



Wyre Forest Study Group

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE MAWLEY OAK

Brian Stephens

No one knows for sure how long the Mawley Oak has been marking the turning to Worcester on the ancient tracks from east to west. In recent years the tree has been well documented, but nothing seems to have come to light as to its origins and earlier history. Like the Roman Empire the tree has taken a long time to weaken and eventually disintegrate, although nothing like so long of course. The many tons of dead wood will ensure that its legacy, like that of the Romans, will persist for many years to come. It is hard to know how long the fungi *Laetiporus sulphureus* and *Ganoderma applanatum* have been altering the structural properties of the wood, and the abundant growth of *Bulgaria inquinans* suggests that the fungus was established before the tree split in 2001. It has been clear for some time that the tree was past maturity, with some die-back in the crown.

There is a record of the girth in 1982 as 7.31m. Dividing this value by pi gives a diameter of 2.33m (A. Morton). With the inside of the tree exposed, some ring counting has been possible. 100 rings spanned 360 mm, with fairly uniform growth. An annual increment of 3.6mm on the radius $\times 2 = 7.2$ mm on the diameter. Thus in 1982, a diameter of 2330 mm divided by 7.2 mm = 323 years as an estimate of age, hence an age of **346** years, 23 years later, in 2005. This compares, within 27 years, with my estimate in 2001, of an age of 373 years, based on a growth rate of 0.124 inches per year = 3.14 mm., derived from growth rates measured elsewhere in the Forest. An age of 346 years would give an origin in **1659**. This is probably the most accurate estimate of the tree's age available to date.

It would seem a reasonable conjecture that the Blount family of Mawley, a notable family and staunch supporters of the Catholic Faith, and loyal supporters of Charles I, established the present tree to mark the accession of Charles II in 1660, with a hope that Catholicism might be restored in England. Alternatively the death of Cromwell on 3 September 1658 might have prompted celebration. Possibly research in the archives of the Blount family may reveal some evidence, for in various respects, the Blount family had much to celebrate at the Restoration.

In August, 1974, in full leaf, about six branches fell away from the north-western side. Subsequently some bracing was fitted to support the crown and attempts were made to keep dead leaves and humus from collecting in the fork.

At 9.00am on Monday 29 October, 2001, twenty-seven years later, the trunk split through its diameter in a SW-NE direction and more than half

the tree crashed to the ground, splitting again as it fell, leaving a huge section standing but heavily weighted to the SE and very insecure.

There have been a number of substantial gales during the three intervening years which the tree has withstood, but its fall was to be expected sooner or later. Finally on the night of 3 November, 2005, the remaining half also crashed to the ground. No one saw it happen so there is no record of exactly when, nor is there a clear record of the weather at the time. It was not particularly stormy, perhaps gusts up to force five. From which direction the wind and how strong is also uncertain, probably a sharp gust from the north west was sufficient. No doubt some research into weather records would clarify the issue. The standing part of this once magnificent tree was so vulnerable that very little extra stress would have been sufficient to topple it. Possibly eddies from gusts from the S or SW, flowing over the protecting trees on that side, may have been more than enough.

Ironically, the tree is protected by a Tree Preservation Order within the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and monitored by "The Blue Remembered Hills Veteran Tree Project" (a five year scheme supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.). A management plan of June, 2005, was about to be put into effect. There is not much else to be said with any plans obviated overnight. There is agreement with the owner to leave the fallen timber to decay naturally as a valuable habitat.

After the damage in 1974, it is recorded that "Young Oaks were also planted near it", presumably by residents and members of the Cleobury Branch of the Shropshire Conservation Trust. Were these grown from Mawley Oak acorns with reliable provenance? Where are they? Who knows? Are there more elsewhere? They should be about 30 years old by now and quite substantial.

Old photographs of the tree have now become more significant. There is a fine print from the Berrows Newspaper in the archive in Kidderminster Public Library, showing the tree mature and in full leaf, and since it shows the branches which fell at that time, before August 1974. (Copied here for research-only with permission from Berrows's Librarian). Another image of the tree in silhouette in winter, viewed from the south, and dated 1931, appears in a small book by John Davis, "Cleobury Mortimer; The Past in Pictures." (p 40). It would be nice to locate the original. There is still work to be done, and it will be interesting to watch the progress of the decay of the massive fallen boughs.



Wyre Forest Study Group



Mawley Oak Image by courtesy of Berrows Newspapers
Pre August 1974



Mawley Oak 2005

Rosemary Winnall

References

- Davis, John, 1989. Cleobury Mortimer; The Past in Pictures. p 40 The Mawley Oak 1931.
- Elliott, Rev. William, 1991. The Blount Family. Cleobury Chronicles, Volume I, pp 29-39
- Hickin, Norman E., 1971, The Natural History of an English Forest, London, Hutchinson
- Mawley Oak Photograph, No date, Pre- August 1974
Black and white print, copyright. Berrows Newspapers, Newsquest Ltd. Berrows house, Hylton Rd, Worcester, WR2 5JX
Copy in Kidderminster Public Library, under Cleobury Mortimer.
- Merchant, Terry, Chartered Forester, 3 June, 2005. Blue Remembered Hills Veteran Tree Management Plan; The Mawley Oak.
- Stephens, Brian M., 2001, The Demise of the Mawley Oak.
Wyre Forest Study Group Review Volume 2, 2001, pp 47-48
Also, Worcestershire Record, No. 12, April 2002, pp 13-14
- Stephens, Brian M., 2002, Oak Trees in Wyre Forest.
Wyre Forest Study Group Review Volume 3, 2002, pp 26-28