

THE ANCIENT TREE COLUMN

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

THE MARTON OAK, CHESHIRE

"Not far from the chapel is a very fine oak, which although but little known, is believed to be the largest in England."

From *Magna Britannia* by Daniel & Samuel Lysons, 1810

Britain is renowned for its many great, ancient oaks which can be found, often in isolation, across the country. The largest girthed and possibly oldest living example is a sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*), measuring 14.4m (47.25ft) in girth.

It stands in the garden of a private house in the village of Marton in Cheshire, and according to recent estimates may have done so for some 1,200 years, when Offa's bloodthirsty reign as Saxon King of Mercia was drawing to an end and the Viking age was dawning. Impossible to date accurately due to an absence of heartwood which has long since decayed, the fragmented trunk grows as four separate stems, leading some to believe that it is four different trees. This fragmentation is quite normal for ancient oaks however, and a common root system confirms that it is one giant tree. Illustrative and photographic records reveal little change in appearance over three centuries.

Local legend has villagers dancing around the tree on May Day, hanging the bark in their houses as a good luck charm and using it to cure skin ailments, including the removal of warts.

In the 19th century, the hollow trunk was used to tether a bull and keep pigs when it was still a part of Marton Farm, fenced in an open field. Now the tree has a secluded garden feel and is lovingly tended by its custodians. In 2012, showing signs of decline, a program including light crown reduction and clearance of scrub around the bole helped revitalise the old oak. On my visit in 2013 it had a glorious crown and was brimming with acorns, which until recently were collected by local school children who sold them for 10p each in aid of Marton's timber framed church that dates to 1343; 550 years or so younger than the great oak.

Text and photos by Julian Hight, author of Britain's Tree Story and World Tree Story; www.worldtreestory.co.uk

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



OLD OAK AT MARTON.

