

Tree Walk
25th June 2004

Hawridge and Cholesbury Commons
Preservation Society

led by John Morris *

(reported by Isobel Clark)

Having met at the Full Moon Pub on Hawridge Common we started out by looking at the large tree with a short trunk and low sweeping branches at the top of the open area behind the Jubilee stone, which happened to be an oak.

Oak : John pointed out how close the leaves were to the stem and how long the acorn stems were. This indicates a Pedunculate oak (*Quercus Robur*). In contrast Sessile oaks (*Q. Petraea*) have leaves with long stems and acorns with short stems. The word acorn derives from the Danish word “korn” meaning oak seed. A large crop of acorns only occurs once every few years, in “mast” years, from the Scandinavian “mat” meaning food. This year is expected to be a mast year for beech. Acorns often germinate in grassland but not so well under a canopy of oak trees. This is partly explained by young seedlings being eaten by caterpillars which fall out of the oak trees, partly by jays hiding acorns in open areas for a winter food store and partly by chemicals given out into the soil by the oak trees already growing.

A question was asked about Sudden Oak Death and John explained that a swimming fungus (both air and water-borne) called *Phytophthora* has been attacking oaks in America. It also affects rhododendrons and viburnums, amongst other species. It is more likely to be prevalent in the West country and Wales because of the higher rainfall. That is why the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall have been felling some of their trees after finding evidence of infection. A major survey carried out recently by the Forestry Commission failed to find any evidence of this disease in hundreds of woods checked.

Apple : Native Crab Apples have small fruits that often grow in pairs, but many apple trees probably originate from apple pips in cores thrown away by passing people. The wild apples tend to be green and small, and these are less attractive to bees and thrushes than the cultivated ones. This is why you can often find many tiny wild apples lying on the ground beneath the tree in the autumn, not being eaten by the local wildlife. There are a lot of old apple trees in the bottom boundary hedge.



Cherry :

Wild cherry (*Prunus avium*) can produce valuable timber, if it has a large clean round trunk. It can live up to 100 years and matures in about 70 years. To work out the approximate age of a cherry tree, you can count the number of whorls of branches, since one whorl of branches is normally produced each year. You may be able to see old knots on the trunk where branches have been shaded out, these need to be counted too. This method of estimating the age of a tree also works for some species of conifer.

Silver Birch: The silver birch is a favourite tree of the linnet and the redpoll which eat the wind-dispersed seeds. These small seeds need bare ground to grow so normally colonise disturbed ground.



An oak at the bottom of the slope has a dead top because the American grey squirrels have torn off the bark in strips to get at the sweet sap-carrying layer (cambium). The introduced edible dormouse, Glis glis, chews the bark in a tight spiral pattern, this damage looks different but can also ring bark the tree. In June and July the sweetest sap is flowing so this is when most damage occurs and the squirrels usually choose the most vigorous trees. The level of damage fluctuates from year to year and seems related to the density of grey squirrels. The native red squirrel was much less of a problem; it used to eat the buds of the tree and not the bark, so this kind of damage has started since the arrival of the grey squirrel. This die-back of the tree tops is becoming a serious safety concern in the Chilterns since the dead tops eventually snap off and fall to the ground. It is also affecting the types of tree that are planted.

Ash: The ash tree has large black buds and smooth grey bark, and is often found growing at the bottom of valleys in the Chilterns because there is more moisture there.

At the bottom of the hill here you can see some pollarded ash trees with very long multiple stems. Pollarding is like coppicing except that instead of cutting down to ground level the trunk is cut at a height which is above the mouths of grazing animals. Ash seeds need 2 winters frosts before they germinate and so are often found in open ground rather than under cover. The timber from ash trees is used for tool handles and makes excellent firewood, since it can be burnt green as well as after seasoning. The ash trees in the Chilterns were used to provide firewood for London, being shipped along the Thames.

At the bottom ride we turned right into the woodland. In the much denser woodland the oaks have much taller and straighter trunks for a given age of tree than those out in the open because of competition for light.

Hazel: Hazel trees can grow under the large trees, forming an understorey if they are not grazed. Dormice love the hazelnuts and have their young in August when the nuts are ready. You can tell when a dormouse has eaten the nut by the angle of tooth-marks left on the edge of the neatly bitten round hole in the shell.

Part way along the ride we saw a number of multi-stemmed ash trees in the hedge. These have been coppiced to maintain the hedge as a dense barrier. Coppicing can prolong the life of the tree; the individual trunks are probably about 50 – 60 years old but the main trunk/stump could be 200 years old.



This hedge may belong to the field owner because it is likely that the farmer would have wanted to stop his animals on the Common getting onto his land. A ditch was the usual boundary marker on commons.

Holly: On the other side of the ride, looking up the hill, we saw that there is quite a few holly trees beginning to grow up under the mainly oak canopy. The holly can form an impenetrable mass in the shade of the oaks so should be controlled when young if possible. It is a native species which provides food for birds and cover for mammals, but it can start to dominate so needs careful control. Only when it is growing in enough light do the female holly trees produce berries.

Hornbeam: A young hornbeam is growing beside the ride. This species was often used in hedges and as a boundary marker. The leaves are a little like beech leaves but the main distinguishing feature is the jagged edge and rougher feel of the leaf. The fruit is completely different so at this time of year hornbeam can easily be identified. At other times of year the leaf is the easiest way to distinguish them.

Willow: Willow is the plant from which aspirin was produced. It has diamond shaped holes in the bark for breathing.



We climbed up into the recently felled area below Holly Cottage and admired the foxgloves. John told us that they can survive for 200 years in the ground, which is why they reappear after the ground is disturbed, rather like poppies. They flower in the second year after disturbance as they are biennials.



On one side of the area there are 3 oaks which are almost dead, having been damaged by the intense heat from the fire used to burn up the thinnings a couple of years ago. These could be felled and the trunks left on the ground to provide food for insects, invertebrates and fungi.

Returning to the bottom ride we came out of the woodland into the grassland area.

Blackthorn: On the edge of the ride is some very dense blackthorn. This produces sloes, often used to flavour gin; pick the sloes after the first frosts have softened them up. The plant suckers freely, often growing into an impenetrable mass which some mammals and small birds love because of the protection it provides.

The superb floral display from the trees and shrubs this year may have been due to the heat and drought of last year. A plant often puts a massive effort into its flowers and fruit after it experiences a great stress like the drought in case it is its last chance.

Just before the ride enters another wooded area near the bottom of Horseblock Lane there is a large oak tree with a slit in the trunk which is becoming decayed and providing a food source for insects. John suggested that this could be pollarded to reduce some of the weight of its branches and hopefully stop limbs falling off. This should prolong its life whilst allowing the wildlife to make use of it.

Walking back up Horseblock Lane and along the top ride we came across some superb honeysuckle where John said we might find some White Admiral butterflies in August, which are rare in the Chilterns. We found a Purple Hairstreak resting on a sweet chestnut although it was very difficult to see.

All in all it was a most interesting and eye-opening walk which everyone enjoyed immensely, thanks to John's very wide-ranging knowledge.

* The Chiltern Woodlands Project is a local charity set up by the Chiltern Society in 1989 that offers advice to woodland owners. For more information please contact John Morris, Chiltern Woodlands Project, 8 Summerleys Road, Princes Risborough, Bucks HP27 9DT Tel 01844 271315