

VETERAN TREES

A priceless biodiversity resource

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What is a veteran tree?

Special trees come under various names, for example “ancient”, “veteran”, “notable”, “heritage” and “champion”. These terms are often broad and overlapping, depending on the writer’s source and interpretation but, for the purposes of these notes, I define a veteran along the lines of the criteria suggested by Natural England – a tree which is usually (but not necessarily) very old, has a large trunk or trunks in proportion to its branches which are often rather stubby, and displays decay features such as branch death and hollowing. These features contribute to associated biodiversity. Veteran trees are usually large, particularly in the sense of being massive rather than tall, and are appreciated for their cultural and heritage worth, at least locally. Such trees are of great botanical interest and biodiversity value because of the wealth of micro-habitats they have developed (rot, knot holes & hollows, crevices, sap runs, *etc.*) that support rich invertebrate, epiphytic, and mycological communities. We have a special duty to conserve them.

Veteran trees and local planning

On our greenspaces around the country, we have thousands of trees – young ones we have planted, saplings regenerating from seed, semi-mature and mature specimens, but very few that are veterans. Indeed, veteran trees are relatively rare in the wider countryside. Those there are, a bit like elderly humans, require special care: landowners, estate managers and Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) have statutory and environmental duties towards them. Natural England and the Forestry Commission have formal guidance on the topic which is a material consideration in making planning decisions. LPAs may, and often do, place Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) on individual specimens or groups of trees.

When examining planning applications, LPAs consider the conservation & enhancement of biodiversity and the impact of proposals on veteran trees under the National Planning Policy Framework, making decisions with its paragraph 175C in mind¹. A hierarchy of such decision-making is applied with avoidance of impact as a priority, followed by reduction/minimization, mitigation and ultimately compensation where negative effects cannot be circumvented. Compensation for the loss of a veteran tree, though, as with almost any significant ecological adverse impact, is impossible in a timescale of years or even decades, if at all. I know there is a school of thought that biodiversity offsetting is an

¹ “development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons⁵⁸ and a suitable compensation strategy exists”

option, but that is an artifice of convenience for those with another agenda, usually financial (a bit like Brexit!).

LPA's are supposed to refuse planning consent if development will result in the loss or deterioration of veteran trees except in wholly exceptional circumstances. This gives you an idea of the importance placed by society on these trees.

It is essential to appreciate the landscape and environmental context of a veteran tree. Obviously, direct damage to their trunks, branches, root zone (including digging near them or compacting the rhizosphere's soil), polluting the ground or changing the water table/drainage regime must be avoided. However, just as harmful to them can be indirect impacts such as breaking their ecological contact with near-by hedgerows or woodland, impoverishing the ecological richness of surrounding habitats, introducing dust, air and ground pollutants, disturbing associated wildlife (for example through increased footfall or vehicular traffic), reducing light and insolation, allowing fly tipping and damage/excessive nutrient input by pets, or simply changing the area's general landscape character.

Adverse impact alleviation or mitigation might need to include protective barriers well beyond the tree's root zone, ensuring plenty of light during daytime but avoiding artificial illumination at night, noise prevention, re-routing footpaths, controlling invasive species and avoidance of buildings, fences, or other structures near the tree. A generous buffer zone must be allowed. Natural England recommend no less than 15m or five times wider than the diameter of the tree, whichever is the greater. Moreover, EN note that the buffer zone should be 5m from the edge of the tree's canopy if that area is larger than fifteen times the tree's diameter. Furthermore, this buffer zone should contribute to wider ecological networks, be part of the green infrastructure of the area and consist of semi-natural habitats such as woodland or a mix of scrub, grassland, heathland and wetland planting, always using locally native species and ensuring the veteran tree is not competitively crowded by such vegetation. Gardens, services (cables, pipes), landscaping and drainage systems should not be introduced within buffer zones or affect their soil moisture status.

Caring for veteran trees

Providing the hazards and adverse impacts noted above are avoided, ongoing management of veteran trees is usually best achieved by minimum intervention. On our sites, we inspect all such trees regularly, at least once in the growing season and once in winter when they are dormant. We assess not only the trees' general condition, but also evidence of bird nesting, bat roosting, epiphytes, fungal colonisation, obvious invertebrate signs (hymenopteran nests, coleopteran larval feeding/emergence holes, *etc.*). A report is made after each visit by our scientists for any necessary conservation actions.

It is often difficult to determine if a veteran tree is dead because even those with extensive decay can hang on with a few green shoots for decades. However, when a tree finally dies, we always leave the remains intact unless there is a clear safety concern that

requires some risk attenuation. Leaving the dead wood *in situ*, even as log piles, allows important habitat for invertebrates and fungi to persist.

Further information

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any concerns about the veteran trees in your greenspace and we will be pleased to assist.

Two of the many publications on veteran tree care and management are:

Natural England (2000) [*Veteran Trees – a guide to good management*](#)

and Lonsdale, D (2013) [*Ancient & other veteran trees: further guidance on management*](#).

Examples

We have a number of notable trees on our sites, but the outstanding examples are those at our Earl's Court Heritage & Nature Reserve greenspace off the A44 in Worcester. This site has an ancient history going back to at least the 13th Century when there are records of a Manor House and its estate here. Several of the veteran trees are ancient, indeed centuries old. Below are some pictures taken in January 2019, in the winter season when the trees' structure and features are best seen. Note the retrenched crowns, hollow and relatively wide trunks and extent of dead wood, all of which displays multiple emergence holes from saproxylic beetles. All photos by the author © Betts Ecology.





