2020 marks one hundred years since the founding of Welwyn Garden City. It embodies Ebenezer Howard’s ideal of a marriage of town and country.

The Welwyn Garden City Foundation was established to develop a programme of events and to create a legacy. One of the ideas was the establishment of a town wide arboretum – The City of Trees.

One of the greatest pleasures of the town is the beauty and variety of the 20,000 trees in its streets and public places. The City of Trees project seeks to make this legacy accessible to all by providing information about the trees and to encourage a full appreciation of the environmental, health, economic, aesthetic, and educational benefits.

The town is most fortunate to have not only a legacy of a large number and diversity of trees but an active and enthusiastic Landscape and Ecology Department within the local council. Information from Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council has been made available to the Project Team and has been invaluable in devising the tree walks and in the preparation of maps for use in the walk leaflets and on the web site – www.wgccityoftrees.org.uk.

The website gives a description of the trees in the town, highlighting those of particular interest and the best seasons for viewing them. It gives details of a series of walks and information about the trees with links to web sites where additional information can be found. It also contains a photo gallery and children’s section.

You can find two rows of me on the edge of the wood and on the edge of a field.

Some people say my bark is like an elephant’s skin!

In the winter I have sharp spiky buds on my twigs.

In the autumn you may find little wooden cases with one or two triangular nuts inside and my leaves turn yellow.

(Special clue – you cannot make sandcastles on me!)

How many different kinds of leaves can you collect in the summer/autumn? When you get home, how many can you identify using the tree identification tools in the Junior Corner of our website www.wgccityoftrees.org.uk or that of the Woodland Trust www.woodlandtrust.org.uk?
Sessile oak (Quercus petraea)

A deciduous broadleaf tree which is native to the UK, primarily to the west. It can grow to 20–40 metres high with a broad crown which allows light to filter through to the ground. It may live for more than 500 and even up to 1000 years but does not produce acorns for 40-50 years. It has a straighter and more slender trunk, and less heavy limbs than Quercus rubur.

It is named the ‘sessile’ oak because its acorns sit directly on the outer twigs as they have no stalks or peduncles, whereas the ‘pedunculate’ oak, Quercus robur, has acorns with long stalks. Interestingly, the reverse is true for the leaves which have a twisted, rounded base and a very short stalk in the pedunculate oak but leaves whose base tapers into long stalks, up to 2 cm, on sessile oak trees. In Sherrardspark Wood the sessile oak is the predominant form but there are some pedunculate oaks and a few hybrid forms. Together these two oaks support more wildlife than any other native tree.

The bark is a silvery grey brown with increasingly deep, vertical cracks and fissures with age, giving it a very rugged appearance.

The leaves are 6-12 cm long, dark green and smooth on the upper surface and lobulated with a scalloped edge.

Green catkins, 4 cm long, the male flowers, and the female flowers, which resemble red flower buds, appear on the same tree in April/May, followed by the acorns in their cups.

Hornbeam (Carpinus betulus)

A deciduous broadleaf tree which is native to the UK. Mature trees can reach 30 metres and live for more than 300 years. In old English, ‘horn’ was the equivalent of our ‘hard’ and ‘beam’ of our ‘tree’, so hornbeam has hard timber.

The bark is pale-silver to dark grey and initially smooth (above left). It tends to develop a fine, pale brown fine network or striations, and ridges or fluting with age, making it ‘bumpy’ to the touch (above right).

The twigs are brown-grey and slightly hairy. The leaf buds are sharply pointed and similar to those of the beech, but shorter (4-7 mm) and fatter, slightly curved at the tips and green-brown. They are held very close to the stem.

The leaves are oval, with toothed or serrated edges, smooth and shiny on the upper surface and have a red stalk (left).

They look and feel corrugated or ‘pleated’. They turn golden yellow-orange in the autumn before falling.

Male and female catkins are found on the same tree in the spring (below) and after wind pollination the female catkins develop into papery, green-winged fruits known as samaras (bottom). These hang in tiered clusters through the autumn. The seed is a small nut, 3-6 mm long, held in a leafy bract with 3 lobes. The hornbeam provides food for the caterpillars of many moth species. Finches, tits and small mammals feed on its seeds.
DESCRIPTION OF THE ROUTE

Starting and ending at the Campus West car park, the full walk is approximately 4 km long. It can be accessed via the Woodland Rise or Pentley Park entrances but there is limited residential street parking. It is not suitable for wheelchairs and there is a steep slope down to the fields (Temple Wood Vale) near Oakdale.

Start by the information board in the top left corner of the car park. Take the steps to access the old railway line track and turn left onto it. This is a remnant of the Luton branch of the Hatfield to Dunstable service run by the Luton and Welwyn Railway Company 1860-1965. It was also sometimes known as the ‘Hot and Bonnet Line’ as it took workers to the hat factory.

Proceed to a crossway and turn right down a fenced alley between two houses to reach Reddings and Roundwood Drive. Cross the road and keep going straight to enter the wood at the Roundwood Drive entrance. Just to the left of the Nature Reserve board inside the entrance, is a good example of a hornbeam, though still with a relatively smooth, silvery-grey bark. To the right of the board are two oak trees with their much more rugged bark with deep vertical cracks and fissures. There has been significant felling in this area in early 2019, mainly of hornbeam and silver birch, to open up light to the forest floor, allowing regeneration. The numerous oak trees thus stand out more clearly and there are many examples of more mature hornbeams with pale brown networks of striations and ‘bumpy’ ridges and fluting (PTO for more details).

Continue to skirt houses on your right and at the first junction take the right hand track, following it uphill to Garrod Walk. This is named after Fred Garrod, a founder member and past President of the Sherrardspark Wood Wardens Society. Oak; hornbeam; silver birch; holly and beech on either side. Rowan on left at crossway.

At the signpost turn right towards Woodland Rise. Almost immediately take the second left, between the yellow arrow marked track on first left and the horseshoe marker straight ahead. This does not initially look like a track but after about 45 metres a yellow arrow sign confirms the route. This is a good area to see bluebells in season.

Continue straight, past a large oak (beech and hornbeam nearby) and then a bench, dedicated to Michael James Collins, on your right, until you reach a junction. Turn right, and follow the trail to the Pentley Park entrance. Turn left noting the hornbeams on your left. A single hornbeam was probably pollarded resulting in two trunks which subsequently touched and rubbed against each other, resulting in natural grafting.

Continue to veer right with houses on your right, past large mature hollies until you pass a horse-shoe bridleway sign and a white ‘permissive path’ sign on your left and an old large oak on your right. This oak (right) is 250-300 years old. This edge of the wood consisted of scrubland before the houses were built.

Turn left between two more large oaks on your left to go carefully down a steep slope heading for a central path in the fields seen ahead. There are young ash trees on either side at the bottom of the slope giving the opportunity of observing the distinct buds, twigs and leaves close up for identification purposes. There are patches of white chalk at the surface in this area and the soil here is more alkaline than the rest of the wood. It is also the lowest and oldest part of the wood with some rocks which are 90 million years old.

Enter the grassy area with an avenue of beech trees, planted in groups of four, in front of you, and immediately turn left following the edge of the wood through the wildflower meadow. Abundant cowslips may be seen here in season. Note old multi-pollarded hornbeam on the left. This gnarled character can be best appreciated in the winter. (See picture a. on right)

Turn left at the next track back up into the wood with a short fence on your right.

After a very large sycamore (see bark left) and a horseshoe marker on your right, turn right. After about 100 metres continue with fencing on your left, past a horse shoe sign on your right, until you reach a road at the perimeter of the wood with a view of the Mimram valley. Turn right, noting sweet chestnut trees with their distinct spiralled bark on your right, and right again through a gate to re-enter the wood. After about 50 yards this track joins an avenue of beech trees which form the ‘Monks’ Walk’ on your left. (See picture b. on right).

This connected the old Rectory, now Digswell Place, with Digswell Church and Manor House and has been recorded as a public right of way since 1086.

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This is named after Malcolm Sefton, a landscape designer who helped design WGC. The area had become colonised by rhododendrons which were planted by the Victorians to provide cover for game birds. Since clearing the invasive, non-native species and allowing more light to reach the forest floor, there has been very good regeneration of heather, not seen for about 60 years at this site, and it is now an important area of acid lowland heath.

Continue until you reach a bench dedicated to ‘Susie’ at a crossway. Turn right immediately after this and continue in as straight a line as possible (hopefully this track will be demarcated by logs) passing a horseshoe on your right and keeping to the left at this fork and left again at a junction. Proceed past “Gwanny and Ben’s Peaceful Place” bench on your right and cross a short wooden bridge. Then follow the meandering track to a T-junction.

Turn right onto Garrod Walk to reach Six Ways. (See picture c. bottom left on map). Patches of remaining rhododendrons.

Turn acutely left to follow signs back to Roundwood Drive and thence to The Campus car park, savouring the birdsong and the beauty of the woods around you.

This recorded history of the wood dates from 1086 with an entry for Digswell in the Domesday Book but evidence of late Stone Age artefacts has been found.

In 1599 it was included in a map of the Manor of Digswell.

1919 Purchase arranged by Ebenezer Howard and associates as part of the site for the new town.

1986 Designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because a significant part of it is dominated by mature sessile oak and hornbeam forest, a habitat commonly found in the west and north of Britain and in Ireland but rare through lowland England.

1997 Designated as a County Wildlife Site.


It is classed as ancient semi-natural woodland. Ancient because the area has been wooded continuously since at least 1600 AD. It consists of approximately 80 hectares / 200 acres of land with a height of 127m at Six Ways, occupying the highest land between two eastward-flowing rivers, the Mimram to the north and the Lea to the south. It consists of chalk, covered with beds of clay, sand and gravel. The soil is largely acid. Sessile oak and hornbeam are the main constituent trees. Where chalk is closer to the surface, sycamore predominates with ash, wych elm and wild cherry. Other trees and shrubs present include beech, larch, Scots and Corsican pines, holly, birch, rowan, sweet chestnut, hazel, elder and hawthorn.

The wood is now owned by the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council (WHBC) and actively managed by the volunteer wood wardens of The Sherrardspark Wood Wardens Society. Management plans are agreed with Natural England and the Forestry Commission with the aim of maintaining and enhancing the wood’s biodiversity whilst encouraging informal recreation and enjoyment. The habitats of a wide range of wildlife are maintained and enhanced with special emphasis on those of local Biodiversity Action Plan species such as dormouse, hole nesting birds especially the Greater Spotted Woodpecker, and rare woodland butterflies e.g. the Silver-washed Fritillary butterfly.