

The ANCIENT TREE column

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

The Tortworth Chestnut, Tortworth Estate, South Gloucestershire

Tucked away in the corner of a grazed field next to Saint Leonard's Church, you'd forgive the untrained eye for not spotting the significance of this tree at first glance. However, step through the gate on the southern side and the full wonder of this tree is revealed.

Once beneath the tree it is apparent that the canopy is made up of five or six stems, the original stem with little live growth in the middle. Over time the tree has 'moved' out in all directions; the result is more reminiscent of a woodland. New trunks have been formed from the growth of epicormic shoots low on the stem or where subsiding branches have touched the ground, re-rooted and continued to grow.

There is ongoing debate over the age of the tree. A plaque located beside it reads: 'This tree supposed to be six hundred years old 1st January 1800'. However, the tree is dated as growing in the 12th and 13th century respectively by both John Evelyn writing in 1664, and Sir Robert Atkyn writing in 1712. To confuse things further, Britain's leading amateur dendrologist of 1762, Peter Collinson, claims it grew from a nut planted during the reign of King Egbert in 800AD.

Regardless of the actual age of the tree, it is clearly remarkable. Thomas Pakenham refers to it as: 'By far the most fully documented tree in Britain'. This claim is supported by the large number of wood engravings, lithographs and paintings of the tree held in the estate. Johannes Kip's engraving of Tortworth (right) in 1712 shows that the tree was incorporated within the otherwise formal gardens of the manor house.

Thanks to Robert Moreton of the Tortworth Estate for providing access to, and use of, the estate's collection of tree memorabilia and Mike Calnan for allowing the use of his aerial photograph.

The ATF champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain's ancient and veteran trees and promotes best practice. See www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk



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