Veteran Trees of Kedleston Park 18.10.08

On a sunny autumn day Head Warden, Simon Hiley, took us on a tour of the parkland surrounding Kedleston Hall to look at some of the ancient trees.
We first met Mr Staggy, a veteran oak tree so named by young RSPB members. This tree is host to a rare fungus, the oak polypore – one of only 17 known sites in England. Simon told us about 'red rotters', fungi which attack lignin in the centre of a tree, hollowing it out, which makes the tree stronger. 'White killers', however, destroy cellulose and so weaken a tree.
The woodland fringes of the park are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of the abundance of deadwood invertebrates. Dead wood may be moved within the area, to safeguard visitors using the paths, but it is not taken out of the SSSI. An oak sapling grows beside a fallen beech, but not a British oak. This is a Turkey oak, which in our climate does not produce useful timber and is host to the knopper gall wasp, with the danger of infecting native oaks, so it will be removed.
In the north woods we met Bill and Ben, old oaks which may pre-date Robert Adam's landscape plan for Kedleston Park 250yrs ago. They may have been 'working' trees, which stood on headlands in the ridge & furrow pattern of agricultural land and were coppiced for firewood. In 1721 this cultivated land was fenced off and allowed to become parkland. It was grazed by cattle and sheep until 1947, (and also by deer until 1940), then fenced to allow natural regeneration from the old trees.
Simon told us of the danger of Bill and Ben being shaded out by young saplings growing around them. He plans to use a technique called 'haloing'; this involves thinning out the young growth gradually over 10 to 15 years – a slow process to avoid the old trees suffering shock from the sudden increase in light reaching their bark.
'Topping' is another life-extending procedure, which needs to be done over 30 to 40 years. The tree's height is slowly reduced to take weight off the top and so stop the trunk from splitting. In the 1987 gales some old oaks were in effect 'topped' by the wind; after some minor tidying up they flourished and are still going strong. Simon intends to have individual management plans for his veteran trees, as the work must extend over many years. We saw a hawthorn tree, probably over 150 years old and beginning to split, which needs to be topped. This tree is important also for an internationally rare insect, the twin-spot borer, which can only live in a dying tree. Near the lake we saw a tree which had been killed inadvertently by suffocation – its roots had been starved of oxygen by a layer of dense silt dredged from the lake and spread around it.
Simon gave us lots more interesting information in a very entertaining way, making for a most enjoyable afternoon. I'm already looking forward to next year's walk!

By Penny Halfpenny