

Can you help find the oldest trees in Sussex?

If you're lucky enough to walk towards St Mary's Church in Sullington, you will spot the most magnificent yew tree in the churchyard. Believed to be at least 500-years-old, with claims it could even herald from the ninth century and the time of the Saxons, the tree is a whopping five metres in diameter and an incredible piece of living history.

You may have a favourite tree; one that you look forward to glimpsing as the seasons change, that you picnic under, or use to navigate as you go for hikes on the Downs. The chances are that this tree is mature and centuries-old; in the conservation world we might even class it as 'ancient' or 'veteran', depending on its species and age.

Ancient and veteran trees, like the yew in Sullington, are amazing. Each one is an irreplaceable habitat in its own right; a single ancient oak tree for example can be home to over 2,000 species of wildlife, plants and fungi. They are vitally important to some of our most endangered species, such as bats who rely on the diverse insect populations they provide, and who like to roost in the hollows and cavities of these old trees. But despite their biodiversity value, many ancient trees do not have much legal protection and are in danger of being lost.

A new project that I'm very proud to be a part of – the Lost Woods of the Low Weald and Downs – is aiming to restore ancient woodlands on our doorsteps in Sussex. This includes finding and mapping all the ancient and veteran trees in the 314 sq km project area, spanning from Lewes in the east to Storrington in the west. And we need your help.

In Sussex and across the UK as a whole, we don't know where all our ancient and veteran trees are, or which are facing threats from development. That's why we're running a volunteer-led project to find them; it's the crucial first step in making the case for protecting these trees at local and national levels.

We're looking for people to join our volunteer team and receive a few days training with me in how to identify ancient and veteran trees and make records of their condition. Volunteers will then go out and survey small areas at a time that suits them. You'll be a part of a huge citizen science project and one that could reveal surprises as we see what trees are discovered.

As I look at the Ancient Tree Inventory map and see where we know our ancient trees are so far, there are big gaps in the areas surrounding Ashington and Storrington. Here there could be small and hidden ancient trees, such as field maples or hawthorns.

By filling in the missing data, not only will we be helping to protect these trees for future generations, but we may also be able to work with landowners to reconnect patches of ancient woodland through planting or natural colonisation (allowing trees to naturally seed). We could create new nature corridors and strengthen habitats, so that our oldest woodlands can thrive once more.

We're also looking for suitable land to create the next generation of veteran trees, by planting new trees in fields and hedgerows.

The project is named the 'lost' woods, because Natural England has identified the Low Weald as an 'outstanding' priority for woodland conservation. By volunteering with us, you could play a crucial role in protecting our natural heritage for future generations.

There are so many ways to get involved in the five-year project, which is made possible by The National Lottery Heritage Fund. You could join us on a free or subsidised training courses in woodland management and green woodworking skills. Or sign up your community group to receive support from us, so that more people can access woodlands and enjoy the immense benefits that being in nature brings.

To find out more, sign up to join the volunteer team, or tell us about an old tree in your garden or on land you own, please visit www.lostwoods.org.uk.

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