

ATF Sussex launch event, 11th May 2019

Some 50-odd people gathered at the National Trust's glorious Sheffield Park, on an equally glorious spring Saturday, to attend the inaugural Sussex ATF Group event. We began within the NT's Tea Room's with some necessary preliminaries, including some fine (and brief!) presentations introducing the Ancient Tree Forum, Sussex's ancient trees, the Ancient Tree Inventory, and Sheffield Park itself. A quick break and then to the main event: out onto the site, to take in a sample of the amazing trees that it has to offer, in this case beginning with the gardens. We were expertly guided by Tom Hill, Trees & Woodland Officer for the National Trust, supported by Chris Skinner (Sheffield Park Gardener) and Tom Burns (Ranger). We were also joined by Sarah George (Plumpton College Lecturer) who has helped to survey the estate's veteran tree population (180+ trees) this year with 14 Countryside Management students.

Scattered around the site are several small groups of giant sweet chestnuts of county-level significance. Their age is not known, but they are thought to be several hundred years old at least. Their significance in the Weald area for fencing and hop production was discussed, as well as the question mark which now hangs over the date of their introduction – did the Romans really bring them over for food, or was it in fact the Normans...?!?

At least two of the largest chestnuts on the site also have small colonies of 'bird trees' growing within their upper storeys: with 3 different species in one case! This is quite a fantastical phenomenon in its own right, but also raises a fascinating quandary: do you allow these trees to persist, to potentially grow on towards maturity, and thus threaten their substrate tree with collapse? Should we consider them a parasite, feeding off the tree's own internal larder of recycled heartwood which is so valuable to it? Or would they ultimately root down into the ground and perhaps co-exist in a more sympathetic symbiosis with the chestnuts...?!?

A very impressive Montezuma pine was planted on the site some years ago, and has since grown into a substantial and bizarre, pompom-like tree, somewhat like something out of a Dr Seuss story. It is such a rarity that very few people have experience with the species, and it is not entirely clear how it should be managed, but it is clear that to lose it would be a terrible shame: there are currently no successors anywhere on the site, and so plans are afoot for some successional planting.

Next we stopped at a veteran oak with a large cavity at the base, which was filled with concrete by the managers of the time. This was accepted practice, the thinking being that this would prevent water and fungal spores from entering the wound, and thus decaying the tree, but thankfully science has moved on a little since! An interesting cultural artefact nonetheless.

Amongst the most impressive beeches on the site is a triple-stemmed sentinel towering over some formal shrubs within the garden. It appears upon approach to be an old 'lapsed' coppice stool, or perhaps even a 'stub'. But upon closer inspection it reveals grooves, perhaps unions, running between the stems and all the way to the ground, suggesting that it may instead be an old 'bundle-plant'; perhaps planted as a landscape feature many years ago, or perhaps just someone using up their leftover beech stock?!?

The tallest tree on the site however, is a giant redwood near the banks of Second Lake. It is already 38.4m tall, but may have much more growing yet to do. In this case, the tree has also produced an enormous swelling, or 'lignotuber' at the base. This is a mass of tissue which is capable of responding to life events such as the collapse of the main stem by producing new shoots, essentially turning it into a giant coniferous coppice stool!

After lunch, we then trekked out into the expansive historic parkland which partly encircles the gardens to the south. This part of the site has been acquired relatively recently by the National Trust (2006) and had been used for decades as farmland for growing potatoes. The acquisition has re-joined two major parts of what would have originally been a continuous estate stretching for many miles under the ownership of the Earls of Sheffield. In the few years since the acquisition, considerable improvements have already been made to the site, reverting it from intensive farmland to grazed pasture, with the intention of ultimately restoring it back towards its 'original' parkland character. Much of the discussion focused upon the challenges and techniques that this will involve, but we were also able to visit a good number of impressive veteran trees which thankfully have persisted since the conversion to arable. Most of these trees are still in fine health, but there was some concern that the re-introduction of grazing within the park may cause some issues such as nutrient enrichment and damage to stems/roots. It will need to be managed carefully then, but Tom Burn's knowledge and enthusiasm for the site suggests that it is in good hands!

Another important aspect of the parkland restoration is the planting of successor generations of parkland trees, to begin to plug the gap left by the loss of older trees, which have not been replaced in many years. These plantings could also potentially be used to create strategic viewpoints in the spirit of the original Capability Brown and Humphry Repton landscapes that the estate once enjoyed. However, it is unsure at this stage whether the planting will follow the original positions, enhancing views of Fletching church and the South Downs, or even mask the built infrastructure such as National Grid pylons which stretch across much of the landscape.

On the way down to the river we took some brief glimpses into the 'tolls', or tree clumps scattered through the parkland. Work is already underway to reduce the threat facing the surviving, open grown veterans within the clumps, where they are being overtopped by younger, more vigorous trees.

Along the river banks we found a giant hybrid poplar, a mysterious crescent of gnarly field maples (perhaps the relic of a single coppice stool that has expanded outwards and hollowed from within?), and a wonderful hornbeam twin maiden, as tall as any you are likely to see in Sussex, and as full of character. Ultimately though the best was saved to last: a wondrous oak nestling in amongst an old hedgeline, quite unassuming on the approach, but when circled and viewed from the hedge-side revealing itself to be surely the textbook veteran tree. A good half of its vast trunk has been entirely shed into the hedgeline, perhaps in the Great Storm of 1987, leaving a gaping hollow which easily accommodates at least 3 Sussex ATF Steering Group members! Further still, the loss of a major limb from the front of this hulk has left a large hole through which daylight pours, lending the shard the appearance of a giant needle. And yet the tree carries on regardless, with a great mass of canopy teeming above this marvel of biomechanics.

Here ended our first visit, with a truly humbling and apposite poem penned and pronounced by Sussex ATF's own poet laureate and host, Tom Hill, from within the oak itself:

The Sussex Oak

*The oldest friend that I did know,
From your acorns titans grow,*

Standing almost still,

*Twisted boughs,
Hollow trunk,
Iron strength,
Steely will,*

*Your might endures,
And all despite 10,000 storms and gales,*

*You've seen it all,
Helped empires rise,
And fall,*

*This land we claim,
And give a name,
Is surely yours,
Not ours,*

*You've been here all along my friend,
Waiting,
With silent power*

A sequoia-sized thanks then from us all to Tom and his fantastic team for a truly inspiring field trip, and one which will be very hard to follow indeed.