

AN ANCIENT OAK

1959 article

How long can an oak tree live?

On the property of Brig.-General J. G. Browne, of Hoburne, Highcliffe, there is a dead trunk of an oak which put out its last leaves 14 years ago.

This is believed to be the actual oak mentioned in Domesday Book as marking one of the southern limits of the New Forest, This would give the oak an age of about 900 years.

Many of the ancient oaks that remain in England may date from Saxon times, and some even earlier.

The general was chopping wood

Yesterday Brig.-General Browne was chopping wood and clearing ferns on his 52-acre Hoburne estate. He stopped work to guide me through a glade of evergreens below the 200-year-old Hoburne House, scarred with incendiary bombs in the last war, to where the oak tree still stands.

We walked a path that is believed to have been trodden by a former owner of the land, Saulf the Saxon, perhaps also by William the Conqueror, and almost certainly by bands of smugglers, taking their contraband to safety from the shallow beach below the hill.



AN ANCIENT OAK General Browne and the Domesday oak

Last leaves in 1945

The ancient oak stands gaunt beside the path, one dead branch stretching like an arm to the sky.

General Browne, who is 80, said: "The last sprig put out leaves in 1945. They say an oak takes 300 years to grow, and has 300 years of maturity, and then spends 300 years dying."

The oak, which is hollow, has a girth of 16 feet.

Said General Browne: "All this land was owned by a Saxon, Saulf. He is believed to have left to fight with Harold at Stamford Bridge, and then at Hastings, and never came back, and it is said that William the Conqueror came here when he inspected his hunting lands in the New Forest. The oak would have been standing then."

Inside the oak, once a favourite nesting place of white owls, have been found sheets of tins and bricks which may have once been used to preserve the interior.

General Browne would like to see the oak, like Hoburne House itself, preserved and scheduled as an ancient monument.

Brig.-General John Gilbert Browne, CMG, CBE, DSO, sailed with the 14th King's Hussars for South Africa in 1899 and served throughout the Boer War and-subsequently throughout World War I. He commanded the 14th King's Hussars from 1921 until 1925 and the Irak Levies from 1925 until 1933, retiring as brigadier-general in that year, and was later employed under the League of Nations on the Assyrian Settlement scheme.