

THE OAK

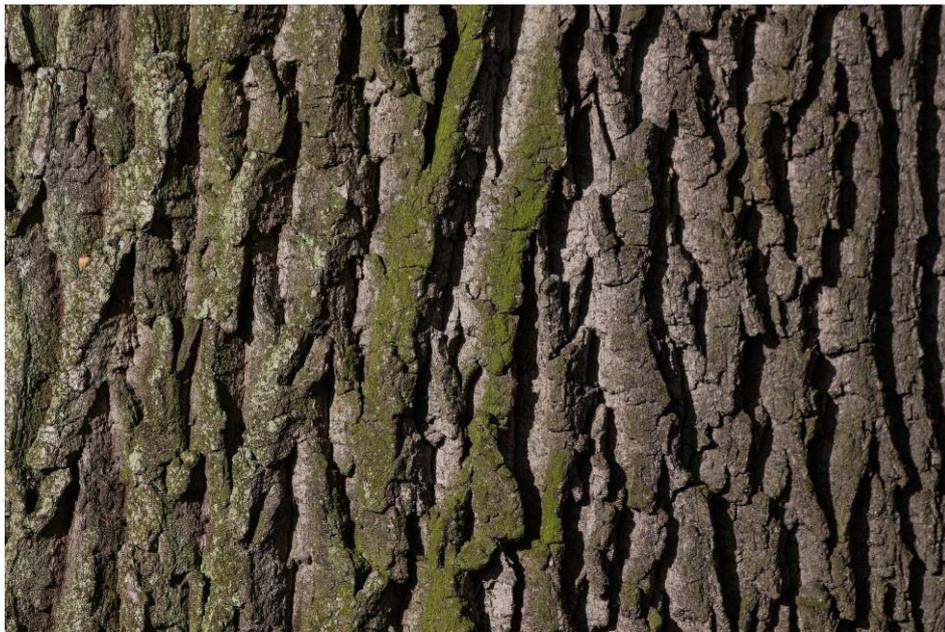


Roger Bowmer, Thropton.

Do you ever wonder whether trees are aware of their surroundings?

Well, we are and what wonderful living historians we make. I am a seven-hundred-year-old oak overlooking the valley. I just missed William Wallace ravaging Northumberland from his base in Rothbury Forest, but when I first poked my head above the ground Edward the second ruled England and the border between Scotland and England was a dangerous place to be after his father assumed the sovereignty of Scotland. Robert the Bruce wasn't too happy about it and during my infancy plundered and ravaged Northumberland. The Armstrongs, Fenwicks, Kerrs, Turnbells, Dacres, Croziers and the rest of the Border Reivers took advantage of the situation and I grew up during 300 years of murderous turmoil as cattle and chattels were swapped from north to south and back again.

I saw stragglers retreating from the battle of Otterburn, including Sir Henry Percy himself, seeking refuge wherever they could. Shortly afterwards, just before my one-hundredth birthday, I saw the Scots returning north from a successful pillage of Northumberland, only to be cut down by the cloth yards of the longbow men at the Battle of Homildon Hill.



Bernard Gilpin picnicked in my shade on one of his days off from sermonising to the wild folk of Rothbury who were renowned for their lawlessness and barbarity.

Throughout the centuries amorous assignations have taken place under cover of my boughs and many hearts carved in my bark survive the death and divorce of the devoted. I can still feel the pain of those chipping chisels. In 1784 I was struck by lightning and a falling branch killed a couple embracing beneath. Nature took advantage of the tragedy and barn owls eventually took up residence in the resulting hollow and still breed there today. Whisky Jack Kane and Black Rory were totally unaware of the presence of the barn owls as they sat beneath the hollow peddling their illicitly distilled and smuggled whisky, bartering with the local farmers for barley and peat or bludgeoning and stabbing the local excise men in the mid 18th century.



By the early 19th century, I was 500 years old and in my prime. A few of my neighbours were harvested to build Nelson's ships, but somehow, I survived the cull and continued to oversee the valley and witness the comings and goings of David Dippie Dixon as he investigated the archaeology and history of the valley, picking up artefacts even older than me. Since 1872 I have taken an interest in every Harbottle show and the current show field is named after a relative of mine.



Before the First World War I witnessed the building of intricate trench systems in which thousands of soldiers trained to be killed on the fields of France and Flanders. Barely twenty years later the stupidity began again and pill boxes sprouted along the valley. Shortly afterwards a Junkers 88 was on its way north and jettisoned its bombs in my field before crashing near Linhope. I lost a major limb. All members of the German crew lost their lives and are buried at Chevington cemetery beneath an aged yew tree.

Just after the Second World War I stood by helplessly as the landowner's ten-year-old daughter jumped into the river to try to save an adventurous ten-day old lamb. The little girl drowned. The lamb struggled to safety unaided.

I have witnessed an agricultural revolution with the mechanisation of farming methods resulting in the need for fewer and fewer hinds. Space travel is commonplace; computerisation has replaced communication; global unrest and terrorism dominate the news headlines. Accidents aren't now allowed to happen; it is always someone's fault. Who knows what I would have witnessed in the next two hundred years?

For centuries I've been a magnet for adventurous children. Six months ago, the child of a first-time visitor to the valley was trespassing on the land and fell from my branches, breaking his back. He eventually made a good recovery, but this first-time visitor successfully sued my landowner for a six-figure sum. The penalty for defying a tree preservation order is a lot less than the cost of similar litigation, so tomorrow I will be firewood.

Roger Bowmer