

Summer Forum 2026 – Report and Reflections

By Clare de Villanueva, ATF Associate



Open grown Cadzow Oak in June sunshine with full crown (shelter belt in background)

Credit: C de Villanueva

What a pleasure to drive north for a generous welcome from knowledgeable Scottish and European colleagues and friends - everyone showing up for a stimulating exchange of ideas, and some marvellous old trees! It's clear that there is a keen appetite in Scotland to celebrate and take good care of ancient and other veteran trees. My notes from the conference follow (and I hope sincerely not to have mis-represented/mis-interpreted any of the technical details!). I start with a summary in case the notes are TLDR or 'too long didn't read'!

Summary reflections - Understanding place as a relationship

The history of people and open grown trees, as at Chatelherault, is a story of reciprocity – the ancient trees exist here as a manifestation of the relationships between humans and place. The relationships as I see it were/are of convenience of scale - for working bodies and tools, animal rearing, animal and human medicine, crops for nutrition, wood for tools, fuel and shelter.

I noticed broad picture thinking at the conference, and priorities around relationships, and low-intervention styles of management, with a recognition of the systems that maintain well-being of a collective of many species. For me, this understanding of place as a set of relationships - climate, geology, and species - was particularly striking in the wood pasture at lunchtime.



Whilst sitting amongst the meadow buttercup, veronica (speedwell), *ajuga reptans* (bugle), and pignut, there was time to observe and listen to the land and one another. Concerns were shared about whether last year's mast crop of acorns would result in any significant regeneration, and this prompted me to ferret about in a mound of brambles associated with a decaying stump - finding a young hawthorn, an elder, rowan, a badger hole, nettles, gallium/cleavers, and sure enough, a strong young oak sapling - the thorn is mother to the oak.

Maintaining the capacity and patience to notice small changes, via repeated visits, can be difficult - we don't have the same intimacy with the land that our ancestors did. So, as multiple speakers appealed to us over the two days - conservation shouldn't be about saving nature, but about repairing connection, by seeing ourselves as part of nature, and finding both our place and our relationships in a wider community of non-humans.

Notebook-pressed species from recovering pasture around the oaks.

Credit: C de Villanueva

Presentations on Thursday

We began with Ted Green, who encouraged us to consider the nuance around native and non-native designations. He used the example of migrating birds moving seeds, and the intersection of climate with disease on the history of sycamore in Scotland (which Ted encouraged us to call the 'Celtic maple', or the 'Scots Plane'!). Ted asked the audience to remain curious about received wisdom and hardline attitudes to native vs non-native species and challenged us to look at multiple sources of evidence. I appreciated his insistence that we have faith in species' capacity for adaptation, his warning against academic elitism or overly hierarchical professionalism, advocating instead for watching nature to learn all we can.

John Stokes from Tree Council (<https://treecouncil.org.uk/>) shared the work he's done on changing attitudes with funding and legislative bodies around built heritage versus ecological heritage. John believes that ancient and big important trees are likely still to be discovered in the UK, but shared concerns regarding the rate of loss of these trees over the last 20 years - '*we can protect trees, but we can't preserve them forever, it's how we manage that journey*'. John's understanding is that legislation/legal protection is only part of the picture of tree protection - that communities and grassroots mobilisation is valuable, via stewardship, guidance and training, a message coming from many of the speakers on Thursday. John advocated well for humans to be seen as part of nature, not separate to it, and for us to treasure the intrinsic and vital connections between human and ecological heritage. Due to a united campaign for change from organisations throughout our sector, he was excited to share that the Government is currently listening, and we look forward to further updates on this from John and the Tree Council, and the new Tree Action Plan. He also mentioned his book, [Out now: Trees of Britain and Ireland is the tree book you've been waiting for - The Tree Council](#)



Question time for the panel with Chris Knapman as Chair

Credit: Katherine Birch

Jill Butler walked us through some of the oldest trees in the Scottish treescape, including the Skipinnish Oak in the Highlands and Fortingall Yew in Perthshire. Jill helpfully explained how to interpret categorisations on the Tree Register (which needs more volunteers!) according to the interpreted form of a tree:

A-type is assigned to a single stem

B-type a split stem (the split meaning it is less straightforward to measure a girth comparable to a single stem)

C-type as a coppice or multi-stem

D-type, where layering is likely to have taken place.

The importance of looking at sub-fossil/microfossil records was emphasised. They show evidence of open grown habitats and wood pasture across the whole of the UK, including surprising species such as Scot's Pine.

Jill also celebrated the continued recording of old and important trees via the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory. Although accessing the inventory can be a challenge in areas of poor phone reception, it is clearly an invaluable resource, proving there are many trees still to be discovered. We learnt about the genetic tools available to trees and their capacity to respond to change via epigenetics (e.g., holly leaf spines) and evolution/co-evolution (e.g., bovine herbivores alongside with plant spines and cage-architecture <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41477-024-01649-4>), reinforcing the message from Ted to have faith in trees' capacity to adapt to changing environments.

Jill also shared evidence from diverse disciplines to support interpretations of past habitat extent and individual species presence/absence, moving beyond pollen analysis to include archaeology (e.g., timber trackways/causeways), and subfossils (e.g., old growth and low lateral branch sub fossils of

beetles). It was concluded that much of our past landscapes were of old open grown treescapes rather than closed canopy forest – glades, rides, edges and pasture being as important as the ancient trees. Finally, Jill appealed for the right trees to be given the right space – with concerns that tree planting presents a risk to established trees, and that we should take better care of our existing trees and woodlands.

Next, an intense, whistle stop introduction to morphophysiology from Russel Miller and James Chambers, focussing on the critical transition of a tree to veteran status (or death!). They appealed for hypothesis-led learning, rather than just observations, which might be vulnerable to confirmation bias. We were introduced to the eight models of tree growth sequence/pattern recognised in the temperate region e.g., A1 assigned to a stem, A2 the first branch off the main stem, A3 subsequent branch and with the A4 and A5 likely to be the terminal and or flowering growth, and to the types of epicormic growth, as orthotropic, plagiotropic and ageotropic.

James talked about reasons why retrenchment pruning does not work, and that we should stop trying to initiate this process artificially. James reminded us that decay and ageing are natural processes, with trees and fungi evolving together to ensure a cycle of nutrients. When we observe a tree in its transitional phases, we can mistakenly interpret that the tree is struggling or dying, when in fact they are undergoing change, adapting to the ageing process or changes in environment.

We learnt about the stages of tree growth, and that the maximum crown size is reached at stage 8, associated with increased hydrological resistance resulting in part from terminal bud scars (lots of terminal buds results in greater resistance to water movement). When (and at what size) the tree reaches this stage is determined by factors including gravity, wind, and genetics. Russell explained that the energy demands of the tree compared to energy production, (and demand versus production of different parts of the tree e.g., branches), will be a constantly dynamic process. For example, if a branch becomes shaded and demands more energy than it produces, then the branch is likely to be dropped, go back to the soil, and the tree reorganises to meet the new conditions – “reorganise or die”.

This process of reorganising is recognised as stage 9. Stage 10 includes elements of fragmentation, reproduction via layering or cloning. Stages of pulsing growth can be observed, including constant recycling of leaves, twigs, failed branches that weren't functioning well, heart rot, and roots. Cambial columns may develop, as an alternative or addition, to avoid the maintenance of the full circumference of xylem and phloem round a large diameter stem, hence cambial columns reduce a tree's energy needs. The recycling process is supported by fungal partners already present in the wood.

James and Russell explained that a tree has the potential for many phases of reorganisation, and we only witness a snapshot in 'tree time', using the well-documented example of The Arthur Clough Oak (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281063036_Conservation_Arboriculture_Learning_from_old_trees_artists_and_dead_poets), photographed over time. We learnt that some tree species exhibit the reiteration processes more often than others, and that oak and hornbeam are better able to use compartmentalisation and fragmentation than beech. Lime, hornbeam and birch are more likely to exhibit phoenix growth (assuming sufficient light and good protection from browsing). More generally referencing the ageing process, it seems that the closer growth is to the roots, the more efficient for the tree. Toward the end of the presentation, Russell shared some great photos of walking trees including a layering, rolling birch ([The Architecture of Trees in Temperate Regions](#) was mentioned and recommended).



*A textured, squat, hollow, ancient Cadzo oak in open grassland at Chatelherault
Image: Katherine Birch*

Next up was a talk from Kevin Frediani on TReMs (Tree-related Microhabitats), which included one of my favourite quotes of the day, “not failure - rather functionality”. Here we learned about reading a tree’s biography in the form of tree-related microhabitats – a collection of features related to the damage, disease, healing and ageing that comes with living as a tree (indeed as a human!). These rich and diverse features were described as both functional, dynamic, and inherently ephemeral – habitat features as both a product and a process. This appreciation of trees as archives, with features to preserve for habitat, rather than hazards to eliminate, might be relatively challenging to more traditional arboricultural theory or productive forestry.

We looked at cracks, burrs, holes, bark-lined con cavities, snags, pools, decay types, twig-tangles/witches broom, slime flux, tar, resins, alluvial deposits, and epicormics. This introduction was as foundation to the idea that our management affects the overall hosting potential of a tree, stand and treescape, and to consider our work in the form of a management score over and above a biodiversity score. This is to mitigate the siloing of species conservation that has happened over the past decades – managing for specific creatures or invertebrates, rather than the broader potential for habitat. The theory of alpha, beta and gamma biodiversity was introduced – zooming out to

understand the wider benefits and value of associated habitats and mosaics. Three priorities were shared:

Retention – of veteran trees, soil, halo release

Recruitment – successional planting or veteranisation

Intervention – low intensity, doing ‘the least’.

More details of the TReMs handbook can be found on the website [Field guide to tree-related microhabitats - waldwissen.net](https://www.waldwissen.net/en/microhabitats)

Next we heard from Paul Greenwood (SYTHI- Scotland’s Yew Tree Heritage Initiative), who highlighted the substantial gaps in the mapping of yew trees in Scotland. This was due to the history of academic and scientific understanding of UK yews and the assumption that they were usually in English churchyards, but the realities are far more interesting. We were taken through some fascinating twists and turns of Scottish history through the lifespan of yews, and the linking of the nation’s heritage with specific yew trees and important Scots, including Robert the Bruce Yew, John Knox and Castle Huntly, Aberdeenshire, St Columba’s yew, the carvings at Rosslyn Chapel with links to the Sinclairs and Knights Templar, and the beautiful Isle of the Yew on Loch Lomond. Intriguingly, Yggdrasil was argued as being a yew rather than an ash tree.

Paul touched on the potential for conflict when encouraging humans to access these magnificent yews as an intrinsic aspect of their Scottish heritage, whilst managing soil compaction. We learnt that yew trees can change their sex partly, wholly, back and forth, seemingly forever. Yews were described as Omphalos – sacred centres – the heart of a spiral around which all else revolves.

After lunch we enjoyed artist, Tansy Lee Moir <https://www.tansyleemoir.co.uk/>, sharing her process and some gorgeous photos, drawings and sketches of ancient and other veteran trees, married with some beautiful quotes from poetry and prose including “a tree itself is a river of sap” (I think attributed to Roger Deakin). She talked through the different ways of seeing, what and how we observe, and being intentional with our observation. We reflected on what creative expressions might be possible resulting from our emotional responses to trees.

Next, we were treated to the best photographs of the day from Chris Puddephat, who shared the progress and successes of a project to photograph the Wych Elms of Assynt. A small project which escalated fast to incorporate community, local schools, planting and propagation, and plenty of interpretation and celebration of these isolated and beautiful trees. It is thought that they have survived in part because of this isolation, combined with the colder temperatures (possibly being too low for the elm beetles).

Finally, Helen Read (ATF) and Simon Richmond (Arboricultural Association) talked through the formal routes to qualification for working with ancient and other veteran trees, via the VETcert programme. They emphasised the value of working on societal and cultural understanding about AoVTs in addition to legislation, as has been mentioned by many speakers during the day. The two main routes of practicing and consulting were explained, and how to access the free resources to support learning (via the Ancient Tree Forum website <https://www.ancienttreeforum.org.uk/resources/>, the free pdf download of David Lonsdale’s book, Ancient and other veteran trees: further guidance on management, and the London based VET-tree trails <https://www.ancienttreeforum.org.uk/resources/vtt/>).



*The ancient open grown Cadzow oaks in sunny grassland at Chatelherault
Credit: C deVillanueva)*

Friday – Field Trip to the Cadzow Oaks

With tree-related microhabitats, morphophysiology and artistic interpretation fresh in our minds, we were anticipating a great day at Chatelherault Country Park. Having successfully negotiated a small but rambunctious herd of bullocks, we learnt from John Darbyshire about the influences that has shaped the treescape at the site, including a landowners' attitudes to aesthetics, and the impact of different breeds of cattle on the land, before entering the wood pasture via a conifer shelter belt. We were told about the dense regional network of National Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest that surround the wood pasture here. We noticed that the 20-year-old planted oaks had experienced significant damage by grey squirrels (though could optimistically be reframed as undergoing a form of veteranisation), and apparently a small population of pine marten in Lanarkshire is likely to be on their way in the next few years. We discussed high intensity versus low intensity farming practises and outcomes, and the issue of poaching <https://ahdb.org.uk/knowledge-library/soil-compaction-by-livestock>

My first workshop was facilitated by Kevin Frediani, of National Trust for Scotland, with Katty Baird of Forest Research, on using the Tree-Related Microhabitats (TReMs) handbook produced by Swiss Federal Research Institute WSL <https://www.waldwissen.net/en/forest-ecology/nature-conservation/field-guide-to-tree-related-microhabitats> We discussed the benefits to developing a common language between disciplines and nations, to notice and protect tree habitats, tree stands and treescapes, and avoids the degradation associated with single species conservation management. We moved through further workshops with Tansy Lee Moir, Chris Puddephat (of Jackson Photography), to a session on landscape history and management with Chris Knapman and John Darbyshire, a session on propping and bracing with Helen Read and Mat Shute, and lastly morphophysiology with Russel Miller and James Chambers.

I was grateful to the participants, speakers and facilitators over the two days for their thoughtful, curious questions, that repeatedly opened discussion to accommodate uncertainty. We noticed that ash dieback was present at the site, although I didn't get time with any mature or veteran ash to assess how they had been affected by the disease. I'd hope that they would be living and managing alongside the infection given the combination of good air flow, the grazing away of fallen twigs (reducing the reinfection pressure), and the reduced intensity of honey fungus activity in a pasture context (compared to denser woodland settings).



A walking group of ancient tree enthusiasts in conversation, approaching the wood pasture Cadzow oaks via the evergreen conifer shelter belt

Credit: Katherine Birch

Reflections on the Cadzow Oaks

Seeing the Cadzow Oaks for the first time, I was taken aback at the high density of healthy ancients at this site – in plan-view (seeing the trees from above), it's likely that many of the clustered ancients form a closed canopy, with individuals likely to be co-dependent. This raised questions for me challenging my ideas on spacing, recruitment, and how many peers the now ancient trees had in their cohort when mature (and what was their spacing hundreds of years ago?).