

The Veteran Oak Enclosure, Wimbledon Park

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Introduction



In early 2019, LB Merton’s greenspaces contractor, Idverde, established a fence around a veteran English Oak (*Quercus robur*) in the public Wimbledon Park. This was to deliver a proposal by the Friends of Wimbledon Park. With an estimated age of 200 years¹, the oak is a heritage feature of wildlife habitat value which was threatened by careless disposal of BBQ waste. The main aim of the enclosure was, and remains, to deter public access so as to protect the veteran into the future. Detailed background to the assessment and management of such trees is found in the Woodland Trust booklet *Ancient and Veteran Trees: an assessment guide*. A subsidiary aim is to manage the vegetation within the enclosure to enhance the park.

Protecting the oak



Figure 1. The tree trunks on the corner East of the veteran in February 2018.

Before the fencing, the land east of the veteran had been used for access to and from temporary construction depots on the grass to the north, when maintenance work was undertaken on the nearby London Underground line. Also, vehicles would often drive over the grass on the corner just East of the veteran. This eroded the grass and compacted the soil. Large sections of dead tree trunk had been placed on this corner to deter such manoeuvres.

The enclosure was designed to include as much of the spread of the veteran as possible, to provide a *root protection area*^o. This proved possible except at the southern edge, where the tree canopy was above part of the pathway. The

¹ Using the method of White, J. 1998. Estimating the age of large and veteran trees in Britain. Forestry Commission Information Note.

roots of veteran trees may be protected from competition from other woody species, by keeping such competitors more than 5 metres beyond the drip line of the veteran's canopy. The dead tree trunk sections were left in place within the enclosure, so providing habitat for species such as the Stag Beetle (*Lucanus cervus*). To deter access into the enclosure, the plan was to establish tall vegetation that did not compete with the veteran. The enclosure also served to keep people away from the hazard of branches falling as will happen as the veteran retrenches its crown. There was a suggestion that a Yew hedge might be planted within the perimeter fence, to reflect the hedgerows nearly in the park, but this never eventuated. The vegetation within the enclosure developed by natural succession over the six years since mowing ceased.



Figure 2. The veteran and its enclosure in January (left) and November (right) 2019

Development of the vegetation.

The Appendix gives a list of the 132 plant species found in the enclosure from 2020 to date, common names are used and Latin names can be found in Stace's Flora. Visits were made each month April to October in those years, but note that the numbers for 2023 are low because visits planned later in the year will reveal more information. It's remarkable that fully 82 species were found in 2020, as the previous mowing regime had allowed only four species of the Great Field to show and only nn species were introduced (in bold below). Doubtless the regular mowing prevented some 70 species from growing sufficiently to be detectable. Peak numbers were found in 2021, when there were 101 species. 85 species were found in 2022, a year when a severe summer drought may have suppressed some species. The species may be categorised as follows:

1. Grassland species were found mainly in the West and North sectors of the enclosure, nearest to the grasslands of the adjacent Great Field (Perennial Rye-grass, Wall Barley, Creeping Thistle, Nettle, Common Bent, White Clover, Rough Meadow-grass, Dandelion, Soft Brome, Daisy, Timothy, Red Fescue, Cock's-foot, Ribwort Plantain, Yarrow, Yorkshire Fog, Crested Dogs'-tail, Smooth Meadow-grass, Broad-leaved Dock, Spear Thistle, Smaller Cat's-tail, Curled Dock and Cat's-ear). As might be expected, these were abundant in 2020 and most decreased in abundance in competition with other species after that. Exceptions were Creeping Thistle, which increased greatly in the Northern tip of the enclosure by 2023 and Nettle that also increased a little further to the west. Most of the other grassland species remain numerous but, without management, will slowly give way. They grow as tall grassland, so providing some disincentive to incursion by people. A bonus there is the arrival of the Yellow meadow ant (*Lasius flavus*), a species of traditional meadows, first noted in April 2024. The thistle and nettle are valuable both as a disincentive to incursion and for the colour and nectar the thistle provides in Summer.
2. Species tolerant of the shade and drought can grow close to the trunk of the veteran oak (Herb Robert, Hawthorn, Garlic Mustard, *Bramble*, Wood Avens, Cow Parsley, Hedge Mustard, **Stinking Iris**, **Wood Sedge**, Hazel, Ash, *Blackthorn*, *Cherry-plum*, Elder, *Evergreen Oak*, Grey Sedge and Wood Dock). A remarkable number of Hawthorn seedlings were seen as early as 2020, doubtless arriving in the faeces of birds, but these have grown slowly, as have the others. The dry shade is not favourable to fast growth, but some of these species are increasing and provide ground cover without competing with the veteran. These are to be encouraged and they give a touch of colour when in flower (the iris in May, for example). The woody species,

however, (*italicised above*) could end up competing with the veteran, so should be removed from all but the periphery of the enclosure.

3. Species tolerant of the compacted soil on the Eastern edge of the enclosure (Cleavers, Cut-leaved Cranesbill, Slender Pearlwort, Sticky Mouse-ear, Greater Plantain, Equal-leaved Knotgrass, Prickly lettuce, Red Deadnettle, Annual Meadowgrass, Barren Brome, Common Couch, Buck's-horn Plantain, Pineappleweed, Guernsey Fleabane, Smooth Sow-thistle, Small-flowered Crane's-bill, Common Chickweed, Common Toadflax, Toadrush, Buddleia, Common Ragwort, Wood Forget-me-not, Dove's-foot Cranesbill, Groundsel, Ivy-leaved Speedwell, Lesser Chickweed, Thyme-leaved Speedwell, Bristly Ox-tongue, Prickly Sow-thistle, Knotgrass, Shepherd's Purse, Mugwort, Wall Speedwell, Bread Wheat, Hoary Mustard, Oxford Ragwort, Burdock and many others). The difficult growing conditions meant that these species grew slowly and competitive species did not thrive, accounting for the initial richness of species there. Most decreased in abundance as taller species arrived, but Cleavers and Cut-leaved Crane's-bill came to dominate wide areas by 2023. None of these species competes with the veteran. Even the Buddleia grows distant from the veteran and provides both a disincentive to incursion and valuable colour and nectar for insects. It's sad that several Buddleia were grubbed up in Spring 2023, as Buddleia would make a useful hedge on this difficult edge of the enclosure.
4. There is a variety of other species growing in the grassy parts of the site and lending some colour there when in flower. Green alkanet, for example, flowers over a long period in spring and summer.
5. Other woody colonists (English Oak, Dog Rose, Apple, Field Maple, Wild Cherry, Horse Chestnut, Narrow-leaf Ash and Spanish Broom). Apart from English Oak, which grew from seed in abundance, most of these were in small numbers. Unfortunately, as tall-growing, woody species they will compete with the veteran and so should be eliminated except perhaps for the roses, which are smaller-growing and a real deterrent to visitors. The Spanish broom is attractive when in flower in May. Buddleia attracts butterflies throughout its long flowering season. English Oak continues to colonise, which is not surprising as the tree above fruits well (even if heavily parasitised by knopper gall as in 2023). These provide a diversity of experience for passers-by, such as the June flowering of Spanish broom.



Figure 3. Daffodils in late March 2022

6. By mistake, many of a horticultural variety of daffodil were planted in 2021, but these serve to enliven the enclosure in Spring when there is little other interest. Seed of Wood Millet was added to the plot on 19th June 2020, but it has failed to establish to date.

The most notable species that is missing from the enclosure is Ivy, despite being dispersed by birds. There is now little room for this woodland species to establish.

The sections of tree trunk that previously served as a barrier to prevent vehicles from cutting the corner were left in place and slowly rotted away, providing habitat for Stag beetles and other biota. In 2025 a fox or badger excavated one of these in search of invertebrates to eat.

Management

Unfortunately, LB Merton sprays beneath path-side fences with glyphosate (for example, in May 2025), replacing attractive wild flowers with a dead thatch. This is wholly unnecessary. A low live branch of the Oak was cut back in the summer of 2025 and left in place on the ground.

The future

We are fortunate that natural colonisation has led to the establishment of some 100 species of plant in the enclosure. This existing vegetation, including Buddleia and Creeping Thistle, provides colour and nectar throughout the Spring and Summer and is thus attractive and interesting. Nettles are the food plant of Nymphalid butterflies. The trend is a decrease of species richness as some species come to dominate and the number of species declines.

As natural colonists, the existing plants are suited to the local soils and climate and so there is little need for management. It is important, however, to remove all woody colonists except on the edge of the enclosure to prevent these growing to compete with the veteran oak.

There remains a need to encourage vegetation that deters incursions by people. So, the Nettles, Creeping Thistles and Buddleia could be encouraged. Buddleia is so vigorous that it would need annual pruning to train it as a hedge. The grassy parts of the enclosure on its western edges are still susceptible to incursion. It would be difficult to establish spiny plants there in the dense grassland, but the success of Hawthorn and Dog Rose nearby suggests that Hawthorn and roses could be established along this western edge. Field Rose does not occur in the enclosure, but could make an effective barrier if twined into the fence.

The slow increase of plants tolerant of dry shade will continue, so providing ground cover without competing with the veteran oak.

Appendix. Species found in the enclosure in order of approximate abundance. The numbers were estimated on a logarithmic scale and averaged, so they give an order of magnitude only.

	<i>Grand Total</i>	<i>2020</i>	<i>2021</i>	<i>2022</i>	<i>2023</i>
Species richness	132	82	101	85	61
<i>Perennial rye-grass</i>	1916	3314	2157	1551	7
<i>Cleavers</i>	1172	30	331	2676	1000
<i>Wall barley</i>	182	55	51	30	1000
<i>Cut-leaved crane's-bill</i>	176	1	10	55	370
<i>Creeping thistle</i>	135	6	61	213	400
<i>Common bent</i>	133	28	303	1	
<i>Herb-Robert</i>	113	6	4	100	505
<i>Slender pearlwort</i>	100		100		
<i>Common nettle</i>	76	1	6	66	550
<i>Daffodil</i>	68		170	44	7
<i>White clover</i>	59	45	87	55	1
<i>Creeping bent</i>	55		10	100	
<i>Rough meadow-grass</i>	50	55	55	70	10
<i>Dandelion</i>	49	48	74	21	70
<i>Sticky mouse-ear</i>	49	70	33		
<i>Soft-brome</i>	46	45	42	44	100
<i>Hawthorn</i>	45	74	36	33	10
<i>Greater plantain</i>	43	74	40	6	1
<i>English oak</i>	35	67	46	9	10
<i>Daisy</i>	35	7	22	54	70
<i>Equal-leaved knotgrass</i>	34	51			
<i>Prickly lettuce</i>	34	24	84	8	10
<i>Red dead-nettle</i>	34		1		100
<i>Annual meadow-grass</i>	32	78	1		1
<i>False oat-grass</i>	29	24			51
<i>Barren brome</i>	26		1	1	51
<i>Common couch</i>	25	1	53	28	1
<i>Timothy</i>	25		40	10	
<i>Buck's-horn plantain</i>	24	16	36		
<i>Garlic mustard</i>	18	1	4	30	10
<i>Pinappleweed</i>	18	30	1		
<i>Guernsey fleabane</i>	17	10	10	30	
<i>Smooth sow-thistle</i>	17	5	24	4	55
<i>Small-flowered crane's-bill</i>	15	1	51	1	1
<i>Red fescue</i>	15	51	1	2	1
<i>Cock's-foot</i>	15	7	34	9	7
<i>Common chickweed</i>	10		10		
<i>Common toadflax</i>	10	10			
<i>Toad rush</i>	10		10		
<i>Buddleia</i>	10	9	10	10	10
<i>Pendulous sedge</i>	9	10	10	10	7
<i>Ribwort plantain</i>	9	6	10	5	10
<i>Common ragwort</i>	8	1	1	25	1
<i>Yarrow</i>	8	1	6	10	10
<i>Wood forget-me-not</i>	8		1	10	10
<i>Dove's-foot crane's-bill</i>	7		8	10	1
<i>Yorkshire-fog</i>	7	4	1	10	10
<i>Bramble</i>	7	1	5	10	10
<i>Wood avens</i>	7	1	5	10	10
<i>Cow parsley</i>	6	3	6	7	7
<i>Groundsel</i>	6	4	8	7	1
<i>Crested dog's-tail</i>	6	1	10		
<i>Ivy-leaved speedwell</i>	6		1	10	
<i>Lesser chickweed</i>	6	6	6		
<i>Thyme-leaved speedwell</i>	6	1		10	
<i>Smooth meadow-grass</i>	5	7	4	10	1
<i>Hedge mustard</i>	5	4	6	6	
<i>Bristly oxtongue</i>	5	1	6	9	
<i>Broad-leaved dock</i>	5	1	6	7	10
<i>Prickly sow-thistle</i>	5	7	1		4
<i>Knotgrass</i>	5	6	6		
<i>Stinking iris</i>	5	1	1	10	4
<i>Common vetch</i>	4	1	6	4	4
<i>Shepherd's-purse</i>	4	6	1		
<i>Mugwort</i>	4	1	6	8	1
<i>Wood-sedge</i>	4	1	10	3	
<i>Spear thistle</i>	3	1	3	5	1
<i>Smaller cat's-tail</i>	3	6		1	
<i>Wall speedwell</i>	3	1		6	1
<i>Bread wheat</i>	3	10	1		
<i>Hoary mustard</i>	3	4	1	1	
<i>Curled dock</i>	3	1	1		6
<i>Oxford ragwort</i>	2	1	1	1	4
<i>Dog-rose</i>	1		1	1	1
<i>Hazel</i>	1		1	1	
<i>Burdock</i>	1			1	
<i>A Willowherb</i>	1		1		
<i>Apple</i>	1		1		
<i>Ash</i>	1	1		1	
<i>Autumn hawkbit</i>	1		1		
<i>Bittersweet</i>	1			1	
<i>Blackthorn</i>	1		1	1	
<i>Borage</i>	1		1		
<i>Californian poppy</i>	1		1	1	
<i>Cat's-ear</i>	1		1		
<i>Charlock</i>	1	1			
<i>Cherry plum</i>	1	1	1	1	1
<i>Common mallow</i>	1			1	
<i>Common orache</i>	1	1			
<i>Druce's crane's-bill</i>	1		1		
<i>Elder</i>	1		1	1	1
<i>Evergreen oak</i>	1		1		
<i>Fat-hen</i>	1	1			
<i>Feverfew</i>	1		1	1	
<i>Field maple</i>	1			1	1
<i>Field wood-rush</i>	1		1		
<i>Fine-leaved sheep's-fescue</i>	1			1	
<i>Flax</i>	1	1	1		
<i>Grass vetchling</i>	1		1		
<i>Green alkanet</i>	1		1	1	1
<i>Grey sedge</i>	1			1	1
<i>Hawkweed oxtongue</i>	1	1		1	
<i>Hedgerow crane's-bill</i>	1		1		
<i>Horse-chestnut</i>	1	1	1	1	1
<i>Hybrid bindweed</i>	1			1	
<i>Hybrid dock</i>	1	1			
<i>Lesser burdock</i>	1			1	
<i>Lesser hawkbit</i>	1		1		
<i>Many-seeded goosefoot</i>	1	1			
<i>Narrowleaf ash</i>	1	1			1
<i>Oat</i>	1		1		
<i>Parsley-piert</i>	1			1	
<i>Perennial sow-thistle</i>	1		1	1	
<i>Perforate St John's-wort</i>	1		1	1	1
<i>Petty spurge</i>	1		1		
<i>Pot marigold</i>	1		1		
<i>Procumbent pearlwort</i>	1		1		
<i>Purple cherry plum</i>	1		1	1	
<i>Purple toadflax</i>	1		1		
<i>Ramsons</i>	1	1			
<i>Remote sedge</i>	1		1		
<i>Scentsless mayweed</i>	1	1		1	

<i>Sheep's-fescue</i>	1	1		
<i>Spanish broom</i>	1		1	1
<i>Spear-leaved orache</i>	1	1		1
<i>Square-stalked willowherb</i>	1	1	1	
<i>Sweet vernal-grass</i>	1	1		
<i>Tall fescue</i>	1	1	1	1
<i>Tomato</i>	1			1

<i>Two-rowed barley</i>	1	1			
<i>Wild cherry</i>	1	1	1	1	1
<i>Wood dock</i>	1		1	1	1

^a **Root protection areas**

A root protection area (or zone) is an imagined or demarcated space of ground within which a tree stands. It is intended to contain enough roots and rooting volume to sustain it. A root protection area can be usefully applied by anyone who owns or manages trees, though they are more commonly used in construction or development scenarios. In these scenarios, a minimum standard is applied to all

retained trees. A root protection area for ancient and veteran trees should be as large as possible. As a minimum, it should be whichever is greater of: • an area with a radius that is 15 times the diameter of the tree (measured at 1.5m above ground-level) • an area extending five metres beyond the outer edge of the crown.

Gilmartin, E. (2022). Ancient and veteran trees: An assessment guide, The Woodland Trust.