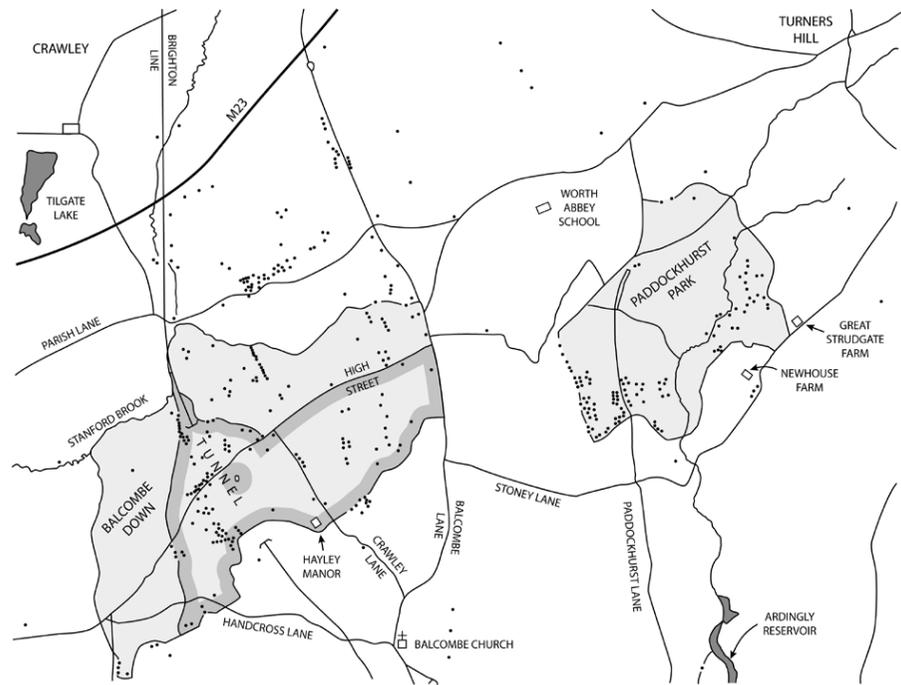
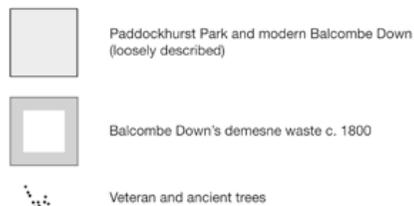


THE VETERAN & ANCIENT TREES OF BALCOMBE DOWN & PADDOCKHURST PARK, IN WORTH FOREST



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These two sites – Paddockhurst, once an ancient deer park, and Balcombe Down, once desmesne manorial waste – hold a huge relict assemblage of old giant trees, mostly Beech, but with some Oak and a few Yew and other species. Most of the veterans are old pollards. The area I have mapped as Balcombe Down includes Monks Forest, Greentrees, and part of Cowdray and Brantridge Forests.



about 350 years old. Four span Oaks may date back over 600 years to the time of Owain Glyndwr's Welsh Revolt. (He died: 1415). Five span Oaks may take us roughly back to the 1086 Domesday Book, some 930 years ago.

THE WEALD IS FULL OF THEM

I first started noting these special trees systematically over 25 years ago, but in the last few years I've got really enthusiastic. I guessed that we'd found maybe 500 or

600 veterans in that period, but when I did the counting I realised that we'd recorded twice that...10753 just in the area covered by this book. There were 561 English Oaks and 377 Beech as well as Hornbeam, Ash and many rarer kinds amongst the 22 species we'd noted. My tatty maps are peppered with them. We found another eighteen just two days before my writing this.

They are very generally distributed across this countryside...in hedgerows, by farmsteads and the sites

of lost farmsteads, by manor houses, in woods and old parks, on commons, by watercourses, in churchyards, along ancient boundaries, and deep in shady gills. They occur across both the Low and High Weald. None of our old parishes are without them.

My early thought was that I was likely to find many more in the High Weald than the Low Weald, but that is not the real distinction. Many of our grandest giants – including the biggest native tree of all – are in the Low Weald.

There is though, a huge distinction between the numbers found within the footprint of our lost Saxon royal forests of Worth and St Leonards and their purlieu woods, and the numbers found across the rest of the middle Sussex Weald. About 44 % of all the middle Sussex Weald veterans are found just in those two forests, and the old Forest of Worth has 31 % alone. We can refine that Worth Forest figure further. The majority of its veterans are found just in one relatively small part: Balcombe Down⁴. There we have found 16 %, that is 166, of all the book's veteran trees clustered, whereas the huge neighbouring erstwhile parish of old Worth, which included Turners Hill, Crawley Down and Copthorne village, well-endowed with ancient trees though it is, has a lesser total of 132.

Balcombe Down and the parts of Worth Forest near to it, still retain one of the best assemblages of ancient trees in the whole of Sussex – mostly hidden, mostly without formal public access, often neglected and endangered.

POLLARDS, WOOD PASTURE, COPPICE AND HEDGE STOOLS, MAIDENS AND BUNDLE PLANTINGS

Most of the veteran trees we've found have been 'pollards'. That is, they are trees which have had their heads cut off⁵, and thus are paradoxically granted extra long life, maybe even twice their normal span. They were usually allowed to grow a trunk to just above the height at which grazing animals could graze them and then their young crowns were lopped, and the cut 'small wood' used for fuel and for all the construction tasks that farms and villages required. They had the advantage that cattle, deer, and other farmed animals could graze beneath them without damaging the wood growth. This combined system of grazing and wood growth was called 'wood pasturage', and it dominated the uncultivated tracts of the Weald until the later medieval clearances. Pollarding died out as a wood harvesting economy in the 18th and 19th centuries, though it survives as a way of managing street trees, like the limes in Lindfield village street.

When woods were enclosed against all grazing, trees could be safely cut at their base, and this 'coppicing' method similarly extended the longevity of the trees. The woods themselves were hedged and banked around

their boundaries, and the individual 'hedge stools' often reach great ages. If they are then left to grow uncut they can also achieve giant sizes. On Low Wealden soils especially, neglected Ash and Hornbeam hedge stools can grow immense, as can Beech stools on the soils of the High Weald.

Naturally growing, un-pollarded 'maiden' trees can also reach huge size and immense age, though they were rarely allowed to in medieval times, when available timber resources were turned quickly to human usage. In Tilgate Wood on the Wakehurst estate, the English Oaks on the steep slopes around the sandrock outcrops, TQ 330 310, have been allowed to grow fully into their mature stage. They contrast strongly with the much smaller maiden Oaks in places like Tottington Wood, TQ 217 122, or River Wood, TQ 330 279, which are near the commoner stage of traditional harvesting.

Occasionally, bundles of young tree whips were planted together and allowed to grow until they fused into one organism and reached immense collective size. When they do, it is often difficult to tell their origin. Way out on the Adur brooks, south east of Partridge Green, there is a huge 'bundle planted' Oak marking the ancient parish boundary between West Grinstead and Shermanbury, TQ 201 181. You can spot it in the bushy hedgeline, not because of any extra height, but just because of its dense, many-stemmed bulk. Just north of Slaugham Common and west of Coos Lane, within the bounds of Ashfold Park there is an immense bundle planted Beech, TQ 254 285. Its six arms (and one or two more have died) shoot up into the sky above a great sprawl of roots. There is a little natural 'stage' about 5 ft up where children can stand and peer out between the multiple trunks. In the brook pasture on the south bank of the Adur east of Wortleford Bridge, TQ 283 210, there is a little impenetrable thicket, like a giant bush or small grove, sitting all on its own. It's made up entirely of Maple!

KINDS OF TREES AND THEIR DISTRIBUTIONS

The English Oak⁶, our 'Sussex Weed', provides clearly our most common veteran trees. They amount to 53 % of those we've found. In the Low Weald they are overwhelmingly the most common. In Woodmancote 15 out of the 17 veterans we found were English Oak. In the High Weald, apart from the twin forests, they are also the most numerous. In Bolney, which is divided between Low and High Weald, all 8 veterans recorded were English Oak.

Veteran Sessile Oaks are much rarer, and we've only recorded five, I think, but that includes the magnificent giant in Pickwell Lane, TQ 280 234, and the fine specimen in the middle of Horsham Park, TQ 172 311, which marks the lost boundary of Horsham Common.



The Danny Old One: When she was young the local folk spoke Saxon and Norman-French

Beech veterans are the next commonest after English Oak, making about 34 % of our veterans, and they are clustered on the High Weald sandstones of the Hastings Beds, where they are the majority species on the footprint of the twin forests. To a small extent Beech veterans also occur on the Wealden Clay, for instance at Markstake Common, as well as along the Lower Greensand ridge of the Low Weald, for instance at Lodge Hill, Ditchling, TQ 324 154, and Little Park, Hurstpierpoint, TQ 284 165. They also occur along the base of the Downs, where the Wealden soils are at first very chalky, for instance along Church Lane, Newtimber, TQ 269 130.

We recorded 36 Ash veterans, but there are many more. They often form huge coppice and hedgerow stools, all full of holes. There is a cluster of at least four veterans in and around High Wood, TQ 147 299, in the crook of the River Arun south of Broadbridge Heath. There's a wizened old pollard in the upper gill south of Great Thorndean Farm, TQ 273 255, and huge hedgerow stools marking the edge of the Adur brooks, south of Great Betley Farm, north west of Henfield, TQ 198 168. At Brook Street, north of Cuckfield, is a soaring Ash maiden of three spans girth, TQ 306 264.

Hornbeam veterans are found particularly to the east, where they often survive as old coppice and hedgerow stools, but they are also found as pollards used to mark the edges of coppice compartments. The saddest and one of the most characterful of these is in the gill wood west of Freshfield Brickworks, TQ 385 267. It is extraordinarily gnarled and Rackhamesque, as only Hornbeam can be. Half its trunk has long broken away, and its knobbly surface is covered in writing lichen, *Graphis spp.* To its west, to its north, and to its south, much of the ancient Daffodil and

Bluebell woods have been chainsawed, bulldozed, and incorporated into the quarry. There is another fine Hornbeam pollard marking a coup boundary deep in Orletons Copse, TQ 222 387, two miles west of Garwick's runway, with roaring banshee planes overhead.

Maple veterans are scattered across the Low Weald in low numbers. There is a particular concentration on the Horsham Stone scarp between Denne Park and Sedgwick Park. A lost green lane, TQ 182 277, climbs the scarp north of Coltstaple Corner

and disappears into the woods. Along its upper side it is lined with ancient Maples, Butcher's Broom, Spurge Laurel (the guardians of ancient tracks), Bluebells and Dogs Mercury.

Veteran Yew will be familiar to folk who visit churchyards, and we have a fair share of those giants, but they can also be found on old heaths, in hedgerows and by farmsteads. We have found occasional old Crack and White Willow pollards, often in a state of collapse. Small Leaved Lime, Wild Service, Alder and even Birch have good veteran survivors, and there are fair numbers of Sweet Chestnut, too.

THE BIGGEST OF ALL

Several of our biggest veterans are over five spans in girth, and a sprinkling are over four spans.

In the sandy field just north of Danny Lake, Hurstpierpoint, TQ 287 155, the biggest and perhaps the oldest of our middle Sussex veterans lives on: **the Danny Old One**. She is the grandest matriarch of a family of Oak matriarchs on a small fragment of the medieval Danny Park. I've known her since I was a teenager, and I'm sure she was stronger and more massive when we first saw her. She is nearing the end of her life and shrinking, but she still holds her presence.⁷ She has huge bulbous roots and has a 32.5 feet girth just above them...That's nearly five and a half of our arm spans. She has four huge splaying limbs and a rusting Victorian brace between two of them (which seems to have killed one). The bark on the split limbs grows curling round to heal the exposed wood. Go see her before she fades further. You will be visiting a being that grew up with the Saxon talk of the woodsmen and



The Greentrees Giant: The girth of this old friend is 5.4 spans

parkers who walked beneath her, and the Norman-French of the medieval Pierrepont lords, who rode by.

I have venerated **the Greentrees Giant** for many years. She has a massive presence. I can sit, happy and content, in her presence for hours. In spring her Beechen canopy spreads light and leafen shade and soft murmurings. In autumn her leaves turn copper, gold and russet. She lives on a woodland boundary bank, eastwards across a field from Greentrees Farm (now Place) on Balcombe Down, TQ 2977 3280. We've measured this ancient Beech pollard at 5.4 spans girth, a size which few British Beech reach. She is probably a bundle planting.

The Sun Oak, St Leonard's Forest, at just over five spans girth, is in vigorous, expansive health, despite her estimated 800 years. She's an English Oak pollard with a huge afro, braced, steady, and firmly founded. She stood against the '87 gale when all of neighbouring Coolhurst Wood was blown flat. She took her name from a next door pub, long gone, and it describes her nature perfectly: sunny and hopeful. She stands by the lodge gates to St Leonard's Park, east of Horsham, TQ 2027 299, easily approachable on the lane.

What must be an old bailiwick boundary bank crosses just north of Forest Grange in St Leonard's Forest, now marking the edge of the Forestry Commission estate. Upon it there is a line of giant Beech. They grow bigger as you walk west from Highburch Gate, till you come to the biggest of all: **the Forest Grange Beech**... an octopoid monster five spans in girth, with arms waving in all directions, TQ 210 319. She doesn't look like a pollard or a bundle planting...more like a hedge

stool that escaped its confinement four or five centuries ago. I climbed her bolling some years back and startled a Stock Dove from a scruffy hole. Woodpeckers make their homes there too.

There's a scatter of four span beasts in Worth Forest: - around Brantridge, in Cowdray and Monk's Forests and Greentrees. The majority of them are senescent and on the point of collapse, or have recently collapsed...or survive just as dead bollings. A couple or more of them look as though they may have been killed by traumatic surgery: cutting all their pollard arms and most of their crown base, too.

There's an ancient 4.5

span Beech pollard, which may be a bundle planting, west of the north portal of the Balcombe Tunnel at TQ 2900 325. This ancient tree is also a time portal...to the ancient forest. Its neighbour tree had a Hornet clan busy flying in and out of their trunk cavity home, whilst their sentinels watched from the entrance. Within a hollow bough of another neighbour was a group of Cave Entrance Spiders, *Meta merianae*, poised on their little orb webs.

The Small Leaved Lime pollard just east of Worth Church, TQ 301 362, may be the biggest of its species in Britain⁸. It is not just massive - four and a third spans girth - but tall, as well. It is set back in the north hedge line off the Worth Way, so you could easily miss it.

There is a lost and grown-over green lane just north of Oreham Common, Henfield. (The modern footpath tracks the open ground just to its west). On that green lane just south of The Pools there is a humungous, bent over pollard Oak, TQ 222 145. Its limbs bend awkwardly groundwards. Its girth is 3.5 spans, but its presence is even greater. It lives on in the shade, vastly older than all that live round it. It lost one giant limb recently, which lies below it (2016).

It is possible that none of these trees is the oldest, though. For that we might have to look for something much less obvious, much less imposing, but with an even stronger link back to the days of the wildwood. Amongst the Bluebells and Primroses, Crab Apple and Gean, in the heart of Courtland Wood, TQ 150 272, just west of Southwater, you can make out coppice stools