

## AN OVERVIEW OF OAKS

**Professor Julian Evans OBE**  
Professor of Tropical Forestry  
Imperial College, London

I am deeply honoured to open this conference. And, as the Forestry Commission's former Chief Research Officer (South), may I welcome overseas delegates to the UK. My particular interest within UK is the silviculture of broadleaved species of which our two native oaks have centre stage. To set the scene for our two-day conference, I shall lightly touch on three of our four principal themes and weave in the fourth, oaks across the world, as we go.

### **Oaks in history**

In the UK we are besotted with oaks! We find engravings of eighteenth century oaks in *Evelyn's Silva* (Hunters Edition of 1802), including the Greendale Oak at Welbeck, measuring 33 ft in circumference at 1 ft above ground. Oaks are also commonly noted on early maps of England, such as this tree in my own wood of Northdown Plantation in Hampshire. Oaks are also deeply imbedded in the national psyche, as evidenced by this decoration on a mug! Finally there are numerous references to oaks in the Bible, such as the great oaks of



Mamre. Here and elsewhere this genus is singled out more than any other among the world's trees owing to its size and great longevity

### **Oaks in cultivation**

In England there is a long tradition of pollarding oaks. An example is this oak in my own wood, dedicated to my wife, that graces the cover of my new book '*What Happened to Our Wood*' (Patula Books, 2002). This practice of pollarding was exported, as evidenced by this pollarded English oak outside a post office in Swaziland. However, while English oaks were planted far and wide as landscape trees, they were rarely used for afforestation purposes.

Here is another example of a special form of pollarding called shredding, a practice common in the Mediterranean and Middle East. This example is from the mountains of Iraq where it is used on *Q. aegilops*, *Q. libani* and *Q. infectoria*.

In the UK, oaks are often grown in mixtures with conifers which act as nursery crops. The success of planting efforts has been enhanced recently by using plastic 'tree shelters' which greatly aid survival and early growth. But there are still problems. The American grey squirrel is an increasingly important pest to oaks and other hardwoods in the UK.

### **Oaks and their uses**

The practice of oak shredding shown above produces branches for roofing and bedding. Oak has also been used to make furniture. Today, antique oak furniture is cherished for its beauty and durability, and the figure and character of oak wood is much sought after by wood workers. Brown oak, resulting from timber that is stained from infection by beefsteak fungus, is especially valuable.

Oaks have also been used in construction and there are many uses for its timber. But equally important is the great beauty of the trees themselves and their remarkably rich value for wildlife. Oaks are truly sentinels of history: I give you two days of glorying in oaks. Thank you.