

THE ANCIENT TREE

COLUMN

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

THE GILWELL OAK, CHINGFORD, LONDON

Gilwell Park is, for many, one of the most important sites in the scouting movement. The site was purchased in 1919 to provide a suitable outdoor space for the organisation, and played host to the first Wood Badge course later that year. It has been synonymous with this award ever since – so much so that it is commonly believed that the beads given to Wood Badge recipients are made of wood from the Gilwell Oak, a tree at the centre of the site. In recognition of the importance of this tree to the Scouting movement, the Woodland Trust crowned the Gilwell Oak England's Tree of the Year 2017.

Prior to being purchased by the Scouts, Gilwell Park was a part of various private estates. Large, impressive trees were typically valued and admired on such estates, as they were a way for the landowners to show off their wealth. A number of veteran oak trees persist on the site today, but none as famous as the Gilwell Oak. In the mid 18th century, the nearby White House (originally called Osborne Hall) was built; its location is likely to have been chosen due to the proximity of the tree.

Today, the tree stands next to the Gilwell Park Conference Centre, and is a must-see for all visitors to the site. Unfortunately, the effects of its popularity are beginning to show,

with the soil around the tree having become compacted over the years. Soil compaction removes the air spaces within the soil, which can potentially lead to anaerobic conditions and waterlogging issues. Unless remedied, the impact upon the soil will eventually cause the tree to decline in health.

Gilwell Park lies on the fringe of Epping Forest, which is an important site for veteran trees, having a population of around 50,000 of them. Given its proximity to the forest, Gilwell Park was chosen to host the Ancient Tree Forum's summer forum, and the three-day training course 'Valuing and Managing Veteran Trees' in 2017. Both events took advantage of the wealth of veteran trees in the vicinity, and, of course, any visit to Gilwell Park would not be complete without a trip to the Gilwell Oak.

The Ancient Tree Forum's 2018 training programme is now available at www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk/events. The programme includes a number of one-day introductory courses, as well as a three-day 'train the trainer' course being held in Hereford.



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 ©Ancient Tree Forum