

The Bowthorpe Oak, Lincolnshire

By

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Charles II so loved his oak trees that on the day of the Restoration, 29th May 1660, when he returned in triumph to London, he declared it a public holiday for ‘the dressing of trees’. Oak Apple Day has been celebrated ever since in royalist strongholds such as St Neot in Cornwall where a leafy oak branch is placed in the church tower each year and the old branch taken down. The chant still rings out through the village: “29th May, Oak Apple Day, if you don’t give us a holiday we’ll all run away.”

Our love of oaks is absolute and their enduring qualities have often been linked with the character of the nation. Though seventeenth century diarist John Evelyn may have been the first to coin the phrase ‘hearts of oak’ referring to acorns as a kind of health food to strengthen the body it was David Garrick’s famous shanty, ‘Heart of oak are our ships/heart of oak are our men’ which made the phrase part of our folklore. The fashionable nineteenth century

garden designer John Loudon described the oak as ‘the emblem of strength and duration, of force that resists, as the lion is of force that acts...’. We fiercely defend any despoliation of the revered venerable trees and in 1995, when over a hundred old oak trees were felled in Windsor Great Park, a reporter likened it to ‘chopping down the Queen Mother.’ There is still a veneration of famous ancient oaks and they are justly celebrated. Every county has its favourite tree: the hollow and hallowed Bound Oak at Farley Hill in Berkshire for instance or Kett’s Oak at Wyndonham in Suffolk in whose shade Robert Kett rallied support for a rebellion against the enclosure of common land in 1549.

For its power to move, few trees in Britain can beat the Bowthorpe Oak. It is in the mild Lincolnshire transitional country of high hedged lanes and gated roads merging with wide, empty expanses of the dark- earthed, dyke-crossed fens. From the modest village of Wilsthorpe with its pantile roofed cottages and strange little eighteenth century church you can follow the long willowy lane to Spa Farm near where a thriving mineral water Spa once stood complete with Regency bathhouse and Victorian station halt. You cross the forgotten grassed over railway line and follow the footpath up the rise to Bowthorpe just over the brow. Below, the farmhouse and barns a copse straggles up the other side of the shallow valley and huge willows and alders lean beside the upper reaches of the East Glenn winding back towards Wilsthorpe .

Dozens of brown hens scatter as you walk among them towards the great oak tree, the oldest in Europe: noble, aloof, solitary and stalwart, its presence filling the whole field its feeling of protection all encompassing.

The Bowthorpe oak is well over a thousand years old and at forty feet round, it has the widest girth of any tree in Britain. There are records from the 1760's describing the hollow trunk being smoothed out by the then Squire of Bowthorpe who created a room in which he could entertain 20 guests sitting down to dinner. The squires of Bowthorpe are long gone as is their big house but a later tenant of Bowthorpe Park Farm put a roof over the hollow trunk and added a door for shelter. He boasted that he could fit 39 people in the tree with standing room only. More recently it has been used as a calf shed and as an annual tea venue for the children of the local Methodist chapel.