

# THE MAJOR OAK, SHERWOOD FOREST, ENGLAND

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## Introduction

This giant tree, weighing an estimated 23 tons with a waistline of 33 ft (10 m), has been growing in Sherwood Forest for about 800-1000 years. The exact age of this magnificent tree can only be estimated, however, since it is hollow in the center, preventing an accurate assessment of its true age. Its huge size is a clue, although it is well known that not all oaks grow at the same rate.

Its large canopy, with a spread of 92 ft (28 m), points to it being a tree that has grown up with little or no competition from oaks nearby. This has allowed the large branches and network of leaves to spread out. Its huge trunks formed as the tree's demands for food, water, and structural support increased during its continued growth, as it still does today.

The Domesday Book, compiled by William the Conqueror in 1086 to assess the lands and resources of England, noted that Sherwood Forest covered most of Nottinghamshire above the River Trent. Large trees were seen as a medium of prophecy and knowledge. These trees were associated with woods like Sherwood. Large oaks were frequently depicted as dwelling places for woodland spirits and legend has it that Robin Hood hid from his enemies inside the Major Oak.



The Major Oak (*Quercus robur*)  
Photo courtesy of the author.

## Natural History

The Major Oak is listed as being an English or pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*). Its leaves begin to grow in April-May and stay on until October-November, depending on the severity of the first autumn frosts. The tree's flowers, small male catkins and the much smaller female flowers with dark stigmas, are produced soon after the leaves have opened.

The acorns of the pedunculate oak grow on stalks and they mature in late October. Generally the tree has a good acorn crop, sometimes known as mast, every 2-3 years. Good acorn crops only occur in the years when the spring weather is warm and dry enough to allow the oak flowers to be wind pollinated successfully.

The oak's great hollow interior is not man-made; it is actually caused by fungi, the most invasive of which is called the "poor man's beefsteak" (*Fistulina hepatica*), whose fruiting bodies are sometimes seen growing on the bark of the tree during the autumn.

Like all other oaks, the Major Oak provides plenty of food for caterpillars and insects; its deeply fissured bark furnishes them with many hiding places, giving much needed protection from predators.

The Major Oak's enormous interior is also useful for hibernating insects and mammals such as bats, queen wasps, butterflies and a variety of spiders. All make use of the valuable protection and shelter the tree has to offer during the harsh winter weather.

In the Spring, many birds, including jackdaws, woodpeckers and great tits make their nests in what is Sherwood's most famous oak. Look out for young grey squirrels in May-June, as they make their first journeys away from their nests; you can often see them practicing their tightrope acts on the oak's network of supporting cables.

So, not only are these ancient oak trees inspirational in their beauty, majesty and spiritual qualities, they are also unrivalled as natural habitats among the many species of woodland trees. Each one is an individual nature reserve; it can act as host to over 32 species of mammals, 68 species of birds, 34 species of butterflies, 271 species of insects, 168 species of flowers, 10 species of ferns, and 31 species of fungi or lichen. Amongst them all stands the Major Oak, a giant in all respects and worthy of a place in all our hearts.

#### An Accident of Nature?

There are several theories as to what caused the tree to grow into the size and shape it is today. One is that the Major Oak may in fact be more than one tree! Perhaps as a consequence of a chance germination of several acorns some 800 years ago, three or four trees began to grow close to one another. The tree we see today is the product of these young saplings fusing together as they grew to form one enormous oak. There are large grooves visible on the outside, and the hollow interior is actually several open chambers combined together, which is evidence that this is a possibility. Genetic testing could determine if this is, in fact, the case.

Another theory is that the tree has been pollarded. This was a system of tree management that enabled the foresters to grow more than one crop of timber from a single tree. Pollarding, or cutting back the top, was repeated every 40-50 years, causing the trunk to grow large and fat, the tops of which became swollen after several centuries of this cropping. This system of management allowed trees to grow longer than unmanaged trees. Some have been found to be 1000 years old. This tree was probably spared from the final forester's axe because of its hollow rotted trunk. The tree was probably spared also because of its landscape and heritage value. Romantic stories of Robin Hood only added weight to the case for the tree's preservation.

#### Care and Management

The Major Oak received special attention throughout the 20th century. In 1908, metal straps and chains were installed high up in the canopy to support the weakest branches. Large holes were covered in lead sheeting to prevent rain entering, but unfortunately this was later removed by some distant relatives of Robin's merry band. Supports in the form of wooden poles were also first used for support about this time.

By 1972 the pressure of thousands of visitor's feet (220,000 per year) was beginning to take its toll, causing the upper branches to die back; soil compaction prevented rain water and minerals from the leaf-litter decomposition to percolate down to the roots nourishing the tree.

In 1975 when the new Visitor Centre was built by Nottinghamshire Council, a fence was installed around the great tree, preventing further damage from the ever

increasing number of visitors to Sherwood. This fence kept visitors away from the tree, helping to save it for the future, as it still does today.

A tree company (Tree Surgeons) was brought in to treat the tree by removing decaying branches, covering up gaping holes, replacing some of the old chains and straps, and giving the exposed wood, both inside and outside, a coat of arboricultural paint to prevent further decay. However, a complete eradication of fungi can prove almost impossible and fruiting bodies can sometimes be seen on the tree in the autumn<sup>1</sup>.

In the mid 80's more supports were added, preventing sideways, horizontal movement of the larger lower limbs. In 1994 the grass under the tree's canopy, which had originally been introduced for aesthetic purposes, was removed to prevent it from competing with the tree for nutrients. An inert mulch was then spread to prevent the soil from drying out. Outside the "drip circle" the natural regeneration of the woodland flora is being allowed to grow back. The tree is now inspected on a daily basis by the ranger staff, whilst Tree Surgeons visit the site on a seasonal basis to check the oak for routine maintenance and feeding.

With your support and respect, this grand old tree may live for many years to come. But, it may be remembered that the Major Oak, even guarded by the spirits of the greenwood and Robin Hood, is not immortal.

#### **Local History**

It is probable that this ancient tree was named after a local historian. The Major Oak's first recorded name was the Cockpen Tree; this was with reference to its earlier use as a cockerel pen during the mid-18th century. The unfortunate game birds were stacked inside the tree in wicker baskets, or just tied in hessian sacking, before they were taken out and mercilessly thrown together for this barbaric sport.

The tree did not become well known until about 200 years ago when in 1790 the tree was described by Major Hayman Rooke FSA, who was a local historian from the Mansfield area. In the same year, he published a book entitled "Remarkable Oaks in the Park of Welbeck in the County of Nottingham." It was soon after this that the tree was named after him. Its name means "The Major's Oak" and not the largest oak.

Throughout the last century, it was also known as the Queen or Queen's Oak. There is no known connection with any Royal figure - this name probably just described its large size and its status as Lady of the Forest, because it was such a majestic tree.

#### **A Tourist Attraction**

In Victorian times, the Major Oak became a popular visiting place, although it was always well known by local people. People visited the tree, coming to Edwinstowe by train and then by carriage, to see the tree. More than 600,000 people from all over the world coming to visit this venerable giant each year.

Whilst this tree is not the largest in girth in the country, it is certainly the most famous, surrounded by mystique and folklore. We hope that it will continue to be so for many years and provide a joy to see for people from all over the world in this ancient forest of Sherwood.

**Editor's Note:** The author of this article is John Palmer, who is the webmaster of the Major Oak web site (<http://www.wirksworth.org.uk/majoroak.htm>), where

you can obtain additional information about this magnificent tree.

John has also informed us that he recently bought 25 acres of pastureland in Dorset and intends to create a "New Sherwood Forest" there using saplings grown from acorns collected from underneath the Major Oak in the Millennium year. There are currently more than 300 saplings growing in 10-litre pots in his back yard that are earmarked for a 7-acre field, and he hopes for more in the future. Through research at his local County Record Office, he found a Tithe Map dated 1813 which names these fields as "Great Wood" and "Little Wood," although today there is no sign of trees, except in the hedges. He also hopes to include other tree species in the planting, including ash and alder.

This proposed planting site is also close to a Roman Fortress, which was built in 45 AD when the 2nd Augustan Legion under Vespasian invaded the British islands. The Romans would have needed a large quantity of stout timber growing close at hand to construct their fortress, house their men, and build giant catapults to attack the huge British Hill Forts nearby. The Roman invasion was successful, and British history was changed forever.

<sup>1</sup>Arboricultural practices vary and some of these procedures might not be universally accepted as the best way to protect old trees. For example, the use of "arborist paint" is not necessarily endorsed by the International Oak Society as the most effective practice (Editor).