

## Chapter 1 Introduction

Veteran trees are an integral and valuable part of the lowland British landscape. They are the old trees in woodland and parkland, the gnarled oaks in the hedgerows and the decaying pollard willows along riversides. Our ancestors valued these trees as vital assets; they were part of their subsistence and economy as well as objects of religious and social interest. In our more urban society most veteran trees are no longer retained and managed for their produce. A few have become tourist attractions because of their historical connections, but most are forgotten and neglected. Many more have already been lost, felled to make room for development, intensive agriculture and forestry, or for safety reasons.

Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in these elderly trees. Their biological, historical and cultural importance is slowly being recognised together with their aesthetic appeal and the unique contribution they make to the landscape. These trees are as much a part of our heritage as stately homes, cathedrals and works of art, and are a favoured subject of many of our most important paintings and engravings. Many veteran trees, such as pollards, exist as a result of man's handiwork.

Britain is of European importance for the large number of old broadleaved trees still surviving here. This is largely a result of historical factors which have allowed veteran trees in Britain to survive while in other European countries, old trees have severely declined in number or were rarely allowed to remain.

Across Britain the distribution of veteran trees is patchy. In some parts of the country they are very scarce, in other areas they may be surprisingly abundant. Once you have begun to notice old trees you start seeing them everywhere, village greens, churchyards, open farmland and urban streets.

Interest in ancient trees has been stimulated in recent years by the formation of the Ancient Tree Forum (ATF), which originated as a discussion group concerned with their management. Two meetings on veteran tree management organised by the Corporation of London resulted in publications (Read 1991, 1996) that have been widely disseminated. Then in 1996 the Veteran Trees Initiative (VTI), a partnership started by English Nature, was launched with the aim of promoting the conservation of veteran trees wherever they occur. Publications arising from the Initiative so far include an introductory leaflet (English Nature 1996), a conference report (Bullock & Alexander 1998) and a book about Moccas Park (Harding & Wall in press.). The interest of the general public has been stimulated by various television programmes (eg *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* and *Spirit of the trees*), *Trees of Time and Place*, the Great Trees of London project and the WATCH tree pack for children. The conservation of veteran trees is being further encouraged through the Lowland Wood-pasture and Parkland Habitat Action Plan (see Appendix 2) and promotion by the Veteran Trees Initiative of the inclusion of old trees in Local Biodiversity Action Plans. The increasing number of regional surveys of veteran trees will also help to establish their distribution and abundance.