

The ANCIENT TREE column

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

Beech trees at New King Barrows, Stonehenge, Wiltshire

Just one mile from Stonehenge is a line of barrows, where the dead were buried during the Bronze Age. Huge areas of chalk downland were stripped of turf to create these important archaeological features within the greater Stonehenge landscape.

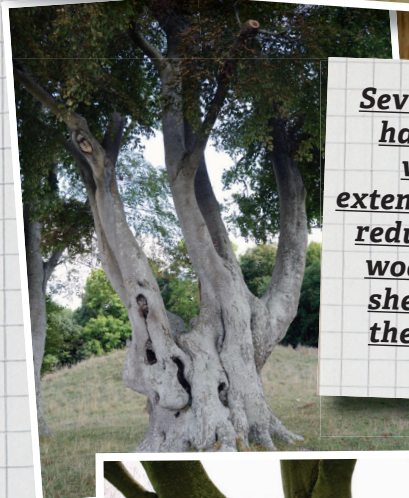
The barrows at King Barrow Ridge make a particularly impressive sight due to the line of ancient beech trees alongside them. One theory is that the trees date from the time when this area became part of the Amesbury Estate in the early 18th century, because they follow an old boundary line. However, the girths of some of them are up to around 7m, suggesting that they are likely to be considerably older. This is particularly true as most of the largest beeches are of pollard form, although they have not been worked for a significant period of time.

"Several of the trees have significant wounds with extensive heart decay, reducing the sound wood to a narrow shell and making them susceptible to collapse," explains Ancient Tree Forum trustee Brian Muelaner, who surveyed the trees when he was ancient tree adviser for the National Trust. "They are now managed to keep them alive and healthy for as long as possible, and a simple management plan was produced for each tree. The two main risks identified were shallow-rooting due to the extremely thin chalk soils, and the danger of major limb collapse, either of which would virtually guarantee the death of the tree."

"An additional issue was the overall lack of epicormic growth on virtually all of the trees. It was decided that the trees at greatest risk of imminent collapse had to have sensitive crown reductions around the whole of the crown. This was done very gradually, with only around 10% being removed in the first phase. If after three to five years the trees have responded to the increased light by producing epicormic growth, then further reductions are planned over the next fifteen to twenty years, reducing the trees to a point where they are thought to be stable."

With their dead and decaying wood, and other veteran features, the beech trees provide valuable wildlife habitat, and have particularly rich lichen interest. They also make this a great spot for enjoying the view of Stonehenge and the wider landscape.

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 at www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk



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