

Cornwall Ancient Tree forum AGM

And field trip to Boconnoc Estate deer park

14th September 2024

What a brilliant day! Good weather welcomed twenty Cornwall Ancient Tree Forum visitors to Boconnoc estate in the Fowey Valley Cornwall, near to Lostwithiel. Elizabeth Fortescue, the owner also welcomed us and thanked us for the surveys and events we had undertaken over the last couple of years. She showed us the exhibition book of a great Cornish landscape artist Kurt Jackson which was opening this year -called "Oak". There were several painting of Cornish trees he completed at our suggestion, including Boconnoc, but he has also visited many great Oaks across the country.



Boconnoc's owner Elizabeth Fortescue welcomed Tim Kellett and the group showing us Kurt Jackson's exhibition book "Oak" with images of his paintings including Boconnoc's trees.

The AGM was refreshing because we had a majority of completely new visitors to the forum, all wanting to see what we had achieved since lockdown and what were the plans for the future. Tim Kellett, the chair, did a presentation of activities since the last online AGM. These included recording hundreds of new trees on the Ancient Tree Inventory, delivering veteran tree training for tree champions, talks to community groups, public events for Cornwall Wildlife Trust public events, sending out regular newsletters, undertaking historical and archaeological investigations into sites such as Boconnoc deer park and Kerrybullock deer park, delivering ancient tree safaris at Boconnoc and walks and talks at their recent music and wellbeing festival. We heard updates from the Ancient Tree Forum, Woodland Trust and the expansion of the Ancient Woodland Inventory to include parkland and wood pasture. After voting in our officers and board we reviewed accounts set up a small working group with some new members to help organise activities.

Pete Herring gave an informative introduction to the history of the deer park. This is the oldest deer park in Cornwall still with a herd of deer and was originally formed in 1393. He had seen evidence of this date because the owner had to seek royal permission to close and re-route a major public road to create the park.

Keith Alexander gave a review of his recent work surveying the saproxylic invertebrates in the deer park, showing how significant the site was in Cornwall and some of the rare species found.

Tim Kellett gave a review of the Ancient and veteran tree recording on the site from the original CATF visit in 2011 to the present. He identified the SSSI boundary, designated for the rare lichens originally recorded by Francis Rose, but strangely not because of the ancient tree themselves. He also showed how the original wood pasture of the deer park appeared in historic mapping and how much had appeared to change to woodland on the current aerial photos.



Walking into Boconnoc's medieval deer park

In the afternoon we ventured out to the medieval deer park starting with one of the gateways through the iron park pale introduced in the 19th century. Just inside this Pete Herring pointed out the wood bank that was the original park pale created in the 14th century. He suggested that Cornish pales were often not in fact created by wooden palings on a bank but by a 2m high stone-faced bank sitting alongside a ditch on the inside of the park. This construction, typical of a “Cornish hedge,” would be sufficient to keep the deer in. More recently these pales have collapsed, and ditches partially filled in, leaving the Victorians to construct new “modern” railings and walls.

At this point we were venturing into the original medieval deer park. However it is worth noting that the park was extended much further to the south in the late 18th century by the Pitt family when one section of the park pale was completely removed to extend the landscape. This area has been surveyed for the ATI revealing older trees that probably were part of original farm field boundaries.



Pete Herring and Tim Kellett examine the clever riders unlocking mechanism on this double acting latch on the wrought iron Victorian park pale gates produced by Hill and Smith ironworks in Staffordshire.



Just inside the iron railing is the original bank and infilled ditch of the stone-faced medieval park pale which formed a 2m barrier to retain deer in the park. The bank has been colonised by beech trees, many recorded as veteran.

As we walked on overgrown paths in the deer park, the landscape character changed, the woodland appeared ancient with large oaks and beech appearing in the dense wood. We knew a large part of this park was wood pasture up until the 20th century, but now it appeared very overgrown and overshadowed. There were some open areas along the track and valley, but many older oaks were showing signs of dead and decaying lower branches due to overshadowing. However nearly all of the oaks had low, wide-spreading branches even if decayed or fallen. This indicated they had grown in an open landscape maximise the size of their canopies.



Oaks originally open-grown in the wood pasture, now overshadowed by younger beech.

At one point we selected an old low branching beech on the side of a stream to give a quick introduction to recording a tree for the new members. Everyone was keen to measure and identify the main features and debate some of the finer points of “tree form.” This beech had a huge decaying upper trunk with extensive bracket fungi, assumed to be *Ganoderma australis*. It also had some high-level carving (arborglyphs) which it was thought originated from stationed troops in the wartime. (ATI tree number 264923)



Keith Alexander assisting the recording of the veteran beech in the medieval deer park.



Wartime graffiti on the upper trunk of the beech.

We managed to identify some of the pre-recorded ancient trees, but this was quite difficult especially with no phone signal for the ATI and also because of the extensive undergrowth of shrubs and bramble. The site looked quite different to the photos from the 2011 survey. We manage to locate one ancient on the extreme northern edge of the park and realised it was sitting on the steep bank of the medieval park pale, dropping down to the stream (a good water source for the deer). Just beyond this bank there was a 19th or early 29th century dry stone wall, a later separation from the fields beyond. This tree was re-measured with an increase in girth from 5.6 to 5.75m since the original record in 2011. It was also noted to have a hollowing trunk with a beefsteak fungi fruiting body inside.



Measuring a 400-year-old ancient oak on the 600-year-old bank of the park pale!

One of the gnarliest leaning oak trunks formed a nice backdrop for a group shot. It was a shame when we realised that this oak was in fact dead and heavily covered in ivy. When we checked the record this was alive in 2011. Still it will be a great decaying wood habitat for decades to come.

Keith Alexander examined deadwood on the ground for species and tapped branches allowing any invertebrates to be collected in his net. He discovered the large larvae of a longhorn beetle.



Larva of a longhorn beetle in decaying wood surrounded by predator species larvae.



Discussing the origins of the ancient oak growing on a circular mound in the flood plain just outside the deer park. This shows huge ivy stems at the base in need of cutting on this retrenching tree.



The same oak from a different view shows the mound. It also shows the impact of overshading from adjacent beech and sycamore trees. A dead elder tree previously recorded on the ATI lies alongside.

Many trees remain to be recorded, and many archaeological features remain to be mapped in the deer park as its history is uncovered. Further surveys of the trees will reveal more of their age and amazing habitat value. Without doubt this is the most important site for ancient and veteran trees and their associated species in Cornwall. We hope to return to do more considered surveys and offer some advice on veteran tree management. Following a successful event this year, we have the chance to attend a big music and environmental festival called Paradhís with walks and talks and a stand at the event.



The Cornwall group posing by a gnarly veteran oak.