

Greensand Country Heritage Trees


The Wild Service Tree, Maulden Wood

The tree in front of you is a Wild Service Tree (*Sorbus torminalis*) which is in the same family as the more commonly seen rowans and whitebeams but this species has a distinctive maple-like shaped leaf. It is one of our rarest native trees and an indicator of ancient woodland. It has been recorded in 5 locations along the Greensand Ridge, with Maulden Wood and Palmers Wood, Old Warden, being local 'hotspots', whilst it has been planted more widely in the last 30 years.

This is the largest Wild Service Tree in the county! Most woodland trees, including others found here in Maulden Wood, were cut down and now grow as multiple stemmed coppice. Coppicing is a historic practice of woodland management, cutting trees to ground level and allowing them to re-grow from the stumps. Because so many of Bedfordshire's woodland was coppiced it is rare to come across a large single stemmed tree like this in the county.



This tree has also survived another kind of management it received shortly after the 2nd World War. With timber supplies in short supply and the need to be more self-sufficient, many of the broadleaved trees in Maulden Wood were removed to



provide room to plant fast growing conifers. Chemical thinning was also used to reduce costs and anecdotal evidence describes this Wild Service Tree as being a victim of this process but fortunately it was unsuccessful!

The Wild Service Tree is also known in some parts as the Chequer Tree, its fruit, known as chequers, were made into an alcoholic drink and it has been suggested this why there are so many public houses called The Chequers. The fruit themselves are finely spotted which may also have led to them being called this.

This species was probably more frequent years ago when we had colder winters because the seeds need a long cold spell to help them germinate, as well as a good summer for them to ripen on the tree. It is a monoecious hermaphrodite, having both male and female parts on the same flower. Look out for the clusters, or corymbs, of cream-white flowers in the spring which are pollinated by insects. However, it can also propagate itself vegetatively by suckering and small trees found around an older one may have arisen as root suckers, rather than as seedlings. In some parts of Britain, where Wild Service Trees are growing closely with Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*), the seed produces a hybrid of the two but isolated in this ancient woodland we can be confident that any seedlings will be true.

This tree is believed to be 100-150 years old and as they can live for 200 years or more it will hopefully be here for a long time to come.



The Heritage Tree post has been installed with kind permission of Forestry England.

