cheshire.

All these oaks are “ancient” but just how ancient? Dating a tree of such an age as these is very difficult. We can't count their rings, not only because we can't fell the trees to count the rings at their bases, but because many of them are hollow. So we have to calculate their ages by proxy, that is by knowing how much girth they are likely to put on each year and measuring their whole girths. For example, Aljos showed us a table whereby a girth of 1m85cm gave an age of 75 years and a girth of 9m88cm gave an age of 1,046 years. So some of these trees of over 9 metres girth are of a considerable age. But there are still difficulties with this method as a tree can put on different increments of girth at different times. It is known that the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest sometimes grew at a rate of 0.84cm a year, whilst in other years its annual growth rate was as much as 1.54cm. Different arborists have their own methods of calculating tree ages. John White and Alan Mitchell, both of the Forestry Commission, had used their own methods to calculate the age of the Major Oak, In 2018, John White's calculation led to a figure of 1,238 years, whereas, using Alan Mitchell's method, a more conservative estimate of 693 years was obtained – quite a difference.

Nonetheless, these oaks are worth preserving and not just for their historic interest. Their real value is for biodiversity. They are habitats for a huge host of different organisms, more so than any other native tree. Birds, bats, invertebrates, fungi, epiphytes all rely on them and Aljos outlined the threats which trees such as these face:

- in forestry plantations, conifers can shade them out
- in agriculture, ploughing near the trees or grazing of animals can cause damage
- neglect: for example, where pollarding has taken place and then discontinued
- vandalism: for example setting of fires in the tree for fun, especially a risk near urban areas.

Kew, The Woodland Trust, the Tree Council and others have long lobbied the Government to give trees such as these the status of “green monuments” by which they could be treated in a similar way to listed buildings. So it was appropriate that Aljos finished with a quote from Ted Green: “Ancient Oaks are monuments to our past and some contain so much diversity that they should be protected nature reserves in themselves.”

This was a fascinating superbly-illustrated and informative talk and we thank Aljos for coming up to Shrewsbury all the way from London to give it to us. Perhaps some time we might invite him back to tell us of his beloved conifers.

John Tuer

### Tree Planting

A big “thank you” again to those members and others who came along to The Hurst to help continue planting the hedge along its drive. We shall need, perhaps, another two sessions here next season to complete the planting. If members would like to visit The Hurst, they are having a garden open day on Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> May (2.00pm – 5.30pm) – admission £4 – with proceeds going to St. George's Church, Clun. This is part of the Shropshire Historic Churches Trust “Gardens Open” scheme. Jo Selman, their gardener, will be there to welcome you and show you around. She has been very much involved with our planting and she and manager, Natasha, have been so grateful to the Severn Tree Trust for all our planting.

Despite the weather we had a good turn-out at the planting in Cophorne Park of the memorial tree for Ruth Cresswell. Her family came along from all parts of the globe. Quite literally. Her two girls and her sister came up from Eastbourne while her sons, Martin and Mark, came from Hong Kong and South Africa respectively. Mark has asked to join us, so the Severn Tree Trust would truly become an international organisation ! We planted a special variety of a London Plane not far from her husband, David's, Oriental Plane that we planted a few years ago. In attendance, among those members who came along, were our Chairman, David Martin, plus two of our previous Chairmen, Carrie Higson and David Pearce. Carrie has been a member since this local branch of the Men of the Trees was started by David Cresswell over 45 years ago. She was also the first chairman of the Severn Tree Trust when we started ten years ago.



The above picture shows Ruth's four children and her sister at the tree planting in Copthorne Park.

STT had something else to celebrate alongside Ruth's tree planting. We have reached our tenth anniversary this year and the very week of this planting, had just exceeded one hundred members. Quite a celebration.

John Tuer

### **Our next meeting: A visit to the Lime Trees of Wenlock Edge (Saturday, 13<sup>th</sup> April)**

We have called this visit "Lime Trees and Holloways" because so many of these trees are situated along the many holloways which pass across the Edge. I shall be leading this visit because, about seven years ago, I was asked to walk along the length of the Edge to try to find all the Large-Leaved Lime trees, *yes all of them*. And during the course of doing this, I found some extraordinary trees and some extraordinary things about them. I became very excited about this because, during the course of my investigations, I unearthed a real mystery, almost a true detective story. Come with me and let me share my findings with you and I ask you to add your thoughts too.

We shall meet in the National Trust Presthope Car Park at 2.00pm. Then, as there is little parking here, we shall move away to where there is more parking space to look at one holloway and some ancient limes. This will not involve much walking but the ground will be rough. After this, we shall move to Roman Bank above Rushbury. There is more parking space here which will allow us to leave our cars to take a walk to see more old limes and two more holloways, also with limes. The walking for the whole of the afternoon will be about 2 miles in total. Strong shoes will be essential.

I do hope you can join me. Coming from Much Wenlock on the Church Stretton road, the National Trust Presthope Car Park is on the right hand side after about 2½ miles.