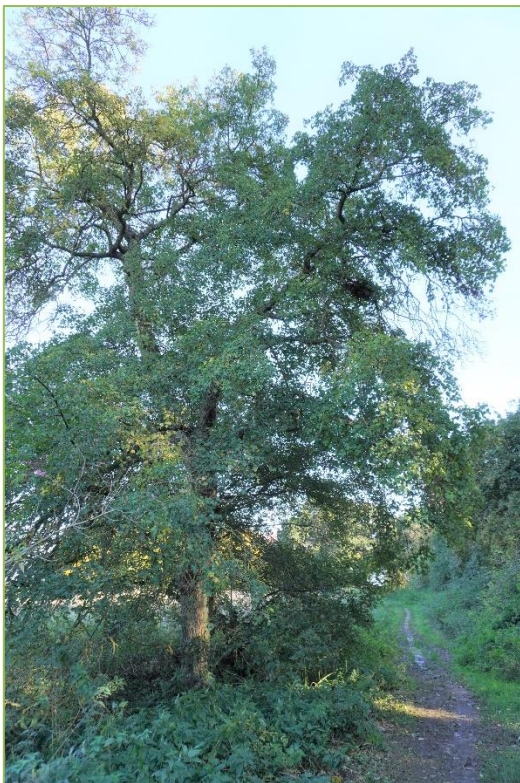


Greensand Country Heritage Trees


The Field Maple, Shuttleworth Estate

The small tree in front of you represents one of many Field maple (*Acer campestre*) in Greensand Country that are survivors and remnants of historic boundaries, hedgerows and woodbanks. It is our only native maple but in autumn its gold or butter-yellow foliage shines out in the Bedfordshire countryside, and it can compete well against its cousins that are the more exotic maples seen frequently in suburban gardens.

This tree is on an old boundary that includes the ancient hollow oaks you will have passed if coming from Old Warden church. If you look across the field you will notice other old oaks around the far edge with the familiar outline of short fat trunks of trees that have been pollarded. This means the trees were 'working' trees whose branches were cut off high enough to allow new growth to be out of reach of grazing deer and livestock. How frequently they were cut would depend upon the timber required at the time. Sometimes only selected branches would have been removed or any branch that fitted the right shape to add strength in the construction of a building or a cart.



Sometimes commoners had rights to pollard trees, often for firewood but also to make smaller utensils. Field maple can also be found as a pollarded tree and its timber was generally well sought after. As it grows relatively slowly the timber is strong but easily turned into bowls with a nice light colour to the wood and there are references to it being used to make musical instruments. In herbal medicine a tincture from Field maple leaves



and bark was used to strengthen your liver.

200 years ago, in Bedfordshire, the Field maple would have been a more dominant tree than it is today. Our woodlands were mostly ash with an under-storey of Field maple but many of these would have been fine trees with sturdy straight trunks reaching up skywards along with the ash trees. The only evidence of this we see today is in Kempston Wood, an ancient wood where some fine Field maple survive. Although it can be found growing across the Greensand Ridge and on the heavier clays, it is most at home on the chalk soils to the south and particularly the limestone soils along the Great Ouse valley. It is here that the largest Field maple can be found in the county but look out for the many old trees within the hedgerows in Greensand Country.

Field maple can live up to 300 years old and become 3m or more in trunk circumference. Pollarded trees may be much smaller for a similar age but the key indicator of an ancient tree is to look for hollowing of the trunk. The more hollow a trunk is the older it is likely to be! If they are growing in a hedgerow or, on a boundary, look to see if the boundary is straight or wiggly? Most ancient boundaries will be bendy and follow natural contours, whereas straight boundaries were often created as part of the Enclosure Acts, between 1794-1819 in Bedfordshire. Enclosures created areas of land ownership and brought uncultivated land under management and removed commoners rights. New boundaries were predominantly planted with hawthorn, whilst oak trees were also planted. Whilst some Field maple were also planted the majority of our old Field maple still identify the earlier ancient boundaries.

If you are fortunate to be standing here with the tree in glorious autumn colour, look around and you will spot other Field maple nearby and in the landscape.



The Heritage Tree post has been installed with kind permission of the Shuttleworth Trust.

