

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

Veteran Tree Care

Veteran trees are an important and integral part of the landscape in lowland Britain. They have been valued for centuries for their historic, religious, economic and social importance. In today's more urban society, most veteran trees are removed for safety reasons. There are a few that are retained because of their historical significance, but most tend to be forgotten.

What is a veteran tree?

English Nature's Veteran Tree Handbook has identified the difficulty in precisely defining the term 'veteran tree' but accepts a tree as veteran if it can be defined by three guiding principles:

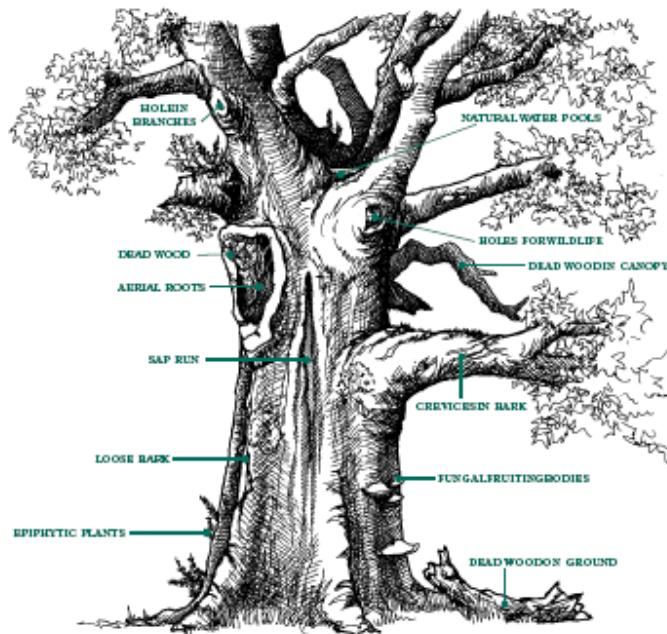
1. Trees of interest biologically, aesthetically or culturally because of their age;
2. Trees in the ancient stage of their life;
3. Trees that are old relative to others of the same species.

These principles are very broad reaching due to the very differences between trees. If a veteran tree was defined by its age, then depending upon the species, one tree could be a veteran at 100 years, while another at 900 years.

There are a wide range of physical characteristics which can help to identify a veteran tree. The more features a tree has, the stronger the case for veteran status.

- Large girth for the species
- Major trunk cavities
- Naturally forming water pools
- Decay holes
- Bark loss
- Large amount of deadwood in the canopy

- Fungal fruiting bodies
- High number of interdependent wildlife species
- Epiphytic plants
- High aesthetic interest
- An 'old' look



Why are veteran trees important?

Veteran trees are important because:

- They are a historic link, whether to a person or notable event.
- They identify how land was previously used. Veteran trees tend to be found on wooded commons, as boundary markers in fields and in ancient farmland landscapes.
- They form part of a notable designed landscape. The 18th and 19th century saw men like 'Capability' Brown and Humphry Repton, designing landscapes on a grand scale with trees playing a significant role.
- They provide the right environment to support a wide range of flora and fauna

Why manage veteran trees?

Veteran trees face many threats including felling for timber, competition from younger trees, disease, fire, soil compaction and damage caused by grazing animals. Those and many other threats can affect the health and stability of a veteran tree. It is therefore important to manage these trees and the surrounding land:

- To safeguard the valuable habitat for flora and fauna
- To fulfil a duty of care with regard to safety
- For historic reasons
- To maintain the character of a landscape.

How do you manage veteran trees?

There are two basic things to consider when managing veteran trees: the individual tree and the site.

Because trees do not exist in isolation, it is important to look at the land usage around the veteran tree.

- What is the land used for?
- How has it been managed?
- Is it farmland, grassland, woodland etc?
- What else is growing on the land that can compete with the tree for light, water and space?

Once the site has been assessed and competitors identified, it is important to develop a management plan. This will identify the appropriate course of action for a specific number of years.

- On agricultural land, should the tree be fenced off to prevent root damage from farm vehicles or bark damage from grazing animals?
- If heath land, should burning of surrounding land be restricted to prevent damage to the tree?
- If in a woodland, should the area be thinned? If so, by how much?

Once the site has been assessed it is important to turn attention to the individual tree.

Firstly, identify the health, vigour and structural integrity of the tree. From this inspection

a decision can be made as to whether any pruning work is required. This decision will form an integral part of the management plan as it will be goal specific. Is the tree to be managed to remove dangerous branches, improve vigour, encourage biodiversity or restore an ancient pollard?

The management of veteran trees is a complex task which requires the skills of various professionals including an ecologist and tree care professional. It is worth investing the time to consult these professionals who can point you in the direction as to the best and most cost effective method of management.

For more in-depth information regarding veteran tree management, contact Natural England, who have produced a handbook entitled, “Veteran Trees: A guide to good management”. This is available at:

<http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/IN13>

Alternatively, you can contact Northumberland County Council on 0845 6006400 and ask to speak to your local Tree and Woodland Officer.