
OAK OPEN DAY AT WESTONBIRT ARBORETUM

by Allen J. Coombes

Some 40 Society members and guests attended a meeting at the Forestry Commission's Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire, England, on October 5, 1996, where tours of the collection were led by Curator Hugh Angus and retired Curator John White. This splendid collection was started in 1829 and, after passing to Sir George Holford, it went through three generations of his family before being taken over by the Forestry Commission.

Westonbirt Arboretum covers some 240 hectares and has some 17 miles of paths. Today, the Forestry Commission manages Westonbirt for conservation, education and recreation. The Conservation aspect of the work involves looking after more than 18,000 numbered specimen trees and keeping detailed records of anything that happens to any one of them. The small Education Unit welcomes over 12,000 school children every year and caters to a wide range of topics. Approximately 250,000 people visit Westonbirt annually, of which half visit in October to see the autumn colors.

Even though Westonbirt is situated 400 feet (110m) above sea level, many mature *Quercus robur* provide shelter for other diverse plantings. We were shown the only specimen of *Q. petraea* on the site, while John White spoke about a tree of this species grafted from an old specimen in the Forest of Dean, which produced some stalked acorns (normally sessile in *Q. petraea*). He later discussed dating methods for old trees and we viewed an obviously very old tree which he estimated at 327 years old with a diameter at breast height of 171 cm (67 inches).

During lunch a meeting was held to discuss the creation of a European Chapter of the International Oak Society and James Harris agreed to chair a Steering Committee to organize such a chapter. In the afternoon the group toured the propagation facilities and saw many other splendid trees, including a magnificent *Q. canariensis*: I was asked to plant a tree in the oak collection, for which James Harris kindly presented a seedling *Q. x saulli* (*Q. alba* x *Q. montana*). Finally, it was time for the traditional plant swap, where some interesting seedlings began to appear. Apart from the few plants raised from seed from the 1994 Oak Conference in Illinois, USA, these included *Q. baloot*, an evergreen species from the western Himalayans, collected by member Shaun Haddock in Pakistan in 1995, which he offered to members as seed at the 1995 Oak Open Day, held at Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum.

Next year's Oak Open Day in Europe will be hosted by Dick van Hoey Smith at Trompenburg Arboretum, Rotterdam, Netherlands on September 27 - 28, 1997. The date has been set to fit in conveniently before the Second International Oak Conference in California. European members will receive invitations from Trompenburg, but all International Oak Society members are welcome. If you live outside Europe and would like to attend the meeting, please contact Mr. van Hoey Smith directly at: Arboretum Trompenburg, Groene Wetering 46, 3062 PC Rotterdam, Netherlands. ☘

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