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LIVING MAG. 1973 DEC

A Countryman Remembers by H. E. Bates

Hearts of Oak

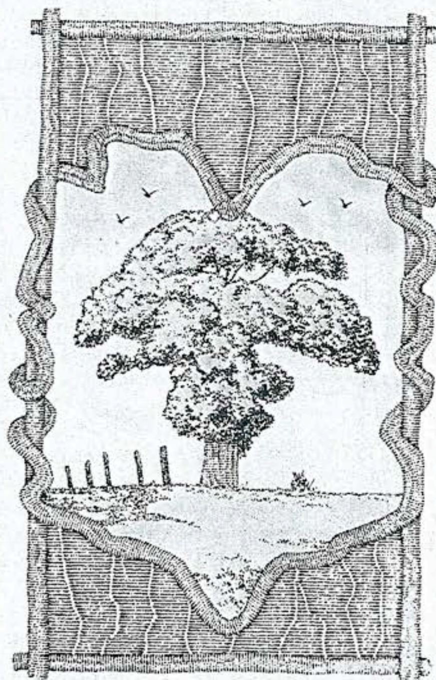
1973 was designated National Tree Planting Year, and in order to give some guidance on this matter the Department of the Environment issued three pamphlets advising what type of tree to plant and why and how.

Admirable though these pamphlets are, I can't help wishing that the Department had also issued a pamphlet forcibly arguing the case against the wanton felling of trees. I feel uncommonly strongly on this matter since I calculate that over the past three years or so my own small village has lost between 2,000 and 3,000 trees, a considerable part of them in direct defiance of preservation orders.

As if this melancholy fact were not depressing enough, I now read the alarming news that it's not impossible that within the next few years we shall have lost the greater part, if not all, of our oak tree population. Now the oak is not only symbolic of much that is greatest in England's tradition and character; its value as a supporter of wildlife is incomparable, since it can support some hundreds of species, mostly insects, while non-indigenous trees, such as the Corsican pine, for example, can support only a few.

In front of my house stands a great row of oaks, the age of which I should calculate to be not less that 250 years, and in the case of the grandfather of them all, which has a girth at the base of 24 feet, some three hundred years or more. Oaks in fact can have a life span of 1,000 to 1,500 years. Nor is the oak merely a generous supporter of wildlife; it is prodigal in its powers of reproduction, so that it is estimated that one bushel of acorns will produce some 700 trees. (Propagation by acorns is the best method of reproduction, since even as a young tree the oak transplants badly.)

Another remarkable thing about this great line of oaks is that they are not English oaks but *Quercus cerris*, the so-called Turkey Oak. This splendid monarch, which comes from Southern Europe and Asia Minor, will attain a height of 120 feet. It differs from our English oak in that its leaves are more deeply serrated and much darker in colour and its acorn cups are covered in a stiff coat of rough bristles. In spring its new foliage is of a captivating yellow which by late autumn has become of so dark a green as to be almost black. It is also the last of the deciduous trees to lose its leaves, so



that it is sometimes well past mid-December before it shows any sign of autumn colour. Truly not only a noble tree but one which you don't see very often—hence my strong attachment to these ancient giants.

There are, of course, species other than the oak which provide generous shelter and sustenance for insect and bird life. Among these birch and pussy willow rank with the oak; other willows, together with hawthorn and blackthorn, are extremely good; apples, poplars, elms, hazels, alders, beeches, wild roses and brambles are also very good; ash, hornbeam, maple, lime, rowan, honeysuckle and gorse are all good too. Other supporters of insect life are nettles, which support some 15 species of moth and provide food for peacock, red admiral and small tortoiseshell butterflies. Brambles are even more generous in providing support for insect life. They are, in fact, the food plant of about 40 species of moths and butterflies, in addition to which they provide ground cover for birds and berries for their food.

Widespread though the felling of trees has been—and no less the destruction of that precious feature of our landscape, the mixed hedgerow—it is only fair to say that various trusts for nature conservation have been doing redoubtable work.

Areas of mixed woodland are clearly among the features in landscape that ought to be most jealously guarded and it has been rightly said that woodland should be regarded as a living habitat. It is an ecosystem of its own. The Kentish mixed deciduous woodland is one of the most varied and most complex of all ecosystems. It has been further pointed out that far too many owners of woodland regard a wood as simply a factory to make timber instead of microhabitats for a great wealth of wildlife, including birds and animals, plants, fungi, etc.

To my way of thinking the mixed hedgerow, that extraordinary composition of hawthorn, blackthorn, maple, bramble, wild rose, young oak, dogwood and Heaven knows what else, is a feature of such attraction that it can give as much pleasure as a well-kept woodland. It is therefore to me a very, very sad sight to see the ruthless grubbing of this lovely part of our heritage and to have in its place that combination of wire and concrete that is as soulless as it is hideous.

As a man in my village once said to me, 'nowadays you can get bloody grants for everything except hedge-cutting', to which I felt like saying that it was high time you could get grants for the preservation of one of the most priceless parts of our rural environment, the incomparable hedgerow. It is not only priceless but unique and ours would be a pretty impoverished landscape without its many and varied joys, from the time of primrose and may and violet through all the fecundity of summer with its cornucopia of wild rose and honeysuckle, to the browns and golds and yellows and purples of autumn.

Finally a note on two ancient and famous oaks, both of them in Kent. The Headcorn oak, standing on the south side of the church, is hollow and propped up in the centre, and is reputedly 1,000 years old. The Bonington oak is now a mere shell and is dying. It is known as the 'lawgiver' and is said to be an ancient 'Court Leete' tree. The Headcorn oak is also said to be a 'Court Tree' and is almost certainly a survivor of the great forest of Andredsweald, which once covered a large part of southern England.

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