

The

ANCIENT TREE

column

Each month we feature an ancient British tree.
This month the Ancient Tree Forum introduces us to the...

Meavy (or Royal) Oak, Devon

The Royal Oak, which stands in the little village of Meavy on the edge of Dartmoor, is a wonderful example of a landmark tree that has been much valued by the local community for centuries.

The tree has been estimated to be at least 900 years old, as it's said to have been planted during the reign of King John. It's known locally as the Royal Oak (also the name of the village pub) as it's thought to be one of the many trees that King Charles hid in while fleeing from Cromwell's men in the 16th century.

Before the church was built in the 12th century, people would have gathered under this 'Gospel Oak' as it was used for preaching. The stone cross is thought to have been erected in the 15th century to consecrate the tree.

Until the 18th century and possibly later, the top of the Meavy Oak used to be clipped to make it flat for the village festival. A set of stairs was erected, leading to a platform on top with tables and chairs where feasting took place. At least one meal was also held within the tree's cavity when the landlady of the Royal Oak entertained nine guests there in 1826.

To prolong the life of the Meavy Oak, tree surgeons reduced its crown in the 1970s and replaced some old wooden props with steel rods, which were set in concrete and still support the tree.

In 1834, G and J Header wrote that "This venerable tree, though it has suffered from the touch of age, still continues proudly magnificent. The lower branches still obey the voice of spring, and spread their living canopy over a large area of ground. The topmost boughs, however, are bare, having long ceased to be hung with the massive foliage which they bore in the days of their young lustihood."

A young oak from a Meavy Oak acorn grows on another part of the village green and will hopefully in time display the 'massive foliage' of 'young lustihood' but meanwhile, nearly 200 years on, the Royal Oak can still be described as proudly magnificent.

Photographs and research by Chris Knapman of the Ancient Tree Forum's Devon group. For details of how to get involved in one of the ATF's local and regional groups see the Who We Are page of the Ancient Tree Forum's website. www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk.



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