



Wyre Forest Study Group

ALBERT LINK AND BARK PEELING IN THE WYRE FOREST

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Albert Link 2003

Wyre Forest oak bark has been used for tanning leather for hundreds of years. Until the closure of the last tannery in Bewdley in 1928, the oak bark was cut and used locally. Since that time bark peeling has decreased as chemicals have gradually replaced natural bark in the tanning process. Albert Link was one of the last bark peelers operating in the Wyre Forest, and this article is based on an interview with him.

Albert Link has lived and worked as a woodman in the Wyre Forest for the past 40 years. He started working for Bill Rogers in Wyre in 1964, and joined the Forestry Commission as a Forest Craftsman two years later. In 1972 he started working for himself at weekends and evenings, with his brother in law Arthur Cheadle, buying standing timber from the Forestry Commission on contract. Although originally from Bagginswood, since 1969 Albert has lived with his family in one of the forestry houses at Callow Hill, and he and his tractor have been a familiar sight around the forest for many years. Albert has indepth knowledge about trees, their uses, and how to process the timber. He retired from the Forestry Commission in 2003, but continues to run his own timber business in Wyre.

When Albert started working in the forest, he was cutting oak and birch in equal quantities. He would start by felling the tree using a power saw and wedges. He could see easily which was the best way to fell a tree to do least damage to neighbouring trees, and for ease of access and extraction. He would then sned (take the boughs off) the fallen tree, and the oak trunks would be cut into 5ft 6in lengths. These lengths of trunk were then split into cleft stakes. These were cut either half round for temporary fencing, or three quarters for permanent fencing. These were pointed at the bottom end on the saw bench and sold locally. Naturally cleft stakes last longer than sawn stakes

because rainwater can run off the cleft stakes more easily. The oak bark was then removed for use in the tanning industry, and the tops were cut for firewood. In the summer peasticks and bean sticks were collected.

Silver Birch used to be taken off in the autumn when the sap was down, and this was sold to Harris Brushes for broom stales or broom heads. The birch brash was used for vinegar-making in Worcester and for horse jumps at Ludlow racecourse.

In the 1960s and 70s softwoods were planted because two crops could be obtained in the time that you would get one crop of oak. Originally Douglas Fir was the main species to be used, although later European and Japanese Larch, then Scots and Corsican Pine were planted. Albert was involved in much of the clearfelling for the planting of softwoods. Some of these used to be planted under an oak canopy. This prevented the lammas growth and drew up the conifers. Albert would take out the top storey trees and stack the brash between the rows and leave it to rot down. More recently Albert has been involved in thinning Beech and conifers.

In the 1980s the Forestry Commission started to fell areas of woodland and put in deer enclosure fences to encourage coppicing and natural regeneration for conservation reasons. This diversified the age structure and helped increase biodiversity. It was usual to leave 7 to 10 standards trees per hectare. This left some mature trees to produce a good seed crop. Natural coppice regrowth was encouraged from the cut hardwood trees. Felling was undertaken when the sap was down to prevent bleeding that would burn the natural coppice regrowth. They never cut a Yew tree or Crab Apple and gave priority to Rowan, Holly, Wild Service and Hawthorn trees when they were present. Dead trees were left as important

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invertebrate habitats as part of conservation practice.

Albert was one of the last bark peelers in Wyre. He used to sell the bark as part of his forest operations. He would start by buying a patch of standing wood, and in the spring he would check the oak to see if it was ready for peeling. He would do this by putting a slit in the bark on the east side of the trunk with his chain saw to see if the sap was running. If the tree was in the right condition, the bark would come away easily. The sap would always start running first on the side of the tree that got the most sunshine. If there were tall trees or a hill in the way, this might not be on the east side. This would generally be in late April, early May depending on the site and the season.

When the trees were ready for barking Albert would fell the tree and cut it into 5ft 6in lengths with the power saw. Then he would split it into 2, 4, 6, or 8 stakes per length according to the

diameter of the top. To start splitting he would use a 14lb sledgehammer and knock in a 3 inch starting wedge at the cut end of the top of the trunk as it lay along the ground, having looked carefully for knots down the trunk to see how to position the wedge. He would follow up with aluminium lift wedges on the top (figure 1). Then he would turn the hammer over to split the 2 sides apart. The hammer used to be used on the railways and it had a rounded nose which, when inserted with force into the wedged gap, would split the trunk well (figure 2). An axe could then be inserted to cut off the thongs (wooden fibres), which still hung to both sides. The stakes were as close to 4 inch cleft stakes as possible depending on the diameter of the trunk. As soon as the stakes were split it was important to take the bark off straight away. If left for even 24 hours the bark dries on and is hard to remove. There is also a danger of the bark breaking into pieces because it is too brittle.



Figures 1 and 2. - Albert using wedges and a hammer to split the oak trunk, New Parks, Wyre 1994.

To peel the bark from the stakes, Albert used a spade that had originally been used for cutting peat (figure 4). He also used it when ditching to cut down into the sides of the ditch before using a shovel to clean out the bottom. Traditionally, bark was also peeled from the branches. This was generally women's work, and a small bark peeling spoon was used for this purpose (figure 3).

To peel the stakes, Albert used to tease his spade in between the bark and the cambium layer. Once he got it into the top of the stake, he used the spade one-handed to tease it further down with a little leverage, and the other hand to pull off the bark (figures 5 and 6). In the best month it was a lot easier to peel because the sap was running up the cambium layer and then it was a job that took just



Figure 3. Bark Peeling in the Wyre Forest, probably during the 1930s. Photographer Miss M. Whitcombe (Kateshill).
From the photograph collection of Mr. Charles Purcell, Bewdley.

seconds to achieve. Once the bark had come off, he usually cut a rail, tied it between the trees and stood the bark (white cambium side outermost) at an angle to let the air circulate to dry it. The rain

would run off easily which would help to prevent mould growth. If this mould was allowed to develop, it would reduce the tannin content and the bark could not be sold to the tanneries.



Figure 4. Bark peeling tools.



Figure 5. Albert peeling oak bark from a cleft stake

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The trunks were only in the right condition for bark peeling for a few weeks of the year. If there was a rush to finish the job before the sap dried, the bark was often spread out on the ground to dry (figure 7). This would take 6 to 8 weeks depending on the weather conditions. When the bark was really dry, it had curled right over itself and darkened in colour (figure 8), and then it would be tied in bundles of about 15lb in weight and stacked (figure 9).



Figure 6. Albert peeling bark from the oak trunk

The firm that collected the bark from Wyre to take to the Cornish tannery used to take clay from Cornwall to Stoke on Trent and collect bark on the way back. Albert used to stack all the bark on his trailers at the edge of the wood, covered in a tarpaulin to await collection (figure 10). The bark was tied in small bundles because the women had to handle them in the tannery lofts. The tanning process involved putting the bark through a mill to break it down into small pieces. They preferred the younger bark because it contained more tannic acid.



Figure 7. The bark laid out to dry New Parks 1994



Figure 8. After 6 to 8 weeks the bark was dry



Figure 9. Albert tying the bark into 15lb bundles

Albert used to put 2 lengths of timber parallel on the ground, at least 6 inches high to prevent water splash, and then stacked the bark across flatways up to 6 to 7ft deep. He used to put an 8ft piece of sheet iron over the 5ft 6in stack to keep it dry and to make an overlap so that rainwater would drip off the ends and not reach the bark.

In the first year that Albert peeled the oak in 1972, he took off 30 cwt of bark, but this soon increased to 10 tons in good years. It was sold to Croggans in Cornwall, one of the last tanneries to use natural oak bark for tanning. Oak tanned leather is particularly fine and soft and was used to make good quality saddles and artificial limbs. It is, apparently, the only leather that the body does not reject because it was tanned using natural materials. In about 1996, Croggans finished using oak bark for tanning and changed to mineral tannage processes, until their final closure in 2002. There is now much competition from imported leather, although some of this is of low quality being impounded with clay.



Figure 10. Stacked bark waiting for collection by the tannery 1994

The tanners mixed precise measures of bark powder with water. They knew exactly how much to add according to where the bark had come from and its quality. This was added to the hides in the pits in a measured quantity according to the breed of cow and the quality and thickness of the hides. The tannin acts as a preservative and makes the skins water resistant and durable. It was a lengthy



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process, some hides taking as long as eighteen months before they were converted to leather.

Many crafts were associated with the tanning industry, which in Bewdley was sited in Severnside South. For hundreds of years leather was needed for the manufacture of saddles and harnesses, boots and shoes, gloves, clothing, seating, boats and coracles, belts, hats and bellows. All these trades used to be present in and around Bewdley. Special processes were used for the manufacture of parchment and vellum for manuscripts, but no evidence has been found locally for these crafts.

Albert Link is no longer bark peeling, having stopped in about 1996 when Croggans Tannery stopped using oak bark. There is just one person left who regularly cuts and sells oak bark from Wyre. Paul Jackson, who used to work with the Doolittles of Far Forest, and now runs Coppice Creations at Sturt, produces decorative garden furniture and fencing. He peels the oak bark as part of his business, and sells it to Baker's Tannery in Devon.

References

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This ancient craft of bark peeling is fast disappearing from the Wyre Forest. The knowledge and experience that used to be commonly passed on from one generation to the next is now rare, and Albert Link's descriptions provide a valuable historical record.

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