



A Remarkable Beech Tree (*Fagus Sylvatica*)

In the Plumpton and East Chiltington parishes there are a number of recorded trees, of particular note being the ancient yew in East Chiltington churchyard and a fine, apparently record-breaking tall wild cherry in woodland off Plumpton Lane. The subject of this month's article is a monumental beech tree located in a plantation on Plumpton Plain. It is part of a shelter belt or hanger, a row of trees planted, often along a fence or other boundary line, mainly to protect animals or crops from cold winds and provide shelter in hot weather. It appears considerably larger, and consequently older, than other trees in the plantation.



This beech is included in both the Ancient Tree Inventory and Monumental Trees register but estimates of its age differ widely. Its dimensions, 21m tall and particularly its girth of 6.61m, put it in the Ancient category for beech trees with one survey claiming it may have been planted between 1685 -1715. A beech tree is categorised as 'Ancient' if it is assessed to be at least 225 years old. However neither the shelter belt or this tree appear on the First Edition 6" OS map of the area. If this beech was a notable specimen by the 1850s and standing alone in a field, (the surrounding trees being considerably younger) it would likely have been recorded. It can therefore be concluded that the plantation was established after 1850 and realistically the tree might be 150-200 years old. So it is still a 'Veteran' tree and is hovering close to the Ancient category.

Apart from its dimensions, what other signs are there which help to assess a mature beech's antiquity? It is important to look at characteristics other than size. A Beech's bark is one clue. Their silver-grey bark can remain smooth until they are 200 years old (and is far more amenable to name and date carving than other trees). As Beech trees age their bark starts to wrinkle from the bottom up. Mosses colonise the nooks and crannies, soaking up moisture from rainfall. Consequently a veteran tree will appear green and mossy and these areas may support other plants. An older tree will have dead wood in the canopy and areas of bark loss.

if this tree is as old as its dimensions and 'greenness' suggest what would have had to overcome to achieve this? Beech seeds can be affected by late frosts especially if a specimen is located on an exposed site. Their shallow roots make them susceptible to damage from high winds, witnessed by the numbers uprooted in the 1987 Great Storm. Despite their ability to survive in poor soils studies show that very hot and dry summers can limit growth and regeneration.

Beech trees shady aspect also affect the growth of their own seedlings, with young trees playing a waiting game under older species to take their place in the sun, literally and metaphorically.

This tree does not present the typical tall and stately beech aspect and although it is of considerable girth it is only half the height of the 44m 'Britain's Tallest Native Tree'. This is the Newtimber Beech which is fortuitously located in Sussex in the National Trust's Newtimber Wood Poynings.

Plumpton's beech is on private land. Its map reference is TQ 3590712344.

Photo courtesy of Kate Gold.