An English Elm in Carlton

An English Elm tree (*Ulmus minor* var *vulgaris* 'Upper Swell' *U. procera*) has been planted just inside the Carlton Parish boundary at the side of the footpath between Saint Andrew's Church and Barton in the Beans, by kind permission of the landowner. Our hope is that this tree will establish and make a significant contribution to the local landscape as it grows and matures.

The planted sapling elm was micro-propagated from a tree in the Gloucestershire village of Upper Swell which had not been affected by Dutch Elm Disease. The pot-grown sapling was kindly donated to Carlton Parish Council by Goscote Nurseries, Syston Road, Cossington. This nursery carries a very good stock of ornamental and fruit trees and is well worth a visit.

There are three 'wild' species of elm in Britain - the Field or Smooth-leafed Elm *(U. minor* subsp *minor U. carpinifolia),* the Wych Elm (*Ulmus glabra),* and the English Elm *(U. minor* var *vulgaris U. procera).* Pollen analysis has shown that the Field and Wych Elms were present in England after the last ice age. The English Elm might have been introduced but is now regarded as a variety of the Field Elm, hence the botanical name above.

The Field Elm is most common in Kent and East Anglia, it was never common in the Midlands, and is not found further west or north of this area. The English Elm is the most common tree in the Midlands and south-west to Plymouth, while the Wych Elm is most common to the north and west of this line. About 19 species of elm can be grown in Britain, with a bewildering number of wild subspecies, hybrids, and varieties, together with ornamental forms in parks and gardens.

The Field and Wych Elms reproduce by seed, but English Elms rarely produce viable seed in our current cool climate. They usually grow up from suckers, forming genetically identical groups of trees known as clones. These suckers provide a ready source of young trees and were widely planted from Neolithic times. This is why there are innumerable local growth forms of English Elm, many specific to small groups of villages. Unfortunately these clones are genetically very similar and share a common susceptibility to Dutch Elm Disease. Native hybrids between Field and Wych Elm are common in eastern England, and many are resistant to Dutch Elm Disease. Some books distinguish these hybrids as Dutch Elm *(U. x hollandica).*

Elm trees have always been closely associated with human settlements, and 'elm' is one of the commonest components of Anglo-Saxon place names. The root systems in hedges may still consist of clonal material planted more than 3,000 years ago – repeated hedge-cutting rejuvenates the plants so they never reach biological old age and die. Elm is still very common in local hedgerows, but the plants are susceptible to Dutch Elm Disease and if allowed to grow up they become infected and die back when the trunks achieve a diameter of about 150mm.

English Elms are impressively rough and rangy trees, living for 250-300 years and growing 30m tall with a girth up to 7m. They were a major feature of the local landscape until almost all were killed by Dutch Elm Disease which took hold in the late 1960's. Several local woods were rich in elm, and a field by field ecological survey of Market Bosworth Parish carried out by J Mousley and J Exley in 1986 noted that there were gaps in the canopy of Cowpastures Spinney and Pingle Spinney where elms had died or had been removed, and that there were dead and fallen elms in two unnamed woods to the south-west of

Coton Priory (SK396020, 397018). Living elms were recorded in woods at Far Coton (SK383017) and in the Wilderness, together with a patch of elm scrub on the north side of Shenton Lane which is still present.

There were once many elm trees in Carlton village, and at one time Main Street was informally known as Butt Lane because of the many stumps of felled elm trees along it. This was before infill development had taken place between Hall Terrace and Barton Road. Carlton Parish Council tried to save a splendid elm tree at the corner of Main Street and Bosworth Road by pumping a fungicide into the trunk, but the treatment did not work. I remember the late Tony Cooper (PC Chairman 1968-91) telling me that they pumped until liquid squirted out of the ends of the branches, but to no avail.

Dead elm suckers in a hedgerow in Carlton

Although the last epidemic was the most severe in historical times, the disease is not new and there were outbreaks in southern England in 1927, between 1819 and 1864, and another in Oxford in the 1780s. In the 18th century it was possible to insure one's elm trees against death. Dead elm trees are also common in Italian paintings between 1450 and 1530.

Elm timber was a hard and cheap material and had many traditional uses from weather-boarding to chair seats and cartwheel hubs. As it did not rot under water it was used for pilings, wharves, groynes, ship keels, sluices, and waterwheels. When the old Waterloo Bridge in London was re-built in 1936, the elm piles were found to be perfectly sound and were cut up and made into souvenirs for people who wanted a piece of 'Waterloo Elm'. Elm logs were also hollowed out to make pump barrels and water pipes - elm pipes laid for the New River Scheme in London in 1613 were still intact when they were dug up in 1930. More locally, the outlet for the old (?medieval) fish-pond at Park House, Barton Road (SK 406 035) was a hollowed elm log.

Remains of the elm pipe from the fish pond at Park House

Mature elm trees have a sinister reputation for blowing over or shedding large branches without warning, and elm boards are traditionally used to make coffins. This has led to the old country saying – *'Every elm has its man'*, and the terse couplet - *'Elm hateth Man - and waiteth'*.

Elm makes good firewood if well seasoned, though the logs smoulder rather than flaring up, as recorded in traditional firewood rhymes:

'Elm logs burn like churchyard mould,
No flame to be seen'

Elm trees used to be classified in the Order Urticales (now part of the Rosids) and are closely related to

nettles, hops and cannabis which contain irritant chemicals and tough fibres which can be used to make cloth and ropes. A mean schoolboy prank involves rubbing elm leaves between the hands, and then rubbing the hands on the face of an unsuspecting victim. This feels like nettle stings, except that the effect only lasts for a few seconds.

Elm trees do not seem to feature in Leicestershire folklore and customs. At Lichfield, during Rogationtide and the Beating of the Bounds, there was an old custom of carrying elm twigs in procession around the Cathedral Close on Ascension Day, ending with the twigs all being thrown into the font. This ceremony probably originated in a pre-Christian fertility rite. When the elm trees in the Close died, the elm twigs were replaced by lime.

200 years is a long time, and it is to be hoped that our new elm tree remains resistant to new variants of Dutch Elm Disease and grows to maturity. It would be satisfying to see the new sapling grow into a reasonably sized tree, and when it begins to produce suckers we should be able to transplant them and begin to bring this iconic tree back into our local countryside.

Chris Peat
Carlton Tree Warden

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