



Chairman's Comments

Ever since moving to Shropshire rather too many decades ago, walking the Severn loop in the county town has been rather a habit. A couple of weekends ago we did our annual October pilgrimage to watch the salmon leaping the weir, but as we walked downstream from the English bridge we approached a couple of people watching something in the river, one of whom had a camera lens longer than Nelson's telescope and by the way he was struggling with it, several times heavier. For once I didn't have my binoculars, you don't expect to need them in Shrewsbury, but it was clearly an otter jumping in and out of the water and devouring a small fish on the far bank beneath the site of the old Gay Meadow, and now the site of a recent development more akin to Iron Curtain Bucharest. This apparently has some rather derogatory names locally and cries out for some judicious tree planting between itself and the river to break up its monolithic structure. The otter has been seen coming down the Rea Brook into the Severn quite often recently and judging by the number of people who kept stopping to watch, it could well become quite a tourist attraction. Hoping to see a pair of them next time.

As for the salmon, well there was an impressive crowd of cameras down at the weir. Only one made a rather half-hearted leap, though what it lacked in distance it more than made up for in height. The weekend before however, the spectacle had been magnificent with fish flying skyward all across the fall of water. Oh well, off to the wonkiest (architecturally) café in town at the Bear Steps for a light lunch and some cool jazz and reflect on what we'd seen.

Almost forgot the trees! Walking the loop back in February through Mountfields, the playing fields adjacent to Frankwell car park, which used to belong to Darwin's birthplace on the Mount, we came across a triangle of freshly planted *Betula papyrifera* (Paper or Canoe Birch). The significance of why this species was chosen escapes me. I presume that the local authority was responsible (I thought they were short of pennies) and no expense had been spared with considerable steel guards around them. Anyway, one is now as dead as John Cleese's famous parrot. Motto: establishment plus lack of maintenance equals a certain lack of life. And I've often wondered about the fastigate (columnar) oaks planted by the Frankwell suspension footbridge. They look odd if not freakish and the tree bible I use does not have a good word to say about them. The last vestige of the old Smithfield, that magnificently long cattle drinking trough, disappeared a couple of years ago and all that remains are the enamelled signs on the walls of Birch's ironmongers, now closed, and which will doubtless be redeveloped before long. It seems that the powers that be wanted to remove all traces of the history of this part of town.

But that was the past and now to the future. The Severn Tree Trust's future winter meetings take place at the **HQ of the Wildlife Trust in Abbey Foregate**. The committee thought it was a more easily accessed and more central location with free evening parking on the adjacent car park so we are hoping for a good turnout for our first talk by Alastair Hotchkiss of the Woodland Trust with the fascinating subject of the Restoration of Ancient Woodlands. As always non-members are very welcome (£2.00), the venue

provides refreshments (£1.50) and we kick off at 7.30pm on Tuesday 10th November. We hope to see many of you there.

Peter Aspin

The Restoration of Ancient Woodlands by Alastair Hotchkiss of the Woodland Trust

A talk mainly on the concept of ancient woodlands in the UK, and an introduction to the work that the Woodland Trust are doing to help restore these sites, particularly where they have been cleared and planted with dense conifers over the past century or so. There will be a particular emphasis on the ecological interactions and the role different trees play in the ecology of ancient woodlands, but the talk will also touch on various subjects including woodland archaeology, pharmaceuticals and the potential for lifesaving medicines to be sought from our ancient woodland plants, and a potentially tenuous link between the UK's lack of timber in the early 20th century and international political problems in the middle-east today.

Our last visit for the year to Powys Castle 11th October 2015

Twelve members turned up for the re-arranged visit to the National Trust-managed area around the Castle of the large Powys Estate which itself harbours many ancient trees. (Beside the entrance road is an enormous hulk of a dead oak with a girth of 10.87m.) But it was the trees in the gardens and wilderness area around the castle which we had come to see. It was a surprise to find on arrival that the gate to the garden was locked at 4pm so our tour of the garden was rather faster than we would have liked. Nevertheless we saw many interesting trees including some national champions!

The brochure for the Tree Trail is out of print but fortunately Graham Pearce had the 2006 version from a previous visit and the entrance volunteer lent us the last copy of the 2010 version, which, Graham pointed out, still had significant errors in the data on species introduction dates. We hope the new edition, in preparation, will be accurate.

The Castle sits on top of a ridge which is separated from the wilderness ridge where most of the interesting trees are to be found, by a flat area of lawn. Along the south facing Castle ridge are beautifully maintained terraces of mainly herbaceous species separated by stairs with enormous areas of yew hedges and topiary which are a feature of Powys. Fortunately there are series of winding sloping paths which lead to the lawns and wilderness area, our main area of interest. Close to the entrance we saw a Paper Bark Maple *Acer griseum*, Maiden hair tree *Ginkgo biloba*, Tulip tree *Liriodendron tulipifera* and a Pocket Handkerchief Tree *Davidia involucrata* with a few round dark fruits on it. Across the pond we saw the UK Champion Common Silver Fir *Abies alba* for height (49m) in 2009, before climbing slowly up onto the wilderness ridge where we admired the many ancient oaks, sessile, pedunculate and hybrid with girths ranging from 5.32m to 7.13m as measured in 2009. From above we failed to spot the county champion *Nothofagus (Lophozonia) obliqua* for height (21m), then passing a few Coastal Redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*), we came to an Atlas Cedar (*Cedrus atlantica glauca*) with very sparse foliage and severe die-back of the branches which Andy immediately recognised as the newly identified disease of Atlas, but not the other, Cedars, *Sirococcus tsugae*.

Nearby we came upon a colourful *Nyssa sylvatica* Tupelo tree and the county champion Sugar Maple *Acer saccharum* not to be confused with the Silver Maple *Acer saccharinum* which we had seen earlier. All the Acers and many other species were showing splendid autumn colour which Graham said was due to the sunny weather we had in September rather than any frosts which are normally linked to autumn colour.

While standing discussing the differences in tree colours we all became aware of the unmistakable fragrance of the Katsura Tree *Cercidiphyllum japonica*, a burnt sugar smell, but could we spot it? Normally in October its autumn colour and round leaves are easy to spot but it was only by walking up-wind about 50m did we find a small grove of young trees completely devoid of leaves. The fragrance persists but to a much lesser extent in the fallen leaves and it is only at this time of year that it is

noticeable.

As time was passing we pressed on as we were keen to find the cork oak tree (*Quercus suber*) which is a feature of Powys Castle garden. We found it on the south side of the ridge as it drops back down to the level of the lawns. Its bark is most remarkable as it is pure cork although due to the extremely knobbly form on this tree, it was difficult to recognise until touched or punched. It certainly did not resemble the managed cork oaks of Spain and Portugal where long sheaths of bark are removed every nine years by which time the new bark has reached the thickness of a normal cork as used in wine bottles.

Peter and Graham were keen to find the UK and Ireland Champion *Acer henryi* for girth, with its small tri-lobed leaves which does not make it immediately identifiable. It is at the bottom of the terrace slope in the north west corner of the lawns hidden behind one of the two metre high yew hedges. At 1.65m in girth in 2009 it was not very impressive and its very straggly forms suggests it may not survive much longer.

Taking the circular path with high yew hedges back to the middle terrace we stopped by a *Cornus kousa*, Chinese dogwood, which was covered in its pink globular fruits about 2cm across. These fruits are edible and most of us tried one, but they are not very tasty. There seems to be no logical reason why some single trees of this species fruit regularly whereas some groups of them rarely produce fruit at all.

From this terrace we saw a row of Strawberry Trees *Arbutus unedo* and nearby a *Heptacodium micronoides* the Seven son flower tree (!) all in full flower. At the exit end of this terrace we saw the UK champion *Ilex pernyi* (Perny's holly), a Chinese holly with its very distinctive diamond shaped leaves closely appressed to the stem and on this female tree, typical red berries.

Although unfortunately rather hurried, our visit showed the autumn colours at their very best but if we had arrived even half an hour earlier we would have seen them in full sunlight! But luckily the tea-room staff bent the closing time rules and some of us were able to grab a cup of tea before departing.

Andy Gordon



An edible fruit of *Cornus kousa*.