

Searching for the Colwall Oaks (Liz Hill 2021)

Wandering around the internet I stumbled across an 1877 drawing by Henry Harris Lines of two large oak trees, which piqued my interest as to where the drawing was done and were they still there.



Henry Lines was a member of a well-regarded family of Birmingham artists and exhibited works at the Royal Academy. He moved to Worcester in his 30s and became involved in the local Natural History and Archaeological Societies. He spent much of his later years surveying the Malvern Hills, meticulously taking measurements and visually recording the ancient and physical features. This drawing was done when he was 77 years old. The tree on the left is given as having a 16 foot 6 inch girth at 3 feet above ground level, whereas the other is 22 feet in girth at 5 feet above ground level. Henry Harris Lines was 77 years old when he drew the trees.

Connie Wan commented on the drawing in her 2012 thesis on the Lines family.¹

“Two oak trees are prominent in the foreground of the drawing, one significantly taller than the other. A small figure has also been included, seen standing by the taller tree, possibly to emphasize its height. The annotations made by Henry Harris are the only indication of his interest in the historical aspects of the site, referring to the size of the trees’ girth. Therefore, it can be assumed that he was attempting to date the site from this information, since oak trees are known to grow consistently in size over centuries. Their age is often indicated by tree rings, seen if a cross-section of the trunk is exposed, but it is also possible to gain an approximate age of a tree by measuring its girth and dividing it by the average rate of growth per year. This technique is specific to archaeologists and researchers of natural history, and it is possible that he procured this skill through his involvement with clubs such as the Malvern Field Club, or through individuals such as Edwin Lees.”

Henry Lines was not the only person to have noticed these Oaks in the 19th Century. In 1856 the Edwin Lees produced a book which included "Incidental Excursions with the Malvern and Worcestershire Naturalists' Clubs."² His description of the trees is:

"There are some old trees about Colwall that demand attention especially from lovers of nature and sylvan scenery. The most prominent are "the Colwall Oaks", scraggy and battered veterans, standing in the middle of a large meadow not far from the church. One of these, tempest-torn and half-bare, forms a fine picturesque object, with its bald stag's horns standing in bold relief against the blue sky. This individual has a bole of some magnitude, measuring nearly twenty-seven feet in circumference; yet not hollow, or only partly so, at the base. These trees stand on ground that constituted anciently a park belonging to the bishops of Hereford, who had a country-seat at Colwall, near the church."



In 1867, the oaks were again visited, this time by the Woolhope Naturalist's Club in an article on "The Remarkable Trees of Herefordshire"³, which included this photograph. In addition to the technical details of the tree we get a full description of those on the trip and a description of their day. (The largest tree is the one in the background of the photo.)

"At 9.45 the Club left Hereford by the Worcester train, and reached Colwall in due course at 10.28. The weather was at this time most unpleasant, dull gray sky with strong wind and driving rain. Umbrellas and Mackintoshes were the order of the day, and the one cheering thing was the mutual surprise of every one there to see so many others boldly braving the elements in pursuit of science.

...

*From the churchyard the main body proceeded by a farm-house, whose great size, and heavily-timbered walls, and odd windows, give it an appearance of departed greatness, that bears out well the tradition of its having been formerly one of the summer palaces of the Bishops of Hereford—on through the farm-yard—on by the muddy remains of the fish-pond—on to the field that still has the name of Colwall Park. In the middle of this field stand the two celebrated Colwall oaks—alone in their glory,—the last remnants of the primeval forest of the district. They are very picturesque trees; —they still bear a considerable amount of foliage about their centres, but lift up through it their large stag-headed branches, bare and dead, towards the sky; they are of great, but not of extraordinary, size. The largest tree, at 5 feet from the ground, measures 21 feet 7 inches in circumference, but spreads out towards the ground to the circumference of no less than 40 feet 10 inches. This tree is hollow; and as five of the members stood up within it, it was evident that three more could also have done so at the same time. The companion tree, at 5 feet, measures 16 feet 2 inches, spreading out in a similar manner to the circumference of 34 feet on the ground. They are both *Quercus pedunculata*, the so-called old English oak. The very great appearance of age presented by these trees, their picturesque shape and solitary position, well backed as they are by the range of the Malvern Hills, gives them a most interesting character. These trees are probably a thousand years old, and as the Club sheltered behind them from a drifting rain-storm, considerably heavier than a Scotch mist, it was impossible to escape the thought that in their day the noble encampment on the Herefordshire Beacon above them may have been a scene of life and action. When they were saplings, the Saxons had not yet overrun the country."*

In 1877 Edwin Lees again visited the topic of the Colwall oaks in the "The Forest and Chace of Malvern"⁴.

"In the middle of a pasture, stand the Colwall Oaks, the two oldest oak trees anywhere about the Malvern hills, and manifesting in their size of bole and bare stags arms at the tops rising high in air undoubted evidences of very high antiquity. The largest has been much shattered and lost some of its finest branches, so that at a distance it has a lank and attenuated look, but when closely examined the size of the old bole now getting hollow within appears very great. The extreme base of the trunk bulges out considerably, and is rather more than 60ft. in circumference; but this diminishes so quickly that a yard from the ground the tree is only about 27ft round. It is worthy of notice that in the deep rifts of the bark of this ancient oak a Lichen grows that I have nowhere else met with near Malvern, and that is the gray speckled Opegrapha (O. lynceaj, which is well marked by the pruinous or bloomy apotheciae, which seem pressed into the white mortar crust on which they are placed. The companion oak to the great one, and almost as old, is 45ft. round its swollen base. These old veterans stand on ground that centuries ago formed part of a park belonging to the Bishops of Hereford, who had a country seat at Colwall.

Considering the centuries that the oak continues to grow, and that the trees are in a decaying state, it may be confidently affirmed that they are 800 years old at least, and more probably 900."

So where are these trees and are they still there nearly 150 years later. The trees are recorded as being in "Colwall Park which is the large field to the SW of the church. The 1885 25" to the mile Ordnance Survey map shows faintly two trees standing on their own in the field. They do not appear in the 1903 or later maps, but do show up in current aerial views



They are also recorded on the Woodland Trusts Ancient Tree Inventory⁵ where you can see information about all Colwall's veteran trees⁶. This gives the current girth of the tree as 4.75m (15ft 7 in) and 4.5m (14ft 9 in). They can be seen walking along CW22 as shown in this photograph



*Three hundred years an oak expends in growth
Three hundred years in majesty stands forth
Three hundred years declines and wastes away
Then dies, and takes three hundred to decay.*

From Iolo ancient Welsh Manuscript

References

1. Samuel Lines and Sons: Rediscovering Birmingham's artistic Dynasty 1794-1898. Connie Wan 2012 https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/3645/1/Wan12PhD_v1.pdf (page 20)
2. Pictures of Nature in the Siluran Region around The Malvern Hill and Vale of Severn: including incidental excursions with the Malvern and Worcestershire Naturalists' Clubs. Edwin Lees 1856 <https://archive.org/details/picturesnaturei00leesgoog> (page 135)
3. The Remarkable Trees of Herefordshire. October 1867 Woolhope Naturalist's Club https://www.woolhopeclub.org.uk/system/files/documents/transaction/1867-woolhope-club-transactions_0.pdf (page 1)
4. The Forest and Chace of Malvern with notices of the most remarkable old trees remaining within its confines. Edwin Lees 1877. <https://archive.org/details/forestandchacem00leesgoog> (page 22)
5. Ancient Tree Inventory <https://ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/tree-search>
6. Woodland Trust Estimating Age of Oaks <http://www.wbrc.org.uk/atp/Estimating%20Age%20of%20Oaks%20-%20Woodland%20Trust.pdf>