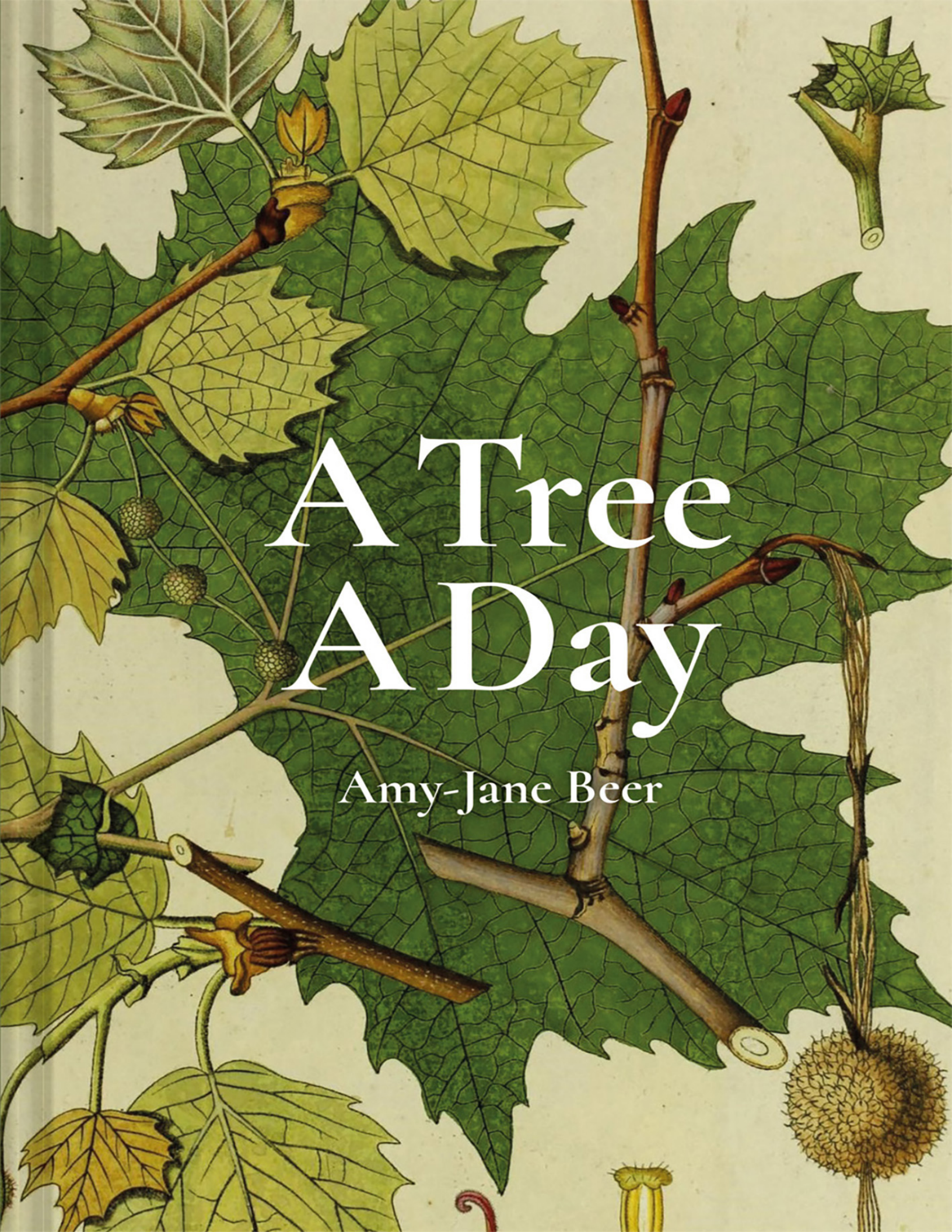


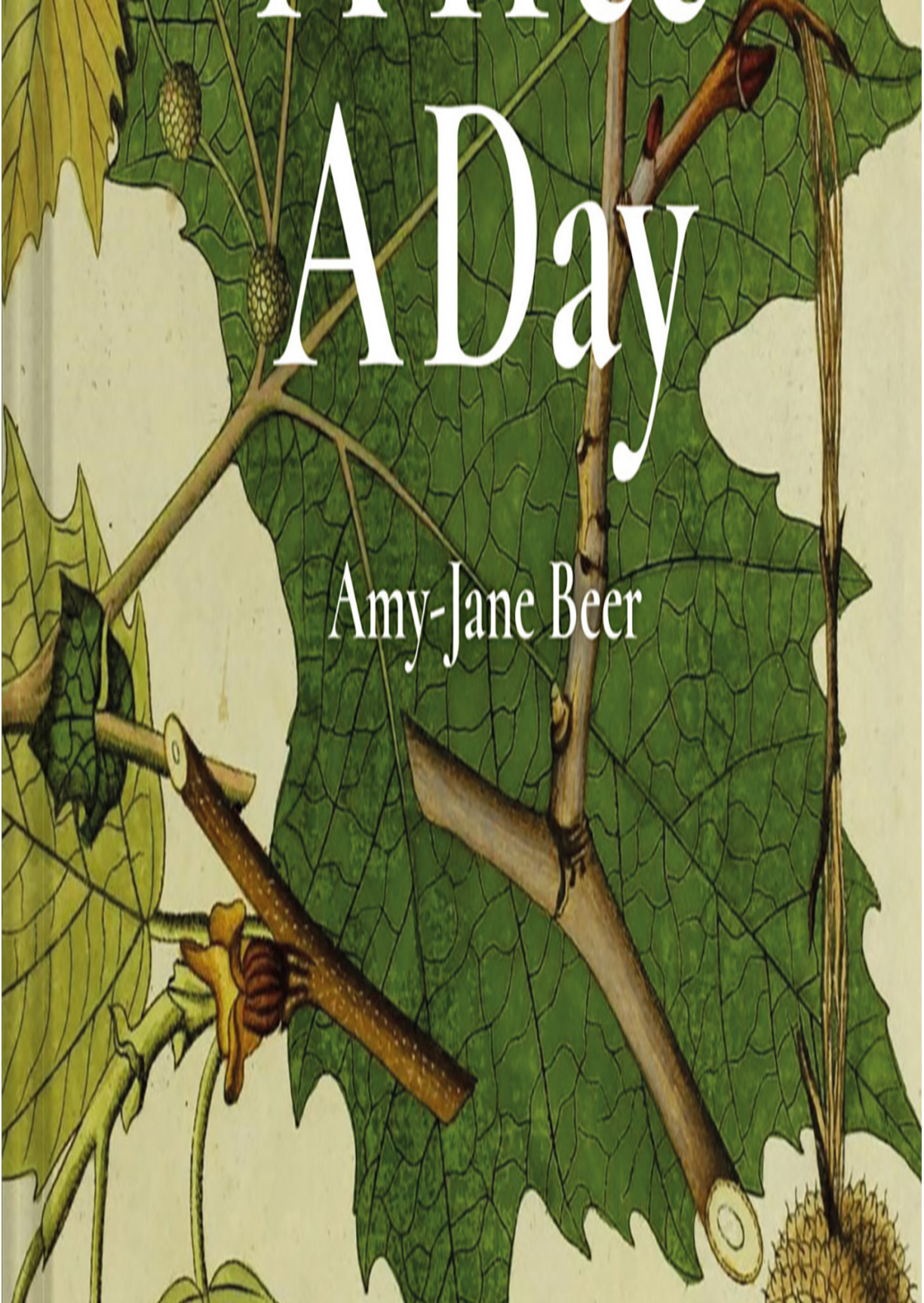


A Tree A Day

Amy-Jane Beer



A tree

A detailed botanical illustration of a plant, likely a species of Asclepias. The central feature is a large, heart-shaped green leaf with prominent veins and a serrated margin. A brown stem with a small, circular cross-section runs diagonally across the leaf. To the left, a yellow flower with a dark center is visible. Above the main leaf, a smaller, textured, brownish structure is shown. The background is a light, neutral color.

ADay

Amy-Jane Beer





Quince tree, a chromolithography from 1870.

A TREE A DAY



A lone tree overlooks the North Kent Downs at sunset.

A TREE A DAY

Amy-Jane Beer

BATSFORD

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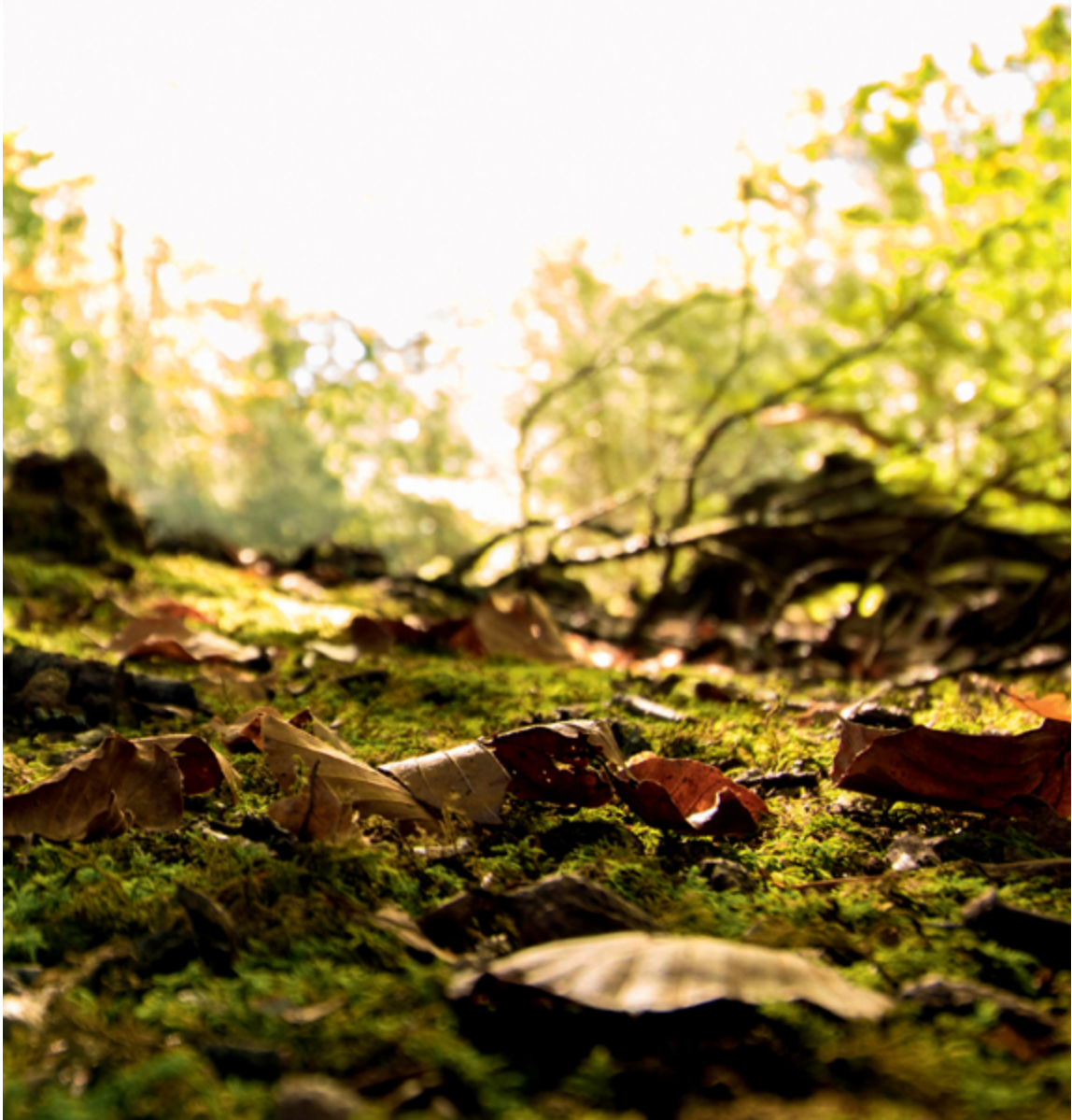
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The forest floor of the New Forest in Hampshire.

INTRODUCTION

What is a tree? While most people have little difficulty naming a tree when they see one, hard-and-fast definitions are hard to pin down: there are exceptions to almost any simple rule of tree-hood. Trees are not a biologically distinct group. Rather the tree form has been adopted by a wide range of plants from a huge variety of taxonomic groups, and in its broadest sense the term can be applied to flowering and non-flowering plants, to monocots and dicots, to tall plants and small ones, upright and sprawling ones, woody plants and those with other means of making a rigid trunk such as tree ferns, palms and bamboos. Most, but not all, trees are woody plants, with one or more stems, known as trunks, and many, but not all, have the potential to grow tall.

In writing this book I've sought to address a different question: not what is a tree, but what do trees mean? Where do they fit in collectively and individually, to the web of experience that encompasses all life on Earth – including humans? I've explored some of those uncountable interactions and transactions in the following pages, but ultimately the question is a personal one. What does a tree mean you?



Humans and trees have been hanging out together since our very beginnings.



Bluebells carpet the floor in beautiful beech woodland.

1ST JANUARY

EMANCIPATION OAK

USA

It was under this huge southern live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) in the small satellite town of Hampton, Virginia, that local people gathered in 1863 to hear the first Southern reading of President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which declared:

'That on the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State ... shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.'

The tree is also linked with Mary Smith Peake, a free black woman, who defied state law to teach enslaved and free black Americans, continuing even as Civil War broke out. The oak under which her lessons took place was the first teaching space of what ultimately became Hampton University, on whose campus the oak still stands today.



The Emancipation Oak still stands near the entrance to Hampton University Virginia.

2ND JANUARY

THE MAJOR OAK

England

Perhaps the best known of dozens of ancient pedunculate or English oaks in Britain, this vast, hollow specimen growing near the Nottinghamshire village of Edwinstowe is thought to be 900–1,000 years old. Its great age and location in Sherwood Forest have led to a strong association with the legend of Robin Hood. Could the outlaw and his men have rested in or beneath these spreading branches? The possibility is enough to draw hundreds of thousands of visitors a year along the gentle walk from the nearby visitor centre to view the tree. The name Major Oak commemorates Major Hayman Rooke, who wrote a book about notable trees of the area in 1790. Before that it had been known as the Queen's Oak and the Cockpen tree.



Loss of branches is a natural process in the veteran life stages of ancient trees, but like many much-loved specimens the Major Oak is supported by props to maintain its iconic shape.

3RD JANUARY

SOUTHERNMOST TREE

The southernmost trees on Earth live on the tip of South America – Isla Hornos (Cape Horn Island) off Tierra del Fuego. On eastern parts of the island trees grow in short, dense evergreen forests, offering shelter to breeding colonies of Magellanic penguins. South of the forest are isolated clumps of trees, growing in the shelter of rocky outcrops where they have some protection from the vicious storms for which Cape Horn is famed. Of these, the furthest south is a Magellan's beech (*Nothofagus betuloides*). It was identified and mapped in January 2019 during an expedition led by ecologists Brian Buma and Andrés Holz. The tree measured not more than 90cm (35½in) tall, with a trunk 10cm (4in) in diameter. A non-destructive ring count suggested it was 41 years old at the time of discovery.



The southernmost trees on Earth, Isla Hornos, Tierra del Fuego.

4TH JANUARY

‘What lies over there?’ asked the Mole, waving a paw towards a wood that darkly framed the water-meadows on one side. ‘That? O, that’s just the Wild Wood,’ said the Rat shortly. ‘We don’t go there very much, we river-bankers.’

The Wind in the Willows, KENNETH GRAHAME (1908)



Mole discovers the reason river-bankers don't visit the Wild Wood, illustrated by Paul Bransom.

5TH JANUARY

THE POEM TREE

Wittenham Clumps, England

*'As up the hill
with labr'ing steps we tread
Where the twin Clumps
their sheltering branches spread'*

These words formed part of a poem written and carved by local artist, Joseph Tubb, into the bark of a beech tree at Wittenham Clumps, Oxfordshire, between 1844 and 1845. The tree fell in 2012, but the spot is marked by a stone with a bronze plaque bearing a transcription of the poem, and a facsimile of the carving taken as a bark rubbing in 1965.



Joseph Tubb's poem grew with the tree for a further 170 years.

6TH JANUARY

WASSAILING

England

The tradition of wassailing in England marks the turn of the year and takes place in the days following the winter solstice. The celebrations begin at Yule or Christmas and culminate on Twelfth Night, when the slight lengthening of daylight hours begins to be perceptible. In some areas the wassailing tradition involves singing door-to-door in return for gifts of food and alcoholic beverages – a forerunner of both carolling and trick-or-treating. In cider-growing areas, however, the tradition focuses on orchards. Fruit trees are decorated (sometimes hung with pieces of toast), doused with cider and exhorted to produce a good crop in the coming year with singing and carousing.



Wassailing apple trees with hot cider in Devonshire on Twelfth Night. *Illustrated London News* (1861).

7TH JANUARY

OLIVE BRANCH

The Ancient Sisters, Lebanon

According to the Old Testament bible story, a dove flying out from Noah's Ark as it floated on the Great Flood, returned with a sprig of green from an olive tree, giving hope that the water must be receding and land not too far away.

Lebanese folklore suggests that the source of the branch is was a grove of trees growing in the small town of Bcheale. Known as the Ancient Sisters, the remaining sixteen trees are reputed to be 5000–6000 years old. This would set them among the world's oldest non-clonal trees, rivalling the bristlecone pines of California (see [here](#)).

The age of the trees has not been verified as their trunks are hollow. But they still produce fruit, which is made into highly marketable olive oil by a charity set up to care for the grove.



It is believed an olive branch from one of the Sisters, carried by a dove, signalled to Noah the approach of dry land during the great flood.

8TH JANUARY

MONEY TREES

England

In woodland around Britain there are fallen trees with hundreds of coins hammered into their decaying timber. While the tradition probably has Pagan origins and there are some reports of money trees in the 19th century, the practice appears to have undergone a strong revival in recent decades, in the north of England especially. A tree that fell in high winds at Bolton Abbey in the 1980s was dragged to the side of a popular footpath and soon began to accumulate coins. Now there are similar examples at beauty spots across the Yorkshire Dales and into Cumbria. It should go without saying that this kind of treatment would be highly damaging to living trees.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Humanity's knowledge of these strong, silent companions is older than we are as a species, and yet we still have so much more to learn. It is almost inevitable when writing a natural history book, that some part of it may be out of date before the pages are printed, and given the astonishing recent advances in our understanding of trees, that will no doubt be the case here too. I owe a debt to an extraordinary collective of named and unnamed naturalists and scientists, foresters and foragers, artists and photographers, poets and writers, storytellers and teachers, leaders and thinkers, conservationists and activists whose imagination, curiosity, wisdom and passion inform and illuminate this book throughout.

Many thanks to Tina Persaud for inviting me to contribute to the beautiful '...A Day' series, and to Kristy Richardson for working so steadfastly under the exceptionally tricky circumstances that have engulfed us all in 2020 and 2021. My love and thanks as always to Roy and Lochy who muddled through lockdown schooling while I shut myself away with this project.

And last but not least, my love and gratitude to the trees, who give me breath.

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