



Next talk: Andrew Allott on the Forests of central China on Tuesday 10th February 2026 @ SWT Abbey Foregate. 7 for 7.30pm (refreshments beforehand). Please see annual programme at end of newsletter.

Chair's corner,

Welcome to 2026 with another interesting programme of talks and visits which I hope you will find to your liking.

A reminder that we do not meet in January but begin our programme on 10th February when committee member Andrew Allott will describe The Forests of Central China. Meet at the Shropshire Wildlife Centre, 7pm for 7.30pm.

Walking out on a rather dull and cloudy day I could see the skeletal branches of deciduous trees with one or two evergreens to vary the scene. I looked closely at a small-leaved Lime seeing its red buds on shiny chestnut coloured twigs and remembered that there is more colour around than you might at first think. Soon there will be the bud burst of the very early foliage of *Sorbus Caloneura* – a favourite tree of mine because it starts into leaf quite unexpectedly when the days are still short and it can be cold.

This started me thinking about my favourite trees and which ones I would always plant (given sufficient space). I found it quite hard to choose because each species has its own attributes, whether deciduous or evergreen. So, here is a short list I have narrowed down from so many possibles –

Birch - *Betula albo-sinensis* – for its vari-coloured bark.

Ginkgo biloba – those amazing shaped leaves, a reminder of its prehistoric origins.

Liquidamber - it's fabulous autumn colours.

Taxodium (Swamp Cypress) – I just love its 'knees' at the base.

The winner of UK Tree of the Year 2025 is – the Argyle Street Ash, Glasgow, it just goes to show what you can get away with in your front garden! Find the details on line, on the Woodland Trust website.

Have you a favourite tree? Send your thoughts to me -jkaye0848@gmail.com and we will see which comes out as STT Tree of the Year!!

Wishing you all the very best for 2026

Julie Kaye

December talk: John Box on The festive ecology of Holly, Ivy and Mistletoe

As a Christmas special and social evening, we invited our speaker, John Box, to have a cuppa and a mince pie with us before he started his talk. A good number of members attended and went away with some memorable things about the above three trees/shrubs to think about.

Let's start with some general comments that John made. The Holly, Ivy and Mistletoe are all evergreens and are all widely used at Christmas. They all, when the sun was "dying" and thought never to return, are a remembrance that light and life do come back. If you like, they're symbols of fertility. So why isn't the Yew included, after all it has plenty of red berries (arils) at this time of year to remind us of a similar thing. John told us that Yews were mostly found in churchyards so they are associated with death, not something that we want around to adorn our houses in that case.

He also quoted a piece from a Robert Herrick poem entitled "Ceremony on Candlemas Eve" and written in 1648:

*Down with the rosemary, and so
Down with the bays and mistletoe:
Down with the holly. Ivy, all
Wherewith ye dressed the Christmas hall.*

So we shouldn't confuse Candlemas with Christmas. Candlemas is quite a time after Christmas when the baby Jesus was taken to the temple in Jerusalem to be shown to the elders of the church. It is also the time when mother, Mary, was to be cleansed after having a baby, not something we do today but certainly a tradition that held sway for many a century. So when is Candlemas this season ? I had to look it up in good old Google and found that the next Candlemas will be on 2nd February 2026. So a "Ceremony on Candlemas Eve" will certainly want all these green adornments down by then.

John continued his talk about these three plants by talking about **Holly**.

He mentioned that branches of these were strewn on barn floors of farms in certain parts of the north and the Welsh Borders for livestock to browse on during the winter when the grass is insufficient for putting the animals outdoors. Apparently the thorny leaves of the Holly are not a trouble to them. But the fact that Holly is a dioecious tree, with trees being either male or female, is of great benefit to the Holly Blue butterfly. It lays its first generation of eggs on the flower heads of Holly. The eggs are laid singly and the hatched caterpillars feed on the flower buds and the young green berries. As these grow into adult butterflies, this next generation lays its eggs on Ivy flowers. Then the adults from this generation lay their eggs on Holly flowers once again, and so this cycle is repeated throughout the lives of these

Holly Blues. This had me thinking... if I see the eggs of this butterfly on Holly flowers, then it must be their first, third, fifth, etc., generation but if I see them on Ivy flowers, they must be second, fourth, sixth, generation eggs! Not that this is of any use to me whatsoever. It's just a diversion.

So let's look at a more sensible diversion. John introduced us to a type of graph, the likes of which I had never seen before. It was called "a graph of thermal limit curves". A graph for Holly would show plottings for all Hollies discovered by the researchers: dead, alive but flowerless, fully alive and flower and seed producing. A line (a curve) would be drawn around all the fully active Hollies and this would be called an "envelope" and its the temperatures of this area of the graph that are those in which Holly can flourish. Should you wish to know more about this graph, the vertical axis shows the "Mean temperature of the warmest month" with figures starting at the graph origin going from +23° to +10°C and the horizontal axis shows the "Mean Temperature of the Coldest Month" and temperatures from +6° to -10°C. So if you start a line on the vertical scale at about +12°C and curve it down to about 0°C on the horizontal axis, the pocket or "envelope" to the left and below this curve show the optimal temperatures for Holly. Sorry, I became a little bit absorbed by this because I was fascinated not having seen this kind of graph before. Now if any of you have become as absorbed as myself, please let me know (john3tuer@gmail.com) and I'll send you even more details including those for Ivy and Mistletoe. These Thermal Limit Curves were the idea of an academic called Iverson who in 1944 used them for the first time.

So let's move on. John told us that Holly are often associated with Rowan and here, in Shropshire, on the Stiperstones on a nature reserve naturally called "The Hollies" (I'm sure you know of this place and many of you will have been there. It is one of the sites of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust), we have some of the largest and oldest Hollies in the country. There are Hollies possibly over 300 years old next to old Rowans and on the crowns of at least two Hollies, berries of Rowan and settled and germinated with Rowan trees growing out of the tops of Hollies. It's an extraordinary sight. Go and have a look.

And so John moved on to the **Ivy**....

Ivy is associated with Bacchus/Dionysus, the Roman/Greek god of wine. So Ivy has a link to wine and wine-making. "Branches of Ivy tied to a pole were often used as 'a sign of the bush', indicating a place where wine and alcohol were for sale." So Ivy is less commonly seen in houses at Christmas these days. "It may well be that established religions opposed its use in Christmas wreaths because of its association with drunkenness."

*Nay, Ivy, nay, it shal not be y-wis (indeed);
Let Holly have the maistry, as the maner is,
Holy stant in the hall faire to behold;
Ivy stant without the dore, she is ful
sore a-cold.*

This is a part of an old carol that John has sent me since his talk. But long ago, Ivy was seen as much indoors for its green decoration as Holly and Mistletoe today. The fact that Ivy is full of berries during the Christmas period would add to its attractiveness.

So what about **Mistletoe**?

This is much more common in the south and south-eastern parts of the U.K., but, using the envelope of the “Thermal Limit Curve” for Ivy, we find that parts of the Welsh Marches also have temperatures conducive to Ivy growth. So we can find a lot of Ivy in Shropshire but not as much as in Herefordshire and Monmouthshire. The trees on which it is more likely to thrive are apple trees. But there are others. Research has shown that best hosts for Mistletoe are: Apple 60%, Hawthorn 22%, Lime 5%, Poplar 3% and Oak only 2%. It is an incorrect assertion that Oak is the best tree for Mistletoe. The Celtic Druids held the oak in particular veneration, using oak leaves in their ceremonies, and regarded anything growing on oak as having been sent from heaven. John told us that on the rare occasions when Mistletoe was found growing on oak, it would be gathered with great ceremony. A priest in white clothing would cut the Mistletoe with a golden sickle and allow it to fall onto a white cloak. Two white bulls would then be sacrificed. Quite some ceremony, but it does illustrate the rarity of finding Mistletoe on oak trees.

The link between Mistletoe and fertility persists to this day in the tradition of kissing underneath bunches of Mistletoe, John told us, and he continued to tell us an anecdote concerning this: in the early 19th century, it was a tradition for each man who kissed under the Mistletoe to remove one berry. Once all the berries were gone, so was the potency.

In John's notes to me after his talk he mentions that Christ's cross is supposed to have been made from Mistletoe wood when Mistletoe grew as standard trees and, as a punishment, it was no longer allowed to root in the earth and had to grow on other plants. Our tongues are firmly in our cheeks!

He did tell us that once removed from its host tree for use at Christmas, the Mistletoe is so far rooted in the tree that when you cut it down, it just grows again and is very difficult to kill.

It also, supposedly, is an antidote to all poisons and the Roman, Pliny the Elder in AD77, wrote that they called Mistletoe by a name meaning “the all healing”. It was gathered by the Romans on the 6th day of the moon with great ceremony.



John finished this really interesting talk by explaining how we could grow Mistletoe ourselves if we wished to. Naturally it would be better to choose an apple tree as its host and it should be tried in January, February or March. He said “smear the seed into the

bark". It's not easy and it can be hit and miss but, once anchored as I've said above, it will be impossible to remove it.

This was just the talk for this time of the year and John gave it with lots of colourful interesting and appropriate slides. It went down very well with his audience and this being the third time we've asked him to give us a talk, it could well not be the last. Thank you John for such an interesting contribution to our year's talks. *John Tuer*

Severn Tree Trust Programme of events for 2026.

Please note that **Visits** are for members only and **Talks** are open to all.

Our full programme will be available on our website from January: severntreetrust.co.uk along with monthly Newsletters and 'Join us' membership information!

Talks will be held at the Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, at 7.30pm.

Severn Tree Trust Programme 2026

January = No meeting

February 10th = Forests of Central China. Talk by Andrew Allott.

March 10th = AGM + Perthshire, Big Tree Country.
Talk by John Tuer.

April 12th = Visit: Nobridge and Oakgates.

May 9th = Visit: Bolesworth Castle (Saturday)

June 13th = Visit: Willey Estate (Saturday)

July 15th = Visit: Birmingham Institute for Forest Research

August = No meeting

Sept. 12th = Visit: Gredington Hanmer (Saturday)

October 11th = Visit: Gatley Park

November 10th = Another fascinating Talk by Bob Watson.

December 8th = Talk on Street Trees **tbc** with Christmas Social.

*meetings are subject to change depending on weather and other events. Please see monthly newsletters for updates.