

Our Beech Tree Walk

The panoramic view from our Hillside home attests to the abundance and variety of Rothbury Trees. At this time a riot of Spring is performed. Winter's bare, bronchial branches develop an airy, intangible bloom of subtle latent colours, hints of green, orange, ochre and brown, as buds begin to form before bursting into the vivid green of new born leaves.

To our far right trees tumble from the moorland above Pennystane Lane to embrace the west end of the village. Nearer, the trees of Coplish Burn cascade towards the school. Our lane and the fields below have Hawthorn, Bullace, Elder and other country trees. Some gnarled and twisted. Across the valley there's the golf course with its own wooded hazards beckoning the wayward slice or hook. There are fields with ribbons of hedging, bordered by trees and small copses. Above, there is the dark green/black, brooding block of Simonside conifers. Here, in Autumn, the Larch stand proud in their auburn splendor. East, on to Whitton, hiding behind its own shield of wood, then passing the trees by Dr Tomlinson's, to Rothbury Forest and the woods of Craggside.

What strikes the eye, however, is the number and variety of trees within the village; the cream and grey sandstone buildings are tucked behind their own arboreal cover. A river of woodland, to match the Coquet, flowing through the heart of the community. Rothbury is an ideal place to complete an "I Spy" book of trees.

Behind us is the diversity of more trees, deciduous and evergreen, that form the woods of Addycombe. Our default walk, with our two 11 year old, Barrowburn collies, is repeated circuits of the group of beech trees standing on the old carriageway across the steep fields behind Addycombe Farm.

There must be about 70 fine specimens rising to form a cathedral like space in which to walk.

The dogs always carry a ball and the game is for me to hold it high in my raised arm and turn slowly. Jed then loves to run in fluid bounds, a wide arc, weaving between trunks and over fallen branches. His long pink tongued cooling system spooning out the more he runs. Tilly, his arthritic sister, stands nearby, eyes fixed on the ball, waiting for me to drop it. She pounces and quickly gathers it. We walk on a little, the ball is dropped and the game is repeated again, and again, and again. In this manner we circumnavigate the trees several times, stepping over a mountain bike track with jumps of logs and banks of mud, presumably designed to make the ride more fun and exciting – though we have never actually seen a bike or anybody riding here. Nearby someone has constructed a bivouac of fallen branches – a fun place to hide and pretend to be Bear Grylls or Ray Mears. It is good to know the woods are used as a playground, as well as for more serious endeavours – hiking, birdwatching, photography.

These trees give us great pleasure and have become our outdoor gym. No treadmill and MTV for us! Rather fresh air on the face, the musty scent of woodland, the rustle of leaves underfoot, all accompanied by a chorus of birds randomly practising for dawn's recital. There may be a mewling Buzzard riding a thermal, a cawing Corvid, the onomatopoeic Chiff Chaff, there's Robin, Redpoll and various warblers and others, I am told, with notes, alas, too high for my ageing ears to hear.

There is always the chance of seeing a deer or very occasionally a group, standing still, unaware. One or two with heads bowed, grazing, while another, on watch, makes eye contact. Two sentient beings, we assess one another's intentions. I stand still hoping the dogs are too concerned with their ball to

notice. Then, without signal, in silent slow motion bounds the Roe are gone, white rumps seeking the safety of the Rhododendron bushes. Recently. I fancy I saw a Pine Martin, a sleek long, low, dark creature loping over the undergrowth. For once I prefer to think of the exotic rather than the mundane – the more likely farm cat on a mission! Though, as they will tell you, there is nothing mundane about a cat!

The dogs require walks every day so we see the trees in all weather and watch them change daily throughout the seasons. Each one, like humans, is unique yet so alike. Some sprout whiskers of twigs in bulbous lumps, others plain barked with birth-marked lichen, still others with scars of lost limbs. Now, in May, the leaves are appearing, first on the South facing edge while those behind have buds ready to burst. The crunch of their mast underfoot reminds us of seasons past. There is a profusion of old twigs and fallen branches. A gleaner's haven.

In this time of pandemic with lives downcast it is good to look upwards and see new growth and all the possibilities awaiting us. The befallen Scots pine, once a magnificent presence, now provides a home for colourful lichen and fungi, busy insects and microbes live where once sap coursed. This decaying organic matter feeds future generations of growth. I find reassurance in knowing this cycle started long before we arrived, continues and will do so long after we have gone.

I assume these beeches were planted to enhance Lord Armstrong's carriage drives through his estate. How many people have walked here over millennia past? Is it the same place or is a wood is like the philosopher's river – it can't be stepped in it twice? It is always changing, as are we. Regardless, the wood continues to provide food and fuel for all creatures sharing this space – both visitors and, most importantly, for those for whom it is home.

We are so lucky to live in such a beautiful area with its variety of landscapes – fields, moorland, forest and woodland. Wherever one looks there are trees. Trees of all sizes, shapes and varieties. They provide so much. Just being and breathing amongst them has health benefits and of course they are vital in their ability to absorb carbon dioxide in this time of climate crisis. It is good to know Rothbury is surrounded by leafy lungs creating breathing spaces for us all.

And remember, in these social distanced times, we can be thankful, we can hug a tree!

Geoff Hoskin May 2021

