

Greensand Country Heritage Trees

The Veteran Oak, Sandy Smith Nature Reserve

As you walk along this ancient track, the three big trees ahead of you are Pedunculate oak, also known as the Common oak (*Quercus robur*), one of our two native oak species. They are the sole survivors of a larger number of mature trees that grew along this old hedgerow leading from Speedsdairy Farm – now The Old Dairy. They are recorded as significant trees on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map (c.1890) and current data estimates them to be around 200-250 years of age, from the time of King George III.

This part of Bedfordshire is famous for its oak trees. Back in 1322 the tower of Ely Cathedral collapsed and the search began to find suitable, large, tall, straight oak trees to rebuild a newly designed and stronger octagonal roof for the tower. Trees were selected from Chicksands Wood, owned then by Chicksands Priory. It is believed that these oak may also have been required to build the great scaffolding towers needed to reach the top of the tower. Each roof beam ended up weighing 10 tons each, and whether the oak trees from Chicksands helped support these or were incorporated within the construction, they would have been fine trees indeed!

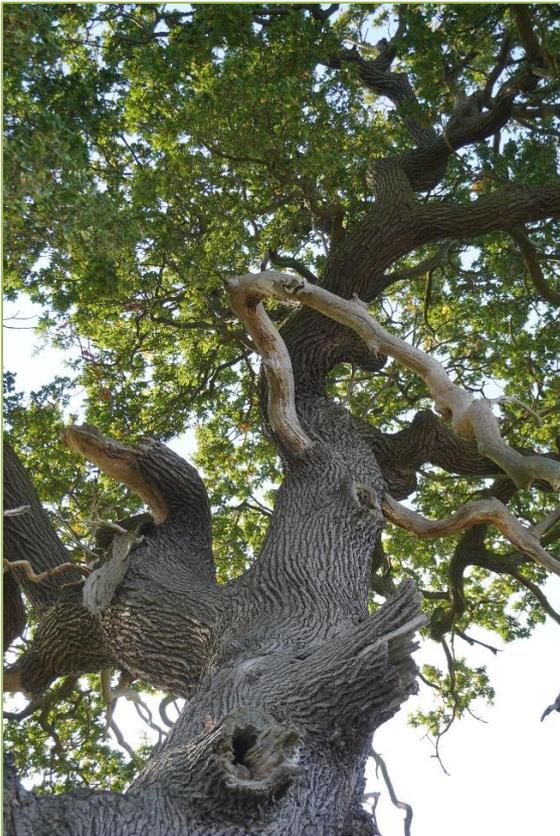


No such trees survive today and the biggest oak in the area is a typically, short-squat, ancient tree that grows 250m south-west of this post, close to the farm. These trees have always been open grown and so would never have had the protection of a woodland to grow tall and straight. Such was the demand for oak timber in the C18th that Lord Nelson wrote to Parliament in 1803 calling for more trees to be planted. This is not surprising when



it took over 2,000 oak trees to construct the hull of HMS Victory, launched in 1765 and later becoming Nelson's flagship during the Battle of Trafalgar. If these trees were indeed planted, then it could have been at this time, to show support for the Crown and grown for ship building. But by the time any of these trees had become mature the demand for such timber had gone as the rapid rise of the Industrial Revolution soon saw ships being made of iron.

Oak of this size and age are categorised as "veteran" trees and are of great biological interest and have high wildlife value. Veteran trees are mature trees that are not quite in their final "ancient" phase of life but are developing features found on ancient trees. These trees will have the beginnings of a hollow trunk as heartwood decaying fungi begin to recycle the centre of the tree that is no longer needed. Fungi have a close relationship with trees and the way fungi recycle nutrients and help roots absorb nutrients from the soil can prolong a trees life. So these trees are already taking advantage of this natural process and living off their own compost!



Some 2,300 different species have been identified as living on oak trees in the UK. Of these, 320 species have only ever been found on oak and appear to be totally reliant on veteran and ancient oak for their survival. It is clear from this that we need to look after our veteran oak trees and support landowners to help protect them.

The Heritage Tree post has been installed with kind permission of the Greensand Trust.

