

Chapter 6 Managing Veteran Trees of landscape and cultural interest

The land surrounding veteran trees may be very important for their survival, and appropriate management can enhance the conservation value of the tree or the site. The situation of the tree is also important for its contribution to the landscape itself.

6.1 Veteran trees in the wider landscape

6.1.1 Introduction

The over-riding importance of veteran trees in landscape terms lies in the trees themselves. While replacement is no substitute for the conservation of the veterans, detailed survey and careful re-planting programmes are needed to perpetuate their pattern within the landscape. The choice of species, source of stock, siting, planting and subsequent management are all vital, in order to provide continuity.

In different parts of Britain the 'Countryside' has a very different feel to it and the ancient trees often reflect this. For example, the flat landscape of the Vale of Aylesbury with its black poplars is very different from the undulating Lake District with field boundary pollards (Figure 30). This in turn has a very different character from the wooded nature of the Chilterns. It is important that this local distinctiveness is maintained and that cutting practices in terms of tree types and shapes continue the local traditions as far as possible.

Figure 30. *See colour plate page 88.*

Following the devastation of the elm population through Dutch elm disease many of the large trees remaining within hedgerows or along the edges of fields and roads are oak or ash trees as maidens or pollards. These are now especially vulnerable because of management for safety reasons along highways. Recent emphasis on planting and managing hedges should take into account the importance of leaving some trees to grow on. In the meantime, existing old trees need to be treated sympathetically to ensure their survival and that of the general aspect of the area they are found in.

Certain older landscape features also have historical associations with trees, many of which are now veterans, for example earth banks delimiting areas of former ownership or management. It is equally important that these features are retained and managed.

6.1.2 The management of veteran trees (and future veterans) in the landscape

Studying the characteristics of veteran trees in the local area can be valuable in perpetuating the character of the landscape. The following are some ideas to consider:

- **Pollard** (especially young trees) if there is a history of pollarding on the site or in the local area. If there is no historical reason for pollarding check that the historical value of the site is not compromised by doing so.
- **Cuts on trees.** In an area where trees were actively managed, flat and even cuts can look quite in keeping. If the overall atmosphere is to 'look natural' flat cuts can be quite intrusive. In this case try methods such as pulling or winching to make more natural looking breaks or roughen up the cuts after they have been made. This can be done simply by making coronet cuts, or V shapes, with a chainsaw in the cut surface (Figure 31).

Figure 31. *See colour plate page 88.*

- Be careful when planting new trees or encouraging regeneration. Make sure that they are in the most appropriate position, for example don't destroy vistas and do not create competition for existing veterans.
- When replacing trees (either by natural regeneration or planting) try to use the same species of local provenance and, if possible, trees that have very similar characteristics. Species that have been 'lost' from the site can also be used.
- The planting of exotic species, for other than timber production, is not necessarily a problem for nature conservation and may be desirable from the landscape point of view - to maintain traditional or planned planting patterns. Exotics should usually remain in the minority on sites with high nature conservation interests.

6.2 Veteran trees on ancient monuments

Where veteran trees are sited on an ancient monument their management must be carefully considered (Figure 32). While it is likely that disturbance by the tree's root structure has already occurred, further physical damage to the monument through collapse of the upper parts of the tree or lifting of the root plate (and underlying archaeological features) continues to be a potential threat.

In these cases it is important to limit the damage that may occur to the monument. Regular inspection is necessary and, where possible, reduction of the height/weight of the tree. If it is of suitable shape, encouragement of growth lower down, prior to cutting, may help to keep the tree alive without damaging the monument.

An additional factor to be considered in the management of veteran trees on ancient monuments is the depth and structure of the substrate. On ancient monuments this is frequently compacted, encouraging a shallower rooting pattern than is encountered elsewhere in the area.

Advice can be sought from the inspector of the appropriate heritage authority. If works are likely to affect an ancient monument, Schedule Monument consent may be necessary (see chapter 11).

Figure 32. See colour plate page 89.

6.3 Veteran trees in designed landscapes

When considering the future management of historic parks or gardens the starting principle should be to conserve, and where necessary repair, the surviving historic fabric. Veteran trees are as much a part of that historic fabric as the structures - from the main house or hunting lodge, to the park wall or park pale - which lie within the park. They should be valued equally as individual features and for their contribution to the wider parkland landscape. In general there should be a strong presumption in favour of keeping them and ensuring their future survival.

For those sites with public access, matters of health and safety can arise and must be given serious consideration (see chapter 10). Similarly, in more formal areas such as gardens, half dead trees and fallen timber might detract from the design or be viewed as evidence of neglect by the visiting public. In these cases a balance should be struck and where removal is considered necessary the timber should be re-located to a less formal area for creation of a habitat. Better still, in some situations this problem can be solved through education and explanation.

At a limited number of sites, the veteran trees will themselves form the basis of an overall landscape design. Usually this happens where the trees have been planted, or incorporated, as part of a late 17th or early 18th century layout that has not undergone the more usual reworking as a result of changing fashions. At such sites there might well be a debate about how to best manage the landscape for the benefit of present and, more particularly, future generations. This becomes more pertinent as the design loses its integrity and becomes gappy.

For example, avenues planted on new lines may result in the loss of much of the historic interest. Felling sections causes a temporary loss of historic fabric, as well as natural habitat, but provides continuity of historic design and new generations of trees.

As the above suggests, good management of veteran trees within a designed landscape needs to be considered in detail in order to maximise understanding and appreciation. Using site-based and documentary research, a comprehensive site plan can be drawn up against which the value of the landscape as a whole, and its individual parts (including veteran trees) can be assessed. Only by working through such a process can an informed decision be made about priorities for protecting veteran trees, the historic interest and valuable habitats.

Further Reading: English Heritage (1998), Phibbs (1991), Rackham (1986, 1988, 1989, 1990).

6.4 Veteran trees in a modern world

Veteran trees are often features in their own right, for example outside houses, pubs (Figure 33) or churches, on village greens and in prominent places. When managing trees in these situations the views of local residents and visitors must be considered. These types of tree are often unlikely to be felled because many people appreciate them. They are, however, vulnerable to concerns about their safety.

Figure 33. See colour plate page 90.

Veteran trees also occur in urban or suburban surroundings. It is unusual to find populations of ancient trees in such places (though they do occur) but individuals can be found in the most unusual situations. Sometimes it seems as if the threats are so great and the space the tree is in so confined that encouraging the attributes of old trees in such places is a foolhardy occupation. However, one of the chief management techniques used on old trees is quite applicable to urban situations and can help create veterans of the future: pollarding.

Some street trees such as plane, lime and sycamore respond very well to pollarding or heavy pruning. Although urban trees may be pollarded, this is not done for the same reasons as trees in rural settings. The aim is to keep the tree to a manageable size and any technique that achieves this can be used. In addition, regularly cut, responsive trees develop unusual appearances, which can add character to the neighbourhood (seen more regularly, for example, in France than Britain). If the work is done for practical or aesthetic reasons the result can be a tree with ancient features. There is no reason why characterful trees should not be found on city streets as well as in the countryside. Although street trees have been understudied in this respect, they may still offer valuable sites to wildlife.

An urban habitat can be a hostile environment for veteran trees, which can suffer from:

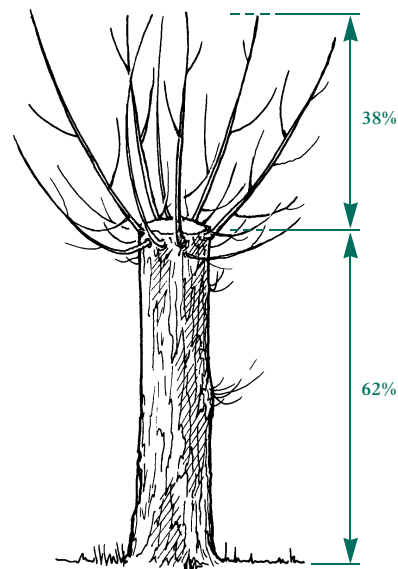
- excessive safety work, trimming and 'tidiness';
- severing of roots caused by the digging of trenches for cables etc. Excavation work should not be carried out within a separation distance, extending away from the tree for 15 times the diameter of the trunk at breast height (ie 30 m for a tree of diameter 2 m). This should be regarded as a minimum;
- run off from roads polluted with salt and trace elements from worn tyres;
- tarmac, concrete or other unnatural substances right up to the trunk of the tree causing drought conditions;
- excessive compaction round the roots;
- vandalism and damage;
- high nutrient levels from dog excreta.

It is important to realise that pollarding trees in this, as in any setting, needs to be done carefully by tree surgeons who show proven experience of working with veteran trees. Lopping the top off a tree that is too big for its setting is not the same as planned and careful pollarding. Poorly cut trees may be regarded as eyesores, incur the wrath of local residents and at worst be felled. In towns the future management of the trees is particularly important. Pollarding a tree once is not an appropriate method of dealing with it. A freshly made pollard needs to be cut at fairly frequent intervals (which can be as short as one to two years for street trees) so that the branches do not grow too big. If a gap in the cutting regime occurs, the task of dealing with the tree becomes substantially more difficult in the future. Today there are lapsed pollards on the streets of our towns that are in need of attention but are more likely to be felled and replaced. Pollarding some of these old trees might still be worth trying, otherwise the numbers of old plane trees, for example, will decrease dramatically in forthcoming years.

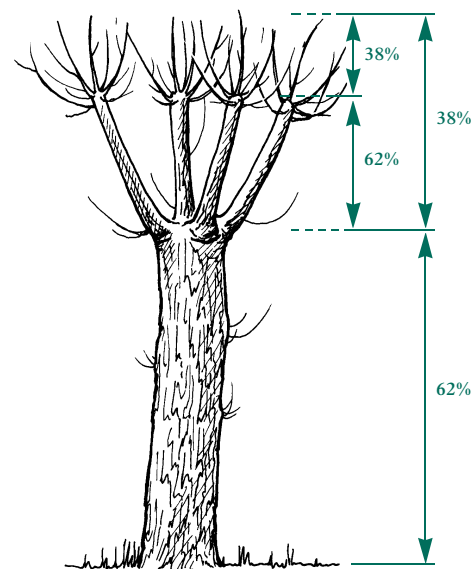
With planes and limes there is plenty of scope to create artistic 'patterns' through pollarding by cutting at higher points than previous cuts. Aesthetic proportions have even been suggested using 'golden mean proportions' where the stem of the tree should comprise 62% of the total height and the branches 38%. These dimensions produce an outline that is thought to be pleasing to the eye (Figure 34).

Figure 34. *An illustration of 'golden mean proportions'.*

Primary pollard



Secondary pollard



Further reading: Coder (1996), Mayhew (1993).

6.5 Educational opportunities

Veteran trees provide ideal educational opportunities for people to learn about their local environment and traditions. Collecting seeds and growing them on to plant out is a good starting point and enables local communities to 'connect' with their local ancient trees; this is the main focus of the Trees of Time and Place campaign. Activities promoted by organisations such as Common Ground also help to provide a focus and structure for such work and distributing information. Making children aware of the importance of trees, especially veterans, is a great investment for the future but adults should not be forgotten. The use of voluntary parish tree wardens helps to involve people and inform them about the importance of ancient trees and promotes tree recording as a contribution to the knowledge of trees in Britain.