

VETERAN TREES

What are Veteran Trees?

Veteran trees are important biologically, culturally and historically due to their age, size and condition and are a valuable part of Dorset's landscape. Typically they are old maidens, coppice or pollard trees in woodland and parkland, hedgerows and along riverbanks. In the past veteran trees were highly valued by local communities both economically and culturally. Today, veteran trees are no longer retained or managed for their produce and most have been forgotten, neglected or lost to development, intensive agriculture, forestry, or for safety reasons.

Figure 1. Characteristic features of a veteran tree

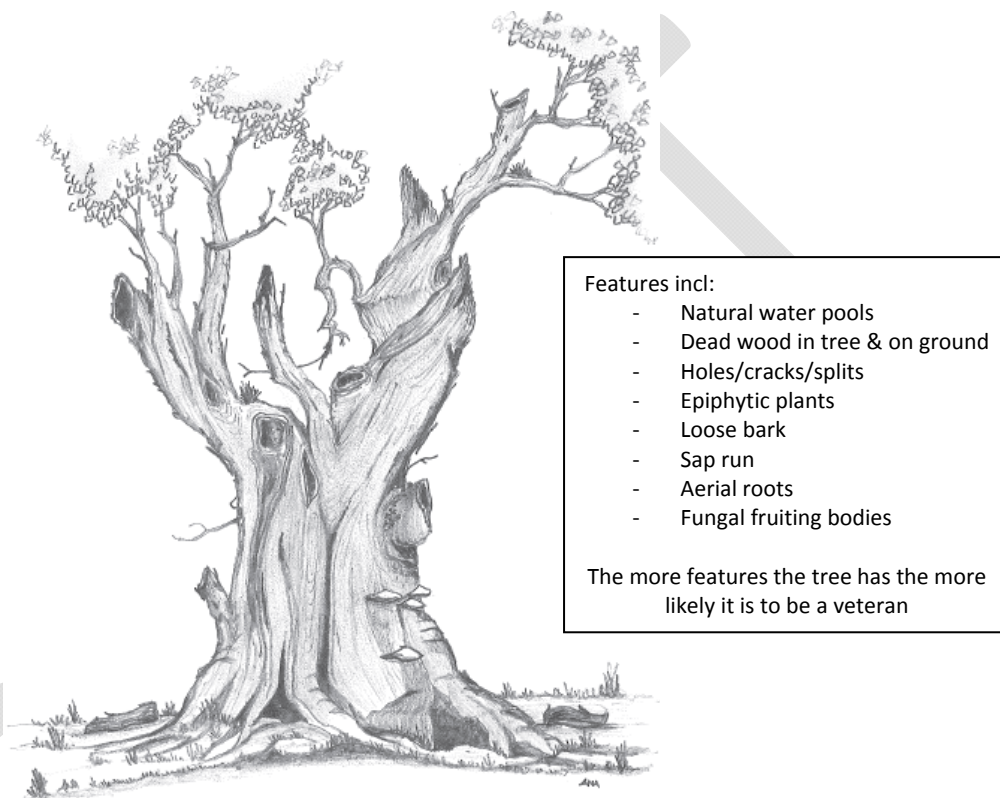


Illustration - Tony Harris

Protection of veteran trees

Veteran trees may be protected by Tree Preservation Orders (Town & Country Planning Act 1990), but they are also protected by planning policy.

Planning Policy Statement 9 (PPS9) makes provision for the protection of irreplaceable resources through land use planning. It states that 'Aged or 'veteran' trees found outside ancient woodland are a particularly valuable for biodiversity and their loss should be avoided. Planning authorities should encourage the conservation of such trees as part of development proposals.'

Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC 2006) includes Ancient Woodland (under Section 41) as a priority habitat (which incl. veteran trees). Local authorities have a duty to protect, maintain, restore and enhance important and priority habitats under NERC 2006. Veteran trees are part of the Lowland wood pasture and parkland Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

There may also be other legislation that contributes to protection of veteran trees, e.g. if the tree is part of a hedgerow (Hedgerow Regulations 1997), if protected species are present in the tree, i.e. bats/nesting birds (Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981/The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010).

Threats to veteran trees

Threats to veteran trees incl: felling, neglect, unskilled tree surgery, inappropriate management of surrounding land, pollution, bark damage, disease, fire and rapid changes in water table levels or surface water.

Populations of old trees and their associated wildlife are also threatened in additional ways by: isolation and fragmentation, lack of a new generation of old trees and removal of standing dead trees and dead wood.

Why manage veteran trees?

Great Britain, particularly England, has a high density of veteran trees compared to many other European countries. There is a responsibility to ensure that veteran trees in Dorset are not damaged unnecessarily. Management is needed to ensure that the threats, do not cause loss of the trees and the value associated with them. Managing old trees can provide continuity of habitat for wildlife, keep individual trees alive as long as possible (enabling a new generation of trees to replace the old ones), perpetuate maturity and continuity in the landscape, fulfill safety responsibilities (due to increase in litigation).

Whilst a veteran tree is alive, part of its value for wildlife is that it is a self-renewing resource. However, once dead the tree still continues to be valuable for wildlife due to their slow rate of decay. Such trees are greatly under-valued. The unique environments created in an old tree, attract many different species of plants and animals, e.g. bats, lichens, nesting birds, beetles and other invertebrates, etc.

Many of the known veteran trees in Dorset have now been recorded and details of individual trees are available from Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT). The Veteran Tree GIS Layer is maintained by Dorset Environmental Records Centre (DERC) on behalf of the DWT Greenwood Tree Project and is available to all council's in Dorset. It includes current veterans and younger trees that have been identified as the possible veterans of the future. For those trees on local authority land it is essential that they are checked at regular intervals and management carried out only if necessary (active management may not involve doing very much most of the time), after consultation with the Natural Environment Team/Council Arboriculture Officers.

References

<http://www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk/ancienttrees/managing/veteraninitiative.htm>

<http://frontpage.woodland-trust.org.uk/ancient-tree-forum/>

http://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/dorset_greenwood_tree_project.html

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