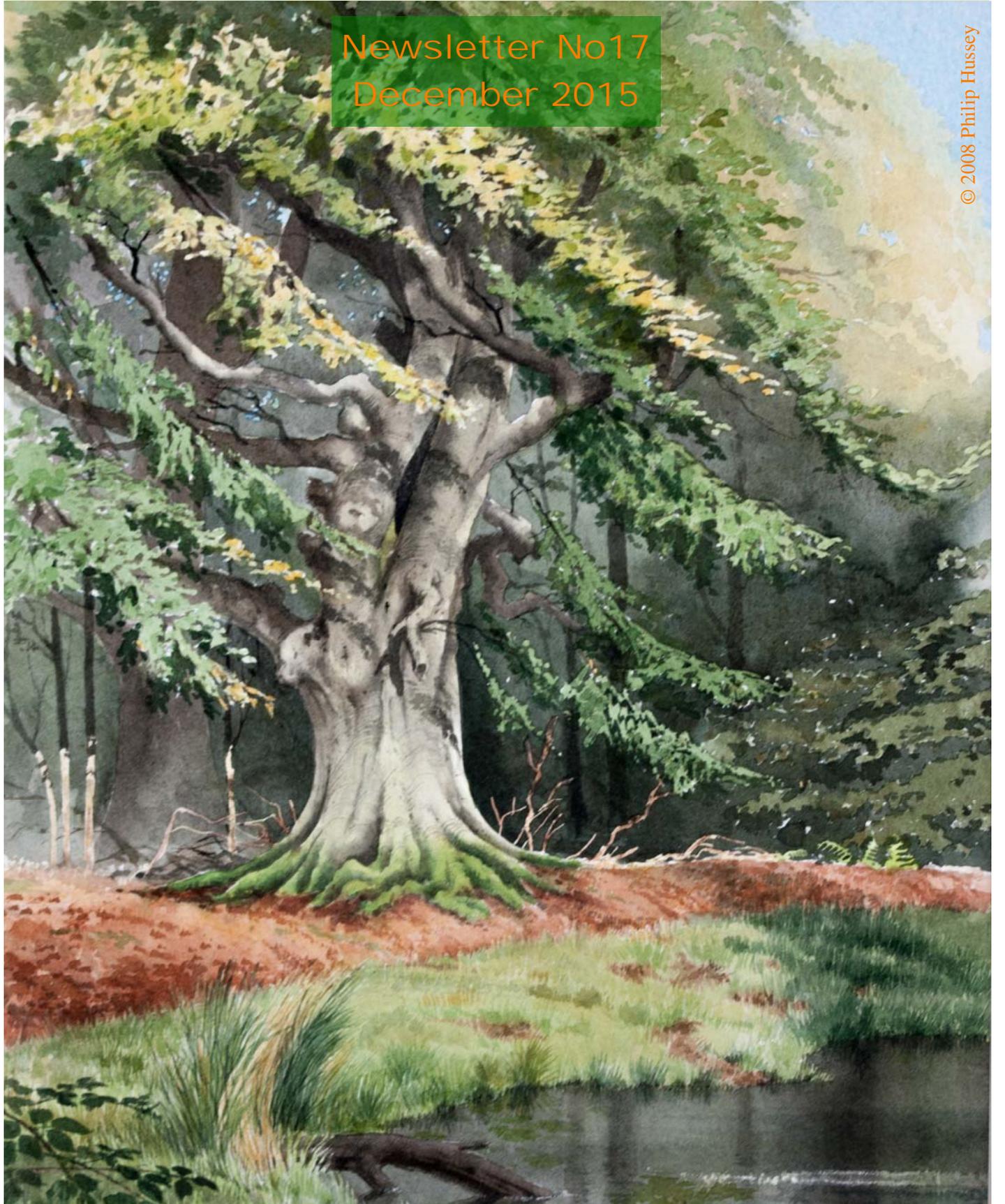




# *Friends of Naphill Common*



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In celebration of the Great Beech of Naphill Common

The high winds on the night of 15<sup>th</sup> November 2015 brought down the Great Beech of Naphill Common that had stood, for perhaps 400 years near Dew Pond, on the top of the bank of what is thought to be an Iron Age farmstead. This fine tree was certainly the largest and probably the oldest on Naphill Common. It ended its life filling the pond that it had accompanied for centuries, leaving only a hollow stump to remind us of what a magnificent and noble life had once dominated the scene. It has left a hole in the landscape and in many people's hearts.

The Great Beech had a girth of 17ft 10½ins (5.44m) measured at breast level and a height of over 90ft (28m), but the massive trunk could not sustain the force of the wind because time and fungi had hollowed it out. What remained was a shell a few inches thick; too thin to carry the enormous burden of its crown. Months before its end there was an omen of what was to come: a huge limb had fallen and, in doing so, had cracked open the bole. The wind on that November night was almost certainly puny compared with some our aged friend had seen, but it was enough.

It is not possible to give a precise age for the Great Beech. Being hollow, we can't count its growth rings, so we are left only with its size and especially the girth. The tree expert A. F. Mitchell devised a rough formula for maiden trees. It is 'rough' for all sorts of reasons, one of which is the fact that some species grow much more quickly than others. He suggested that for free-standing trees their age will be approximately one year for every inch of their girth. This would make our tree only 214 years old. However, if the tree has grown in woodland, then its age will be one year for every ½ inch of its girth; making our tree 428 years old. During recent times the Great Beech has stood in woodland, but how open the area was in the past is debateable. It would almost certainly have varied over the centuries and the tree's parent must have stood fairly closeby.

The problem of estimating the age does not end there. Mitchell's formula applies to maiden trees – that is, trees that have not been coppiced or pollarded. Being a tree standing on common land where cattle and sheep were regularly grazed it is likely that the Great Beech was pollarded and its general shape supports this suggestion. Pollarding involves lopping off the

branches well above the reach of browsing animals, at about 10ft (3m) from the ground. This is done roughly every fifteen years to produce a crop of usable timber and firewood. Pollarding slows the growth of the tree so that it is generally older than a maiden tree with the same girth. From this labyrinth of reasoning, my best estimate is that the tree was between 300 and 450 years old and probably a little over 400.

So, at sometime around 1600 a beech mast must have fallen and lodged on the top of the bank of an earthwork. One of the little triangular nuts must have avoided any snuffling pigs or grazing deer and cattle, and a seedling began its life: its first leaves like two green halfpennies in the grass. The infant had entered a harsh world. The 'Little Ice Age' was approaching its worst when frost fairs would be held on the frozen Thames. Perhaps the sapling sheltered from the frosts under the canopy of its parent.

The infant also entered a busy world: the English Enlightenment was underway and in 1600, Shakespeare published *Midsummer Night's Dream* and William Gilbert published *De Magnete* which described the Earth's magnetic field for the first time. Sir Walter Raleigh was made governor of the Channel Island of Jersey, but was in prison for treason by the time the seedling was three inches high. Elizabeth I was on the throne and, if the tree was a few years older than we estimate, the Queen might have seen it – there is a story that she once walked across the Common from Bradenham to Hampden. Could she have imagined that the little tree would last for almost half a millennium until a second Elizabeth sat on the throne?

Of more significance were the activities of the ordinary working men and women who lived nearby. It was their scythes and their pigs and cattle that threatened the growing sapling. Fortunately "the desert of the Chilterns" was sparsely populated and the soil was a heavy red clay that resisted the plough. The area was probably already common land but that would not have protected our sapling because the lord of the manor and various locals would have had commoners rights such as collecting wood, digging clay and grazing. But survive it did, through the reigns of eighteen monarchs and a brief republic, and through innumerable wars.

For much of its life the tree stood in grassland and grazing animals would have

sheltered under its boughs and drank from the pond. It seems that at some point the commoners came with their ladders, saws and axes and lopped off most of its branches. The tree laboured to produce a new canopy only for the people to return and take those, and so on. Its growth rings, if we had them, would have recorded this pollarding. Fortunately, the many encroachments onto the Common by squatters and locals trying to secure a little land, did not reach Dew Pond and our tree. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the Great Beech would have reached a noble size, Benjamin Disraeli bought Hughenden Manor with a mortgage and so needed money. With the support of other big landowners he set out to enclose about a third of the Common and sell off the land for building and agriculture. Again fortune smiled on our tree and it escaped the enclosure which gave the village of Naphill its present shape.

Part of the glory of old trees is that they are hosts to a huge community of flora and fauna. Some live in harmony with the tree and some are more destructive. Apart from the pollarding, there was little to damage the tree except when the youths came to carve their initials in its grey bark (who were 'F', 'HL', 'AW', 'AH' and 'IH'?) but at some point a fungus managed to penetrate the tree's defences and its decline began. The characteristic brackets appeared on its lower trunk and the hollowing rapidly increased. The common bracket fungus was joined by others including a great rarity, the tousel-headed *Hericium erinaceum* which brought it some fame in its last years.

Now the Great Beech lies prostrate in the pond, the twigs of its crown bearing fat buds that, for the first time in 400 years, will not open into leaves. We have our memories but future generations will have to make do with pictures and stories. It is sad, but there are things we can do. Something could be made from some of the timber to commemorate a great life. We can clear the pond and ensure that it survives. But most important of all we can continue to care for the Common which gives so much pleasure to us all. There are other fine trees to safeguard; one is almost as old as the Great Beech. Finally, there is a tiny sapling growing near the stump, almost certainly an offspring, which we could nurture. If we do, I wonder what that will see over the next 400 years.

Trevor Hussey



Email: [chairman@naphillcommon.org.uk](mailto:chairman@naphillcommon.org.uk)

Twitter: @NaphillCommon