STT

Newsletter

December 2025

(Formerly Men of the Trees following the work of Richard St Barbe Baker)

SEVERN TREE TRUST

Seasonal Talk: *The ecology of Holly, Ivy and Mistletoe,* with John Box. Tuesday 9th December @ the Shropshire Wildlife Trust Refreshments from 7pm; talk begins 7.30pm. Free to members. (We are expecting the talk to last about 40 minutes plus questions, and we should be out by 9pm.)

Chair's Christmas Chat,
Symbols of Christmas vary widely from person to person, some secular, some religious, certainly it's difficult to miss them! However you look at it there are three symbols that always spring to mind – Holly, Ivy and Mistletoe. If you would like to know where these originate from and their links to Christmas, you can find out at our December talk by John Box (see attached poster for details)
One of our main (secular) symbols is a tree and trees have had an association with Christmas since pre-Christian times, symbolic of life and resilience. The traditional evergreen tree, spruce, pine and fir stands for eternal life and the promise of the return of Spring.
As so much of the meaning and traditions of Christmas can easily be found on-line I thought I would choose a selection using the word 'Christmas' as a starting point and see how many tree links I could find to this annual festival:-
C – **Cedar** –strength, knowledge; most mentioned tree in the Bible; incense
H – **Holly** – protection and rebirth; decoration.
R - **Rowan** - diviner of the future. Not much of a Christmas connection except its red berries!
I - Irish Yew - symbol of immortality. It is evergreen; provides shelter and food for native animals – link to King Wenceslas and his page taking food and wood to a poor peasant (tenuous!! Further ideas welcome!)
S - Scots Pine - our only native pine. Druids decorated the pine with lights and shiny objects- connect to today's Christmas customs, including the Yule log.
T – Tree (evergreen) - one of the first things we think of at Christmas.
M – Mistletoe – venerated by Druids, witches and other pagans because the green shoots appear to spring from the branch where it has rooted, often an apple tree or rarely an oak.
A – Apple – once used to decorate Christmas trees in Germany. Symbolism – knowledge and wisdom, among other things.

S – Spruce - one of the popular trees for decorating at Christmas. One, over 20m tall, is sent every year since 1947, by the people of Oslo to thank the people of London for their support during World War II.

There are so many facts associated with trees and Christmas although some require a little imagination**.**

May I wish all our members a very Happy and Peaceful Christmas.

The December meeting will begin with seasonal refreshments from 7pm before John Box's talk at 7.30.
I look forward to sharing this very festive talk with you on 9th December.
Please direct any queries to me by email – jkaye0848@gmail.com
Best Wishes, *Julie Kaye*

Talk by Archie Miles on "*The Heritage Trees of the Welsh Borders*": Tuesday, 11th November 2025

What a wonderful talk this was. Those of you members who couldn't make it missed something very special even though Archie did talk for about 90 minutes. Naturally, for a professional photographer, his slides were magnificent, enhanced by a subject matter that looked at the biggest, the oldest, the most characterful trees of the Welsh borders.

Archie structured his talk by looking at the "heritage" yews, oaks, sweet chestnuts, beech, ash, limes, black poplars and other genera and species of tree and showing where these could be visited and seen. I am going to structure this report rather differently. If members wish to visit these trees, I shall be concentrating on where to find them and to make that easy, I have divided Archie's Welsh Border area into four sections: Shropshire and near Shropshire; Herefordshire; Monmouth, Abergavenny and the south border country; Mid and North Wales.

Shropshire and near Shropshire:
There are veteran yews, which are also hedgerow trees, in Bourton and Easthope.
The Buttington Oak near Welshpool is, sadly, no longer there. It was the second largest oak in Wales but it split into two and fell to the ground. Archie now has a record of it while it was still alive. (Not much point in placing this among those to visit, is it?)
The Linley Beeches: not far from the Stiperstones. An impressive avenue and well worth a visit.
The Purslow Ash: Purslow is on the Craven Arms to Clun road.
A small-leaved lime at Chirbury is only 150 years old but significant because of its position.
A large-leaved lime at Downton Castle near Ludlow. Archie showed us a photograph of this tree taken in 1912 and, by this time, it was a very large tree and it was even very large in 1837 when, for Queen Victoria's Coronation a painting was made of dozens of people celebrating beneath this large tree.

The large-leaved Lime which holds the tree house at Pitchford Hall is worth visiting when the hall has open days. This tree is between 700 and 800 years old and is propped up. The tree house dates from the 17th century.
Longnor Hall, just north of Church Stretton, has one of the tallest native Black Poplars in the country but you will have to make arrangements with the owner to visit it.

Herefordshire:
The Gospel Oak at Grendon Bishop with a girth of 42 feet is a joint British record holder. It is likely that it's name derived from a local vicar preaching under it.
Jack of Kent's Oak at Kentchurch has a girth of 35 feet and is about 1000 years old. This about 20 miles SW of Hereford and just off the A465 in the deer park.
The “Armada Avenue” of Sweet Chestnuts at Croft Castle (National Trust) which our group visited and saw recently.
Moccas, very near Bredwardine, is another place we visited in recent years. We went to see their oaks in particular but they do have one Ash of importance, the only ash they have, with its girth of 29 feet.
The Stoke Lacy Ash, 4 miles SW of Bromyard on the A465. A very old ash with more than one stem and whose heavy stems were going to split it apart but its crown has now been reduced.


Figure 1: 1,000 year old larch in Switzerland (photo Archie Miles c)

There are what appear to be interesting Small-leaved Limes at Pentaloo Brook in Haugh Woods. This is a Herefordshire Wildlife Trust site about 5 miles east of Hereford. These lime have many stems as a result of coppicing but DNA testing has shown them to belong to the same tree.
There are old Native Black Poplars on Castlemorton Common between Ledbury and Tewksbury north of the A438.
There is a massive Cedar of Lebanon at Garnstone, an estate near Weobley.
At Whittern there is a large “pedestal” Larch. This is near Lyonshall and, impressively, I have its postcode – HR5 3JA.
A large Ginkgo at Kinnersley Castle (about 2 miles east of Eardisley). This was grown elsewhere and was transplanted here in the1890s. The transplanting seems to have had little effect on its growth.
The Holme Lacy Perry Pear – this appears to be very large for its variety because it has layered. About 5 miles SE of Hereford.
The largest Wild Cherry in Herefordshire is on Herrock Hill near Kington. Well, actually, Archie told us that this was the largest “Cherry Tree in waiting” because the real largest was elsewhere and was dying.
There is a very strange Birch on Garway Common. Very peculiarly, its stem has turned in a complete circle before continuing to grow upwards towards the light. About 15 miles west of Ross-on-Wye across the A466.

Monmouth, Abergavenny and the south Border country:

Yews – a circle of them each about 1000 years old probably associated with a pre-Christian site. Archie told us that being planted in a circle on such a site was likely to deter the devil who couldn't hide in a circle. These are at Llanfihangel-nant-Melan – in Powys near New Radnor on the A44 and on the edge of Radnor Forest.
The Bettws Newydd Yew is about 1500 to 2000 years old and is near Usk – N of Usk between the A40 and A472 and between the A4042 and the A449. As Archie remarked: “This tree has a strong desire to keep going.”
Sweet Chestnuts at Llanfihangel Court in an avenue on the estate. This is on the Hereford road out of Abergavenny (A465). The avenue is shown in a painting of the estate in 1680.
There are two Beech trees at Little Doward each having very large coppice stools, These would have been coppiced on a regular basis, Archie told us, for charcoal, the charcoal then being taken down to the ironworks in South Wales.
There are old Beeches along a hollow way at The Blorenge. This is a prominent hill overlooking the Usk valley SW of Abergavenny.
Archie also showed us his photograph of a layered Beech at The Whittern which I have not yet been able to locate.
Interesting Small-leaved Limes at Partrishow. This is 5 miles N of Abergavenny.
In the grounds of a school in Brecon, there is an old and interesting native Black Poplar.
More Black Poplars are to be found at Llangaron, 10m miles SW of Ross-on-Wye.
Largest Wych Elm in Wales can be seen at Llangors, 10 miles east of Brecon on the B4560.
Craig y Cilau is a limestone escarpment in the Brecon Beacons National Park above the Usk Valley. Here you will find one of the “Lesser” (Archie's term) Whitebeams. These are very rare trees. In the same breath, he also mentioned other of these rarest trees in Britain: Of the Arran Whitebeam (in Scotland on the Isle of Arran) only one specimen grows wild and this is its total world population. Ley's Whitebeam is the rarest tree in England, 13 specimens of which grow in the Taff Valley. They are very slow growers. Hence their small sizes.

My own comment: If you want to see one go to the National Botanic Gardens of Wales in Carmarthenshire but I warn you, unless you are going there anyway, it's not worth making a special visit.(JT).
The Monmouth Catalpa – a very large Indian Bean Tree in Monmouth itself.
The Perry Pear trees at Llanfihangel-Ystern-Llewern – these are very old orchard trees but, presently, under threat.

Mid and North Wales:
Dolfor “sentinel” Yews along a very old trackway. About 4 miles S of Newtown on the A483.
The Pontfadog Oak is, sadly, no longer with us. This was over 1000 years old and the largest oak in Wales. Archie showed a photograph of this oak taken in 1910. A huge oak full of character. Unfortunately it was felled by a freak storm in 2013.

The Great Oak at the Gates of the Dead in the Ceiriog Valley.
The Llangollen Whitebeam (another “Lesser” Whitebeam) on cliffs in the Dee Valley.
You probably know the Coast Redwoods of Leighton near Welshpool. We have made visits there a few times.

And a final comment from Archie: he is on the hunt for “Mistletoe Oaks”. They are very rare. In the whole country there may be only a dozen or so. If you come across any oaks with mistletoe growing on them, please let us know and we'll tell Archie about them.

What a fascinating talk with so much for us to follow up if we wish to do so. Archie's photographs were nothing less than stunning and we thank him hugely for coming to speak to us. In fact he didn't have far to go home as he lives in Herefordshire among many of those magnificent trees he spoke about.

John Tuer

P.S. A few weeks ago Archie went on a tree hunting trip to Switzerland. He sent us a photograph of a thousand year old larch. It is portrayed in this article, so we get to see it before it appears in any of his books. *J.Tuer*

Roving with Robin Hood

Recently, we were in Nottinghamshire and decided to visit Sherwood Forest. Now, whether it was home to Robin Hood and his merry band of outlaws is debatable, but what is certain is that it was once part of a vast Royal hunting ground and covered 100,000 acres. Its name, first recorded as ‘Sciryuda’ in the 10th century, means ‘wood belonging to the Shire’. By the time the Normans had conquered England, Sherwood was already an area which had been managed and shaped by the people who had lived there since at least the era of the Roman occupation of Britain.

These days, the Forest has shrunk to a mere 450 acres, managed by the RSPB (yes, we were surprised, too – and even more surprised to be charged £6 to park in the village car park!).

Sherwood has a remarkable collection of ancient oak trees (almost 1000) which have thrived here for 500 years or longer. But they won’t live forever. Many trees were cut down in the past to be used in shipbuilding and other industries. As a result, Sherwood is missing a generation of ‘middle-aged’ trees which were destined to become the ancients of the future. Tree specialists have ‘mimicked’ natural processes on some of the younger trees to give them the features of ancient trees, in a technique called *veteranisation.* This will bridge the generation gap.

Why are Sherwood's ancient and veteran trees so important? The Forest's position in roughly the middle of the country means that it has a mixture of northern and southern species, some of which are very rare and threatened. These include the endangered Oak Polypore fungus and various darkling, scavenger and wood-boring beetles. More widespread species include Lesser Stag, Rhinoceros and Spotted Longhorn Beetles, which rely on decaying oak wood. The tiny Midas Tree-Weaver Spider only lives in old birds' nests in cavities of the ancient oaks. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers will feed on invertebrates in decaying wood. Bats use cavities and cracks for roost sites.

The most famous oak in the Forest, of course, is the Major Oak. It is estimated to be 1200 years old and has a girth of 10 metres and a canopy of 28 metres. Its wide shape and large spreading branches are typical of very old oak trees that grew in spaces where animals grazed. These conditions helped the tree to grow so big as it had plenty of space, light and nutrients. But why did this particular tree, of all the ancient oaks around, become so well-known? Contrary to popular belief, its name does not imply 'the biggest/tallest/oldest' but is taken from Major Hayman Rooke, a retired soldier and historian who wrote about the oaks of Sherwood in the late 18th century. This was clearly the oak that impressed him most.

Over the next two centuries, the Major Oak attracted thousands of visitors: it became a tourist destination. Crowds of day trippers clustered beneath its huge branches and squeezed though the 'door' in its trunk formed where a limb had fallen off. An enterprising Mrs Bullimore set up a lemonade stand in 1917 to sell refreshments to visitors.

Sadly, the Major Oak suffered from all this attention. 200 years of feet tramping up to and around it have compacted the acidic sandy soil, making it impossible for water, oxygen and nutrients to reach the roots. But this is not the only challenge facing the tree. Not all the work done to it has helped in the way it was intended. As early as 1904, metal rods and braces were installed along with wooden props to stop the heavy branches breaking and pulling the tree apart. The metal rods seen today replaced the originals at the turn of the millennium, causing disruption and damage to the soil. Removing the ironwork now would cause more damage than leaving it in place.

Lead sheeting and, later, fibreglass was once used to cover old wounds, thought to protect the tree from further decay. But we now know that different types of decaying wood are a vital part of a healthy woodland eco-system. Other 'helpful 'interventions in the past that we wouldn't use today include filling the base with concrete, applying flame-retardant paint and layering woodchip on the ground around the trunk.

In the 1970s, the oak was encircled by a fence and this helped to stop further impaction of the ground where the few remaining roots are still being strangled. Today, plants are allowed to grow and die naturally rather than being cut back, so their roots can fully develop, helping to loosen the soil and letting in and retaining

water, oxygen, nutrients and important organisms. There is a plan in place to carefully improve the health of the soil around the tree's roots, to create the best possible conditions to get food to the leaves.

The Major Oak that we saw on our visit is quite a sorry sight compared with Rosemary's memory of it when, as a child, she was one of those who stood inside the trunk! Indeed, other ancient oaks look far more impressive. Yet it is the Major Oak that is forever associated with Sherwood Forest – and with Robin Hood.

Ivor and Rosemary Salter
October 2025

Call for volunteers to help-

CPRE Sropshire hedge-planting group. There are 20 dates available. Please see the CPRE Shropshire webpage for opportunities. Please note you need to apply using an online form or through Sarah Jameson, the admin.

cpreshropshire.org.uk/help-us-plant-hedges