

Favourite Trees and The Epping Forest Veteran Tree Hunt

Across the Epping Forest district people have a strong sense of identity with trees. The remnants of the great forest of Essex, which now survive as Epping and Hainault Forests, are on people's doorsteps and the district is named after the Forest. However, generally people's knowledge of their tree heritage is limited. Being surrounded by ancient trees it is very easy to take them for granted, when in fact Hainault and Epping form a collection of veteran trees of European importance.

We knew these veteran trees were not confined to the Forest areas. The widespread practice of pollarding has left a legacy of veteran trees across the whole district. This includes many trees that centuries later find themselves surrounded by urban development or arable farmland. Because of its location close to London and the M11 corridor, the district is facing increasing pressures for development. Epping Forest District Council has strong and specific planning policies, but these alone are not sufficient to protect our invaluable tree heritage. How could we protect these trees more effectively? How many trees were out there? These questions inspired the 'Favourite Tree' web site and with it the Epping Forest Veteran Tree Hunt.

Favourite Trees

In March 2006, the district council successfully bid to the Local Heritage Initiative for £24,700. This enabled us to launch the 50 favourite tree project and establish a web based video and pictorial database to record trees www.favouritetress.com

Members of the public were asked to nominate their favourite tree, which they did in their hundreds. From all the nominations 50 have been chosen as the favourite trees of the district. We received great media attention both locally, but also nationally through the BBC2 'Trees that made Britain' team (Series 2 is due to be screened in the new year) who heard about the project and were involved in judging. A major exhibition of the project followed in the Autumn of 2007.

Veteran Tree Hunt

It was always our intention on the completion of the 50 favourite trees project that our attention would then focus on the veteran tree hunt. This will be a huge task, but hopefully one that we can inspire the community to help us with. Throughout the summer of 2007, we ran numerous training and tree hunt days so that people could learn how to record trees and get involved themselves. To date over 850 veteran trees have been recorded and photographed, but we know this is a tiny percentage of what is probably out there. As the database grows a clearer picture is emerging and the project becomes more inspiring.

What have we achieved?

The project already has the lasting legacy of a web-based video and pictorial database, to which the general public have access and can add to. We have managed to engage and involve many members of the public, tree wardens and community groups and very importantly, landowners. All this has helped to raise the profile of trees across the district. Our long term aim is to be able to protect individual or groups of veteran trees as they often fall outside the statutory protection. By knowing how many trees we have and their form and size, we will be much better placed to argue the case for individual threatened trees. Having created the technology we would now love other Councils or groups to take it on too. Hopefully, in this way we can protect our unique tree heritage for future generations.

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