

Folklore of The Silver Birch

By Martin Blount



The birch, or Beth as it was known to our Celtic ancestors, or Bedwen as it is known in Wales, is truly a native tree of these islands. It thrived here before the Ice Ages and was one of the very first trees to recolonise Britain after the ice had retreated. Massive tracts of forests, consisting of birch and Scots pine, covered the ancient landscape.

Today, three species of birch grow in Britain - the Dwarf Birch, the Downy Birch and the Silver Birch. The Dwarf Birch is restricted largely to the Scottish moorlands and, as its name suggests, is really only a shrub. The Downy Birch (Haarbirke in Scottish) is far more widespread and prefers the cold, wet acid soils of the uplands. The Silver Birch (Gemeine Birke in Scottish, Bedwen Arian in Welsh) prefers the drier soils and is also widespread.

Neither of the latter two grow well on chalky soils and both like their fair share of sunlight, as do we humans. The birch is usually the first tree to establish itself on new sites, and it grows rapidly and is very hardy and tolerant of adverse conditions. It withstands frosts and will grow right up to the edge of the tundra as well as up to altitudes of 2,000ft. Amazingly, even man's suicidal pollution of the air by modern industry does not seem to worry the birch excessively - perhaps there is hope for our planet after all!

For many centuries trees played a very important spiritual/mystical role in man's lifestyle. "Beth" was the first letter (B) in the tree Ogham alphabet and also represented the first month of the Celtic year. In the centuries before we became obsessed with wealth and industry, man still lived in close harmony with his environment and the birch represented new awakening, the return of spring and fertility. In the past the Earth was realised to be a living entity - the Mother of mankind - and the moon also represented an aspect of this Mother. The three phases of the moon - waxing, full and waning - were seen as the Maiden, Mother and Old Hag stages of the cycle of nature - death and rebirth. The birch tree, being symbolic of fertility and new birth, was therefore closely associated with the waxing/Maiden phase of the moon. In Norse mythology, the birch is dedicated to Thor, who besides being the God of Thunder is also a fertility God.

In many places, such as Pembrokeshire (now Dyfed) girls would give their lovers a twig of birch as a sign of encouragement; if they were not so lucky they often got a hazel twig. For a long time the "Besom Wedding" was considered legal and even in the 19th century many Irish navvies still regarded it so. A besom of birch would be held over the doorway of their house, the couple would jump over it and then they were wed.

The fires of the Festival of Beltaine/Mayday/Calan Haf, which took place on 1st May, were kindled with birch twigs and much of Beltaine, it being a fertility festival of people, crops and animals, was spent by young couples frolicking in the birchwoods. Fertility dances, to ensure

health and abundant crops, were performed around the maypole of birch. Very often the maypole was a living birch tree. Our modern Mayday Bank Holiday is a remnant of the Beltaine celebrations but it is a shame that all its origins and symbolism have been largely forgotten. Nowadays, it doesn't even fall on Mayday.

The birch was also seen as a protective influence, so on Midsummer's Eve boughs were hung over doors to bring good luck; and in Herefordshire on Mayday trees were decorated with red and white rags then propped against stable doors to ward off evil.

Not only did the birch have these values but it played a great practical role as well. The bark was stitched together by early man to make food vessels and canoes for hunting. In spring, the sap was made into mead and the fresh cambial tissue was made into a highly nutritious bread. The pitch was made into a glue for fixing flint arrow and spear heads onto their wooden shafts.

In Scandanavia people wrapped the bark around their legs to keep out the wet - this being the origin of our modern gaiters. The twigs were ideal for besoms, thatching roofs, for smoking hams and fish, for baskets, bedding and providing a firm base for roads over marshy ground. The sawdust was good for smoking fish, the bark was used in tanning hides and was also used on roofs to keep out the rain in much the same way as felt is used today. The timber is tough, stiff and fairly easily worked and is used in joinery, carving, cabinet and furniture making, clogs, spools and bobbins, plywood and flooring. The pulp can be made into writing paper. The timber is not very durable unless it is treated with preservative. Birch logs burn well if dry and are a very useful firewood.

The silvery grey bark, which becomes fissured with age, yields a tar which is used in ointments for skin ailments and the sap is used in hair tonics. For those who like long walks in the forests, the wet inside of the bark is good for relieving muscle pain when placed against the skin. When cutting the bark, take it from the branches, not the trunk. Never take a complete ring from around the trunk as this would halt the flow of nutrients and would kill the tree.

The birches, Downy or Silver (or *Betula pubescens* and *Betula pendula*, to give them their Latin botanical names) are both fast growing and reach about 65ft. They are often used as nurse trees to protect less hardy species, especially on the higher, more open grounds.

The birch seed, which is small and light and easily spread by the wind (750,000 seeds to the lb) is eaten by many birds such as the chaffinch, redpoll and siskins. Other birds like the tree pipit and the greater spotted woodpecker are attracted to many of the 229 species of insects which thrive on, in or near birches, such as the Kent Glory Moth which feeds on birch leaves from May to July.

Many trees and plants such as alder, alder buckthorn, bird cherry, grey willow, oak, rowan, Scots pine, guelder rose, heather, honeysuckle, bell heather, bracken, bilberry, crowberry, wavy hair grass, yellow tormentil, heath milkwort, wood sorrell and gorse grow well alongside birch, depending on soil types. The hallucinogenic fungus Fly Agaric grows in symbiosis with the birch, and another fungus, the Birch Bracket or *Piptoporus betulinus* is responsible for the death of many birches. The latter is a light-coloured, hoof-shaped fungus and the infectious mycelium spreads into the higher branches and trunk and works its way down the trunk, causing a reddish-brown rot. The fungus gains entry through damaged bark and spreads from tree to tree, so when collecting sap, check around to see that none of the bracket fungus is visible. The honey fungus

also lives on the birch, especially dead birch, and yet another is responsible for the clumps of twigs which look like large nests in the birch's branches and is known as witch's broom.

Birch Sap Wine

8 pints sap
1/2lb chopped raisins
2lb sugar
juice of 2 lemons
general purpose yeast

Collect the sap from a number of trees so as not to over tap an individual tree, which could kill it. The sap should be collected in early March whilst it is still rising. Select larger trees, bore a hole about 1"-2" deep, around 4ft off the ground, place a tube or something similar in the hole and allow the sap to run down. Then put a suitable container underneath and allow to fill. The hole will heal naturally, but it wouldn't hurt to wedge a piece of birch bark over the hole to aid it. Boil the sap as soon as collected, add the sugar and simmer for 10 minutes. Place the raisins in a suitable bucket, pour in the boiling liquid and add the yeast and lemon juice when it has cooled to blood temperature. Cover the bucket and leave to ferment for three days before straining off into a demi-john and sealing with an air lock. Let stand until fermentation finishes, then rack off into a clean jar and let the sediment settle. Bottle the wine and store in a cool place for at least a month.

Birch Tea

This is an old and effective remedy to combat cystitis, urinary problems, gout, rheumatism and arthritis and to remove excess water from the body. To make the tea, collect the birch leaves (the best time is in the spring when the leaves are fresh) and dry them out of direct sunlight. Put 2-3 teaspoonfuls in a cup and pour on boiling water, then cover and allow to stand for 10 minutes. Take the tea 3-4 times daily or just occasionally if you need a mouthwash. Fresh leaves can also be used but as the months progress the leaves deteriorate.