

Two Great Oaks of Europe

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In 1999 and 2000 I visited two oaks of monumental value, one in Germany and one in Austria. What a difference in appreciation and maintenance! Dorothy Holley (currently Secretary of the International Oak Society) had sent me a copy of an article from 30 October 1841 about the first tree. It was the mother of fastigiata *Quercus robur* cultivars, located in the Village of Harreshausen, near Babenhausen (not far from Aschaffenburg and Frankfurt), Germany. (Editor's Note: refer to another account of this tree in the International Dendrology Society 1999 yearbook, pages 61- 63.)

I asked my friends Gisela and Gerhard Donig from the Arboretum Altdorf bei Nürnberg, Bavaria, whether this tree was still there. Indeed it was, and they sent me another article from 23 April 1997 which stated that this oak already in 1934 was named a Nature Monument and today should be under legal monument protection. From the article from 1841 I had learned that at that time, the tree was already fenced and surrounded by a wall with a locked gate. This tree is worth being treated in conformity with its historical value. (Traditionally, this would include protection by a brick wall with pieces of broken glass on top, and a gate with sharp spikes!).

In Krussmann's Manual, this tree is also mentioned with its history. It says that most probably all European fastigiata oaks, including those from the famous park Wilhelmshöhe in Kassel, Germany, originated from that specimen. However, in the south of France another fastigiata oak was discovered, and some of those cultivated in France and Spain could have originated from that second tree. I could not find this French tree still to be present.

Following the very successful Oak Society tour in Germany in June 1999, my wife Riet and I decided to try to find the German tree (or its remains) on our way back home. We found the village of Harreshausen, but all road-signs to the tree were gone. We feared for the worst. We asked local people, and they sent us in all directions of the wind. Yet we finally found

what a state! Notwithstanding its position as a Nature Monument under monument protection, it had no fence remaining, and fires had been lit by vandals in the hollow of the big trunk. The only protection was an old, bent and damaged nameplate. It is a shame that some villages handle their national monuments in this way.

The metal plate indicated that the tree was declared a Nature Monument in 1934, and estimated to be 550 years old at that time, so it must be more than 600 years old now. After World War II it apparently was treated by a notable arborist, Mr. Maurer, who tried to strengthen the trunk with metal bars. (This type of treatment is no longer practiced by professional arborists, but was considered proper fifty years ago.) Unfortunately, the original wall was not rebuilt at that time.

I suggested to the German Dendrology Society that they should use their influence to induce the Villages of Harreshausen or Babenhausen to take care of this most important monument, and prevent further vandalism. Their answers were most unsatisfactory. The president asked local authorities about the tree, and from their desks without inspecting the tree anew, their opinion was that the condition of the tree was hopeless. This was contrary to my opinion that the tree is still very viable. The leaves have a glossy, healthy dark green color and the old wounds are closing beautifully.

The vice president and several of the board members of the German Dendrology Soci-

ety are not very interested in saving the original (ortet) tree, although they did propose to make some grafts, seemingly unaware that this already had been done several hundred years ago. Clones of the tree are growing now in the famous Wilhelmshoehe Park of Kassel. In the Village of Harreshausen several grafts or seedlings can be found in private gardens, and even next to the old tree grows a beautiful young fastigate oak, which will soon give his mother full

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The ancient Bierbaum Oak (Quercus robur) in Austria, already mentioned in documents dating to the year 990 AD.

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protection and in the future take its place. They also intend to remove a linden (*Tilia*) growing next to it. This would cause more disturbance to the oak, and should not be done; the two trees are in balance now, and the oak benefits from the protection afforded by its neighbor, the *Tilia*.

In Germany, many other old oaks and lindens in hopeless condition are conserved in a very expensive way, yet these are relatively common trees. Conversely, no interest exists for saving this viable unique tree, which is worthy to become a place of botanical pilgrimage.

Contrary to the above unexplainable laxity was our experience in Austria in 2000. There we visited what may be the eldest oak of Europe, in Bierbaum, 70 km. east of Graz. When in Switzerland, we had heard that this tree was still growing there and that it was worth visiting. The existence of this tree was already mentioned in documents dating back to the year 990, so it must be over 1200 years at least. Although in doubt whether we should make this detour based upon the opinion of a layman, we were most impressed by this tree; all the more, because its maintenance was perfect!

Financed by the widow of an important industrialist, five years ago the famous arborist Manfred Saller from Vienna spent 500 hours on a complete overhaul of the Bierbaum oak. The results are spectacular! The tree is perfectly healthy, the color of the leaves is good, and the rate of closure of the pruning wounds is remarkable, as in a young, vigorous tree. Mr. Saller gives it at least another 100 years before another arborist will need to come back.



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Riet and Dick van Hoey Smith with the Bierbaum Oak (Quercus robur) east of Graz, Austria.

It is a pity that Bierbaum is so far away from any tourist route. Most of our members probably will never see the ancient Bierbaum Oak, and will have to settle for the photographic coverage accompanying this article.