

A Lone Lime Tells Tales of Ancient Times

By Dave Green

December 2016

In the summer of 2014 I was doing some botanical fieldwork along the western edge of North Wiltshire where it bounds the Bristol Avon valley. In the process I visited a large old lime tree in Monkton Farleigh parish that I have known for over 30 years. It sits in a very prominent position in a large, improved, stone-walled pasture on an elevated bank that crosses the field, very close to Inwoods, an ancient woodland SSSI. The tree stands alone in the field (Figure 1) and is visible from the A363 between Bath and Bradford-on-Avon. I had always assumed that this tree was a planted *Tilia x europaea* (Common Lime). However, on closer inspection I found it to be *Tilia cordata* (Small-leaved Lime); I had this confirmed by the national referee.



woodlands in the north of the county, such as Braydon Forest – are ancient woodlands and have been designated SSSIs. So finding this specimen adjacent to Inwoods, an ancient woodland that I knew well and which to my knowledge contained no limes at all, was intriguing. I guessed that this lime was about 150-200 years old, with a girth of 4.4 m at chest height (Figure 3). Given its proximity to Inwoods, which has one of the highest ancient woodland indicator species counts in Wiltshire, I began to wonder whether this specimen could be a relic from a larger ancient woodland.

Small-leaved Lime has always been rare in Wiltshire (Figure 2) and unknown in the Bradford area until I found a single hedgerow tree near Ashley in 2016. The nearest other recorded specimens are those I found in 2014 on the steep cliff edges of Bathampton Woods in Somerset. The species is an indicator of ancient woodland (one that has been in existence for more than 300 years). Many of the sites where it occurs - the Avon Gorge, the lower Wye Valley and some

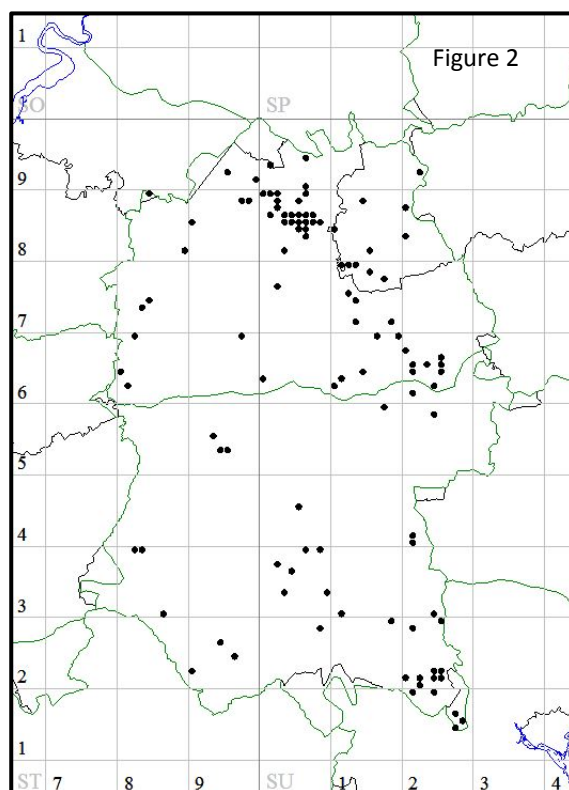




Figure 3

I would normally have simply recorded this tree's occurrence and moved on. However, to complicate matters, I was interested in the raised bank on which the tree stands. I knew that Inwoods and its surroundings have a lot of archaeologically interesting features, including low walls, banks and enclosures. I had recently become aware of an aerial archaeological survey that was undertaken in and around the area. This survey used "Light Imaging Direction and Ranging" methodology (Lidar for short) to scan the ground and pick up features in the landscape, including those on the woodland floor underneath the tree canopy, and anomalies in pasture invisible to the naked eye. In this case it revealed ancient fields systems, boundaries and structures.

We botanists may have tended to assume that ancient woodland has existed since time in immemorial; but modern research show that as with Inwoods the landscape may have been managed quite differently in medieval times and earlier.

On reviewing images of this study, I found that what is now woodland was at one time a mix of field systems and small-holdings enclosed by walls. The lime tree sat directly on the bank top of one of these field boundaries.

If you look at Figures 4-5, you will see that the lower part of the image is covered by trees (Inwood). The A363 crosses left to right (the image is north-aligned), with a sunken track leaving the road and crossing the fields, traveling southwards to enter Inwoods. The lime tree is the largest feature to the left of that track, a third of the way from the road towards the wood.

So this lime tree and its bank-top location pose some thought-provoking questions:

- How old is the bank on which the lime tree sits?
- Is the bank a relic of the boundary to an ancient wildwood that covered the area prior to the field systems revealed by the Lidar study and the later ancient woodland?
- Was the tree a deliberate planting, for instance as a viewpoint for a large house?
- Was the tree important as a manorial or parish or some other historic boundary marker, and therefore safeguarded in this location for hundreds of years?

To answer the last two questions first: current OS maps, as well as older maps, show that the bank on which the tree sits is not a parish or manorial boundary. It does not seem to have been planted as a viewpoint for a large property, since it predates the nearby Inwood House, and there are no other estates nearby.



As to the age of the bank supporting the tree, I contacted a local archaeologist who had studied the Lidar images. He wrote in reply: "As the 1840 tithe map indicates, the bank the tree grows on what was a field boundary". This indicates that the bank may form part of a ghost woodland boundary and the tree is the final relic of hedgerow removal in the last 150 years. He continued: "No-one knows the date of these boundaries. The boundaries are shown on the tithe map from c1840 - but not on the 1st Edition OS map. These boundaries are however identified in the modern OS maps as historic field systems."

"I am advised that sunken tracks/hollow ways are characteristic of medieval origin. The image from the Lidar survey of Inwood shows tracks radiating out from the sunken track (Figure 6) and these were described as medieval. There are however Bronze Age and Romano-British finds in the area, with a mediaeval settlement at Farleigh Wick. Note that the description of medieval in the Wilts Records is 1066 - 1539."

"This region is in the Parish of Monkton Farleigh (consistent with the description in the Saxon Charter) and the tracks into Inwood radiate out from there showing that this area was under the management of Monkton Farleigh. Potentially they could date from Saxon times when the Parish boundaries were set."

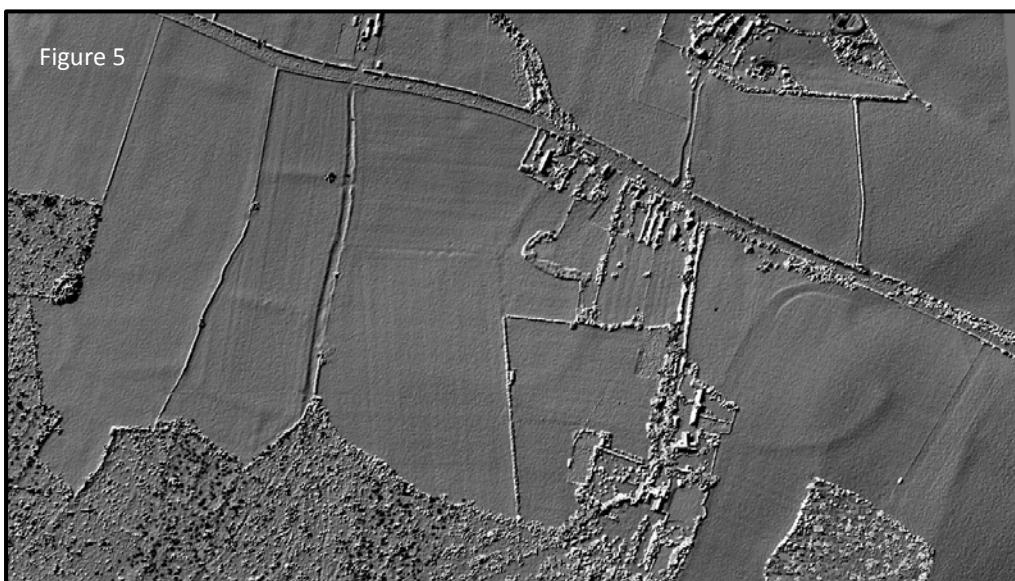




Figure 6

The fact that the boundary is not marked on the first OS map (1887) indicates that there was a change in agricultural management in the years following the tithe map, and that by the time of the first OS map the old wall or ditch and bank had become less of a stock-proof boundary and more of a linear hump in the field.

The hypothesis that the tree indicates the boundary of a long-gone wildwood can't be proven, but is still a possibility.

This lone lime tree and its bank-top location raised some interesting questions and invited me to delve deeper into the history of an area that I thought I already knew well. New technology is allowing us a glimpse of life and times past that until recently were literally hidden from view.