



# Wyre Forest Study Group

## THE DEMISE OF THE MAWLEY OAK

Brian Stephens

The mighty Mawley Oak collapsed at about 9.00 am, Monday, 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2001, after a long period of increasing weakness. There had been some strong south west winds for several days preceding but, on this morning, not exceptional, west to northwest, about force 5 perhaps gusting 6. Possibly the change of wind direction was significant and the extra strain was more than the tortured trunk could stand.

This is not an obituary and demise is a more suitable term than death. The tree is far from dead, although, for the time being, a shattered fragment of its former self. The southeast portion survives intact with a tall upright branch and several long, almost horizontal, branches spreading low from the original crown. The short main trunk has split through its diameter on a southwest-northeast axis, down to ground level. The half nearest the road is again split down its radius, leaving the tree in three huge sections, with the fallen boughs spread over a wide area on the ground.

So, the roots are intact, the branches remain attached even if some are split, the original height remains (almost, but looking vulnerable), and there would seem no reason why the tree cannot continue

to grow. One would expect new shoots to arise next spring from dormant buds and the cambium at the fractured edges. Like a coppiced stool, there will be many young shoots but, left alone, or even selected, we could hope that strong new branches will grow upwards eventually developing an even greater tree. It would be a most regrettable loss should the fallen branches be removed. Demise, from the Old French *demise* - to lay down, refers to the transfer of a sovereign's crown to a successor. Young trees from acorns of the Mawley Oak are already established and new growth will flourish from the extant tree. The habit of the tree suggests that it was pollarded years ago and now we can see the effect. Dead leaves collected in the crown of branches, rain drained down and from this mass of accumulated humus, rot spread into the heart.

Dr. Norman Hicken describes the Mawley Oak, as it was in October 1968, in his book "The Natural History of an English Forest" (Hutchinson 1971 page 6), and thirty years later estimates will be much the same. However, in 1974 the tree suffered some loss of branches from the northwest side. A large section of wood from the tree was set up at the, then newly established, Visitor Centre at Callow Hill, and a plaque set on the fence at the roadside. Work has been done on the tree from time to time and the last few years have shown some stags heading.



The Mawley Oak in Hoare Frost – 1991

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The notice reads

The Mawley Oak  
April 1975

Estimated age	240 years
Height	90 feet
Girth breast height	24 feet
Max. spread of canopy	130 feet

In August 1974 several large branches broke away from the main trunk, probably due to an earlier lightening strike coupled with the great weight of the lower limbs. Local residents and supporters of the Cleobury Mortimer Branch of the Shropshire Conservation Trust, raised a sum of £343 to carry out the necessary work for the preservation of this fine tree. Young oaks were also planted near it.

In recent years local great and significant trees have suffered. The Seckley Beech and Preacher's Tree have gone. The Royal Oak at Boscobel has suffered storm damage (its ancestor acquired fame just 350 years ago) and the Mitre Oak is but a remnant. The Goodmoor Oak thrives and the giant Sweet Chestnut at Kate's Hill continues to spread. In contrast, the once unique Witty Pear has received enhanced prestige with many successful propagations and newly discovered specimens in other parts of the Country. The survival of these specimens emphasises the constant need for long term and sustained measures for conservation.



The Mawley Oak after the Fall – 2001

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