

TREES FOR THE TRAVELLER



ALISTAIR SCOTT
Illustrated by
Gillian McWhirter

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A monthly selection of trees in Moray
between the Findhorn and the Spey

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The Moray Field Club
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the Garden Centre cypresses there are Atlantic cedars, yew, larch, southern beeches and goodness knows what else waiting their turn. Many are cuckoos in the nest and will have to go but some will grow on and on, becoming a landmark for three or four generations like that majestic copper beech beside the Cooper Park.

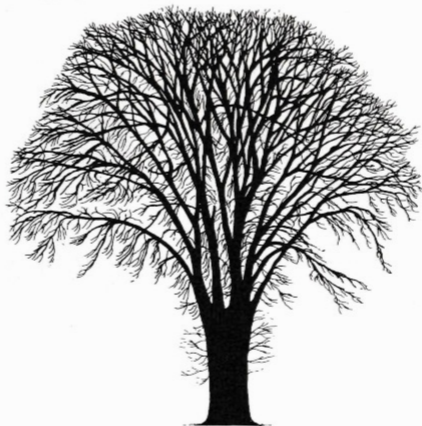
What makes the best treescape or landscape with trees is not diversity or uniformity but unity, whether that unity comes from ecological fit — New England, Rothiemurchus, Aldroughy oakwood — from a disciplined adherence to a formulated aesthetic — Versailles, the London squares, the holly hedges around Lhanbryde planted in the Dutch style by the Duke of Fife — or from a viable tradition of land use.

The whole of Aldroughy oakwood is very special but fragments at the eastern end which have not been — with the best of intentions — underplanted with beech or conifers are, in the precise meaning of the word, irreplaceable. They are in direct line of descent from the original forest and if destroyed can no more be reconstructed than a Rembrandt. Fortunately Aldroughy is in safe hands.

Lowland Moray is doubly fortunate in the small and not so small woods planted amongst farmland on ground too stony, too wet or too steep for the plough. They were planted by skilled foresters and they are predominantly of one species, the Scots pine, so not only are they working woods with all that that implies for health and rotation but they give coherence and articulation to the farmed landscape and a strong framework for the towns. Looking down from the Dramlechs the traveller can be in no doubt where he is.

Roadsides are the public space of the farmed landscape unusable for anything but growing things squeezed out of the working countryside. Perhaps they should be left for hawthorn, poppy and corn marigold. But if they are to be planted, let the planting be simple and regimented and the trees allowed to be big and unutilated. There is a spreading sycamore and a handsome beech marking the line of the old road in a field at Sheriffston that is what roadside trees should look like.

There is always more public and semi public space in towns than you think. It is not difficult to remember the Grant Park or the Plainstones but easier to forget the hospital, the sheltered housing, the schools, the cemeteries, the proliferation of local authority offices, the swimming pool, the abandoned railway sidings, the playing fields or SLOAP, that resonant acronym for space left over after planning. There are the gaps which should be filled with professional's trees, trees which quietly and urbanely occupy the space available as do the sycamores in Fochabers Square, or the beech trees at the Haugh or the towering poplars round the Cooper Park. This is the realm of the landscape architect — or should be.



Who, about the turn of the century, planted a Huntington elm at the eastern approach to Elgin? There is no answer to this question, but the vigorous, fan shaped tree is there, beside the road to the gasometer, as a witness. It may well be the most northerly Huntington elm in Britain. The best time to enjoy it is, leafless, against a frosty morning sky.

The elms are botanically complicated, but those two most competent authorities Dr Melville of Kew and Mr John Jobling of the Forestry Commission confirm this as the Huntington elm. It is a hybrid between the smooth-leaved and the Wych or Scotch elm rejoicing in the Latin name of *Ulmus x hollandica* 'VEGETA'. Only the Wych elm is at all common in Moray, where it was once a constituent of the more fertile land in the lowland forest.

All elms are susceptible to the devastating Dutch elm disease. The nearest outbreak recorded meanwhile is near Laurencekirk. The Moray population of elms is small, isolated and could remain uninfected.

The Huntington elm carries prominent red flowers, or at least clusters of anthers, on the leafless branches in April. These are soon followed by the green winged fruit bearing a crimson blotch near the seed in the centre. The leaves are typically elm like with an asymmetrical base but more drawn out and with a longer stalk than the Wych elm.

The tree is healthy and should stand many years yet for the continued pleasure of travellers.

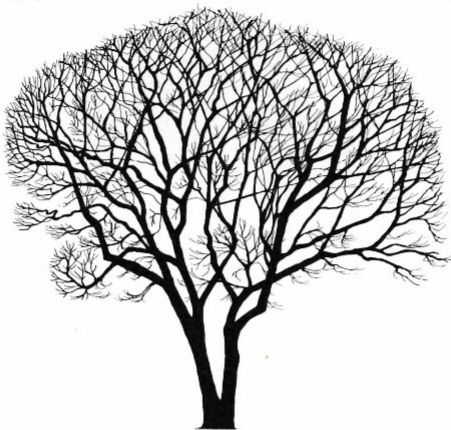


There are some fifty million trees in Moray and over half of them are Scots pine, so everyone must be familiar with this red barked, native tree either massed in plantations or as individual, umbrella topped, wind battered veterans. The French call this pine, *pin rouge* in contrast to the *pin noir*, or black pine which is native to a wide area over southern Europe but not to Britain.

Botanists and foresters recognise a number of subdivisions or varieties within the range. Black pines from Corsica are notably straight with regular, ladder like branching and have been planted extensively on sandy soils around the eastern coast of Britain. Perhaps the first plantation of Corsican pine in Moray was laid down in 1910 by Major Chadwick at Binsness, now part of the Culbin Forest; the success of these trees lead to the use of Corsican pine for the reclamation of the Culbin sands.

Austrian pine is another variety of the black pine. In this country it is too coarse a tree to make useful timber but the dense branching and thick foliage make an excellent tall windbreak. The row of trees along the road beside old Craigellachie station, for example, are Austrian pine. Last century it was a favourite tree to use as a 'nurse' for beech — the conifer protecting the more tender leaf tree in its early years. This must have been the origin of the fine clump of trees in the illustration, on a sandy hillock just south of Lhanbryde on the Elgin side.

When planted this was the property of the Dukes of Fife to whom this generation owes much for the landscape of lowland Moray.



This fine walnut can be seen over the wall from the Inverness road out of Elgin just west of Dr Gray's roundabout. The view preferred by the artist is from the new hospital car park on what used to be Mr William Wittet's garden. Walnuts need deep fertile soil but on a good site grow fast, so this tree need not be much more than a century old.

There is something about the set of a walnut which makes it recognisable from a long way off. Close up in winter, the platey, silvery bark, the thick twigs and velvety buds are distinctive. The leaves are pinnate like ash leaves but bigger and more rounded. They have a strong aromatic smell which reminds some people of brown boot polish.

This species of walnut comes originally from Asia Minor from where it was brought to Europe and perhaps Britain by those busy Romans. The name is Anglo-Saxon and means 'foreign nut'. The only other walnut species likely to be found outside botanic gardens, is the black walnut from Eastern America. There is a perfect tree at Glassgreen, Elgin, planted by Mr Adam in about 1956, but very few others.

Walnuts do not ripen well in Moray but they have been used as green pickles. They are fertile because Mr Wittet used to find self sown trees in his garden.

The wood is strong, durable, stable and beautiful. It is still the wood for any self respecting gunstock.

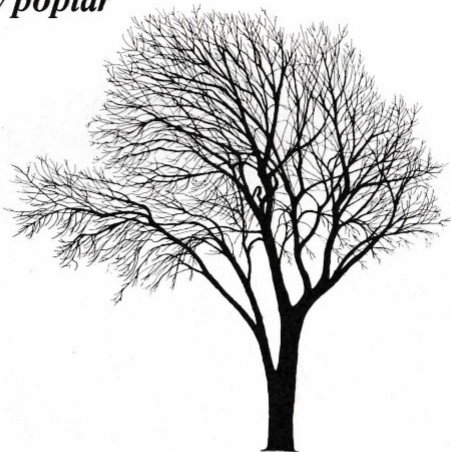


If all goes well, the trees for the traveller in October will be the oak trees in the Aldroughy woods as they take on their autumn beauty. This month it is the turn of the Scots pine that grow amongst the oak, particularly the tree with a shape like a thundercloud, opposite the Oakwood Motel.

Travellers in Moray are familiar enough with the Scots pine growing massed and straight in plantations but may not always make the connection between these and the bushy topped trees that have had unrestricted growth all their lives. Sir Walter Scott, amongst others, fought strenuously but unsuccessfully to retain the old name of Scotch fir.

Leslie in his *General View of the Agriculture in the Counties of Nairn and Moray* (1811) said that 'the extent of this natural wood (through which the highway upon the road from Elgin to Forres, has been formed) has been greatly enlarged by extended plantations principally of fir'. Moreover this tree has a girth of 160 inches and a height of 85 feet which is about right for an open grown Scots pine approaching its bicentenary. For comparison the oldest dated tree in Scotland was blown down at Inverary in 1951 aged three hundred and thirty years, when it had a girth of 192 inches and a height of 128 feet.

The natural longitudinal distribution of the Scots pine or Scotch fir is from the Pacific coast of Russia, across Siberia and Northern Europe and in to France and Spain. So the Caledonian Pinewood is at the extreme north west of the range.



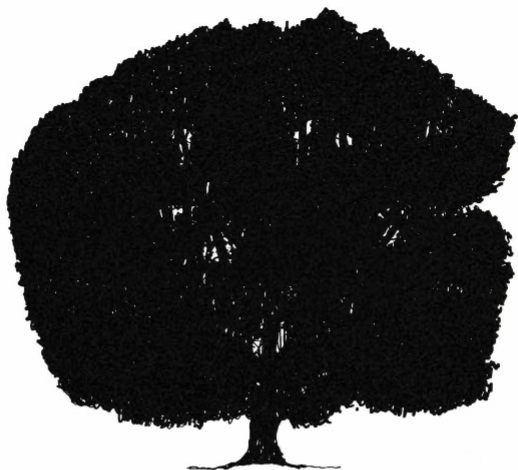
During early May, as leaves unfold in stunning variety, it is foolish to try and award an Oscar for the most beautiful, but amongst the candidates must be the grey poplar. There is an early tree in the belt between the A96 and Newton Nursery, another towering over the Dark Grains plants at Rothes and the tree illustrated, on the field edge immediately on the Nairn side of the Findhorn Bridge.

This tree shows very clearly the direction of the prevailing wind as it leans gracefully away from the south west. The lean is typical of grey poplars along the coast where they have been grown because resistant to salt winds. In sheltered sites they can grow to over 100 feet.

Poplars are male or female. Most grey poplars are male probably because nurserymen have preferred to propagate male trees for their more attractive, crimson woolly catkins. These appear on the leafless branches in early April and are soon shed.

The grey poplar is a hybrid between the white poplar and the native rustling aspen. (There are thickets of aspen in Speyside.) The leaf is rounder and has a less white underside than the white poplar but the way to be sure is to check the catkin scales. They should be fringed with long points.

The trunk of grey poplar, like an honest brow, becomes furrowed with age but the upper bole remains silvery. It has very regular horizontal lines of black, diamond shaped pits, as though a very methodical woodpecker had been at work.



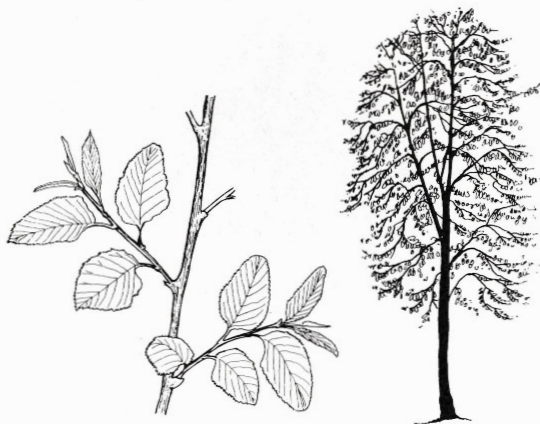
The opening of the Elgin relief road (Alexandra Road) has made suddenly more accessible to view one of the few, and among the best holm oaks in Moray. It grows, an evergreen mop, alongside the Drill Hall beside the Cooper Pond.

Holm was the old English name for holly, and holm oak therefore the oak like an evergreen holly or unlike the native deciduous oaks. The leaves are very variable in shape but all have dark, glossy upper surfaces and undersides paler and covered with short hairs, and are thick and waxy. They persist on the tree for about four years and once they fall, lie on the ground beneath for a long while. Shade and leaves combine to ensure that nothing can grow beneath the tree.

Male and female catkins appear amongst the glossy leaves each May, but the chestnut brown, pointed acorns take two years to develop. They are not fertile in Moray but along the English south coast, where holm oaks grow to majestic sizes, germination is easy.

Holm oak or *Ilex* is a Mediterranean species, and the leaf characteristics a useful adaptation to a moist warm winter and a hot dry summer. The timber is as hard and durable as that of our native oaks.

There are bigish holm oaks at Pluscarden Abbey and Gordon Castle, but at few other places. We should be planting more.



The very observant traveller might have noticed, just on the Elgin side of Newton Toll, that one tree came in to fresh, green growth ten days before the surrounding birches. This is a South American tree called the Roble beech or, botanically, *Nothofagus obliqua*, and is one of a pair of deciduous, southern beeches which have been causing quite a stir over the last decade or two. It was planted by Colonel Petrie of Newton House.

Nothofagus are the southern hemisphere equivalent of our beech, with about twenty species growing in Australia, New Zealand and South America. The Roble is not unlike beech, particularly in the smooth grey, bark and translucent green leaves, although the branch arrangement is quite different — the Roble branches being distinctively and attractively held in a herring bone fashion — and, close up, the margins of the leaves are toothed rather than wavy like the beech.

The other important, deciduous *Nothofagus* is called Raoul but there are few in Moray and they do not appear to be growing well. Raoul leaves have the same regular parallel veins as Roble but there are fewer of them.

Neither species was introduced to Britain until the early years of this century so it is only quite recently that people have begun to realise that they have few equals among broad leaf trees for growth. On a good site three feet per year is common. It will not be long before the Newton Toll tree really strikes the eye.



Everyone knows a monkey puzzle, which is not the least remarkable fact about this remarkable tree — the illustration is of a fine specimen at The Park Hotel, Forres.

It is the only species in its genus which will grow outdoors in Britain. Indeed it is one of the very few South American trees which are happy here at all. It is quite distinct whether at close quarters or seen a mile off. It is as tough as old boots until, with an older tree, a really cold winter comes along, when collapse is sudden and complete.

Monkey puzzles are male and female so you have to have two if you want the green footballs of edible seeds. (They are produced freely from one of the Brodie trees.) The somewhat oily nuts are better roasted than raw.

The monkey puzzle is also a good barometer of fashion. During late Victorian times a property of any pretension was scarcely complete without one. In less affluent times with little space between the front door and end of the garden there is seldom room for such a presence, so that young trees are few and far between. (There is a fine young tree at Craigellachie). We must depend on the imagination of local authority and industry to put aside space for the monkey puzzles of the future. A hundred or so would make an interesting complement to the new maltings or along the recently widened and re-aligned A96 at Pilmuir, Forres.

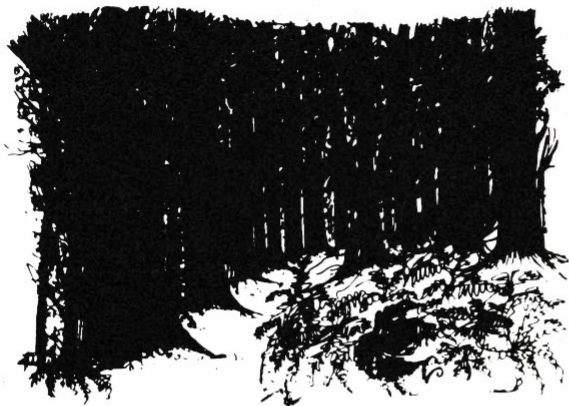


Field maples are not flashy or conspicuous trees but once you have appreciated that the two dark green trees overhanging the hedge just on the Elgin side of Newton Toll, are field maples, there is much to enjoy about their quiet progression through the seasons.

Field maples are native in Southern Britain, and a common constituent of chalk landscapes. They grow vigorously in the north and it is a little surprising that they have not been more planted in Moray. There is a good free standing tree on the lawn at Gordon Castle, an ancient at Arndilly, a thicket at Garmouth, but few elsewhere.

The leaves are small, hard and, like all maples, set in opposite pairs. Through the summer they are dark green, but they unfold pinkish; in Autumn they turn a rich gold, with some red and some purple.

There are some two hundred species of maple in the world at large. A good number of them can be safely and rewardingly grown in Scotland as anyone will appreciate who has seen the collection in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh. In Moray the most obvious are the ubiquitous sycamore — is there any non native tree so at home? — and the Norway maple in numerous variety, but here and there are fine examples of silver, Japanese, Cappadocian and snakebark maples suggesting that we should grow more of them in reasonably sheltered places, public and private.



How many people drive daily from Forres to Elgin or vice versa? Whatever the answer to that question can there be one who grows tired of the stretch through the oakwood from The Bield, to Newton Toll, especially this month as the leaves go through their annual pyrotechnics?

It is extraordinary to remember that this is almost all that is left of the woodland that once stretched from Inverness to the gates of Aberdeen, and except for areas immediately west of Elgin, it too has been irreversibly altered by the planting of beech.

Early travellers noted the wood. This is Leslie in 1811. 'In the low part of Moray the quantity of wood is inconsiderable. The largest is a tract of oakwood on the estate of the Earl of Fife, through which the highway upon the road from Elgin to Forres, has been formed. It is enclosed, and has for several years been kept clear of brushwood, properly weeded by cutting out where the trees crowded on each other, and otherwise well preserved. Though the timber be as yet but small, the wood has been for a considerable time in a thriving state.'

The oak is Sessile oak, which is as it should be. In the most natural parts of the wood they are joined by birch, rowan, holly and juniper in silvicultural harmony.



November's tree is the Spanish silver fir at the Park Hotel, Forres, partly because it is a tree to enjoy on its own account, partly for the occasion it gives to talk generally about silver firs.

The Spanish silver fir comes, satisfactorily, from south-east Spain, from the mountains around Ronda. It is unusual amongst silver firs in growing best on drier ground and in growing at all on limestone. The needles radiate all round the twig, to look like a small bottle brush. An alternative name is, aptly, the hedgehog fir. The Park Hotel tree is the largest in Moray. There is a nice young tree at Newton House. There could be more with advantage.

Do not be put off by the apparent similarity of conifers. Major differences appear on closer scrutiny. Pull a needle from a silver fir, for example, and you will always be left with a neat round scar.

European silver firs are becoming less common than they were but there are still giants about — along the Aldroughty roadside, and at Ballindalloch for example — often with a dead herring bone top poking out above leaf trees. They have been largely overtaken in popularity by North American firs, especially the Grand and Noble firs. These are formidable growers. There is a small plantation of Grand firs above Ness End Bridge, Pluscarden which has produced more than 1000 tons of wood on a single hectare in the past fifty years.



The landscape of the Laich of Moray still owes much to the enlightened tree planting, as belts, clumps and singletons as much as in plantations, of the Dukes of Fife. These hollies, north of the main road between Sherrifston and Woodside, were planted as breaks 'in the Dutch style'.

There could be no other choice for December's tree than holly. The custom of associating holly with Christmas goes back at least to the 15th century, and in the dead of the year, this bright evergreen with rich red berries has always been powerful against evil of whatever denomination. A rowan and holly planted at your door (and protected against birds) should see you safely through most of the year.

It must be a female tree because male and female flowers are mostly on separate trees and only the latter produces the red berries. The size of the crop has much to do with the weather during the preceding summer when new flower buds are being laid down. A curious fact, with plenty of theories but no agreed explanation, is that some trees in some years are scarcely touched by birds.

Holly wood is excellent, strong, white, durable. Stained black it has been passed off as ebony; perhaps still is.