MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE TREES

Text and photographs by

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W&N
WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON

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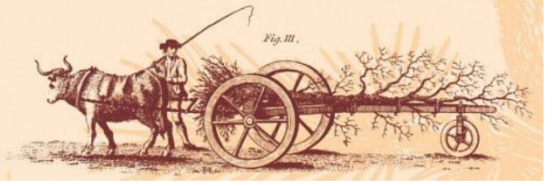

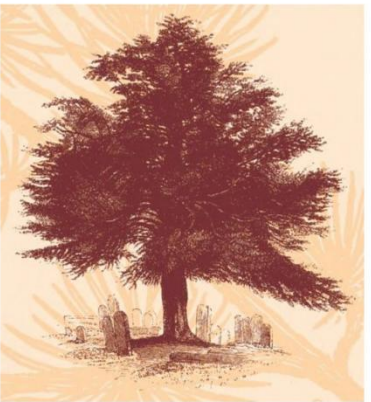

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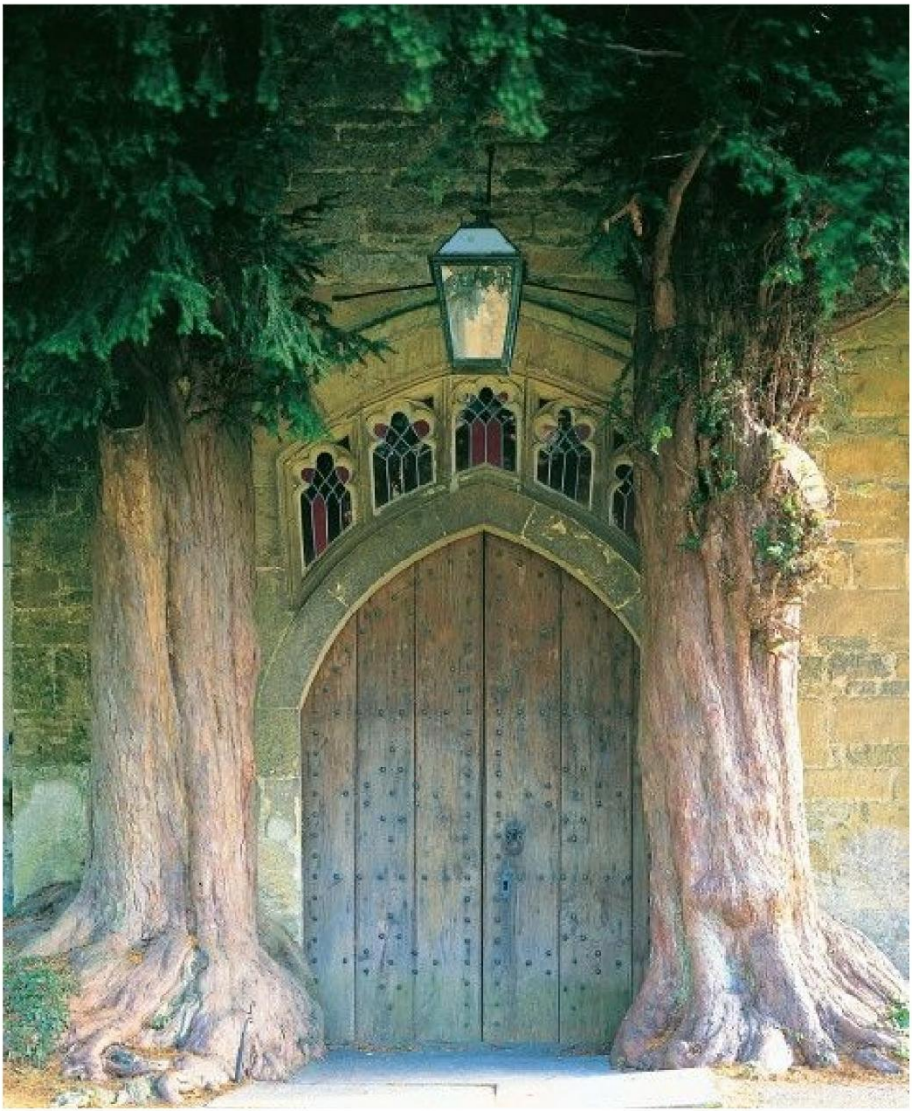


INTRODUCTION

MY BEST SIXTY

THIS IS NOT A CONVENTIONAL BOOK ABOUT TREES. IT WILL NOT HELP YOU IDENTIFY THEM, LET ALONE CULTIVATE THEM. IT'S A PERSONAL SELECTION OF 60 REMARKABLE INDIVIDUALS (OR GROUPS OF TREES) MOSTLY VERY LARGE, AND MAINLY VERY ANCIENT, AND ALL WITH A STRONG PERSONALITY.

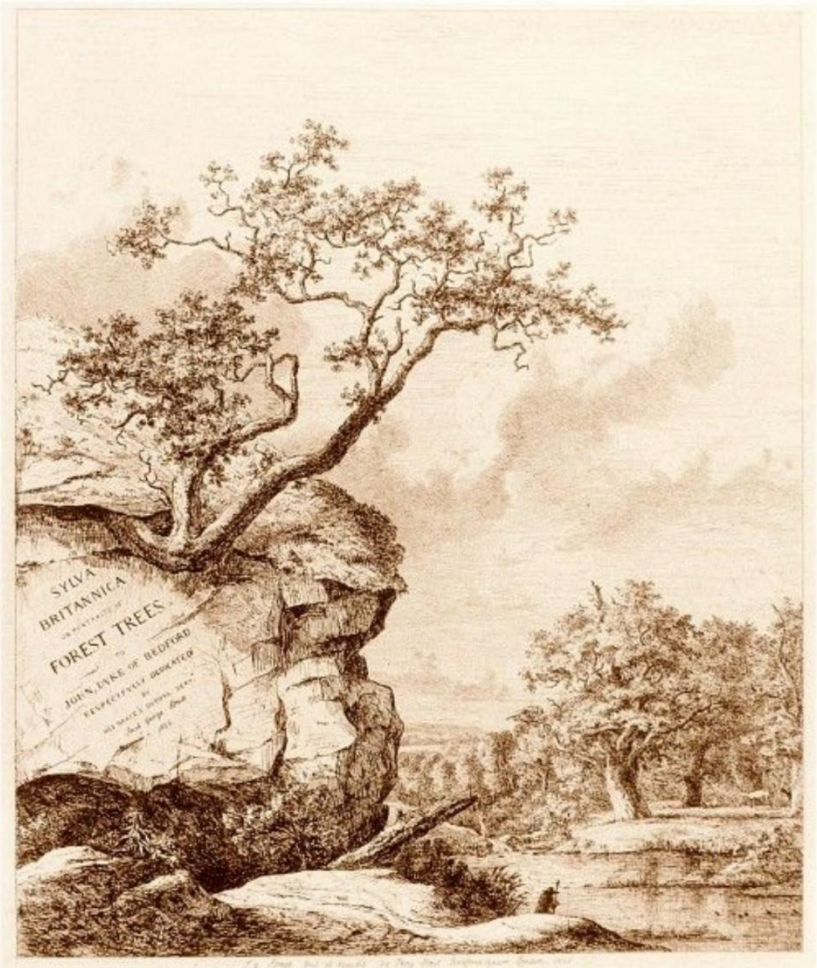
It is these living (or dying) monuments that I have tried to portray with pen and camera. No one has produced a book of British tree portraits, I think, since Jacob Strutt's *Sylva Britannica* of 1826. And of course Strutt, a little-known artist, did not have the benefit of the camera.

I can trace the origins of this book to two experiences – encounters, if you like – of my own. The first was at home in Ireland, the second on the borders of Tibet.

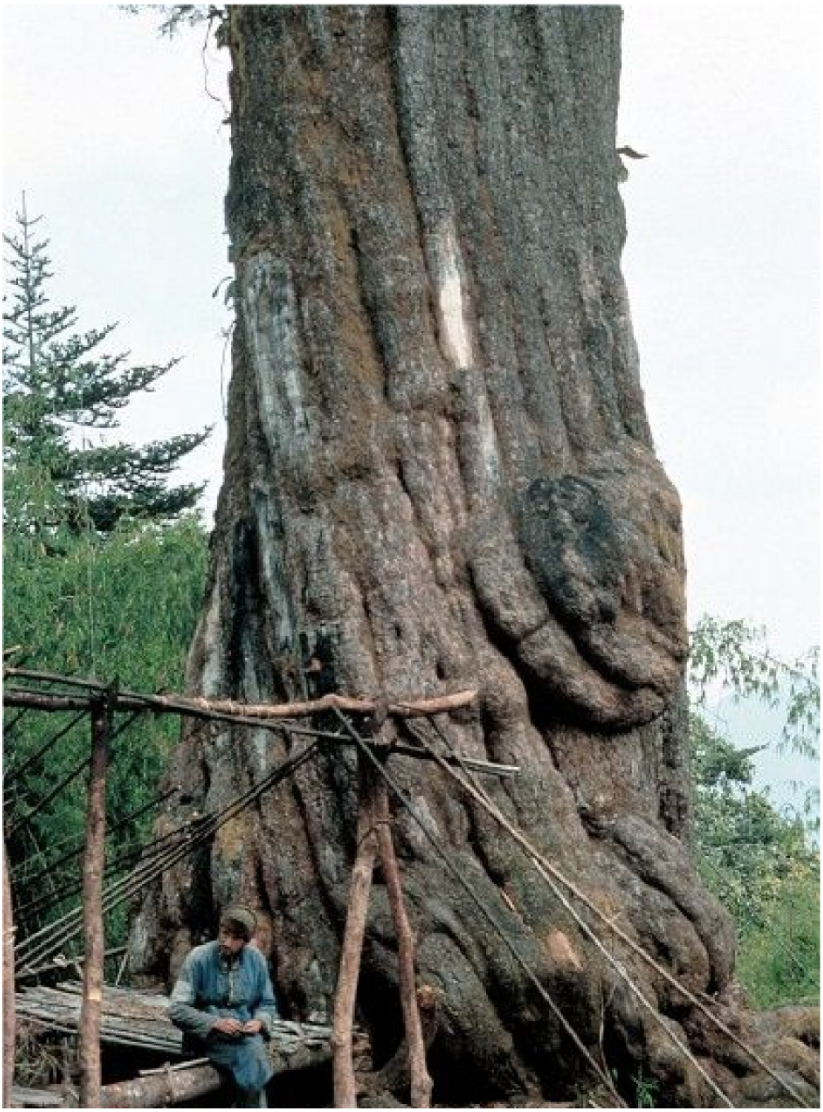
Now I don't usually hug trees, but on the evening of 5 January 1991 I made an exception. For three days the weatherman on Irish television had been tracking an interesting hole in the Atlantic pressure system; he forecast, rather too cheerfully I thought, that a severe storm would hit Ireland early in the morning of 6 January. I went out in the evening of the 5th and stood contemplating the old beeches in the garden: 19 of them. I guessed they were a little under 200 years old and 100 feet high. Why had I not looked at them more carefully before? The evening was absolutely still with the patch of red in the western sky that is supposed to delight shepherds. Pessimistically I put my faith in the weatherman. I slipped a tape measure round the smooth, silver-green, lichen-encrusted bellies of the trees and listed the measurements in a notebook. None was a record breaker. But all had been good friends to five generations of our family. *As* I taped each tree, I gave it a hug, as if to say 'good luck tonight'.

I awoke next morning to a noise like the sea, but a gale, not a hurricane. Rather an anticlimax, I thought – stupidly. When I went down to the garden, crunching over broken twigs and branches, the tallest beech lay there like a fallen sentry. All that day and the following night the gale persisted, with news of casualties coming in by telephone (oddly, the telephone line survived). Two of our oldest beech trees were straddling the main road; they were being cut up by the fire brigade. Another had sealed off the back drive. One had just missed the stable archway. I went out into the open parkland and watched, from as close as I dared, the trees facing their tormentors. The gusts struck each tree, or clump of trees, like a wave hitting the bow of a ship.

It reminded me of a night I once spent in a Force Ten storm in the North Sea, perched on the bridge of a trawler from Lowestoft. There would be a moment's struggle when you thought the bow would never lift; then the ship arched its back; with a juddering bang the spray flashed over the ship from bow-rail to stern. In the park, each time a gust hit a beech I thought it would capsize. Then it arched its back and was free. But 12, tall, ancient beech trees were ripped out of the ground before we heard the last of that storm.



Frontispiece for *Sylva Britannica* by Jacob Strutt (1826)



The only large ancient tree left alive by the loggers: a 33-feet-girth hemlock in Yunnan, China

The second encounter took place in November 1993 when I was plant-hunting in Yunnan, in south-west China, close to the border with Tibet. Yunnan is botanically one of the treasure chests of the world, as well as being stunningly beautiful. There are ten times more tree species in western Yunnan than in the whole of Britain and Ireland. We spent three weeks hunting maples, sorbus and birch – and dodging the logging trucks – in the mountainous border region where the peaks go up to 23,000 feet. One day our lorry brought us to a plateau full of giant rhododendrons and drooping juniper. Half an hour's walk down a path we were shown a giant Chinese hemlock spruce, *Tsuga dumosa.* It was so large, 33 feet in girth at breast height, that an old man had built a cabin among the roots. But the most remarkable thing about it struck me only after I had returned home. It was the first – and last – very large tree we saw in the wild in the whole of Yunnan. All the other large, ancient trees (away from the precincts of Buddhist temples) had been taken by the loggers. Yet this giant hemlock, unique in south-west Yunnan, was probably smaller, at least in volume of timber, than a large beech tree that it is commonplace to find in a fine park in Britain or Ireland.

From both encounters I drew the same lesson. We tend to take our large, old trees for granted. When they fall we feel a pang of bereavement. But it should not need an Atlantic storm in Ireland, or the hurricanes that hit southern England in 1987 and 1990, or even the new bypass that is ripping the heart out of Newbury, to teach us to appreciate old trees.

In Britain and Ireland, as Oliver Rackham has shown, we have inherited a richer legacy of old trees than any other people in western Europe. The French cut theirs down with cool efficiency. (Among the exceptions are the 300-year-old veterans in the forest of Tronçais, near Moulins, honoured with the names of outstanding Frenchmen. 'Marshal Pétain', named in 1918, was recently rechristened 'Hero of the Resistance'.) By contrast we have had a soft spot for old trees since the time of Shakespeare – or so we like to think.

I travelled the length and breadth of Britain and Ireland doing research for this book. Away from gardens and arboreta, many of the ancient trees that I saw were suffering from neglect. Fences, put up years ago to protect them from sheep, cattle and horses, were often broken and useless. I do not blame landowners. Often the task is beyond them. They receive little help from the authorities. There are few signposts to any of the trees in this book; in fact few ancient trees have ever been put on the Ordnance Survey. And few historians have troubled themselves much about these monuments – with the honourable exceptions of Oliver Rackham and Sir Keith Thomas.

Yet old trees are living documents; when they die they can be dated from the annual rings, unless the core is hollow; even then it may be easier to date them than a building. Most depressing was the experience of finding 1,000-year-old trees, once famous and well cared for, now left to their fate, like the yews at Lorton and Borrowdale in Cumbria, whose bark is being stripped by local sheep.

The indifference towards old trees makes a mockery of our supposed new respect for the environment. Consider the raw facts. The giants of our native species – oak, ash and beech – are the biggest living things on these islands: heavier than any land animal, taller than most buildings, older than many ancient monuments. If a big tree was not a living organism it would still be a remarkable object. A big oak or beech can weigh 30 tons, cover 2,000 square yards, include ten miles of twigs and branches. Each year the tree pumps several tons of water about 100 feet into the air, produces a new crop of 100,000 leaves and covers half an acre of trunk and branches with a new pelt of bark. Yet the tree is alive. There is no mass production: every tree, sexually conceived, is built to a different design – as we see at first glance.

And nowhere are these astonishing objects to be found in more profusion than close to where millions live. They are the wonders we take for granted, shading the village green, crowding the park, dominating the landscape.

In the past we have been complacent – with tragic results. Look at the views of southern England as we know them from the painters of the last two centuries: Salisbury painted by Constable, Petworth by Turner. The English elm dominates each of these landscapes, 'immemorial' in Tennyson's phrase. And now we can hardly remember them.

Those trees have gone the way of the dodo (apart from some dogged survivors around Brighton), killed by a fungus brought by an immigrant bark beetle carelessly imported from North America.

How did I choose the 60 trees, and groups of trees, for this book? Anyone interested in trees would have made a different selection. But this is my choice from thousands. I found these 60 remarkable in age, size, form, historical interest, or the use to which they were put. I have chosen them as an anthologist would cull his literary flowers, or an architectural writer would choose his 1,000 'best' buildings. I set myself only two rules. All trees had to be alive (or dead on their feet) in Britain or Ireland. They had also to be photogenic – or at least accessible to my camera. Roughly two thirds of the collection consists of ancient native trees, one third of exotic newcomers from Europe, the East and North America. The natives include only six out of the 35 species normally considered by botanists to be indigenous – meaning that they came to Britain unassisted after the last Ice Age. But these are the six that grow biggest and live longest: common oak, ash, beech, yew, Scots pine and birch. A seventh giant, the sessile oak (*Qtiercus petraea)*, common in western Britain and southern Ireland, has failed to be included. As a token of my respect, I include a photograph of the champion sessile oak, a tree at Croft Castle, Herefordshire, 37 feet in girth above the lowest branch.

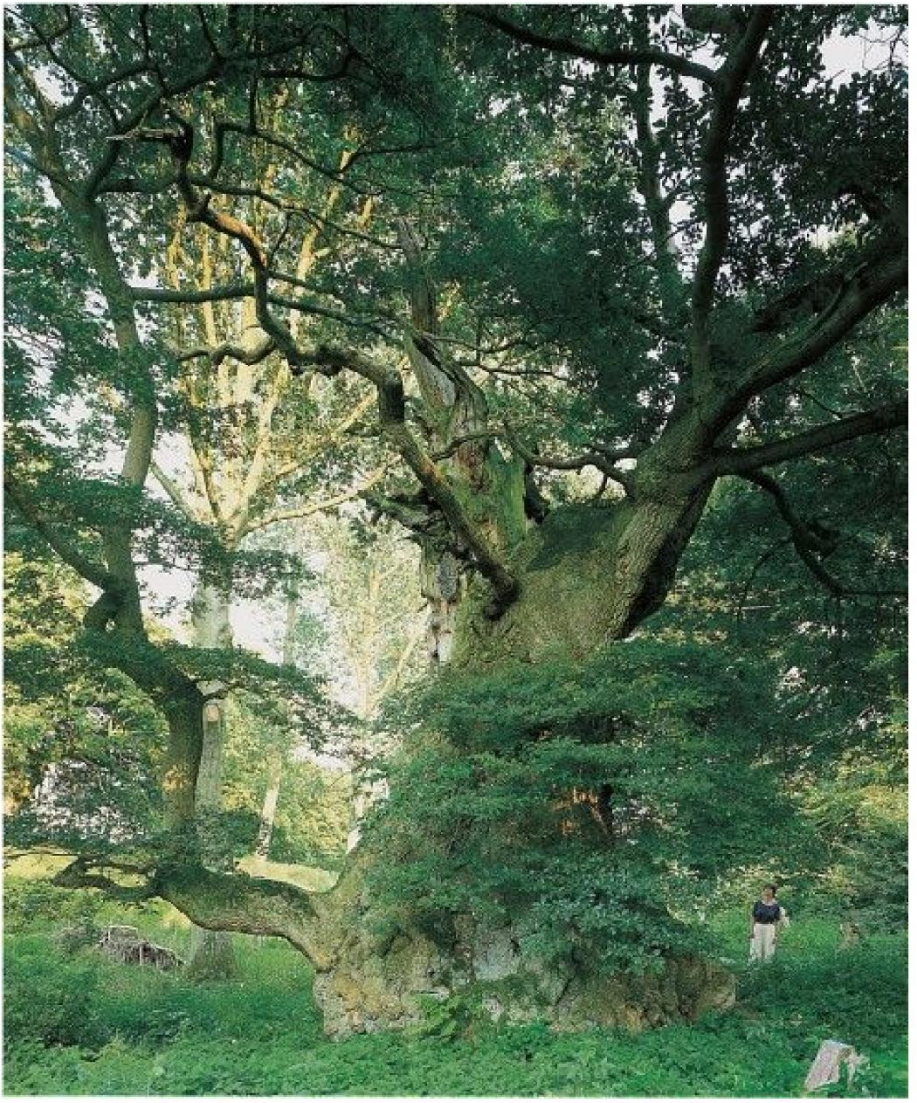
My selection ranges from the cavernous Bowthorpe Oak in Lincolnshire, to three ancient Scots pines at Rothiemurchus, remnants of the Caledonian Forest. Among the exotics, in the section called *Travellers*, the trees from North America are dominant. These are the new champions of British and Irish woods, replacing those that were brought from Europe hundreds of years ago. The tallest Douglas fir, the 212-feet-high specimen at the Hermitage, Dunkeld, is the tallest tree yet recorded in these

islands. And who knows, it may one day top 300 feet – the height it has reached at its home in Oregon. The tree is hardly more than 100 years old and rising like a space rocket. In the final section, *Survivors*, I contrast ancients like the 'Conqueror's Oak' at Windsor with an amazing Chinese newcomer, the *Metasequoia glyptostroboides.* This newcomer was discovered as a fossil by a Japanese palaeobotanist in 1941, and only a few months later was found to be alive and well and living in a remote corner of south-west China. Today the 70-feet-high specimens at Cambridge Botanic Garden are only 48 years old but have already the gnarled roots of veterans. The Conqueror's Oak has been dying for about 300 years but has still a large head of fresh green leaves.

To visit these trees, to step beneath their domes and vaults, is to pay homage at a mysterious shrine. But tread lightly. Even these giants have delicate roots. And be warned that this may be your farewell visit. No one can say if this prodigious trunk will survive the next Atlantic storm – or outlive us all by centuries.

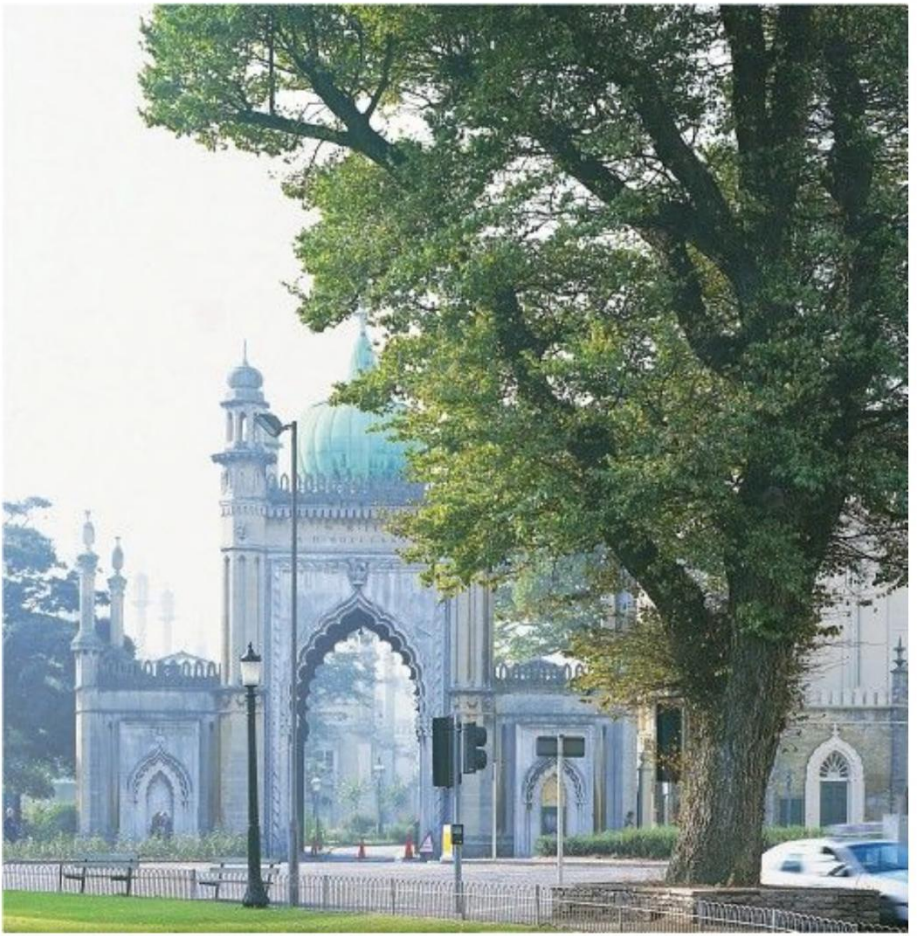
To hunt out and photograph these trees, that punctuate the landscape from Kerry to Tayside, I depended on the knowledge, goodwill and enthusiasm of numerous experts. No one gave more generous supplies of all three than Alan Mitchell, for many years Britain's leading tree guru, though sadly he died before this book was finished. For botanical advice, and unflinching criticism of every sort, I have relied on Charles Nelson, formerly taxonomist at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin. Other botanists to whom I am especially grateful include Matthew Jebb, Keith Rushforth, Keith Lamb, Donal Synnott, Stephen Spongberg,

Thomas Ward and David Hunt. I should also like to thank the staff of the Royal Archives, (Windsor), the Kew Herbarium library, and Brent Elliott and the staff of the RHS library. I am much indebted to Kenneth Rose who added polish to the text.

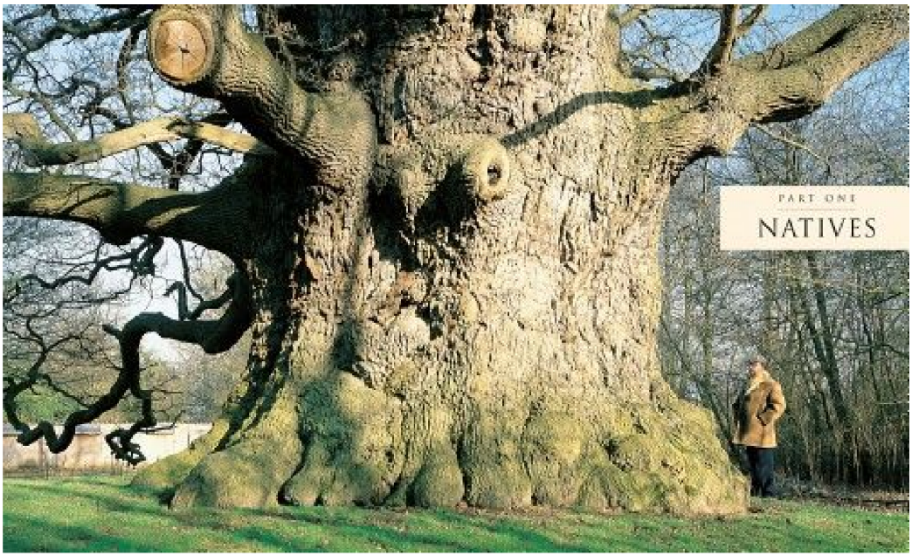


The champion sessile oak at Croft Castle, Herefordshire – 37 feet in girth

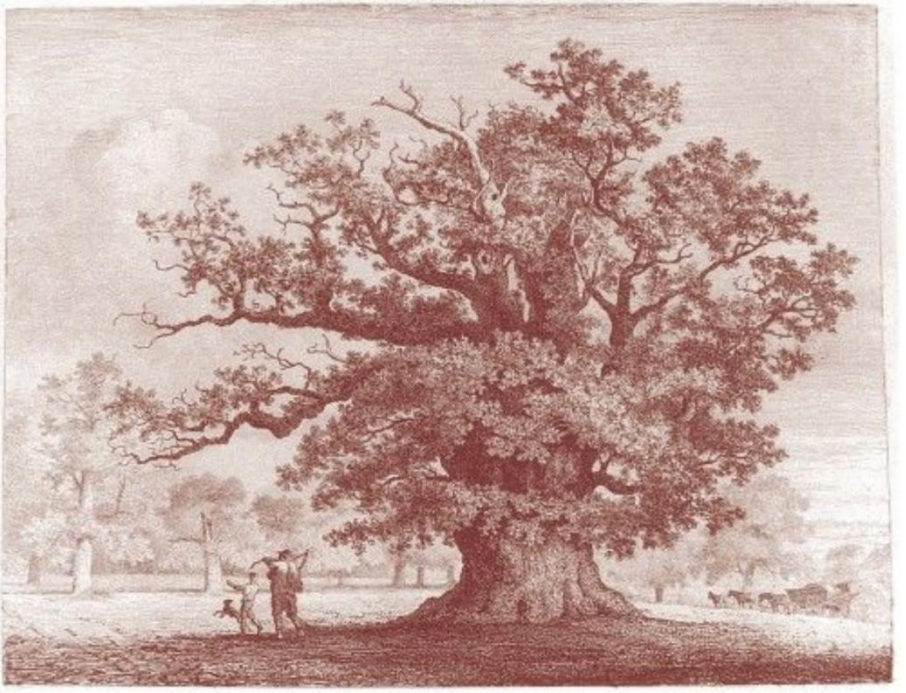
addicted to trees herself; her zeal in editing this book was all the more valiant.



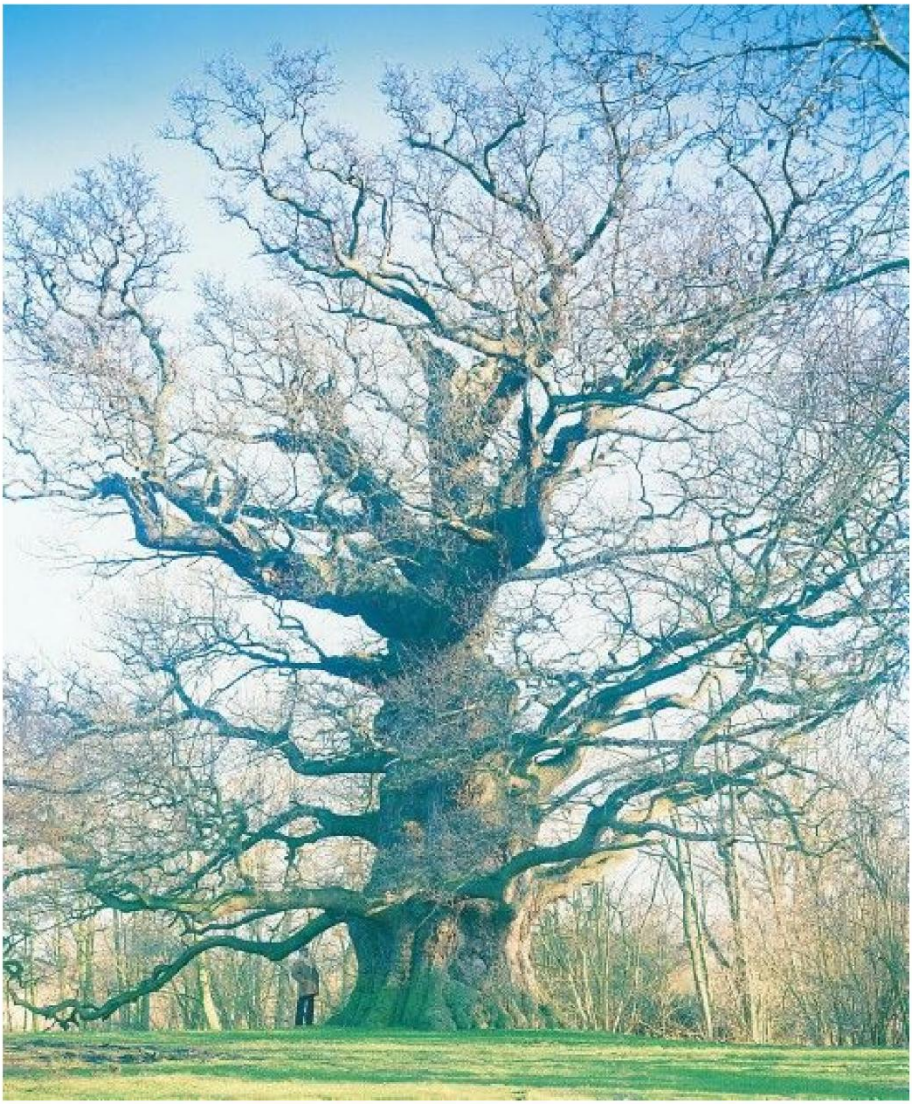
Survivors from the elm plague: English elms at Brighton



Fredville ‘Majesty’, co-champion oak of Britain



The Fredville Oak, from Sylva Britannica *by J. G. Strutt, 1825.*



Taxus baccata
Wakehurst, Sussex.
Kew/National Trust

53 *page 164*
Common oak ✔
Quercus robur
Windsor Park, Berkshire.
Crown Commissioners

54 *page 168*
Sweet Chestnut ✔
Castanea sativa
Tortworth Church. *Vicar*

55 *page 170*
Yew ✔
Taxus baccata
Old castle at Crom, Co.
Fermanagh, N. Ireland.

56 *page 173*
Yew ✔
Taxus baccata
Harlington Churchyard, Middlesex. *Vicar*

57 *page 174*
Common oak  ✔
Quercus robur

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