



The 'lesser' trees of hedge, heath and river bank

After having written on the many uses of the elder I have decided to mention some of the other minor trees that would, certainly before the Enclosure Acts, have been more freely available to countrymen. The main building hardwoods, such as oak, were valuable and remained under the watchful eye of the landowner. Likewise, the managed understorey of woods, containing such things as hazel coppice, had a value and the decision of who was entitled to what, and what due was payable, remained with the landowner - be they king, bishop or lord. It is to the scrub on the edge of the common, the fringes of the heaths and fens and all the odd forgotten corners that we (and probably the good people of Sutterby) will look.

Ivy - seems rather unpromising, given that its wood is small and inclined to be brittle, but it is a beautiful, pale, creamy wood once stripped and polished. Suitable for fancy walking sticks, small turned items and spoons - the ideal love token for the single country lass!

Wild privet - produces stems that are strong and heavy. The finest rods are good for side weaving (basketry) and thicker branches supply hard, tough wood for tool handles, walking sticks and yet more spoons!

Spindle - supplies a very white, hard wood that is difficult to split. But it has an even grain and turns well. It makes up into spindles, skewers, small turned items for kitchen use, toothpicks and charcoal for gunpowder!

Hawthorn - really deserves a whole article to itself and is a tree I would dearly like to write on in length (and may do so later!). In this context we should consider its hard, smooth and close-grained wood used for the handles of chisels and knives, for mallet heads, stool legs and stakes. The root-wood has a very fine grain and was made up into combs and small fancy boxes (more love tokens?).

Holly - not so often cut as many woodmen believed this brought bad luck, but its hard, heavy and close-grained wood is white and very beautiful to the touch. It does have a tendency to warp, but takes dyes well and has long been used for inlay work. It has been used to make spear shafts and whip stocks, in the wheels of coaches, for handles, for cleavers, engraving blocks and many small fancy carved and turned domestic items.

Dogwood - gets its name from the butchers' skewers once called dogs. Its durable yellow-brown wood is ideal for basketry, arrow shafts, walking sticks, small mallet heads and turning, as well as the butchers' dogs!

Field maple - and the now much scorned sycamore - have been so useful in the past. Their wood is not durable outdoors, but is hard, compact, straight and close-grained. Sycamore is the easier of the two to work because maple can be prone to hidden knots and does not rive well. But what would the dairymaid and country housewife have done without them? They supplied her with breadboards, bowls, ladles, spoons, pastry boards, rolling pins, butter hands and butter moulds. Not to mention furniture, weavers' shuttles, butchers' tables, beetles and musical instruments.

Blackthorn - aside from the joys of sloe-gin (!) has a very hard wood of a lovely deep brown colour, which takes a high polish. A favoured wood for walking sticks, it was also used for cudgels and the sticks used for fighting at fairs. It is the traditional wood for the Irish shillelagh and, on a less violent front, it made good teeth for rakes.

Crab-apple - tends to warp and split during the drying process, but once dry it remains stable and gives a close-grained heavy wood of a pale to medium pinkish brown with a fine even texture that resists wear. A fine wood for carving, fancy turning, spoons and mallet heads.

Willow for baskets goes without saying - but its wood, although not durable outdoors, is light, soft and resilient. It will dent, but being tough and flexible is difficult to fracture. It was once much used in houses for rafters and floors, the bottoms of quarry carts were willow. It was used in ship building and coracle making, the handles of rakes and besoms, thatching wood, clothes pegs, wattle fencing, gate hurdles, tethering rods (for hedging) and scythe snaiths.

Alder - another tree of the wetlands, has the reputation of yielding wood that does not rot if it remains submerged in water. It was used in the building of bridges, platforms and jetties, pumps, troughs, sluices and lock-gates. Its water resisting quality made it ideal for clogs and cart-wheels. Its lovely warm colour (once called Scottish mahogany) saw it used for chairs, spinning wheels and musical pipes. It had a draw-back and was known as a 'sweet-wood'. It is adored by wood-boring beetles. Indeed a fresh alder log was placed in the cottage in the spring in order to attract egg-laying woodworm. The log was thrown on the fire in the autumn - hopefully destroying a whole generation of beetles!

This is just a small sample of man's ingenuity coupled with Nature's bounty. Our ancestors found much of use in the environment around them. This knowledge was the cord which bound man, village and land together in a functioning whole. As we continue to cut those cords and turn our backs on our rural heritage, thus are we impoverished.

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