

STORIES OF CENTRE VALE TREES

Philip Marshall & Sarah Pennie

Illustrations by Stella Hill

for The Friends of Centre Vale Park, Todmorden

PUBLISHED BY

Friends of Centre Vale Park
www.friendsofcentrevalepark.org.uk

2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Todmorden Town Council for their faith in, and support for the project

Robin Pennie for his invaluable assistance and editorial skills

Chris Goddard for creating the map

Roger Mellor for revising the map



**STORIES OF
CENTRE VALE TREES**

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PRINT & DESIGN

Print Bureau, Hebden Bridge | printbureau.co.uk

This booklet is dedicated to:

All the lost trees of Centre Vale, particularly the fine old Beeches that have fallen, or were felled in 2015 as a result of the tree disease *Phytophthora ramorum*.

If we look after our woodland it will regenerate naturally, creating a different beauty.



Introduction

This booklet has been created by the Friends of Centre Vale Park. It was first imagined by two of the Friends' volunteers in the Spring and Summer, during the first 2020 Covid-19 Lockdown. While physical distancing rules prevented our regular volunteer teams from carrying out practical work in the Park, this then became a special project.

It is not designed to lead you on a numbered trail in sequence; we leave it to you to explore the park and the woodland in your own way. The pages focus on twelve Centre Vale Park tree species, in most cases seeing them as individuals with their own story. As well as giving brief botanical and identification information the author, Philip Marshall, also explains how each tree fits into Centre Vale's history and planting schemes.

Philip was born in Todmorden and has lived in Todmorden most of his life. He has studied woodlands and their history for many years, in particular the mature and veteran trees. A founder member of the Friends of Centre Vale Park, he has noted and commented for over a decade on the growth and health of Centre Vale's trees, alongside the overall ecological health of the park woodlands.

The saying "You can't see the wood for the trees", makes a good starting point. It is useful to look at Centre Vale tree planting in specific phases, starting 200 years ago when our park was first set up as a "gentleman's estate". Before that it was quite likely to have been open pasture with scattered native trees.

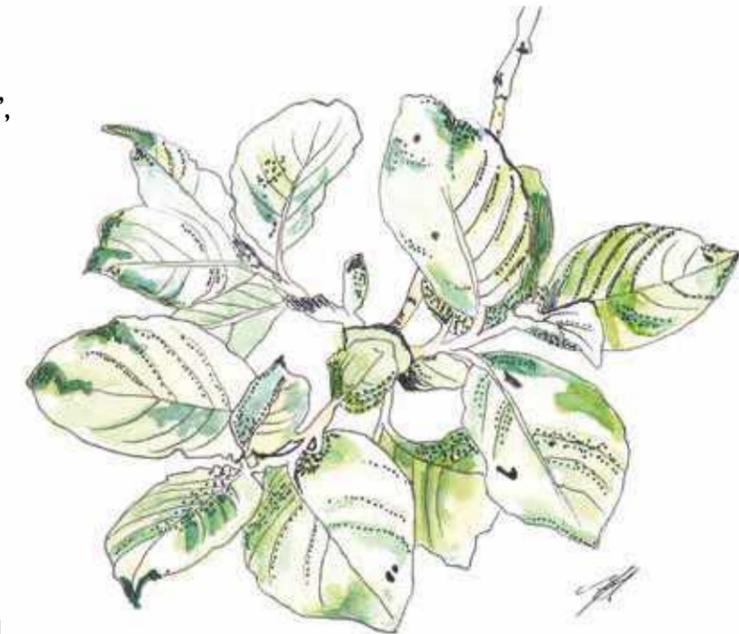
The planting of trees surrounding the former Centre Vale House was done by celebrated landscapers in phases from the 1820s. A mix of mainly Beech and Oak trees, together with some Ash and Sycamore, were planted above Lovers Walk in the early 19th century. It was not until the 1930s that further planting took place in the farm fields below Lovers Walk. This was followed

in the 1940s by a plantation, all in neat rows, beside the upper part of the steep cobbled path which is accessed from the Well Lane entrance.

As Philip explains in the back pages of this booklet, management is all important for the wellbeing of these trees, and the biodiversity of the woodland as a whole. As this is a public park and the property of Calderdale Council, all felling and heavy tree work must be carried out by professionals. Even so, there is much volunteers can do, with Philip's guidance, to improve the woodland and to alert Calderdale to any problems.

Centre Vale woodland management carried out over the last decade has seen much improvement to the health of the trees, and the biodiversity of the parkland habitat. The work continues. We hope this booklet will be enjoyed, and go a little way towards encouraging us all to value our trees and woodland biodiversity wherever we are.

S.P. November 2020



Beech: *Fagus sylvatica*

Impressive Centre Vale Beeches

Beech trees were not a part of our Calder Valley woodlands until early 19th C. At that time the rich land owners began landscaping their estates with what must have seemed an exotic tree. Beech was able to withstand the terrible smoke pollution from the mills and homes when other species suffered badly or died. They might also have been planted for use in making clog soles for mill workers.

The first Beech you are likely to come across in Centre Vale are the big trees below the site of the Centre Vale Mansion. These old trees are representative of many others of similar age within this woodland. They become very impressive, with huge trunks and large spreading branches. When walking along almost any path in Centre Vale you will find Beech of many ages. They were also planted on the steep slopes below Doghouse Lane, a beautiful sight in May with their bright new leaves, and the carpet of bluebells.



The park's Beech trees are certainly beautiful but they cast a lot of shade. This has been a major cause of land slippage on the steep wet hillsides of the park, because of the bare earth under the heavy shade. In places where they have died and been felled, the extra light allows a great number of seedlings such as Hawthorn, Birch and Rowan, to appear and thrive, providing a more diverse and healthy woodland.

Even so, it is a shame that after living through nearly two centuries of industrial pollution, many of the impressive Centre Vale Beech are now collapsing and dying. The obvious reason is old age, and ones that are above 200 years are considered exceptional. Now is the time to enjoy these old trees that are reaching the end of life. Their joyous presence and statuesque grandeur will be missed.

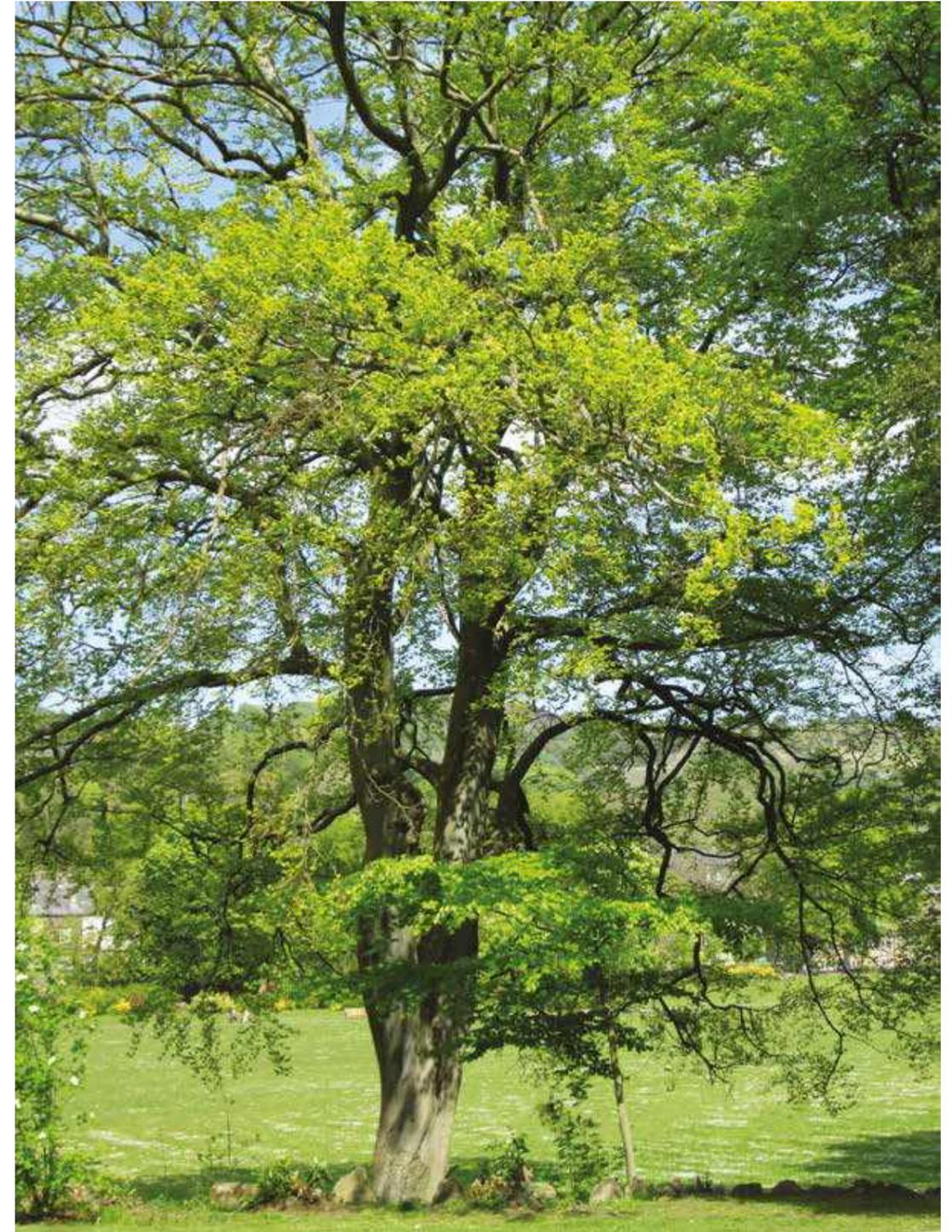
More Beech Facts and Stories

Beech trees are at their best in early Spring when the fresh, velvet green leaves appear. The flowers, which appear after the leaves, used to be collected by gardeners. They were then dried and preserved for packing fruit, as they are as soft as cotton and do not transfer any kind of scent. Every few years, the trees produce enormous amounts of 'mast' nuts in autumn, making a great treat for squirrels, mice and birds before winter.

Sadly, the end of the old Beech trees in the park is being hastened by the arrival of a serious disease in the park about 10 years ago. It is a fungal-like micro-organism, accidentally introduced to this country from SE Asia about 2002. It is commonly referred to as Ramorum disease, and Rhododendron is one of the main plants that harbour and spread huge numbers of the disease spores. It became necessary to try to remove, and burn all the park Rhododendron. The disease kills the bark of Beech and cuts off the sap flow, eventually killing the tree. Part of the lifecycle of the disease is that it survives in the soil, and these Zoospores can 'swim' through damp ground to infect the roots of nearby trees.

The name 'Beech' is of Northern origin, the German name being buche and the wood of the tree was once used for forming the sides of books, so 'books' and 'beech' have a common origin. The thin bark is also still used for writing on; just look at the many names carved into the trunks of some of them in Centre Vale. One just outside the park has "Charter Day 1896" carved into the trunk.

The Beech



Where to Find This Tree

Our noted tree is part of a small group on the slope below the statue of John Fielden as you walk towards the Centre Vale Mansion information board. It is the lowest of three, almost on a level with the field. Sadly, this tree is now beginning to show signs of stress and dieback within its crown. This group of trees may have survived from when Centre Vale House was first built and the area landscaped 200 years ago, or perhaps they were planted a little later when Sam Fielden made improvements to his estate after the death of his father John Fielden in 1849.

Sycamore: *Acer pseudoplatanus*

Centre Vale's Different Sycamore

The tree we have chosen is unusual, but it grows on the edge of the main drive so it is easy to reach. It has a crown growing from multiple stems of the main trunk. To achieve this effect, the main stem is cut at height on the young tree (a technique known as pollarding) which causes the tree to send out new growth.

This Sycamore was planted for its ornamental value as a prominent estate tree, and the multiple stems have allowed the crown to expand much wider than normal, creating a pastoral visual effect. Its date of planting is likely to have been soon after 1820, at the time when Thomas Ramsbotham built Centre Vale House. At that time the Centre Vale estate began to be expanded and landscaped. This was over 20 years before John Fielden MP bought the estate.



Sadly, this tree is showing signs of stress, with die-back of the crown and its extreme lateness coming into leaf. This is not because of its age, but because of root disturbance when the park flood works were undertaken about 2006. It also suffers from water-logging and soil compression caused by the heavy machinery used for park maintenance and at events. The tree needs some care if it is to survive some years after its 200th birthday.

Sycamores - More to Know

There is no evidence to show the Sycamore species is a native tree. It is likely to have arrived from France via Scotland, when these two countries had close relations. The oldest tree in Scotland dates to ca. 1550. The species withstands high winds and grows defiantly upright, making it a useful shelter tree for planting around upland farms in the Northern hills.

Sycamores come into leaf much earlier than our native trees and produce long dangling flower spikes. The underside of the leaves is home to thousands of aphids which provide essential food for birds and their fledglings. The pollen from the abundant flowers is important to bees and other insects. The Sycamore is therefore an important species but it needs careful managing or the high number of seedlings will dominate the woodland. The familiar 'helicopter' winged seeds are distributed by the wind in autumn.

The growth of the branches for its first 60 years is straight and regular, and the trunk is smooth. It is at this time the tree is often disfigured or even killed by grey squirrels that strip the thin bark to get at the sweet sap. After 60 years the bark becomes progressively broken into rough plates, beginning at the base of the trunk and working upwards over the years. The twigs and branches then become gnarled and rough.

The timber is ideal for making furniture, decoratively grained veneers, and kitchen-ware such as chopping boards as the wood is non-tainting. It also has good "sounding properties" and is prized for making fiddle backs on string instruments.

The Pollarded Sycamore



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Where to Find This Tree

Walk into the park from North Lodge. Continue up the drive till you get to the park shelter and the path to the right that goes up to the depot. This sycamore stands almost at that junction on your left, just on the edge of the drive and the big park field. It is noticeably larger and older than the other trees, mainly lime trees, which line the drive from North Lodge.

Turkey Oak: *Quercus cerris*

Centre Vale Stories

The good shape of the mature trees made them popular as parkland trees, and Centre Vale has a pair of mature and stately Turkey Oaks that were probably planted in the 1860s, near where the John Fielden statue now stands. This takes us back to the documented influence of the Victorian landscape designer, Edward Kemp, on the Centre Vale estate. At this period, Samuel, the eldest son of John Fielden, was living in the Centre Vale mansion, and it is he who commissioned the planting and landscaping.

Edward Kemp trained at Chatsworth under the celebrated Joseph Paxton during the 1830s before setting out on his own to become a landscape designer of numerous parks and cemeteries throughout the country. His most celebrated work was at Birkenhead Park on the Wirral - the first publicly funded park in the world. The design was by Joseph Paxton, and Kemp became the superintendent of works. That park opened in 1847.

Edward Kemp designed and supervised all the landscaping of the other Fielden residences of Stansfield Hall and the newly built Dobroyd Castle in 1869. It is likely parts of Centre Vale were designed and landscaped at the same time.

One of his signature trees for Dobroyd Castle was the Turkey Oak, and these are of similar age and size to the twins at Centre Vale – see the opposite page. (He also planted the only Lucombe Oak in Calderdale at Dobroyd Castle; this rare species has an unusual story all of its own.)

Turkey Oak - A Little More Information

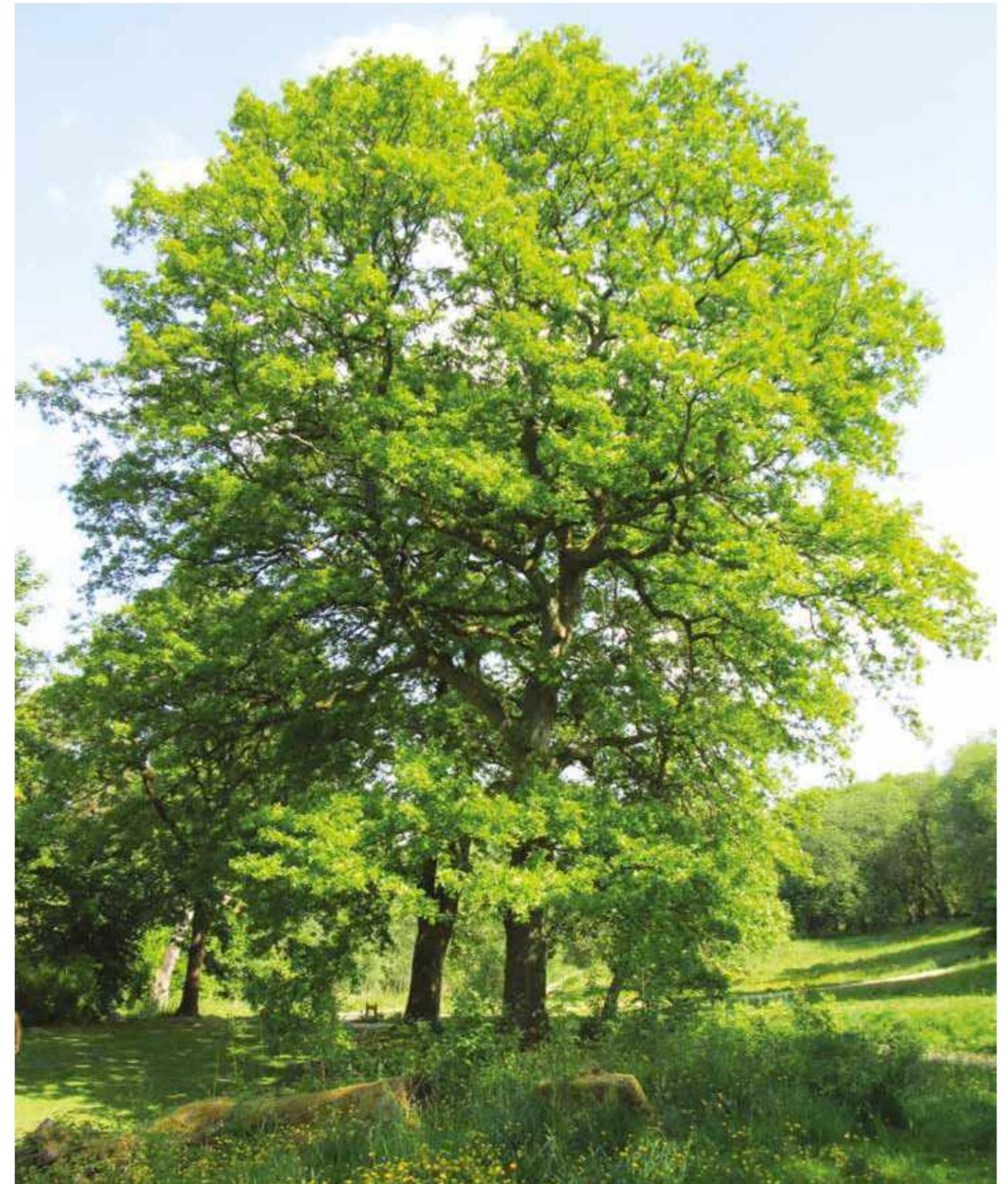
William Lucombe introduced the Turkey Oak from SW Asia to his nursery in Exeter in 1735. It is a remarkably hardy tree considering its southern origins, and in Centre Vale there are plenty of young seedlings from these twins. It is certainly at home here.

The leaves of Turkey Oak are dark green and have a shiny top surface. Compared with our native Oak they have much variation in shape, but mainly show very deep lobes cut almost to the mid-rib. Its acorns are held in a distinctive mossy cup, and in winter the buds have long stipules extending beyond them. The bark is rougher than the native oaks.

It is a fast growing species and, as it has a straight trunk, it was hoped that its timber would replace our slower growing English Oak for shipbuilding. This never happened, as the sawn wood decays quickly outdoors, and was found to contain many splits and shakes. Instead, this made it suitable for domestic interiors, where it was much used for wall panelling.



The Turkey Oaks



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Where to Find This Tree

Walk up the main path from the John Fielden statue towards the Old Coach Yard. You will see the two Turkey Oaks on your right, identifiable by their very rough fissured bark, as you look towards the site of the old mansion.