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Book Reviews



ANCIENT TREES IN THE LANDSCAPE. NORFOLK'S ARBOREAL HERITAGE. By Gerry Barnes and Tom Williamson. Pp. x and 179, Illus 73. Oxbow, 2011. Price: £25.00. ISBN 978 1 905119 39 4.

This book is based on many years of work by the authors in their local landscapes, who organized a systematic survey for old trees across Norfolk — with over five thousand having been identified by them and their helpers. The authors stress this is not a complete inventory but it is a sufficiently large sample that they can explore the patterns of where and how these distinctive elements of our landscape have survived. In the process they question some assumptions that have crept into discussions about old trees in recent years; they do not presume that their conclusions for Norfolk necessarily apply elsewhere, but in many cases I suspect they do.

The authors look at the trees in their landscape context and the spatial variations in their distribution, relating this to, for example, differences in soils from the dry sands of Breckland, through the boulder clay plateaus, to the flood plains of the various rivers (Chapter 1). However, they stress that such environmental variations often only have an indirect effect on farming and settlement patterns; hence the importance of considering the historical development of the landscapes in which old trees occur.

The focus is on old trees in all situations, whether native or not, from woods to isolated field trees, to hedgerow pollards (Chapter 3), woods and wood pastures (Chapter 4), but also orchards and pine rows (Chapter 6). The problems of dating trees are discussed (Chapter 2) and the conclusions reached are that even amongst the oaks relatively few are likely to pre-date 1500 (p. 63); the legacy of ancient trees in Norfolk is an early modern rather than a medieval one. There is only a loose connection between the current tree cover and the county's natural vegetation cover, whatever that might have been (p. 15).

Just four species — oak, ash, beech and sweet chestnut — make up 87 % of the old trees identified, with oak pollards the commonest single type. Pollarding may prolong the life of a tree, but the authors feel that the predominance of pollards amongst Norfolk's old trees is simply because that was how most trees, excluding coppice, were managed in the early modern era (pp. 66–7). Similarly, the current dominance of oak is enhanced by its greater longevity compared to ash or beech and the loss of elms to disease. What we see now may not reflect how things were in the past. Why we value old trees may also change over time (Chapter 5).

A strong case is made that the north Norfolk heaths often had quite a significant cover of pollarded trees (pp. 104–10), which raises interesting questions for heathland restoration

programmes. By contrast, the distinctive pine rows of Breckland are argued to be largely the product of a relatively short-lived fashion for creating pine hedges in the early part of the nineteenth century (pp. 138–51). These and other examples illustrate the importance of understanding the particular history of the trees in a landscape and not relying on general extrapolations from studies elsewhere in the country.

The book is very readable and well-illustrated; it deserves to be widely read amongst the conservation community as well as by landscape historians.

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