Quercus *Fagaceae*

Quercus is derived for some authorities from Celtic *quer* (fine) and *cuez* (tree) components, and is a classical Latin name for 'oak'.

The oak features in heraldry. A branch of oak leaves flanks the shield and cross in the coat of arms of San Marino (off the north-western Adriatic Sea), and a garland of oak leaves clothes the loins of the two wild men depicted in the royal coat of arms of Denmark. The tree (species unspecified) is also a national emblem of the Irish Republic, as well as in the United States where it is a state emblem adopted in 1961 by Iowa.. In symbolism the oak is often an unofficial representative of England and was used in the heraldic device adopted by the House of Stuart, and the crest badges of the Scottish Hamilton, MacAndrews and MacEwan clans. It is also an emblem of the Scottish Cameron clan. A branch of oak appears in the national coat of arms of Italy too as a symbol of strength.

Europe used to be able to boast extensive oak forests and in the 16th Century these covered one third of England. The tree not only attracted magical, religious and symbolic connotations but due particularly to its strength, durability and medicinal qualities it also had (has) everyday practical uses and considerable economic value. The oak has given its bark as an ingredient in medicinal remedies, as an agent for tanning leather and as the source of a variety of dyes. The oak apples (galls) yield dyes and inks (the latter remaining unfaded on the page and legible for centuries). They were used not only by the ancient Greeks and the Romans but also more recently by 17th Century women in Europe to blacken their hair and they were a source of medicine too. Its acorns provided a somewhat indigestible famine food (particularly in Saxon times in England). They were fed to pigs in some country districts, and when roasted they have offered a substitute for coffee.

The oak tree also provided timber on a grand scale for the construction of buildings, furniture, ships, docks, railway sleepers and weapons. Continuous demand over the centuries destroyed the forests which as the trees can take up to 300 years to reach maturity take a very long time to develop. The insatiable demand for oaks in the 16th Century particularly is well illustrated by a series of events which occurred in Western Europe then especially in England. The Armada was sent to English shores in 1588 by King Philip III of Spain (1578-1621). Not only was it meant to teach England a lesson for having the audacity to harrass Spanish vessels (the English privateers Sir Francis Drake, Sir John Hawkins, Sir Walter Raleigh and their peers had obviously been too successful) but also to fulfil another perhaps even more important task – the fleet had been ordered to destroy the oaks in the Forest of Dean. This last was never achieved however as the Spanish fleet was ignominiously vanquished by the out-gunned and smaller English opposition – and the British Navy's 'timber yard' remained untouched by foreign hands. (A touch of enthusiasm for the victory needs to be forgiven when one considers the stark contrast between the size and might of the contenders.) In England it was realized however that so many trees were being felled by that time for ships or charcoal that Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) was obliged not only to pass sweeping bye-laws to try and conserve all the Royal Forests but also to order extensive replanting. But the Navy was insatiable as the number of oaks needed for one vessel could be phenomenal. [This is dramatically demonstrated in an example from 200 odd years later. HMS *Victory*, Admiral Nelson's

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(1758-1805) flagship in the British naval battle with the Spanish in November 1805 off Cape Trafalgar on the southern Spanish coast, was built over a period of six years from 3000 oak trees.] Demand continued to increase during the next two centuries so that oak wood had to be imported from Germany and the new American colonies. This imported oak was often 'green' unseasoned wood which meant that the hulls of ships made from it rotted rapidly with the fungi that appeared on the waterline particularly. The fate of one, HMS *Queen Charlotte*, is ample illustration. She was launched in 1810 and is said never even to have made it to sea. She rotted first. However Britain's thirst for oak and other hardwood combined with other demands arising not least from urban expansion (which would have gobbled both natural building materials and space) surpassed even this in more recent years. Over half the remaining forests in southern England were lost in the 40 years from 1945.

The oak was sacred to the ancient Hebrews because (as related in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament of the *Bible*) Abraham gave God and two angels, all three disguised as travellers, hospitality under an oak tree. The tree was sacred for the ancient Greeks, and the Romans dedicated it to Jupiter. Greek and Roman mythology both tell a variation of the Hebraic legend. A couple upon their deaths were transformed side by side into a linden tree (*Tilia cordata*) and an oak tree (the latter signifying hospitality) in return for their humble generosity to disguised travelling gods earlier in their lives. Independently not only did the early Gauls revere the oak as a symbol of their god but it was also sacred to the Celtic Druids and played a significant role in their ritual. For the latter the supreme deity's words were defined by interpreting the rustling of the oak's branches.

The tree's persistent association with thunder in both legend and religion may partly be influenced by the fact that many people believe that it tends to attract lightning more often than any other tree. For northern Europeans the oak was the tree of life which was sacred to the thunder god, Thor, and for the ancient Greeks it was sacred to Zeus who initially was god of the sky and lord of the winds and the clouds, as well as of rain and thunder. As already mentioned for the Romans the oak was sacred to Zeus's counterpart, Jupiter (who particularly in his function as the Etruscan Jupiter possessed three thunderbolts which were hurled at men in warning and punishment), while in Slavonic mythology the oak was associated with Pyerun, the god of war (the name varies slightly in different Slavonic languages but in Polish the word *piorun* means 'thunder').

To dream of the oak is said to indicate good health.

An oak wreath crown was earned in Roman times for saving a citizen's life during a battle, while for some northern Europeans too an oak leaf cluster was considered to represent victory and heroism. Today this symbolism continues in military decorations given by the American Services.

The acorn used to provide the staple diet for Norwegians until cereals superseded it. Today in many countries particularly in central Europe acorns are still used as cattle fodder and the basis for litter in pigsties and cowsheds.

Most English schoolchildren have learnt that Charles II (1630-1685) who was king of Scotland and England from 1660, was said to have hidden in an oak tree at Boscobel in Shropshire following the Battle of Worcester in 1651 when he was routed by Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), the English soldier and statesman. Until the 20th Century on the commemoration of Charles II's birthday (29th May) it was the custom to wear a buttonhole made of oak leaves and oak apples as a symbol of allegiance to the British sovereign. However the origin of this day often known as Oak Apple Day, Oak Ball Day, Royal Oak Day or Shick-shack Day has caused some debate. It appears still to be a matter of argument as to whether the oak played a significant role in the far older May Day activities and it is thought likely that this celebration on 29th May could well be

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connected with these and thus pre-date the birth of Charles II. The Shick-shack (made from an oak apple and a piece of oak) had to be worn before noon (in the county of Oxfordshire) at which point this was succeeded by ash leaves (*Fraxinus*) or 'monkey powder'. Sporting either in the evening however attracted a beating with nettles (*Urtica dioica*).

At one time the sixpenny and shilling pieces in English coinage carried a spray of oak leaves on one side.

There have been many famous oak trees in Britain. These include the Fairlop Oak in Hainault Forest, the Newland Oak in Gloucestershire and the Courthorpe Oak in Yorkshire – all of which have been marvelled at for their size. There is also the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest (named after an antiquarian and local historian Major Hayman Rooke whose book on the trees in that area was published in 1790). This last one has been estimated to be about 650 years old.

A single slice of oak was used to make King Arthur's Round Table which can still be seen in Winchester. And the shrine in Westminster Abbey (in London) of Edward the Confessor (c. 1003-1066). who reigned from 1042-1066, has lasted for just on 900 years and is also made of oak.

In England each parish used to 'beat the bounds' annually usually during the Rogation Days (the three days preceding Ascension Day in the Christian Calendar). This involved a procession of clergymen and parishioners walking round the perimeter of the parish boundary and at certain points (usually marked by notable trees) passages from the Bible would be read and blessings would be asked for the people. Many of these 'Gospel trees' were oaks. Thus the name 'Gospel Oak' – and someof them still stand today.

The oak tree has been used as a symbol of British strength and it is also the hub of an English saying

> Great oaks from little acorns grow.

Another old saying,

> If the oak's before the ash, you will only get a splash;
> But if the ash precedes the oak, you will surely get a soak.

meant that if oak leaves appeared before those of the ash (*Fraxinus*) the weather would be dry and dusty, whereas in reverse it would be rainy. Then there is the one that warns against sheltering under an oak from lightning in a thunderstorm.

> Beware of an oak, it draws the stroke;
> avoid an ash, it counts the flash;
> creep under the thorn, it can save you from harm.

And finally

> Little strokes fell great oaks..

This is supposed to remind one that small persistent incursions eventually undermine massive structures.

The famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) makes innumerable references to the oak in his plays and poetry. In *The Winter's Tale* he wrote

> ....and will not
> (For, as the case now stands, it is a curse
> He cannot be compell'd to't) once remove
> The root of his opinion, which is rotten
> As ever oak, or stone, was sound.

Then in contrast in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Puck talks of the effect of Oberon and Titania's quarrel

> And now they never meet in grove, or green,
> By fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen,
> But they do square; that all their elves, for fear,

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Creep into acorn cups, and hide them there.

From the end of the 20th Century oaks in North America have been subjected to attack from a disease that is having the same effect as that which ravaged elms (*Ulmus*) in Europe especially in the last decades. As a result stringent rules have been introduced in Canada and the United States in an effort to contain this unfortunate outbreak .

Some authorities point out that the leaves and acorns of all species in this genus are poisonous for humans and some animals. The toxicity of any species however is understood to be variable according to climate and weather conditions.

In the language of flowers it is said to be a symbol of bravery (leaves), hospitality (tree), and liberty (live tree).

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