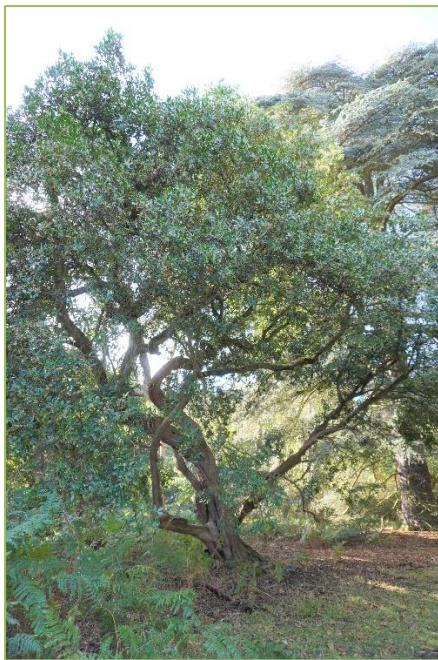


## Greensand Country Heritage Trees

### The Strawberry Tree, The Lodge, RSPB, Sandy

The tree in front of you is our most exotic native, a Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*), although geographically restricted to the far south-west coast of Ireland, and often referred to as the Killarney Strawberry Tree. It appears most at home in its wider natural range of the Mediterranean and thrives on cliffs and poor soils. Some Irish botanists believe *Arbutus* seed travelled here by the sea, or by birds, long after the ice sheets melted and so may not strictly be native. It has also been found on the southern cliffs of Jersey, perhaps arriving the same way.

It appears well adapted to climate change and the dry sandy soils here at The Lodge but how did it get here? Generally seen as a large shrub it has long been planted for its glossy evergreen foliage, its white urn-shaped flowers, and red strawberry-like fruits. Some of the oldest planted in Britain have now collapsed and appear to be associated with Georgian properties but it was still popular in Victorian times and this tree is believed to have been planted c.1870 shortly after the house was completed. It will be a similar age to the larger conifers that surround you here on the lawn.



If you are visiting in late autumn, you will see it flowering at the same time as last year's fruit are ripening red. This makes it doubly attractive at this time of year and well worth planting anywhere on the greensand, but it equally thrives on heavy clay and more alkaline soils elsewhere in Bedfordshire. The brown shredding bark



exposing smooth pink and red colours beneath is a feature of all ten species of Arbutus found around the world.

Although you may see Strawberry Trees quite frequently as part of a shrubbery, you are unlikely to see a bigger tree than this, unless you travel to Killarney National Park in Ireland. Its planting here was obviously inspired because today it has the fattest trunk of any specimen in England and as such is the national champion.

It is a self-pollinating species and can seed itself freely in the right conditions. Here at The Lodge, there are other trees, believed to be seedlings of this tree, below you on the other side of the garden fence. The fruit is not unpleasant but bitter compared to a real strawberry and the botanical name “unedo” originates from the Latin, unum (one) and edo (eat), suggesting you would eat only one of them, a quote attributed to the Roman naturalist and military leader Pliny the Elder. The Strawberry Tree is now the national tree of Italy, where the fruit is made into a jam and even an alcoholic drink!



Please note that this tree was badly damaged during Storm Eunice in February 2022.

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

