

OAK

On the 21st of October 1805 as Horatio Nelson lay dying on the deck of HMS 'Victory' off Cape Trafalgar in Spanish waters a large, snuffling pig made a deep depression with its foot in the muddy floor of a dense woodland close to the Chalk Way, a highway used for millennia by people on the move. By chance a fallen acorn rolled into the nutrient rich footprint and was quickly covered by deep litter as the pig mob moved through the undergrowth.

It was a good cropping year for acorns and beech mast. The custom of pannage or 'common of mast' is centuries old, a method of fattening animals, mainly swine, before being slaughtered and processed to get the villagers through harsh winters. The privilege was granted to local people to release their animals onto Common Land or into Royal forests and woodlands for the good of all. Pigs are rooting creatures, turning the soil with their strong, trowel snouts seeking out nutritious roots and stems and vacuuming up the dense covering of acorns and beech mast. They will clear an area of ground of its natural growth in the time it takes to shake a pig's pizzle!

The acorn lay snugly in its pitted scrape through snow and ice, rain and hail. It lay dormant for months until its resilient brown hard casing began to soften and finally split, revealing, if you were able to look underground, the kernel within. Our acorn had fallen from its pedunculate Mother during an early October storm, the nut held snugly in its cupped holder at the end of a sturdy stalk until it hit the ground and rolled free.

The Mother Oak herself had begun life as an acorn during the time that Henry VIII had tired of his Queen Catherine and was pursuing Lady Anne Boleyn with great gusto. The forest was much larger at that time and deer hunting was a regular pursuit for the Lord of the Manor and his aristocratic friends. Finally at the grand old age of almost 300 years Mother Oak had succumbed to the ravages of fungal recyclers, shed branches and become a home for wood-boring beetles. Woodpeckers drummed deep into her bark and cambium searching for insects and badgers used her as a scratching post reducing her to shreds while crunching on any tasty long-horn beetles that may have been encased in the softwood.

However, her offspring had begun its own journey and the kernel began to take up moisture and respond to warmth. It started to sprout, the cells of the radicle dividing quickly, forging downwards through the soil and anchoring it. In the opposite direction the plumule searched for light and erupted above the soil. A dangerous time for both plumule and radicle, as it wasn't just pigs on the lookout for a fresh, tasty snack. Deer are heavy grazers of acorns and like pigs are able to tolerate the toxic compounds which are part of the acorn's biochemistry. Cattle and horses do not have that tolerance whilst Jays will cache them for hard times and during that period were largely responsible for the distribution of acorns away from the vicinity of the Mother Oak as the grey squirrel, now a major cacher of acorns had not yet been introduced to Britain from North America, escaped from captivity and is now a major pest in woodlands of Mainland Britain.

As the early years rolled past the seedling grew into a young sapling in a densely populated woodland where pheasant and partridge were fed and subsequently shot by wealthy landowners and their guests and a roasted haunch of venison appeared courtesy of Cook. For sport they said. The sapling became a sturdy young tree and the woodsmen cleared areas of woodland around it not just for fuel or charcoal but for house timbers, ship's beams, pit props, planking and furniture. The woodland gradually depleted but the young oak flourished. Its branches were pollarded to increase the volume of timber and it began to grow into a beautiful, domed shape with wide-spreading arms.

As woodland became ploughed land, fields were divided, hedgerows became installed and the young Oak found itself an integral part of a boundary hedge alongside the ancient Ridgeway denoting ownership of land.

The Oak grew ever larger and became more and more a feature in the landscape, a beacon for travellers and drovers tramping along the Ridgeway on their way from North to South or South to North. A symbol of homecoming for some and a long journey for others. A symbol of longevity and life. A home for thousands of species of flora and fauna, a food source for many others and shelter for myriads. An oak-wide web, an ecosystem in its own right....a carbon store and provider of life-giving oxygen.

The longevity of Oak trees is celebrated and revered in many countries, the longest lived specimens acknowledged as being in Lithuania and Bulgaria, thought to be around 1500 years old. The Bowman Oak in Lincolnshire is accepted as being the oldest in Britain at a mere 1000 years, whilst The Majesty Oak in Kent with a circumference of about 40 feet has the thickest girth in Britain and is also one of the tallest maiden (unpollarded) Oaks. The Oak and acorn have long been used symbolically in ancient art, particularly loved by the Celts and the Romans and today the acorn is the symbol adopted by The National Trails of England and Wales for their waymarkers and marketing. Not an insignificant recognition for a small nut!

It is said that a mature Oak harbours thousands of other species providing food and shelter, from Purple Emperor butterflies in its canopy to mycorrhizal fungi at its root with spiders, beetles, caterpillars, algae, lichens, not to forget birds, bats and other mammals inhabiting every branch, leaf and bud. An amazing habitat supporting a wondrous array of life forms.

Generations of humans were born and died but our Oak flourished. Drovers taking their stock to market rested under its protective branches during heat and rainstorms. They inscribed their initials into its bark with the date, lovers meeting secretly cut heart symbols with 'me 4 you' in the centre followed by crosses for kisses and plighted their troths to each other. The Oak embraced them all, spreading its branches wide, comforting, encompassing. Cattle rubbed their flanks against the creviced bark to remove parasites and lambs jumped from jutting roots, tails wagging at the accomplishment. Children climbed into its arms, a lookout and a measure of their bravery and skill.

The Great Storm of 1987 ravaged the trees of South-East England and London. Countless large trees were uprooted and lay like lifeless dinosaurs, one on top of the other. But it wasn't this Storm which decimated our Oak. It was on the night and following day of January 25/26th 1990 that a weak category 1 hurricane known as Cyclone Daria or The Burns' Day Storm hit the Chilterns on Rabbie Burns' birthday and uprooted our hero as if it was a matchstick in a crib board. If we had been standing in that field on that day we would have heard the ripping of the rootstock and felt the vibrations as the tree hit the ground with a resounding thud. A large hole appeared in the underlying chalk as the tree was ripped from the earth, the torn roots mutilated, broken, tangled. Its branches smashed and twisted, squirrel dreys and a red kite nest at eye-level, beyond repair. A sad sight.

This storm felled 3 million trees, killed 45 people and brought an insurance bill of £3.4 billion, a greater cost than The Great Storm of 1987 and more fatalities as it attacked during daylight.

With so much damage in the area the Oak, not yet in its prime at 185 years old, lay in the field for over a year before the chainsaw gang came to cut the tops to leave as brash, the small branches for firewood and the larger ones corded for posts and rails. The bole was separated from its huge rootball, its lifeblood, like the cutting of the umbilical cord of a child to separate mother and baby.

This sturdy trunk was carted away to the sawmill where it was debarked and cut in half across its girth. One half of the bole was planked and the other quarter-sawn, both lots 'sticked' and kiln-dried ensuring the valuable timber would be at its most saleable. Quarter-sawn oak reveals the lovely patterning of ray-flecking in the larger medullary rays, a valuable commodity for furniture veneers and panelling.

I would like to think some of the low-grade timber of our 'Horatio' oak tree went into the production of Ridgeway fence posts and finger boards but with a plethora of fallen trees available our Oak was the source of a higher grade of material destined for much better uses.

Recently while walking a section of the Ridgeway from Swyncombe (Old English-'Swin' =wild boar, 'Combe'=valley) to Ewelme House (Anglo-Saxon 'ea'=stream 'wielm'=bubbling up) I examined the finger-posts and was dismayed to find they appeared to be made of 'plastic wood'. I can understand this practice as, although Oak has a durability in ground in excess of 25 years, cost is also a large factor. However, some algae had colonised the substrate of the 'plastic wood' and the symbols of the Acorn, walking man and the routed words 'Ridgeway' in white and 'Footpath' in yellow were in excellent condition.

Wood-plastic composite is made from wood fibre/flour with the addition of thermoplastics such as polythene, polypropylene, PVC and can be moulded and patterned with various wood grain details. It is long-lasting and low maintenance but is also non-biodegradable and uses non-renewable fossil fuels in its manufacture although it can be argued that it may be recycled into a new form of composite eg concrete. The use of these materials for items such as waymarker posts perhaps should now be questioned in an age of increasing environmental concerns particularly when there is a considerable amount of fallen timber available in woodlands increasingly left to decay naturally for wildlife but which are arguably also spreading disease throughout our native trees and could be used in the manufacture of these goods.

QUERCUS robur...R.I.P October 1805- January 1990

Carole Barfoot 2024