

The

ANCIENT TREE

column

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

The Darley Oak, Cornwall

This tree stands in front of a very old farmhouse in Darley Ford, just south of Launceston in Cornwall. It has a craggy gnarled trunk and deadwood piercing the leafy crown. On closer inspection you realise you are looking at only half a tree, the right hand section visible in Edgar Thurston's black and white photo (bottom right) having been destroyed in the great storm of 1987. The healing bark curves round to the inside of the former hollow however and the iron bar that once held the two sections together can still be seen at about 4m high.

In 1927, Thurston measured a circumference of 27ft at a height of 5ft, which allowing for its slow growth in the shallow soil of Bodmin Moor, would have made the tree in excess of 800 years old at that time.

For many centuries this wonderful tree has been the subject of local folklore and curious superstitions. A manuscript from 1727 notes: "In the plaisance of the village stands the great natural curiosity known as the Darley Oak. At the height of three feet from the ground (where there are many excrescences), it measures 36 feet in circumference. Being hollow and having convenient openings for ingress and egress, it is capable of housing small pleasure parties, which it often does in the season." The tree was claimed to have many healing properties and the ability to grant wishes if you passed through the hollow and walked around the girth of the tree on the encircling path. Today this pedunculate oak is known to be a life giver of a different kind, being home to a multitude of lichens, fungi, epiphytes, invertebrates and birds.

The owner, whose family has lived in the farmhouse for a century, is proud that the Darley Oak was one of fifty trees to have been singled out by the Tree Council as a tribute to the queen in her golden jubilee year and she is happy for visitors to view the tree if they ask permission.

Photographs and text by Tim Kellett of the Ancient Tree Forum's Cornwall group.

The Ancient Tree Forum champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain's ancient and veteran trees and provides advice on their value and management. For details of how to get involved in one of the ATF's local and regional groups, see the Who We Are page on www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk.



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