

The Forrard Oak



At the beginning of March, most of our native trees are still shut down for winter. However within a month or so they will be showing the green fuzz that presages the new leaves of spring. One particular tree will be ahead of the game and will burst into leaf some way before its fellows. This is the tree known as the Forrard Oak (forrard because its foliage appears forward of, or earlier than, that of other oaks). It was given public prominence in Eric Parker's 1947 book "Surrey", the second in the series of County Books, published by Robert Hale Ltd. The tree could be seen from the train half a mile or so south of Witley station. As he put it "You can see it in its brave new clothes

from the railway carriage, or, as I think better, from the top of a stretch of land presented to the National Trust some years ago just north of Sandhills". Parker noted that it never set seed and added "There is no other like it known to books on forestry, nor, I believe, to Kew".

A group including experts from Kew are compiling a private database of Surrey's notable old trees and last year were keen to find the Forrard Oak, to measure it, and to pinpoint its location. The trouble was that they couldn't find it! Sixty one years growth of the surrounding woodland had obscured its view from Sandhills and the map reference they had for it was incorrect. When I enquired around on their behalf, residents with long memories pointed me at the Whithorn estate, off Combe Lane, Wormley. There it was, a fine specimen oak, not very ancient, perhaps 200 years old, with much buttressed trunk. I revisited it a few weeks later, with the expert group, led by Dr Brian Spooner, who was delighted to make its acquaintance. They were able to solve the mystery of its mismatch with other oaks, and its failure ever to set any acorns by establishing, with the help of oak expert Allen Coombes, that it is a rare hybrid between our native Sessile and Pedunculate oaks.

Its survival in 1947 was (according to Parker) because "A few years ago thanks to the pleas of local residents, and the generosity of buyer and seller, it escaped the axe while all its surroundings perished". He asked: "Could it not be secured for the future? England could not possess a happier tree. The Forrard Oak, columnar, gracious, nobly boughed, survives – as yet". Sixty one years later it still does, and he would be so pleased to know.