



ROOT & BRANCH

British Magical Tree Lore

MELUSINE DRACO



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Melusine Draco

First published by ignotus press 2002;
revised and expanded edition 2016

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

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Introduction

It is perhaps surprising to learn that only thirty-five species of tree are indigenous to the British Isles. The following are common native trees that the natural witch should be able to recognise and utilise for magical purposes, although strictly speaking the blackthorn, ivy, spindle, heather, gorse and elder are classed as shrubs, their place as sacred or magical trees cannot be ignored. And so their addition brings the number up to forty of the most common that would have been familiar to the indigenous people of these islands. Neither should we

ignore the parasitic mistletoe, and the ‘vine’ whose presence is more complex since it is listed separately from ivy in the Ogham tree alphabet – but it brings our total of magical native ‘trees’ to forty-two.

The species covered in this book spread into the landscape naturally – that is without the assistance of man. This was possible because about 10,000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age, there was still a land-bridge between Britain and the rest of Europe. About 7,000 years ago the ‘British Isles’ separated from the mainland as melting glaciers flooded what is now the North Sea and the English Channel. This natural barrier prevented the arrival of further trees and so those that were already established here by that time are our own native species.

At that time, the British Isles was almost completely covered by trees – the natural Wild Wood of our legends.

When Neolithic man arrived around 4,000BC, he began to clear the land for agricultural purposes and it is believed that by the late Roman period (AD400) man-made farm and moor-land had transformed the landscape. Although a considerable amount of dense woodland remained, more was cleared in Anglo-Saxon and medieval times, while other areas, many of which still exist, were turned into 'managed woodland' in the guise of royal hunting forests.

Not all the remaining woodland is ancient; nor are all the woods that are not ancient, man-made. Left alone, Nature has a tendency to re-colonise almost any land in Britain that is allowed to remain idle. Open land is quickly invaded by trees such as birch and oak which readily colonise new territory.

Throughout our long history, forests have been places of shelter, providing

food for man and fodder for the animals; the wood for fuel (i.e. warmth and cooking) and for making weapons and other utensils. At the same time they have also been places of fear, where the temperamental Faere Folk, wood sprites and elementals lurked in the dappled shadows.

Even today, few places can rival an English oak wood in early summer for peace and beauty with its carpet of primroses and bluebells. Or the cathedral-like majesty of the autumn beech wood with the sun's light filtering through the leaves. Or the brooding quiet of the ancient holly wood. Perhaps it is not surprising that our remote ancestors performed their acts of worship in forest clearings and woodland glades, for this is where they came face to face with 'Nature' – however they chose to see it.

What is hard to understand is the modern trend for many pagan practices

to ignore many of our native trees and include introduced species into their tree-lore., despite the fact that they profess to be following the beliefs of the indigenous people of ancient Britain. This is, of course, understandable in the case of the rare strawberry tree, for example, which can now only be found growing naturally in Ireland – but where is the alder and the beech? Why is Ellenwood often listed among the nine sacred woods suitable for the Beltaine-Fire when any seasoned countryman would tell you that it can never be burned without some risk to hearth and home?

So come and walk with us awhile
*... take my hand, child, and I will
take you safely through the Wild
Wood.*

Alder (*alnus glutinosa*)

The dampness of the English spring doesn't stop the common alder, one of our most sacred of trees from flowering during March and April. In fact, the trees are found growing by the waterside, their little pink roots creeping into the water from the bank – some actually spreading into the water. It is a tall, fine-leaved tree with crooked branches; the whole trunk bending towards the water and often hanging over it.

Alder woods, or 'carrs', are found all over the British Isles, even in the extreme north of Scotland, but only where the ground is water-logged. Alder woodland would have been more abundant when large tracts of the primeval forest comprised of undrained swamp especially in the

mild, wet conditions that existed 10,000 years ago.

Since then, extensive drainage and clearance have reduced the carrs to their present fragmented state, often on the edge of fen or marsh common. In many areas alders are now only found along river banks or around small ponds; the presence of alder on dry ground is a sign of recent drainage or planting. As a living tree, alder is beneficial to all of the other species growing nearby; its role in life is to colonise derelict land by seeding to establish tree and shrub cover, and then be shaded out by more enduring species. It can only exist in full light and its life is naturally short, although coppicing can enable an alder to exist for hundreds of years.

Bearing both catkins (male) and cones (female) on the same tree, the male catkins are greenish in colour and cones before the leaves. The female

cones form in small clusters and resemble very small red-brown fir cones that appear in the autumn. The leaves of the alder are blunt with saw-like edges and one side of the leaf is rarely the same size as the other. When young the leaves are sticky and shiny above, with a fine whitish down in the angles of the prominent veins underneath. The tree does not produce any seeds until it has passed its twentieth year.

The wood of the alder is soft and light in weight; the living wood being white. Once cut, however, it shows red and dries to a pinkish hue, which has earned it the name of 'Scottish mahogany'. Alder wood lasts a long time under water and was used by those ancient forebears who lived on the edges of lakes, to make the piles on which their homes were built. It has traditional uses that go back to the dawn of history and the wood was

used for every conceivable purpose – pumps, troughs and even small boats were made from it. In heavy waterside engineering it provided baulks of timber for piles and sluices; alder faggots were even buried in lines end-to-end to provide land drainage. For a more mundane purpose, the wood was turned into clogs because of its grease and water-resistance; they absorbed impact and lasted a long time, besides being light and comfortable to wear

In ancient times, the indigenous tribes of Britain regarded the tree as sacred to the pre-Celtic raven-god, Bran, believing it to possess ‘human’ qualities when the first witnessed the white wood turning a vivid reddish-orange – the colour of blood. This caused the alder to be revered as a sentinel, guarding the realms of Otherworld. The tree was also sacred

to incoming deities such as Eostre, while the Norsemen observed '*the lengthening month that wakes the alder and blooms the whin* (gorse)' and calling it Lenet – meaning spring.

Originally it was one of the seven Celtic Chieftain trees but was displaced by the ash following the Battle of the Trees, which shows that it was sacred long before the Celts came to these islands. It is described by Robert Graves as 'the very battle-witch of all woods, the tree that is hottest in the fight', which suggests it may have been a military standard or clan totem belonging to the native people in their battles with invading Celts.

The alder also has its associations with the Faere Folk, whom many believe to be the native people of the British Isles. The alder was used for its fine dyes: red from the bark, green from the flowers, and brown from the

twigs – with the green dye long being linked in British folklore with the green clothes of the Faere Folk.

Left to its own devices, thickets formed by the alder, usually together with a tangle of matted brambles and nettles, quickly become impenetrable to humans, yet provide an ideal habitat for the flora and fauna of the water margin. This demonstration of the alder's continuing battle to reclaim the land which was lost to our native ancestors makes it an obvious candidate for the 'very prince of trees'. Unfortunately, in modern paganism and many areas of traditional Craft, the alder is sadly missing from their tree-lore.

From a magical point of view it is unwise to attempt to fit the alder into any of the stereo-typical groupings popular with contemporary pagan belief. With the alder's habitat being streams and river banks it can be

viewed as being representative of **Elemental Water**, although with its various associations it seems to embrace all four Elements. Pipes and whistles were made from the wood, making it sacred to Pan and **Elemental Air**; whistles can be used magically to conjure up destructive winds — especially from the North (**Elemental Earth**). Associated with the **Elemental Fires** of the smith-gods (because although it burns slowly, it makes one of the best charcoals, which in its day was used in the manufacture of gunpowder) and has the powers of both dissolution and regeneration.

With its pale, flesh-coloured timber turning blood-red when cut, the alder can also be seen in symbolic terms of the ‘sacrificial god’ and embodying Elemental Spirit and, with its Faere Folk associations, the gateway to Otherworld. Primarily, however, the alder is the tree of fire, using the

power of fire to free the earth from water, and as a symbol of resurrection since its blooms herald the drying up of the winter floods by the spring sun. The indigenous people would have used this natural calendar to calculate the re-emergence of the sun, and so the alder is ideal to use as an integral part of the celebrations for Spring Equinox. Just as the tree itself can be seen as the embodiment of all the elements, so its use can bestow both negative and positive outcomes to any magical working.

Great care needs to be taken when working with alder-power since there is an unpredictability surrounding it – as one would expect with anything associated with the Faere Folk. When collecting flowers, cones, leaves or wood it is advisable to leave something in exchange for what you take. Used as incense, alder can be used to dispense other powers and to

dissolve malevolent forces. On the other hand, when burned it can also cause dissention between even the closest of relationships – and the felling of a sacred alder will be revenged by fire in the home.

Hang a sprig in your home, however, and alder brings you and yours under the protection of powerful forces, which will both attract good fortune and banish negative powers. Cut this sprig before the Autumn Equinox when both cones and catkins are fully developed. The dried cones also make suitable ‘good luck’ decoration to add to Yuletide gift wrapping, or as part of a spicy pot-pourri.

Perhaps it is its unpredictability that makes modern pagans shy away from working with alder-power since the tree is neither benign nor benevolent. For serious magical practitioners, however, the uncertainty of working

with the alder is part of its irresistible challenge as a 'battle-witch' with all its connotations of ancient ancestral power.

Staff or Wand

A staff or wand cut from the alder should be obtained with great care. Since this tree is under the protection of the Faere Folk, a libation of milk or fruit, and the offering of a small silver coin would be appropriate. Do not underestimate the power of the alder as the combination of all the elemental symbols make it a formidable wand or staff to wield. Once you have found your tree and agreed a 'price' make sure you take it with a swift, clean cut. Prepare the wood in the normal way but do not allow others to handle it, particularly if used as a staff or stang.

Magical Properties

Alder wands are used for witchcraft rituals concerned with charisma, journeys, self-confidence, bravery, supervision skills, and spiritual growth. Also used in shielding the astral-self from unwanted intrusion from other realms.

Ash (*fraxinus excelsior*)

The common ash is native to Britain and most of Europe, being widespread throughout the country in oak woods, copses, in hedgerows and along river banks. Recognising the ash is easy because the twigs in winter and the foliage in summer are so distinctive. In the spring the silvery grey twigs show

characteristic velvety black buds; the leaves are formed in 3-6 pairs of toothed, lance-shaped arrangements. The ash is one of the last trees to come into leaf, which gives rise to the country rhyme that associates it with **Elemental Water** and **Elemental Earth**:

*Oak before ash, we're in for a splash;
Ash before oak, we're in for a soak.*

The ash loses its leaves quite early in autumn and are frequently shed at the first hint of frost, although bunches of ash keys last well into winter to provide food for the birds. The name of ash 'keys' dates from medieval times when door keys were fashioned in the shape of the seed pods of the ash tree; while the Anglo-Saxon word for ash is *aesc*, which was also used to mean spear.

Ash has always been highly prized

for firewood because it burns ‘green’ – that is, unlike many other woods it is suitable for hearth fires when it has been freshly cut. Another advantage of ash timber is that it is so tough and elastic that it can withstand stress, strain and sharp knocks, and so throughout history it has been used for tools and weaponry, especially for the shafts of spears and lances.

From very ancient times, the ash has also been revered as a sacred and fortunate tree, connected with fire, lightning and clouds. In some pagan mythologies it appears as an ancestor of mankind, although it appears to have displaced the alder when in-coming tribes defeated the indigenous people of Britain. The ash played an important role in Norse mythology where it was regarded as the ‘Tree of Life’. From a huge ash tree, whose crown reached up

to heaven and whose roots penetrated down into Otherworld, the gods ruled the world. To watch over earthly affairs they were helped by an eagle perching on the top-most branches; the eagle was assisted by a squirrel, which spent its time scampering up and down the tree taking messages.

Because of its sacred and magical character the ash was sometimes considered a dangerous tree to cut down without the necessary propitiatory observances. As late as the 18th and early 19th centuries, Derbyshire people still believed that anyone wantonly destroying an ash tree would certainly be deported as a result of some misfortune.

Unlike the alder with its Faere Folk associations, the ash is benevolent and friendly to mankind. It cured diseases and it could be used in divination and charms – for example: Finding an ash leaf with an even number of leaflets

was considered to be lucky and the phrase ‘even ash’ was almost as common as ‘four leaf clover’ is today. Its leaves and wood protected all who kept them in the house or wore them, from all sorts of evil – in later times ash was used as a charm against witchcraft! The dividing line between magic and folk-medicine can become blurred when referring to old remedies but both would have been the province of the local wise- or cunning-women.

In Lincolnshire, the berried, female ash was known locally as ‘sheder’ and used to defeat the spells of male witches, while the berry-less variety, or ‘heder’ was used against female witches. This indicates that the charm was an old antidote against evil long before it was hijacked by Christian folklorists.

In Devonshire, new-born babies were given their first bath in front of a fire of ash-wood; and probably the

best-known ash-cure is that used in the treatment of ruptures and rickets in children. The technique differs from county to country but there are numerous records of these methods affecting a cure. The leaves of the ash have been used to treat all manner of complaints: dried they can be taken as a gentle form of laxative, to ease colic, help pass kidney stones, and as a treatment for gout' rheumatism, jaundice and flatulence. An infusion of ash leaves in the bath is said to soften the skin.

Magically, the leaves can be used in any rites of regeneration – either in incense or part of a cleansing bath. They are particularly powerful when used in negative magic or charms for protection – either as incense or carried in a charm bag, which works just as well for people, animals or the family car. Ash keys can be taken in a brew to help bridge the void between

the worlds; as an aid to divination or scrying; or in a spell for prosperity – particularly if burned at the Winter Solstice. The wood is used as a charm to protect against vampires (psychic or otherwise), and is known to contain a mild treatment against malaria and fever.

“This is a magnificent tree when mature, yet at the same time so light and graceful that it has been called the ‘Venus of the Woods’. This may appear to be rather too close a title to the ‘Lady of the Woods’ (Birch) but it well expresses the characteristics of the two. They are both exceedingly graceful, but the beauty of the birch is that of the nymph, while that of the ash is the combined grace and strength of the goddess. It is in a meadow, or on the outskirts of a wood, or in the hedgerow, where it is not hemmed in by other trees ... where

it has had elbow room to reach its long, graceful arms upwards and outwards, and to cover them with plummy circlets of long leaves, that the ash is able to do credit to the name bestowed upon it.”

*The
Observer's Book of Trees and Shrubs
of the British Isles.*

Although in modern Wicca the ash tree is often referred to as the ‘Goddess tree’ and associated with the Triple Goddess, this is not a hard and fast rule, and is often misleading. In classical Norse, Greek and Celtic literature, the ash is seen to have predominantly *masculine* attributes. From a natural history’s point of view, however, the ash can undergo a sex change from year to year; a male tree of last year may be female this year, and perhaps bisexual the next. This means the tree is the perfect magical

androgyny — i.e. its sexual/magical/mystical propensities are interchangeable and can be ‘both, either or neither’ as symbolised by Kether in Qabalistic terms — and a useful tree to work with if the group contains gay or bisexual members.

The ash is one of the ‘Nine Woods of the Beltaine Fire’ — the others being birch, yew, hazel, rowan, willow, pine, hawthorn and blackthorn — and one of the Irish ‘Chieftain Trees’. The availability of the individual woods will, of course, differ in different parts of the country, so any of the other trees mentioned as being part of our traditional heritage may be used, with the exception of oak and elder. Traditional Craft-lore simply states that the need-fire should consist of nine woods with the exception of oak and ellen-wood.

The traditional ash-faggot (bundle) is made up of ash twigs and burned at

Yule to ensure good fortune in the coming year. This can often be in place of the Yule log and a miniature one can be kept in the house for good luck.

NB: At the time of writing the ash trees in the British Isles are under attack from a progressive disease similar to Dutch Elm disease that devastated the countryside some years ago.

Staff or Wand

According to country-lore, snakes cannot stand ash and will keep well away from anyone carrying a staff made from it, despite the fact that it is the tree of Mercury, whose symbol is the caduceus. All deities associated with the ash appear to have a penchant for magical illusion, and so a wand would be useful when used for glamouring or enchantment. In traditional Craft, both the coven or

personal stang or staff was cut from an ash tree as this represents the Horned God. Dressed with garlands and with crossed arrows, the stang can be used as an altar, although a personal staff should be left plain.

According to Evan John Jones (*Witchcraft – A Tradition Renewed*): “When an ash staff is found, you will know it is the one for you. It will feel right to the hand. A slight tingling in the fingers will tell you that it is yours and yours alone ... When taking the staff, a small coin is left behind as payment.”

Magical Properties

Ash wood is an excellent wand for promoting brain power, aids in communication, intelligence, wisdom, and promotes curiosity. Use this wood to remove mental blockages and aid in the promotion of word use and understanding. It is the wood of the

writer, poet, and scholar. Promotes spiritual love and health; and protects against unwanted change. Brings balance to the mind. Use for protection from drowning, magical effectiveness, sea power, and healing. Ash is also used for protection, finding special roots, horse magic, enhances skills of arts and crafts, justice, weather magic, and for working with the magical energy of cave and wells.

Aspen (*populous tremula*)

One of the most hauntingly beautiful of our native trees, the aspen is also one of our less familiar. Sometimes referred to as the ‘quaking aspen’ or ‘shiver tree’ because the leaves

tremble in the slightest breeze the tree has been the source of much folklore, all associating this lovely tree with evil and gossip. The aspen is a species of fast-growing poplar that can quickly reach a height of 65 feet. It is more common in the north where they are most often seen on hillsides and valleys, especially where the soil is damp and light; it does, however, grow in hedgerows and copses, and is quite often seen in open oak-woods.

The aspen flowers in March before the leaves appear, bearing separate male and female catkins on separate trees. The catkins produce no scent or nectar, so they are not visited by any pollinating insects: pollination is carried out by the wind. The shape and size of the leaves vary according to whether they come from the main part of the tree or from suckers. The leaves are copper-brown when they first break, turning to grey-green – usually

paler on the underside that gives the aspen its curious shimmering silver light. In late autumn the leaves turn to gold in a spectacular display. The leaves turn inwards, and one country superstition says that the leaves curl upwards when a thunderstorm is due.

Timber from the aspen is very light and not particularly durable but it has often been used for veneer and plywood, for matches and light boxes for fruit and vegetables. Today it is widely used for pulp and paper, while in the past it was turned into arrows. In Scotland aspen wood is little used because of the tree's negative folklore. Geoffrey Grigson, writing in *The Englishman's Flora* comments rather cynically: "If the timber had been tougher, harder and more durable, and more valuable, perhaps the legends would have been different."

If the aspen had little commercial worth, it has been much admired by

artists and poets. Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote some famous lines in memory of the aspens at Binsey near Oxford after they had been cut down:

*My aspens dear, whose airy ragings
 quelled,
 Quelled or quenched in leaves the
 leaping sun,
 All felled, felled, all are felled.*

The aspen's 'airy rages' have been the source of much local folklore and legends – although most have a biblical basis. This usually means that the tree or plant originally had pagan associations and so we need to look much deeper behind the latter-day Christian superstitions. For the aspen to receive such 'bad press' it must have figured largely in pre-Christian beliefs, as did the elder (or Ellen-tree), which suffered the same fate as being labelled the tree from which

Judas hanged himself (see Elder).

The constant movement and rustling of the leaves has also led to connections with the sound of gossip and loose tongues. This is recorded in Scotland, where the tree is known as ‘old wives’ tongues’. In parts of Berkshire it is referred to as ‘women’s tongue’ and the Welsh name for the aspen, *coed tafod marched*, also conjures up the same image; as does the Manx name *chengey ny mraane*.

In witch-lore, no tree is looked upon as being evil although certain species may have different propensities for averting negative energies. It may be worth tracing the aspen’s names in Anglo-Saxon (*aespe*), Welsh (*aethnen*) and Old Irish (*eadha*) to see if there are any references to the part it played in pre-Christian superstition. Considering the aspen is one of our indigenous

trees, it would be extremely rare to find little or no mention of it in the old oral traditions, especially as it had some recorded healing powers.

On the plus side, the aspen is credited with the power to cure agues and fevers. A very old sympathetic magic charm held that ailments could be treated by something that resembled their effects or symptoms – and since ague causes the patient to shake and tremble, they were more likely to be healed by the shaking tree.

In *Folklore of the Northern Counties* (1879), William Henderson records the Lincolnshire belief that to be cured of the ague the sufferer should pin a lock of their hair to the tree and say: “*Aspen-tree, aspen-tree, I prithee to shake and shiver instead of me.*” As is usual in many healing charms, the journey home must be made in complete silence, otherwise the magical will be negated. Another

method is to bore a small hole in the bark and insert the patient's nail-pairings; the hole is then closed up and once the bark has grown over the opening, so the affliction will disappear.

Much of our native wood-lore has been submerged under a superficial veneer of modern paganism but for our ancestors, these indigenous trees were the focal point of the spiritual nature of these very Islands. In the wilder, remote places there is still the belief that the 'Little' or 'Fair People' of the *sidh* (Irish) or *y twlwyth teg* (Welsh) can be contacted via certain trees, which must be respected at all costs, otherwise harm will befall those who adopt a cavalier attitude to such sacred places. From a magical perspective, the aspen tree is seen at its best on a moonlit summer night, when warm breezes stir the leaves and it is possible to believe that this is another

tree that might once have been associated with the Faere Folk.

The fact that the tree is pollinated by the wind; that its wood was used for arrows, plus the constant movement of the leaves all point to the aspen as being associated with **Elemental Air**. Despite its size, it is a short-lived tree and so symbolises the transience of this earthly existence. In this capacity it can be used as part of Otherworld rituals and funerary rites of passage, either included in the incense mix or in garlands.

Since its traditional use was in the production of arrows, it may also be appropriate to fashion the pair that normally decorate the coven stang out of aspen wood. The symbol of the arrow is another connection to the Faere Folk as they were a dab hand at archery. Much of what is written here is, of course, pure conjecture but for those who still possess the spirit of

adventure, re-establishing a working relationship with the aspen might just produce some interesting results.

Staff or Wand

Because the timber from the aspen is not of particularly good quality, it will take a lot of patience and hard work to produce a magical tool – and even then it will not be very robust. For this reason, it would probably be inadvisable to cut a staff from aspen since this would not be strong enough to stand up to rigorous circle work as a staff or stang. The otherworldliness of the tree, however, would make it suitable for a funerary wand, if such a tool was to be interred or cremated with a respected member of the coven or group. When selecting a small branch for your wand, make sure you leave a suitable offering that symbolises air, such as food for the

wild birds.

Magical properties Use an aspen wand to protect property from thieves; it also provides protection from unwanted spirits and to help release old fears.

The Sacred Trees

Many types of trees found in the Celtic nations are considered to be sacred, whether as symbols, or due to medicinal properties, or because they are seen as the abode of particular nature spirits. Historically and in folklore, the respect given to trees varies in different parts of the Celtic world. On the Isle of Man, the phrase

‘fairy tree’ often refers to the elder tree. The medieval Welsh poem *Cad Goddeu (The Battle of the Trees)* is believed to contain Celtic tree-lore, possibly relating to the *crann ogham*, the branch of the ogham alphabet where tree names are used as mnemonic (i.e. memory aid) devices.

The Nine Sacred Woods for the Need-Fire

Ash

Birch

Yew

Hazel

Rowan

Willow

Pine

Thorn

and all other trees mentioned as being traditionally sacred with the exception

of the oak and the elder.

In medieval Ireland under Brehon Law trees were divided into four categories with a scale of fines for their unlawful felling.

The Seven Chieftain Trees

Oak – dair
Hazel – coll
Holly – cuileann
Yew – ibur
Ash – iundius
Pine – ochtach
Apple – aball

The Seven Peasant Trees

Alder – fern
Willow – sail
Hawthorn – sceith
Rowan – caerthann
Birch – beithe
Elm – leam

? – idha

Seven Shrub Trees

Blackthorn – draidean

Elder – tron

White hazel – fincoll

White poplar – crithach

Ebutus – caithne

? – feons

? – crann-fir

Eight Bramble Trees

Fern – raith

Bog myrtle – rait

Furze – aiteand

Briar – dris

Heath – fraech

Ivy – eideand

Broom – gilcoch

Gooseberry - spin

Cad Goddeu or *The Battle of the Trees* is a medieval Welsh poem preserved in the 14th-century

manuscript known as the *Book of Taliesin*. The poem refers to a traditional story in which the legendary enchanter Gwydion animates the trees of the forest to fight as his army. The poem is especially notable for its striking and enigmatic symbolism and the wide variety of interpretations this has occasioned.

Beech (*fagus sylvatica*)

Although the common beech is classed as one of the native trees of the British Isles, pollen records show that it only arrived some 3,000 years ago compared with some of the other species. There are, for example, many early records of alder wood and

catkins dating back 10,500 to 9,500 years from Yorkshire, while the ash was known to be present in southern and central England between 6,000-7,000 years ago.

Current pollen data reveals the differences in origin, directions of spread and timing of the spread for each individual species, which indicates that the Beech arrived from the south-east much later, and explains why the beech is not represented in the tree-alphabet as the latter pre-dates the time when the beech became widespread in Britain. The fact that Julius Caesar recorded 'there are no beech trees in Britain' strengthened the belief that this magnificent tree arrived with the Romans. This is now known from the pollen records to be incorrect, but the tree was certainly a British rarity in Roman times, although it is now the third most common tree in British woodlands.

A mature beech tree is an impressive sight at any time of the year with its smooth grey bark and distinctive foliage. In the spring the new leaves fringed with soft silvery hairs have a shining, translucent appearance, turning dark and glossy as summer approaches. The flowers are followed by the nuts developing inside a bristly case. In October the cases burst open to allow the 'beech mast' to fall out so that the delicious nuts can be gathered and eaten.

Woodland animals such as badgers and squirrels are particularly fond of beech nuts, and for birds such as nuthatches and bramblings, a plentiful supply can increase their chances of surviving a bad winter. A really heavy crop occurs about every four or five years and in the past it was common for pigs to be turned out into the woodlands to forage for nuts and acorns. This common grazing still

occurs in parts of the New Forest and is called ‘pannage’.

In autumn the beech really comes into its own with the leaves turning from orange, russet and gold until they fall to the ground in a thick carpet of dull copper. Because of the dense foliage there is little that will grow in the shade of a beech tree and so the tree casts a large bronze circle on the woodland floor. Younger trees and beech hedges often keep their leaves until the following spring when the winter twigs with their spear-like buds wait to burst into life again.

Despite their massive trunks, beech trees are shallow rooted, which makes them susceptible to storm damage. If they survive, and beeches will reach 100 feet when fully grown, the tree’s normal life span is about 300 years – although some of the ancient pollards at Burnham Beeches are known to be over 400 years old. Other ‘hulks’ at

Windsor Forest and Wyre Forest may be even older. Pollarded trees eventually become hollow and this enables them to live for centuries since they are better equipped to stand up to strong winds. Beech trees ...

“Make spreading trees, and noble shades with their well-furnished and glittering leaves ... the shade, unpropitious to corn and grass, but sweet and of all the rest most refreshing to the weary shepherd”
John Evelyn (1729)

Beech wood is white, or even reddish if it is grown on very rich soil – and very heavy when newly felled. It is close-grained, hard and smooth, being one of the native timbers. According to that celebrated poet and countryman, Geoffrey Grigson, the “wood endures best under water or in waterlogged soil”, and to support this

claim, the piles under Winchester Cathedral and some of those under the old Waterloo Bridge were made of beech. Other sources, however, state that the timber's use is limited because it decays quickly.

On a more domestic front, it is a very good wood for kitchen utensils, furniture making and sports equipment. It burns well and is used in Scotland to smoke herrings – while charcoal made from beech ‘is well suited for the manufacture of gunpowder’. Queen Victoria is said to have preferred to burn beech from Burnham Beeches on the fires at Windsor Castle.

In his book, *Ancient Woodlands*, Oliver Rackham points out that “the ecology is perhaps better known than of any other native tree. In southern England, it has been a valuable timber since the Bronze Age”. Despite the magnificence of the beech there is

surprisingly little in terms of British folklore associated with the tree, apart from it offering protection from lightning. In European history, the only records of it having any cultural significance are pre-historic in that the beech appears to have been of great importance to certain Iron Age Celtic groups from Central Europe.

In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves' notes suggest that the Franks and Achaeans originally consulted beech oracles but, finding no beeches on their migrations, transferred their allegiances to the oak, the nearest equivalent, to which they gave the name *phegos* – the same word as *fagus*, the Latin for beech. Beech is also a common synonym for literature, with the English word 'book' being etymologically connected with the word 'beech' from which writing

tablets were made. Venantius Fortunatus, a 6th-century bishop-poet wrote: *Barbara fraxineis pingatur runa tabellis* – “Let the barbarian rune be marked on beech-wood tablets.” Magically, therefore, we can associate the tree with knowledge and learning; for this reason it was also the totem tree of at least one Old Craft coven whose origins came from the south-east.

Staff or Wand

It is rare for beech wood to be used as a staff or wand but it is by no means taboo simply because the tree was omitted from the tree-alphabet. As the tree has connections with knowledge and learning, it makes it an obvious choice for those who pursue their magical quest on a more intellectual level. To obtain a staff of a suitable thickness may prove difficult,

however, since such branches may well be out of reach.

It is interesting to note that while the beech is often described as the ‘queen of the woods’, those who work with beech staffs and wands maintain that the energies from this tree are most definitely male and aligned with **Elemental Earth**. Therefore the offering or libation would need to be something decidedly cross gender – such as a vintage port or cider.

Magical Properties

Beech wands are used in the magic of divination and helps to balance mental health. Aspiration, desire, and victory are all key elements of this wood. Used while working with ancestors, old wisdom, and magical research. **Beech is a sacred wood of the Summer Solstice.**

Birch (*betula pendula*)

There are two native birches, the downy birch (*betula pubescens*) and the silver birch (*betula pendula*); there is a third dwarf shrub (*betula nana*) that can be found in northern England and Scotland. The birch was one of the earliest trees to colonise Britain after the last Ice Age with pollen records having been found that date back to 13,500 years, although it is believed to have become very rare, or even on the verge of extinction between 10,200 and 11,000 years ago.

The silver and downy birches are very similar. The silver birch, as its name suggests has a paler, silvery bark; the downy birch has a bark that is

more variable in colour from silver-grey to brown. One way of telling the difference is by the area of black, knotted bark on the lower part of the trunk of the silver birch with its 'weeping' twigs. The downy birch is smooth right down to the ground and its twigs point upwards. Birch timber is a pale, creamy colour and although it is a hard wood, its uses tend to be more domestic than outdoors.

The small leaves appear towards the end of April and after a heavy shower it is possible to detect a delicate fragrance from the aromatic resin that is washed from the unfurling leaves and twigs. In the autumn the leaves turn bright yellow before falling, leaving the bare trees gleaming in the winter sunlight. Birch trees appear to attract a large number of birds' nests among the branches but these are in fact, galls – a natural deformity known as 'witches broom'.

A name that also derives from the cutting of birch twigs to make the traditional witch's broom or besom. Large amounts of birch brushwood are used to fill out the jumps at racecourses during National Hunt season.

With its characteristic silvery bark and delicate leaves it is easy to appreciate why the birch has inspired painters, poets and writers down through the centuries. For example:

*“Beneath you birch with silver bark,
And boughs so pendulous and fair,
The brook falls scattered down the
rock;*

And all is mossy there”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Known as the ‘Lady of the Woods’ the birch is a tree of Venus and therefore associated with **Elemental Water**.

Both species produce a bitter, astringent tonic that has diuretic and mild laxative effects; it reduces inflammation, relieves pain and increases perspiration. This can be used internally for treating rheumatism, arthritis, gout, water retention, cystitis, kidney stones, skin eruptions and fevers. Externally, it is mainly used in the form of a birch tar-oil for the treatment of psoriasis and eczema. The sap can also be fermented to make beer, wine, spirits or vinegar, and Culpeper recommended it ‘to break the stones in the kidneys and bladder’, and as a mouthwash.

Folklore associated with the birch tree is wide and varied since it can be used as a protective charm against evil spirits, bad luck and the evil eye – or

for a spell for fertility and love. The birch is another of the 'Nine Woods of the Beltaine Fire' – and make excellent kindling for camp fires as the wood burns well. Birch kindling was used to set? although the ritual fire at the rising of the first sun in May heralded the approach of the warmer weather. The tree was also believed to have life-giving properties and in some parts of the country, birch branches were hung over the doors on Midsummer Eve as they were considered to be symbols of return and renewal.

Many different areas have their version of 'beating the bounds' that is traditionally carried out to remind a particular community where their territory officially ended. This was a symbolic and magical casting of a protective perimeter against the dangers from outside, and to cast out all negative energies from within the boundaries. The birch was also

associated with corrective powers and in medieval times, a bundle of birch rods was carried in front of the magistrate on his way to court, both as a symbol of his authority and as a means of correction. Birch rods were used to beat felons (and sometimes the mentally ill), to rid them of the demons causing their affliction; and was still used as a punishment in the Isle of Man until the 20th century.

On a much gentler note, birch is supposed to be feminine and lucky, as the tree of birth and rebirth. Strips of birch bark can be used as a magical writing surface, particularly for love spells, while the wood can be used in incense connected with romance. The birch is also used in garlands to decorate a ritual area, especially for spring and summer celebrations.

To make use of the tree's protective energies, collect a handful of thin birch rods and fashion them into a long

broom-head. Circle the boundary of your home and garden (or land), sweeping all the 'dirt' and unclean spirits outwards from the home, beating the ground at significant boundary markers such as fence posts, and where it is necessary to change direction, or where there are gateways, openings, etc. It is said that birch trees were often used for the May Pole erected every year at the Beltaine festival, and then kept in the stable or farmyard afterwards to protect the household and livestock – and especially against horses being 'hag-ridden', although this custom has proved difficult to verify.

Staff or Wand

This is a sacred shamanic tree and so practitioners should carry a birch wand or staff to aid their journeys in this world and through the astral

planes. The place of the birch staff within magical rites is that of the bridge between the worlds. The handle of a witch's besom is, of course, a form of staff, cunningly concealed as a simple domestic implement, although this is the male component of the broom, often with a phallic shaping to the handle at one end, and fashioned from alder, ash or hazel. The actual brush part of the besom is symbolic of the female component that is made up of certain twigs – including birch, broom or heather.

As can be seen, there are so many different facets to the birch tree that it would be a mistake to attempt to pigeon-hole its energies merely for convenience sake, or to fit in with any preconceived ideas about tree magic. A light wine would make an ideal offering in payment for your wand or staff, especially if the wine had been made from birch sap.

Magical Properties

The birch wand is used in many cleansing rituals. Birch is a symbol of rebirth, renewal, and diligence and some use this wood to aid in the calming of emotions. Many European communities use or have used, birch twigs to expel evil spirits with some cultures utilising birch rods in rituals designed to drive out spirits of the old year. Birch by tradition has been linked to youth and new beginnings so use in rituals that signify a new start of any endeavour.

Blackthorn (*prunus spinosa*)

The blackthorn is probably the tree (or more correctly, the shrub) most strongly identified with traditional British Old Craft, through its long associations with magic and the Faere Folk. It is mentioned in Celtic Brehon Law and is even supposed to have its own special tribe of Faere guardians who will take revenge on anyone cutting a branch from the tree at either the old opening or closing of the year – i.e. according to the old Julian calendar.

Archaeological research has established that the fruit from the blackthorn – sloes – which were common in the wild, were consumed in large quantities as far back as Neolithic times. These ancient references probably explain the deep-rooted fear of the blackthorn as something that is best avoided since it represents the displaced, indigenous people of these islands. In later times,

these ancient people, the Faere Folk and witches were all said to be ancestors of one and the same.

The blackthorn is a deciduous shrub common throughout the British Isles. It does grow in woodland but because it needs plenty of light, it is unlikely to be found under dense cover, preferring the edges of woods, clearings, verges and grassy tracks, hedgerows, embankments and on common land. This is a rigid bush with a tangle of vicious spikes that offer nesting birds a large degree of protection from predators.

The bark is usually black – hence its name – and in the spring the blackthorn breaks into a mass of pure white, delicately perfumed blossom. The shrub flowers early, usually in March or April, before the leaves appear. In some years the profusion of white starry blossom completely obscures the bark. There is an old

country saying that if the weather is cold when the blackthorn flowers then it will remain cold for the whole of the flowering period – about a fortnight – a so-called ‘blackthorn winter’.

The small leaves unfurl in May to complete an almost impenetrable hedge or thicket, especially in cold, exposed, or coastal areas. The flowers are followed by hard green fruits that ripen during the summer to become the familiar blue/black sloes, each one coated with a natural dusky bloom. If these are left on the bush until late autumn they do become sweeter and can be used to produce sloe-gin, a delightful liqueur.

The blackthorn sends up erect shoots or suckers from its roots and if these are not cut back they gradually spread to form a large stand of blackthorn resulting from just one parent plant. This method of re-colonising, and its Faere Folk

connections make this an ideal symbol for **Elemental Earth**. Blackthorn wood is hard and the grain forms intricate patterns of colour. Ireland's fearsome cudgel, the *shillelagh*, is cut from the main stem of the bush, while the straight stems from younger bushes make handsome walking sticks or staffs.

Another country tradition involves the weaving of a garland or 'crown' from the thin twigs of the blackthorn to be used as a Yule-tide decoration. The garland was burned on New Year's Day and the ashes scattered on the fields to ensure a good crop, both in terms of agriculture and livestock in the coming year.

From medieval times the bush's medicinal purposes have been recorded: blackthorn flowers were used as a tonic and mild laxative; the

leaves as a mouthwash and to stimulate the appetite; the bark to reduce fever; the fruit for bladder, kidney and digestive disorders. According to medieval herbalists, the shrub was held to be the 'regulator of the stomach' since its flowers loosened the bowels and its fruit bound them. The bitter fruit of the blackthorn was made into jellies, syrups, jams, wine and *verjuice* (an acid liquor). Sloes were also an ingredient in fruit cheeses. Sloes can also be used in wart charming and the following is still used in some parts of the country. Rub a wart with a plump, juicy fruit and then dispose of it; before the sloe has dried out, the wart will have vanished. Alternatively, rub each wart with a scrap of raw meat and hang the meat on a thorn for the same result.

Because of its cultural links with the

Faere Folk, the blackthorn is known as the 'Faere wishing bush'. Collect a flower or leaf and put it in a small charm bag with your special wish written on parchment (or the silver bark of the birch) and hang it on the bush. Alternatively, fasten a scrap of ribbon or fabric to one of the thorns as you make your wish. The spikes from the blackthorn have long been used to pierce wax images, both for cursing and healing purposes. Blackthorn is important at the Spring Equinox when the beautiful clouds of white blossom appear on its branches; at the time of Samhain when the berries are ripe and it can be used to summon the Wild Hunt; and, thirdly, at the Winter Solstice when the wood is used as an offering to the Underworld powers for the return of the sun.

The wood and dried berries can be used as incense in rituals of banishing negativity and so it is well to collect a

small supply of these to dry out and use in a special blend of your own, as and when necessary. Anoint a few twigs of blackthorn with an appropriate oil and burn a little as incense each day at noon and midnight for several consecutive days to banish even the most persistent negative forces. Carry a leaf or dried berry in your charm bag, both for protection and to attract the powers of good fortune.

It is obvious that the folklore and superstitions surrounding the blackthorn are a result of thousands of years of cultural clashes and we would be well-advised to strip away as much of the incoming or non-native beliefs as possible when exploring its power. Like most trees, it has both benign and malevolent energies, depending on the period of history to which its folklore relates. Whatever we may feel about the tree, it really does herald the beginning of spring in a spectacular

fashion.

Staff or Wand

The blackthorn used as a magical tool has long been associated with cursing. According to Evan John Jones (*Witchcraft – A Tradition Renewed*): “As it is a wood of ill omen, the only use of the blackthorn stang is in the solemn rite of a formal cursing when the coven has to defend itself, or one of its members against an attack from the outside. In this guise it is the representative of the Two-Faced God. From the same stem comes the power that can be used for both good and evil; a face that should be rarely invoked or worked.”

Having said that, there are a number of Old Craft witches whose personal wand is made out of blackthorn because it also represents the energies of the God in his ‘dark of the moon’

aspect – in other words, the deep primordial powers of the Wilderness and Wild Wood. As with all magic the power is neutral and the responsibility must therefore rest with the individual, and the end for which it is being used. Blackthorn *is* notoriously difficult to control but it should not be viewed as having a sinister or evil reputation.

Mention of a blackthorn rod has featured in several witch trials recording that when the body of the witch was burned, their blackthorn staff was thrown onto the pyre. An ideal offering in payment for a piece of its branch would be a handful of dried fruit.

Magical properties

In Ogham, the blackthorn is regarded as an increaser of secrets and the ‘rune of the great wheel’. Its vicious black thorns make it impenetrable and it is a

tree of great density and strength. A wand or staff made from this wood has great power, especially if it is made from a rare twisted branch. **Blackthorn is a sacred wood of the Autumnal Equinox.**

Box (*buxus sempervirens*)

The box is another native tree that doesn't appear in the tree-alphabet despite the fact that it's been around for a very long time. Box grows naturally on limestone and chalk although there are very few places where actual wild woods of box still exist; two being Boxwell in Gloucestershire and Box Hill in Surrey where there are naturally occurring

woods. In the distant past, however, the trees must have been much more common, particularly in the south of England where the frequency of 'box' or 'bex' in place names confirm its presence.

This is a small tree reaching up to 33 feet in height, but more often growing as a dense, evergreen shrub. In the past its wood was so prized that, according to Geoffrey Grigson's *The Englishman's Flora*, the box woods were decimated for the timber. Natural box wood has now become so scarce that in the early 1990s the Society of Wood Engravers mooted the suggested that box be planted for use of future generations of wood carvers. Indigenous species, however, are not necessarily native everywhere in the British Isles and the various Forestry Agencies realise that each one is usually of its 'highest value to nature conservation when they grow in places

where they would occur naturally in the absence of human disturbance or assistance throughout the ages’.

According to the conservationists, when creating new woodland, it is best to plant the same native trees that occur in nearby ancient and semi-natural woodland, using only stock of local origin. This means that ‘wild’ box will only be re-introduced into southern England where ‘seed collected from semi-natural stands, no further away than, say, 10 miles from where the stock is to be planted’ will be used.

Box’s yellow, extremely hard and fine-grained wood was the best material for fine wood-engravings of medieval times and for several hundred years until the introduction of steel-engraving. It was also used to make small decorative boxes, chessmen, musical, mathematical and nautical instruments,

In 995AD Aelfric, a Benedictine monk of Cerne Abbas, compiled a list of over 200 herbs and trees in which box was listed. It was used for hedging, topiary work and to shelter young plants. A thick screen of box separated the gardens from the main courtyard at Shrewsbury Abbey. The slow-growing dwarf variety was close clipped (a custom said to have originated with the Romans) to make decorative edgings to formal herb gardens, some of which have been recreated as formal knot gardens.

Although all parts of the tree are poisonous if taken internally (animals have died from eating the leaves) box, taken in small doses, was used as a substitute for quinine in the treatment of recurrent fevers, like malaria. The leaves were used to purify the blood, stimulate hair growth and, together with the bark, to treat rheumatism and

dispel intestinal worms. The oil was used to relieve toothache and piles, while Pliny recommended the berries for diarrhoea. Both wood and leaves produce an auburn hair dye, while the bark was used in the making of perfume. According to Gerald Wilkinson [*Trees in the Wild*], box wood turner's chips were used by herbalists as the basis of 'hysterical ale', also containing iron filings and a variety of innocuous herbs, it was recommended to be taken 'constantly by vaporous women'.

For some strange reason, in some parts of Britain, box became associated with funerals. In Lancashire box sprigs were handed to the mourners who dropped them into the grave, according to R Vickery, writing for the Folklore Society [*Unlucky Plants*]. It was probably due to it being an evergreen

and having a rather disagreeable smell when cut, that caused it to be incorporated into the Victorian death cult rather than any deep-rooted superstition surrounding the tree's history.

From a purely magical point of view there appears to be nothing recorded to give any guidelines as to whether box was included in any magical correspondences or spell-working. Since all parts of the tree were known to be poisonous, it would no doubt be shunned as being unlucky or evil once its healing propensities had gone out of fashion.

Nevertheless, it is a good idea to have box growing in the garden among the herbs, if only for decorative purposes. Do not be tempted to try a little experimental work with box incense as it can produce the same effects as laurel and, as such, must surely represent **Elemental Air**. This is

also borne out by the fact that its names *buxus* means ‘flute’, and box was used from ancient times for making musical instruments.

Staff or Wand

Since mature box wood is so rare today, it is doubtful whether it would be possible to obtain a full length staff, although a mature garden shrub might yield up a reasonable sized wand. Because of its rarity a box wood wand would be a very precious object to both give and receive, although its use would be more ceremonial than magical. An ideal offering would be a libation of fruit juice.

Magical properties

Box is a very valuable wood for those who work with animal magic and spirits, as a box wood wand provides protection for pets and livestock.

The Celtic Tree Alphabet

Beth B - Birch

Luis L - Rowan

Nion N - Ash

Fearn F - Alder

Saille S - Willow

Uath H - Hawthorne

Duir D - Oak

Tinne T - Holly

Coll C - Hazel

Muin M - Vine

Gort G - Ivy

Pethboc P - Dwarf Elder (or Reed)

Ruis R - Elder

Ngetal NG - Reed

Ailm A - Scots Pine or Elm

Onn O - Furze/Gorse (or Broom)

Ur U - Heather
Eadha E - Aspen
Idho I – Yew

This is the version that appears in The White Goddess to which Robert Graves also added:

Qwert Q/CW – Apple or Quince
Straif SS/Z – Blackthorne
Y Mistletoe

The last being magical to the Celts. The Apple is the Silver Bough; the Mistletoe, too holy to have a written letter or name in the Golden Bough; the Blackthorn is the tree of Magic and the Faere Folk.

Bird Cherry (*prunus padus*)

Wild Cherry (*prunus avium*)

There are two indigenous wild cherries in Britain, the bird cherry and the wild cherry although there is an element of confusion between the two. *Prunus avium* – Latin for bird's cherry, is commonly found in most parts of the British Isles as far north as Caithness. Confusingly, *prunus padus*, which is known as the bird's cherry in England, is a northern species, occurring naturally across Scotland, Ireland and northern England.

The wild cherry, or gean, is called *idath* in Old Irish, and carries various localised names such as crab cherry, hawkberry, mazzard and merry. This is a tall, handsome tree that can grow to almost 100 feet and when it is covered with snow-white blossom in May it is a magnificent sight, attracting swarms of butterflies and insects. The fruit of

the wild cherry, as its name suggests, is black or dark red, and although not as fleshy or tasty as the cultivated variety, it is edible. The tree reproduces by sending out suckers to develop into small stands. Cherry wood is reddish-brown in colour and can be used for exquisite wood sculpture because of its fine, attractive grain. It is also traditionally used for smokers' pipes and is available as joss to perfume the house with a delicate, restful aroma; choose either cherry wood, which has a more subtle perfume, or cherry which is slightly more fruity.

Strangely enough, there are no historical or oral records of the cherry tree being associated with folklore in Britain, although it is listed as the gum being an old remedy for coughs – hence the traditional flavoured cough medicine that is still popular today.

Culpeper wrote that the gum dissolved in wine *'is good for a cold, cough and hoarseness of the throat; mendeth the colour in the face, sharpeneth the eye-sight, provoketh appetite, and helpeth to break and expel the stone'*. The fruit, bark and gum were all used to soothe irritating coughs, treat bronchial complaints and improve digestion. Crushed cherries, applied externally, were reputed to refresh tired skin and relieve migraines.

In the kitchen, the fruit was cooked, eaten raw or pulped with the stones and made into wine, conserves and liqueur. Although the wild cherry listed by Aelfric is a native of Britain, it is believed that the Romans introduced the cultivated variety. Medieval herbalists grafted the more productive varieties on to the rootstock of the wild cherry; while the fruit was picked when it was wine-red and eaten ultra-ripe.

Modern medicine has found that certain cherries have proved effective in treating prostate gland enlargement. Looking further afield, we find that the cherry has long been used by traditional healers from different cultures around the world. With all this information to hand, it is obvious that cherry trees have always been looked upon as providing a domestic service rather than any particular magical use.

From a magical perspective, cherry timber (as with all *prunus* species) gives off a wonderful perfume if the wood is burned on an open fire. If someone is cutting or pruning cherry trees, dry the wood for winter burning, making incense, or for a Beltaine fire.

Staff or Wand

A cherry wood wand or staff would be

a beautiful gift to give a woman who is a healer and/or priestess because the cherry is obviously a tree with predominantly feminine overtones and so represents **Elemental Water** and **Elemental Earth**. If we have to go searching for correspondences, we find that: *“sweet odours are also lunar, because the moon represents the physical senses and refers to the common people. Similarly, sugar and sweet things are generally much liked by children (who are classed under Luna)”*. If you can find a suitable branch that would be suitable for carving into a special wand or staff, the perfect libation would be cherry juice or wine.

Magical properties:

Cherry wands are extremely centred and possess very grounded energy – unwavering, and solid – so cherry

wood is used in ritual to stabilise and focus. It is often used for intuitive and insight and to overcome obstacles. This is an excellent choice for divination or medium work, as well as healing and love magic; also suited for use in hunting magic, working with animals and familiars, eroticism, unification of covens and groups, spells of detection, and amplifying spell work.

The Cherry Tree

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.*

*Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a
score,*

It only leaves me fifty more.

*And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodland I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

A E Housman

So spectacular are cherry trees in full bloom that in Japan they celebrate Hanami as a national holiday; while poems would be written praising the delicate flowers, which were seen as a metaphor for life itself, luminous and beautiful yet fleeting and ephemeral.

*In these spring days,
when tranquil light encompasses
the four directions,
why do the blossoms scatter
with such uneasy hearts?*

Ki no Tomonori

Crab Apple (*malus sylvestris*)

The crab apple must surely be the true 'goddess' tree of the British Isles. It usually occurs singly, scattered throughout almost all types of woodland and hedgerows in eastern England. According to Oliver Rackham in *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* there were roughly one tree for every ten acres in the 1970s. Crab apples can be found throughout Ireland, England and Wales, although they are less common in Scotland.

Crab apple blossom is pinkish-white with an exquisite and delicate perfume. The fruit is small, ranging in colour from yellow to red, with a very sharp taste. Nevertheless, made into

crab apple jelly it is an ideal accompaniment to roast pork, or alternatively the fruit can be used to make home-made wine. Old country recipes often say that the addition of a couple of crab apples make all the difference to an apple tart. Timber from the crab apple can be used for the most delicate of woodcrafts, including engraving and carving. At one time it was the premier wood for making set-squares and other drawing instruments.

The saying 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away' lays claim to the fruit's health-giving qualities that science now recognises has more than a little truth in the concept. In medieval times the fruit was a cure-all; the bark was also used medicinally. The fruit was mainly used to relieve constipation, reduce acidity of the stomach and assist the digestion. Rotten apples

were used as a relief for sore eyes.

The cultivated variety of apple was probably introduced into Britain by the Romans and it is believed that the indigenous crab apple blossom was white – the pinkish hue being a corruption of the cultivated variety of apple tree. During medieval times the monks increased the number of varieties of ‘eating’ apple that became a favourite fruit eaten cooked or raw. They were also used for making cider, chutney, sauces, jams and jellies.

Although an indigenous tree, the crab apple appears to have been in domestic use since ancient times with crab apples being found in an oaken coffin dating from the early Bronze Age. The apple has always been regarded as a holy tree and from early history it has been considered extremely unlucky to destroy apple

trees or an orchard. On the opposite side of the arboreal coin, it was said to bring luck to the household if several apples were left on the ground after the harvest to keep the Faere Folk happy. While apple orchards have long been regarded as places where the realms of the Faere Folk meet the mundane world. The folklore associated with it appears mostly to do with determining romantic outcomes and finding a marriage partner.

The Isle of Avalon is often translated to mean 'the island of apples' and is one of the gateways between the worlds and first mentioned in the 12th century by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Avalon was the paradise of Welsh legend, presided over by the Queen of the Faere, it was an island of apple trees, situated in the far west where kings and heroes went after earthly death. It was to Avalon that Arthur was taken in the Black

Ship.

In Celtic mythology the apple was known as the 'Silver Bough'. Mistletoe being the 'Golden Bough' and, although it is more traditionally associated with oak trees, it is more commonly found on apple trees. The apple was one of the seven Chieftain trees and under Brehon law, the unlawful cutting down of an apple tree had to be paid for with a life.

According to Norse legend, apples were sacred to Idun, the Keeper of the Apples of Immortality, and all the gods had to eat one of her apples regularly in order to keep their youth and vigour. Idun is one of the oldest of the Norse deities, very closely linked to Freya, both belonging to the tribe of the Vanir. As guardian of the apples, Idun was also the original guardian of the runes that were carved upon apple wood. The war-loving Aesir, led by Odin, captured and tortured the holy Vanir

priestess, Gullveig, to try to get her to reveal her magic, which led to war between the two tribes. For a long time the Aesir were held at bay because of the Vanir's superior magical knowledge but gradually they were overcome and destroyed.

Apples are often referred to in British witchcraft because when cut across the circumference, the seed cases are set out in the form of a natural pentacle. The five points of the pentacle represent the magical elements of earth, fire, air, water and spirit, and can serve in this capacity on an altar. The apple therefore unites the folklore and beliefs of most of the pre-Christian people of Britain, and as such should be honoured as a holy tree more than it is.

Burnt indoors, apple wood will perfume the whole house, which certainly makes it one of the woods suitable for the Beltaine fire. Some

traditional witches will also use apple juice or cider as a libation in their magical workings and festivities. Falling apple blossoms can be used for divination in spring: catch a falling petal and you can use it to make a wish, or catch a dozen and ensure a happy year to come. Make it thirteen if you're counting by lunar months.

Apples also make an appearance at Harvest Home suppers and Samhain when 'bobbing' is a popular entertainment. To use the time to call back spirits of those who have passed from this world during the previous year, choose an unblemished apple and as the clock finishes striking midnight, stick twelve new pins into the fruit. Place the apple in the fire and call the name of the person you wish to contact.

The celebrations of Wassail Eve used to be carried out around the Midwinter Festival (Winter Solstice) but with the introduction of the

Gregorian calendar, the date now falls on the 5th January. On this night apple trees were offered libations of cider to encourage fruitfulness in the orchards during the coming year, while pieces of bread soaked in cider were placed in the crooks of the trees. Guns were fired to frighten away evil spirits – but in these post-gun law days, it can be just as effective to use Chinese crackers.

Staff or Wand

As we can see, a wand or staff of apple wood would be ideal for the priestess of a coven because she is symbolically the embodiment of the goddess, and also the keeper of the hearth and home for the members of her group. Traditionally apple wands were used in all forms of love magic and represent **Elemental Water**. When selecting a branch to cut, make sure

you leave a libation of apple juice or cider by way of thanks.

Magical Properties:

This is a powerful wand of choice for the witch when working with the Faere magic; a good wood for aiding in the propagation of skills, promotes peace and harmony, magic of light and the divine, and encourages visions.

Elder (sambucus nigra)

Although technically classed as a shrub, the elder is one of the most useful of our native trees and one of the most widely avoided. For the gardener it is classed as little more than a weed;

both animals and humans avoid the ill-smelling leaves, while in folklore it is considered to be a most unlucky tree. For the countryman and wise-woman, however, the elder is known as the ‘poor man’s medicine chest’ having countless uses and representing **Elemental Water**.

“Elder grows almost anywhere, from heavily polluted roadsides to wind-lashed cliff tops where it is crusted with salt from the sea spray. It thrives on waste ground, in hedgerows, on heathland, chalk downs, woodland and scrub, and especially where the soil is rich in nitrogen from the manure of animals such as rabbits and badgers. You often see it near drains and sewers – and it can be a sign to archaeologists of the site of former dwellings.” [*The Patchwork Landscape*]

The dark green leaves that appear in

spring keep flies at bay; in the past they were dried and used as an insecticide, so a sprig of elder hanging up in the house or worn on a hat will send flies packing. Elder leaves also make a useful ointment for bruises, sprains and wounds. Known widely in country-lore and witchcraft's wort-lore as 'Poor Man's Medicine Chest' for all its beneficial properties, care must, nevertheless, be taken since the leaves, twigs, branches, seeds and roots contain a cyanide producing glycoside. Ingesting any of these parts in sufficient quantity can cause toxic build of cyanide in the body. In addition, the un-ripened berry, flowers and umbels contain a toxic alkaloid.' Due to the possibility of cyanide poisoning, children should be discouraged from making whistles, slingshots or other toys from elderberry wood. In addition, 'herbal teas' made with elderberry leaves (which contain

cyanide inducing glycosides) should be treated with caution.

Nevertheless, the elder in flower is a magnificent sight with its enormous heads of creamy white blossoms and a heady fragrance. While they can be used to make a delicious elderflower champagne, they are also utilised to raise the resistance to respiratory infections. And ointment made from elder flowers is excellent for chilblains and stimulating localised circulation. The flowers are also used in hay fever treatments for their anti-catarrhal properties.

The berries are small and green at first, ripening to deep purple clusters that weigh down the branches. These are made into wine, chutney, jellies and ketchup. Medicinally, both the berries and the flowers encourage fever response and stimulates sweating, which prevents very high temperatures and provides an

important channel for detoxification. To cure warts, rub them with a green elder twig which should then be buried. As the wood rots so the wart will disappear.

Under the circumstances, it is quite surprising that with all its beneficial properties, the elder gets such a bad press to connect it with all manner of devils, demons and bad 'uns. This is no doubt due to the great number of negative folklore association surrounding the bush. It features in Arthurian tales and has long been associated with witchcraft that might explain why the Christians demonised it by having Judas hang himself from its branches, and thereby making it a cursed tree! It has been suggested that the name 'elder' derives from the Anglo-Saxon *eldrum*, meaning fire – but this is highly unlikely since elder

does not burn well and most country people refuse point-blank to burn it on the hearth fire.

In rural areas the elder has long been referred to as 'ellen-wood', which suggests that it was once identified with the Faere Folk. Even country folk who would not normally consider themselves superstitious will not cut down an elder tree for fear that bad luck will descend on the house. There have been cases where homeowners have paid an outsider to come to cut down a tree and remove the wood, but this has not prevented bad luck from dogging the house and its inhabitants until the tree grows again.

In many areas of the country there are tales of the Elder Mother, or elder spirits who both inhabit the bush and who 'are' the tree. Any cavalier treatment of the tree may result in all manner of calamities. It was believed that if a branch was cut and blood

spurted out from the wound, then likely as not the village witch would be seen wearing a bandage or walking with a limp. If elder wood was taken into the house, death would follow within a year – and put a baby in a cradle made of elder and the Faere Folk would steal it.

These beliefs made it necessary to take very special precautions should anyone wish to gather any ellen-wood for magical purposes. The elder should be approached with the head bare in the manner of a suppliant, with folded arms and partially bent legs – in a ‘symbolic between-the-worlds pose with arms and legs neither bent not straight’.

Let’s make no bones about it, with the elder’s reputation it is well to remember that you are approaching a very real, magical and extremely powerful ‘being’. Tell the elder why you require its wood and what it will

be used for. Wait for permission to be given and be prepared to give some recompense for what you take. A suitable invocation would be:

“Lady Ellhorn, give me some of thy wood.

*And I will give thee some of mine
When it grows again in the forest.”*

Wait for a moment of stillness to occur among the leaves and branches – this being the sign that the tree gives its permission. If there is a violent shaking of the leaves then permission has been denied and you should not proceed. If permission is given, whatever you cut should be taken ‘wrong-handed’.

There are numerous modern tales of the bad luck or illness suffered by those who ignored this warning – and equally good fortune coming the way of those who showed the right amount of reverence. If you have an elder

growing in the garden, let it thrive and see how your fortune changes – just have a little word whenever it needs pruning! The name of the Elder Mother in the above supplication also reveals the elder's connection with the Faere Folk and musical instruments, as *ellhorn* literally means 'elf horn', i.e. pipes – that suggest the Little People used its wood for that purpose.

Magically the wood is used in personal charms to turn aside curses and banish malevolent spirits from the vicinity. These charms can be placed around the inside of the home for the same purpose. Elder leaves gathered at Beltaine are especially powerful and bunches hung over the doors and windows prevent negative forces from entering. The leaves can also be dried and added to protective pouches, although some may find the smell of elder offensive.

The bush, of course, has plenty of

otherworld associations. It is a gateway between-the-worlds – whether the kingdom of the dead or the realm of the Faere Folk where the Elder Mother acts as the gatekeeper. This is why it was believed that sleeping beneath the bush could enable you to make contact with the Mighty Dead; this was also a risky business since there was a risk of not waking up again! Rather than run this risk but still be able to utilise the elder's powers when astral journeying, hang a bunch of leaves above the bed and take an infusion of the flowers or berries – or better still, a glass of elderberry wine.

Staff or Wand

Because of the uncertain nature of the elder it is perhaps unwise to use it as a magical or ceremonial wand or staff; also because the wood becomes very brittle when dried.

Magical Properties

Elder wands are most often used in Faere magic, banishment, magical arts, protection from evil, imagination, change, and healing.

Furze, Gorse or Whin (ulex Europaeus)

Furze, also known as gorse or whin, is a perennial evergreen shrub belonging to the pea family and only usually called furze in Ireland. It forms a multi-branched, stunted shrub usually no taller than six feet high. The leaves are very small and in older plants they form into long needle-like thorns. It is found in rough pastures, heaths and

rocky places, preferring a dry soil. The word furze is derived from the Old English name *fyrz*; gorse from the Anglo-Saxon *gorst*, which means 'a waste' this being a reference to the open moorlands where it is often found; and whin from Middle English. Gorse thrives in poor growing areas and conditions including drought; it is sometimes found on very rocky soils, where many other species cannot thrive.

Common gorse flowers a little in late autumn and through the winter, coming into flower most strongly in spring. Western gorse and dwarf furze flower in late summer (August–September in Ireland and Great Britain) and between the different species, some gorse is almost always in flower, hence the old country phrase: "When gorse is out of blossom, kissing's out of fashion". Gorse flowers have a distinctive coconut

scent, experienced very strongly by some individuals, but weakly by others.

Nevertheless, after the bleakness of winter, gorse clothes the hillsides and heaths with a welcome blanket of headily scented yellow flowers. It is one of the first flowering plants of the spring, with most bushes in full bloom by April. With the newly awakened bees busy among the flowers it fills the senses with the promise of honey and other good things to come. The folk-song recorded by Spiro: *I am the blaze on every hill...* suggests that gorse is representative of **Elemental Fire**, since it was also used for cleaning chimneys!

This is borne out by the fact that gorse is well adapted to encourage and withstand fires, being highly flammable, and having seed pods that are to a large extent opened by the intense heat, thus allowing rapid

regeneration after fire. The burnt stumps also readily sprout new growth from the roots and gorse was traditionally gathered into faggots to be used as tinder; in the 19th-century it was cultivated especially for this purpose, being popular with bakers to whom it was sold as fuel for their ovens. Because it has a high concentration of oil in its leaves and branches, it catches fire easily and burns well, giving off a heat almost equal to that of charcoal.

Gorse can also be used as fodder for animals with the bushes often deliberately burnt down in order to encourage new growth, the fresh sprouts of furze and grass providing easily accessible food for stock, especially for cattle, horses and donkeys. It is supposed to be good for them and was also used as litter [*Trees in the Wild*]. It was said that an acre of furze could provide enough winter feed

for six horses, with half the protein content of oats. Horses and goats can strip the leaves and eat them straight from the plant, but it was usual practice to run the branches through stone mills or hit them with wooden mallets when fed to sheep and cattle. This procedure crushed the thorns and reduced the wood to a moss like consistency, which made it more palatable.

Gorse is also a valuable plant for wildlife, providing dense thorny cover ideal for protecting bird nests and protecting new saplings from deer and livestock. Chopped up branches were used by gardeners and placed in vegetable beds to keep mice and birds off newly planted crops. Moreover, it is widely used for land reclamation where its nitrogen-fixing capacity helps other plants to establish themselves.

Gorse produces wood that can be

used to make small objects; being non-toxic, it is especially suited for cutlery. In spite of its durability it is not used for construction because the plant is too small and the wood is unstable, being prone to warping. Gorse is useful for garden ornaments because it is resistant to weather and rot.

The bark and flowers produce a fine yellow dye; and the flowers can be used to make a traditional salve used by Whitby fishermen, (farmers and gardeners, too) to protect their hands and help heal cracks caused by cold and salt water [*The Secret People*]. Gorse flowers are edible and can be used in salads, tea and to make a non-grape-based fruit wine. In Eire the flowers were used to flavour and add colour to whiskey; while the Danes were reputed to use them to make beer. Flower buds mixed with a blade of

mace and peppercorns in a white wine vinegar and salt solution, make a fine pickle.

Culpepper states that furze was good to open obstructions of the liver and spleen. “*A decoction made with the flowers thereof hath been found effectual against the jaundice and also to provoke urine, cleanse the kidneys from gravel or stone ingendered in them.*” Studies in the 19th-century confirmed that the high alkaline content of the plant had a purgative effect and an infusion of the blooms was given to children suffering from scarlet fever. It was also used to cleanse the home: “... *against fleas, take this same wort, with its seed sodden; sprinkle it into the house; it killeth the fleas ...*”

Gorse (or furze) is closely associated with the sun god Lugh, the Celtic god of light and the Spring Equinox, when

it is in full flower – although folklore attaches it to festivals throughout the spring and summer months as a symbol of the power of the sun. As one of the sacred trees, furze was included in the Celtic Beltane bonfires when livestock would be herded between them for purification and protection before being released onto the summer grazing. When this tradition diminished, torches of furze were still carried around the herds and farm buildings in order to cleanse the air and protect the animals against disease and infertility. In the Scottish Highlands holly and gorse were sacred trees of the Cailleach Bheur, who was associated with winter and the protection of animals; she was reborn every Samhain Eve bringing with her the winter weather with her magical staff and on Beltane Eve she threw her staff beneath a gorse bush before returning into the Earth.

Magically, the thorny nature of the plant means that it is often viewed as having protective powers in that it bestows the wisdom of preparation and prevents conflict; in Wales it was said to guard against malevolent witchcraft and the Faere Folk. The custom of placing a sprig of furze in a bridal bouquet was thought to keep luck within the marriage [*The Dictionary of Plant Lore*].

On the negative side, according to the *STIHL Encyclopedia of Trees*, the branches and oblong, black-brown seed pods of the gorse are highly toxic. “The constituent substances initially have a stimulating but later paralysing effect on the central nervous system. A burning sensation is experienced in the mouth and throat after about one hour, with nausea, strong thirst and centrally induced vomiting. Death is caused by circulatory collapse due to paralysis of the respiratory organs”.

Staff or Wand

It might be possible to acquire enough wood to fashion a wand but a length of straight wood suitable for a staff would be rare indeed. Since it represents **Elemental Fire** and the flowers used to colour Irish whiskey, a libation of Jameson's would seem like a fair exchange.

Magical properties

A rare gorse wand can be used in protection against evil; the restoration of faith, hope and optimism, and the gathering of strength. The wood also attracts gold so it is used in money spells.

Common Hawthorn (*crataegus monogyna*)

Midland Hawthorn (*crataegus laevigata*)

There are two indigenous types of hawthorn: the common and the Midland hawthorn. The former is found throughout the country, except in the far north of Scotland. It thrives on most soils, in open habitats such as hillsides, neglected pasture, on commons, in woodlands and most hedgerows. The Midland hawthorn is mostly confined to the east Midlands and south-east England where it is often found in the shrub layers of oak woods.

The leaves of common hawthorn have distinct lobes and indentations that may reach as far as the midrib, with the tips of the lobes serrated. The

leaves of the Midland hawthorn are more rounded with small lobes and shallow indentations. The leaves of both trees have a nutty flavour and used to be eaten by children as 'bread and cheese'.

The hawthorn blossoms in May (hence its familiar name), when the trees are smothered in clusters of white blossoms that give out a strangely disturbing but unmistakable perfume. The berries known as haws, turn red in late August and last well into the winter to provide vital food for the birds, who in turn scatter the seeds away from the parent tree.

Common hawthorn has been used for about 2000 years as natural barbed fencing because its tangle of thorny branches make an ideal barrier for enclosing and protecting livestock. Its name derives from the Anglo-Saxon *haegthorn*, which means 'hedge-tree' and signs of defensive hawthorn

hedges have been discovered round the edges of excavated Roman forts.

The natural life-span for a hawthorn is around 100 years but some have reached the ripe old age of 300 years. Slow growth produces a very hard wood and although it burns well, hawthorn timber is little used today except for tool handles and walking sticks.

In modern herbalism the properties of some of the hawthorn's active constituents are now better understood and present a remarkable picture of what is known as synergy – meaning 'working together'. Some constituents strengthen the heart's action, others slow it slightly and improve the blood supply. The net effect is to make a weak heart work more effectively and to reduce blood pressure. An infusion of 5gm of dried flowers and leaves per

cup must be taken three times a day, long-term, to have any significant effect. For culinary use, hawthorn berries or flowers were used to make jellies, wines, liqueurs and sauces.

Hawthorn has perhaps more connections with ancient beliefs, folklore and traditions than almost any other native tree in the British Isles apart from the blackthorn and elder. The appearance of the blossom at the beginning of May in the Gregorian calendar (May Day was on what is now the 12th May in the old Julian calendar) heralded the end of winter and the beginning of summer. It was said to be unlucky to take may flowers into the house because the Faere Folk were believed to live inside or under the trees – especially those growing on grassy mounds.

For the Romans, however, the

hawthorn was a symbol of hope and protection, and cuttings were brought into the home to ward off evil spirits. It also echoed the ancient British tradition that the tree was associated with marriage and fertility. Pliny wrote the 'there are some who maintain that women who take the flower in drink conceive with 40 days'.

An old country rhyme recommends the tree as protection for man and animals during thunderstorms:

Beware the oak – it courts the stroke.

Beware the ash – it courts the flash.

Creep under the thorn – it will save you from harm.

Like the elder, the hawthorn was also looked upon as a gateway to Otherworld and perhaps it is this association and its links with the old pagan festivals that gives the tree its

‘unlucky’ reputation. Quite recently it was discovered that one of the chemicals that make up the flowers’ sweet smell is also produced during the decay of corpses. On the other hand, the fragrance of the blossom is also reputed to have a strong aphrodisiac effect, particularly on men.

Taking all things into account, it would appear that the pre-Christian view of the hawthorn was one of protection. It is appropriate to use hawthorn for the Beltaine bonfires, which the cattle were driven through, and the villagers leapt over to ensure prosperity in the coming year. Make a wish as you leap the hawthorn fire, but keep it secret to ensure that it will come true.

The tree can also be used to protect babies and young children. Hang a sprig above a child’s bed to bring them under the protection of the goddess/guardian, or keep a pouch of

the leaves sewn into the pillow.

Hawthorn can also be planted by the home to keep out evil or negative influences and protect from lightning strikes. It was also said that cattle thrived in fields where hawthorn grew. Make a wash of flowers and leaves and sprinkle around the house to repel negative energy and evil spirits; an infusion of berries (known as haws or hags) gives added protection when dispelling negative energies. The wood, berries and leaves can also be burned in incense form to purify and attract beneficent energies; in times of trouble or depression take an infusion of the flowers or leaves – or burn them as incense.

To make a Hawthorn Ball

On New Year's Day the women of the house should cut a selection of long, thin branches of hawthorn and plait them into a sphere. This should be

dried in the oven/hearth and suspended in the kitchen until the following New Year. While the women of the household were making a new ball, the men would take the old hawthorn ball out into the fields and set light to it. According to tradition, it should be carried so that pieces of the burning hawthorn fall into the furrows in order to bring life and fertility to the crops. For a special charm to bring good fortune into your home, burn the ball in the garden and when it has been rendered down to ash, sprinkle the remains around the boundary of your property for good luck.

Staff or Wand

Hawthorn is said to be sacred to the powers of **Elemental Fire** and **Elemental Air** and any demon or malevolent spirits can be controlled

with a wand cut from the tree. This is one of the trees of *The White Goddess*, Cardia who casts her enchantments with a hawthorn wand. A staff of coven stang can be used for similar purposes. Make sure to leave a suitable offering if you take any wood from the tree — perhaps bread and cheese.

Magical Properties

Hawthorn wands open insight, provides psychic protection, encourages creativity, used to make charms, aids in the development of self-confidence, purification, develops patience, detects magic since it is deeply magical from outer realms, used in weather working, banishment of evil spirits, concealing magic, chastity, male potency, and Faere magic. **Hawthorn is the sacred wood of the Vernal (Spring) Equinox.**

Hazel (*corylus avellana*)

The hazel has always been a major coppice tree and was listed by Aelfric in his *Nominum Herbarum*. It was one of the first trees to grow widely in Britain soon after the last glacial period. In the fossilised pollen records preserved in peat, which are our guide to the earliest native flora after the Ice Age, hazel predominates over much of the British Isles – appearing at much the same time as willow, alder and birch. In fact, studies have shown that there were seventeen times the amount of hazel pollen in the air at one point, than the total pollen from all the other trees in Britain.

The hazel belongs to the same family as the hornbeam, which has more scaly catkins and winged nutlets. The hazel leaf is a dense, green colour that turns to brown and then yellow-gold in the autumn. The brownish-yellow catkins (lamb's tails) begin to develop in the autumn and burst into flower in the spring, dangling from leafless twigs and releasing clouds of golden pollen.

At least two hazel trees growing close together are needed for fertilisation and the production of nuts. This is because the female catkin usually ripens after the male flower of the same tree. The hazel can be seen as a harbinger of spring, displaying cascades of golden flowers against the sombre backdrop of the wood. Beware of bringing sprays of catkins indoors as the falling pollen can mark furniture.

The bark, leaves and fruit had various medicinal uses, including the treatment of varicose veins, circulatory disorders, menstrual problems, rheumatism, haemorrhoids and slow-healing wounds. Culpeper wrote that the nuts, sprinkled with pepper ‘draws rheum from the head’, while hazel oil was used in soap and cosmetics. Hazel nuts were said to be a wonderful gift for a new bride – as long as she wanted plenty of children!

Hazel cobs (nuts) were eaten raw and used in cakes, bread, confectionary and liqueurs in the Middle Ages, while oil from the nuts was used in cooking. The indigenous cobnut (or filbert), however, has become almost an endangered species although some 250 acres of the original 7,000 acres in Kent still produce an annual crop. The Romans used them to flavour roast duck, and the Victorians considered them an important ingredient for soups,

roasts and puddings, often serving them as an after-dinner accompaniment to the port.

Cobnuts are only sold fresh and although some folk prefer to pick them at the beginning of the season (late August) while the shells are still green, the majority will leave them until the shells turn brown in mid-October. They are larger versions of the hazel nut although the kernel has a sweeter taste, more like sweet chestnuts. The nuts are high in vitamin E and calcium, and can be used in autumn recipes such as baked marrow, stuffed with tomatoes.

A recipe using these as an ingredient would be an ideal accompaniment to the Sunday roast, or part of your magical workings to find a close friend or lover. Share a double nut with them – although you must both eat the nuts in silence for the charm to work properly. There are lots of

magical associations with the hazel tree, which has been linked with wisdom, magic and divination for centuries.

Remains of hazel nuts shells have been found at the bottom of peat deposits, suggesting that the early Stone Age hunters were probably at least partly dependent on the hazel nuts for food in the absence of any kind of cereal. Since prehistoric times the log flexible twigs of 'withies' of the trees have been used to bind bundles, weave baskets, make hurdles and build coracles. In medieval times the twigs were used for the 'wattle' or panels, in wattle and daub buildings. The brushwood was bundled into faggots that were used for the weekly firing of bread ovens.

The hazel was considered sacred in Celtic mythology as one of the

Chieftain Trees, and symbolised fertility and immortality. Since hazel is associated with man's earliest ancestors, it is perhaps not surprising that in Celtic folklore it was also known as the 'Tree of Knowledge' and, as such was supposed to have many magical properties. There are several important Celtic myths surrounding the association of knowledge and wisdom and, like the apple, it was a capital offence to destroy a hazel tree. It was the 'only breathing thing paid for only with breathing things' – meaning that a life would be demanded to recompense for the fallen tree. Irish aches and pains caused by the damp climate – or elfin malevolence – were thought to be warded off by a hazel nut carried in the pocket.

Incense made from the nuts or twigs can be used for almost all magical purposes, particularly to strengthen mental powers. It is

especially effective for aiding magical Will and concentration; also to give stamina needed to complete long and complicated rituals. Hazel is associated with **Elemental Air** and is one of the nine sacred woods used to kindle the Need-Fire at Beltaine.

Weave a wreath of leaves and twigs to place in your sacred space during magical workings to gain your most secret wishes and desires. Most of the spells given in folklore and modern grimoires concentrate on love charms but these can be easily adapted to suit most requests, including banishment. Hazel nuts can be used in love philtres, when they will awaken the recipient to the virtues of the sender. On the other hand, if you want a person out of your life, simply chant repeatedly '*Depart! Depart! Depart!*' as you fix their image in your mind's eye and cast hazel leaves into the fire.

The nuts can also be used for

divinational purposes especially asking questions relating to partnerships (business, personal, domestic, etc.). Place two hazel nuts side by side on the bars of the fire grate. If they burn together, all is well; if only one burns, the partnership is one-sided. If they both fail to burn it could be the time for you to be looking at discontinuing the partnership; if one or both nuts explode, give it up as a bad job, anyway!

Hazel nuts can be used to gain the aid of Nature spirits, or to make contact with the Faere Folk. Make a necklace of nuts and either wear it when you go out into the countryside, or hang it in your home or sacred area to attract the entities of the Greenwood.

Staff or Wand

Although we think of the forked hazel

twig as the diviner's rod, a straight hazel wand can also be used for water divining and to attract rain, despite the fact that the tree represents **Elemental Air** and **Elemental Fire**. To protect a seed bed from birds, insects and the Faere Folk, draw an equal-armed cross followed by a heart and another cross, with a hazel wand. Because of its magical powers associated with wisdom and divination, the wood was traditionally used to make a sorcerer's wand or staff. The most potent magical tool should be cut on a Midsummer's morning, and the carrying of a hazel wand or staff conferred not only wisdom but the power of eloquence on the bearer. Leave an offering of sweet bread flavoured with nuts.

Magical Properties:

Artistic ability, magical knowledge, and optimism are provided by the use

of Hazel. The energy of hazel wands promoted love and creativity allowing a person to move beyond self-serving modes of existence. Hazel is the bringer of change. Hazel also promotes creative expression, eloquence, and art of all types. This was the most common wood used to create wands in the ancient Celtic traditions; also used in magic spells for wisdom, creativity, intelligence, navigation, inspiration, and focussing wrath.

Old Woodland Flowers

Wild flowers provide the woods with some of their most attractive features. Because many have adapted naturally

to flower before the leaves develop in the shrub and canopy layers, they are regarded as the harbingers of spring. No doubt to our primitive ancestors this re-awakening of the woodland contributed to the mystical significance of the many rites and rituals associated with spring.

An indication of an old wood is a rich variety of flowers, particularly if bluebells, snowdrops, wood anemones, primroses, yellow archangel and early purple orchids are present. Bluebells spread very slowly on heavy clay soils, so a carpet of them under trees could be the clue to old woodland.

Dog's mercury may seem to be a common woodland plant yet it is rarely found in recently planted woods – that is, woodland that has formed in the last 100 years – and so is also a good indicator of old woodland.

The presence of these particular

flowers in a hedge bottom today are all good indicators that it originated as part of a wood since these species spread very slowly and do not readily colonise hedgerows.

Heather or Ling (*calluna vulgaris* or *erica*)

Heather or Ling is a low-growing shrub found widely in Europe and Asia Minor on acidic soils in open sunny situations and in moderate shade. With its small, pale purplish-pink flowers and very small leaves, heather is the dominant plant in most heathland and moorland in Europe, and in some bog vegetation, pine and oak woodland. It is tolerant of grazing and regenerates

following occasional burning; it is often managed in nature reserves and grouse moors by sheep or cattle grazing, and also by light burning. Heather is an important food source for various sheep and deer which can graze the tips of the plants when snow covers low-growing vegetation. Its other name – ling – is derived from the Old English for fire, and refers to the plant's importance as a fuel in Anglo-Saxon times.

Referred to as *erica* in all the old references, the generic name *calluna* may possibly derive from the Greek *kallyno* meaning 'sweep clean', in reference to its traditional use in besoms, a practice recorded in the 18th century song *Buy Broom Buzzems*. Heather was also used for thatching, bedding and to weave into baskets; the plant was used in tanning and yields a yellow/orange dye. At Skara Brae, the prehistoric village in Orkney,

archaeologists found heather rope dating back to around 2000BC; the rope was made from long stems of heather, pulled and woven by hand, and used for a variety of purposes – from holding down thatch to securing fishing boats. In the Helmsdale area ladders made from heather ropes, bound together and swung over the cliffs, were used to give direct access to the shore.

As one of the most common and readily available resources in the countryside, heather has always played an important role in the traditional construction of buildings, particularly in areas such as the Hebridean Islands where construction was strictly determined by the availability of natural materials and their proximity to the proposed site. As a result, heather was used to build many dwelling houses, churches and farmhouses – from walls and thatching to the ropes

and pegs which actually held the building together. The roots of heather served as effective nails and pegs – used especially for hanging slates, but it was the small twigs of heather, trimmed and shaped with a knife that were used to peg down the heather divots in the thatch. It has also been used by hill people as insulation against the cold by packing it down trousers and inside jumpers!

Heather is also an ingredient in ‘gruit’, a mixture of flavourings used in the brewing of heather beer during the Middle Ages before the use of hops. The use of heather in the brewing of modern heather beer is carefully regulated and the heather must be cleaned carefully before brewing, as the undersides of the leaves may contain a dusting of an ergot-like fungus, which is a hallucinogenic

intoxicant.

As the flowers are a rich source of nectar for honey, medieval beekeepers often placed their hives amidst the heather moorland. Today, heather honey is a highly valued product in moorland and heathland areas, with many beehives being moved there in late summer. Heather honey has a characteristic strong taste, and an unusual texture – often sold as honeycomb.

White heather is regarded in Scotland as being lucky, a tradition brought from Balmoral to England by Queen Victoria and sprigs of it are often sold as a charm or worked into bridal bouquets. Legend has it that a gift of white heather brings luck to both the giver and the receiver, whereas red/purple heather is said to have been coloured by those killed in battle by

Christians, so is less lucky.

The Joy of Living, written by folksinger-songwriter Ewan MacColl refers to his growing old and his saying goodbye to the hills, mountains and his loved ones, the last verse containing his dying wishes in the lines: “*Take me to some high place of heather, rock and ling, Scatter my dust and ashes, feed me to the wind...*”. While the English folksong, *Scarborough Fair*, has the line: “*Gather it all in a bunch of heather*” as does the Scottish folksong, *Wild Mountain Thyme*.

Magically, heather is sacred to the Summer Solstice and used in charms involving maturity, consummation, general luck, love, ritual power, conjuring ghosts, healing, protection, rain-making and water magic – hence its association with **Elemental Water**. Charms made with heather can be worn or carried as protection against

danger, rape and other violent crimes and as the shrub represents good fortune it can also be carried as a lucky charm.

Associated with secrets from Otherworld, a sprig of white heather placed in a special place of silence and meditation has the power to conjure ghosts or spirits. After picking a piece of white heather at midnight, place it in a glass of spring water in the darkest corner of your home. Sit and think of a departed loved one and it is said that the loved one's shadow will visit you. Heather is also said to ignite Faere passions and open portals between their world and our own. Heather represents solitude because it thrives in wide open spaces, and the Faere Folk who enjoy living in such undisturbed places are said to feast on its tender stalks.

As a water herb, heather is very useful in weather magic; when burned

outdoors with fern, the herbal smoke of heather attracts rain. Bouquets of heather and fern can also be dipped in water to call rain.

Staff or Wand

It is rare that enough wood can be cut from the shrub to create a wand or staff but it is possible to produce mini-wands that can be carried in a magic pouch. Since heather is so versatile it can be used or given as a gift by anyone as a good luck charm. An offering of honey or beer would be appropriate and any off-cuts from the branch can be burned on the hearth fire for good luck and protection.

Magical properties

A heather wand may open portals between this world and the world of Faere; it is both helpful to those who

shape shift, as well as protective against harmful shifters, and to conjure spirits of the dead.

Holly (ilex aquifolium)

The holly is probably the most recognisable of all our native trees, and is found mostly in parks, gardens and woodland. Holly is also the important evergreen in the traditional pagan customs of Yule/Midwinter indoor decorations, symbolising the continuation of life during winter's dormancy. The old winter carol reminds us that:

The holly and the ivy, when they are

*both full grown,
Of all the trees in the Greenwood, the
holly bears the crown.*

This is because the holly is sacred to the Horned God in his guise as the 'Holly King', Lord of the waning year, who takes precedence until the Winter Solstice. It was also sacred to Mother Hel, the Norse goddess of the Underworld; and represents **Elemental Fire** and **Elemental Earth**.

The holly is dioecious, bearing separate winter flowers in early summer that are pollinated by bees. These flowers first appear when the tree is around 20 years old but the splendid display of scarlet berries on the female trees do not occur until the tree has reached 40 years. Despite being poisonous to humans, the berries sustain the local bird population throughout the winter when other food is hard to come by. For a variety of

reasons the berries stay on the tree longer than others, and do not spoil or fall off, even after a severe frost. Very often you will find that an individual holly tree is vigorously defended by a pair of thrushes who seem to treat the tree as their own personal larder.

In the Middle Ages, holly proved to be a useful tree for both peasants and farmers since, in spite of the prickly leaves, the upper foliage of mature trees provided nutritious fodder for domestic animals and deer. Historically, it was coppiced and pollarded for this purpose and is still carried out today to feed sheep and cows during harsh weather conditions. Holly is often found in old hedges dating back to before 1700 and across the country there are relics of medieval holly woods that were widespread across England, Ireland and Scotland. According to Oliver Rackham in *Ancient Woodland*, holly woods

appear to have been peculiar to Britain and so for the witch, these rare sites offer an ideal sacred space in which to work in peace.

Timber from the tree is white and fine grained, although it is very heavy – even sinking in water. It stains and polishes well, often being used for chessmen, the hammers in harpsichords, the butts for billiard cues and fine engraving. It was apparently used by the Celts to make chariot shafts and, according to Brehon Law, that was why the holly was one of the Chieftain Trees. When boiled and fermented the bark makes a sticky substance known as ‘bird lime’, which was used to trap small birds. This method is often referred to in period novels and history books.

The berries of the holly are highly toxic and can cause serious vomiting

and diarrhoea. This can be particularly dangerous for children who may find the bright, shiny berries irresistible. In professional use, the leaves are infused to help treat colds and coughs, and have diuretic properties that relieve urinary infections. They are also used as a fever remedy and have some therapeutic action in the treatment of jaundice and rheumatism. Despite its many applications, holly should only be used medicinally under strict professional supervision and should never be used as a self-help treatment, or for children. Despite these warnings many modern herbals encourage the use of holly berries as a purgative. **You have been warned!**

Needless to say it is considered unlucky to cut down a holly tree, especially in Ireland where it is held to be sacred to the Faere Folk. Because

of this connection, it is also said to be inadvisable to grow holly near the house. In England, however, it used to be planted close to the home to ward off lightning as well as to repel witches and poison – which, according to the beliefs of the time, meant the same thing!

Aside from the good luck that the tree brings when growing near the house, the holly is a weather omen; when the branches are heavily laden with berries it is the sign of a hard, snowy winter to come. Holly has been used as a Yule decoration for centuries and was used for the same purpose at the Roman Saturnalia. Exiled Romans would still have celebrated the festivals of their homeland even if the British climate was a little cold for Roman revels. Because of the tree's pagan associations, the early Church attempted to ban its use, but without success.

The wood of the holly gives off a hot fire that burns very quickly. It can, however, be burned 'green' (i.e freshly cut), without waiting for it to dry out. The kind of holly brought into a couple's home for their first Yule together will dictate who will wear the trousers. He-holly, with the sharp prickles, means the man will be the boss; she-holly (without prickles or only very soft ones) means that the woman will rule the roost. Some superstitions say this is the way it will be, while others say it only lasts until the next Yule when fresh holly is brought home.

Magically, holly is used primarily to keep intruders at bay, deflect negative energies and rebound spells to the sender. On the first count it makes an efficient boundary hedge as very few people would be willing to push their way through a holly hedge. Use holly in charm bags and incense

for all defensive rituals and, in times of greatest danger, position sprigs of holly around the boundaries of your home to keep out negative forces.

Holly also works well as a protection for domestic animals. Fasten some to an animal's collar to keep it safe when away from your protective influences, and be sure to hang a sprig in any barns or stables where animals are kept. This helps them thrive and wards off the attentions of the Faere Folk. One country superstition says that if you throw a sprig of holly after a run-away animal it will return of its own accord.

Staff or Wand

Holly wood makes an excellent staff or wand because it is an undiluted symbol of male energy. When out walking at night, a holly staff will keep you safe from all mischievous entities and at

one time, no coachman would drive after sunset unless the handle of their whip was fashioned from holly wood. A wand made out of holly is also helpful in keeping unruly spirits under control. An offering of spiced wine might be appropriate if the staff or wand is cut at Winter Solstice – the time of the Holly King.

Magical Properties

Purity, strength, logic, power transfer, protection. Holly wands are often used in magic concerning sleep. It is said that a man who carries the leaves and berries of holly is irresistible to women. Since the story of the rulership of the Holly King and the Oak King deal with cycles and rebirth, it is often used in magic to ease the loss of loved ones to death. It also carries properties of the sacred, material advance, physical revenge, and beauty. **Holly is**

the sacred wood of the Winter Solstice.

Hornbeam (*carpinus betulus*)

The hornbeam grows as a native tree in the oak woodlands of southern England and is noted for its compact stature and magnificent yellow and red-gold autumn colours. As the climate became warmer after the last Ice Age, Britain was colonised by trees that spread across from the Continent. The pollen records show that the hornbeam was a relative latecomer, arriving about 5000 years ago, whereas the oak was already wide-spread 2500 years earlier.

Unfortunately, the hornbeam is not

at all well known, and unless a search is made for it and an idea gained of what it may look like, it may quite easily be passed by as it can be mistaken for a beech tree. In fact, it also goes by the names of horse beech, hurst beech and white beech and, as such can be associated with **Elemental Earth**. Left to its own devices, hornbeam will spread their branches as widely as beech and, when allowed to grow unhindered, matures into a really impressive tree of between 30 to 70 feet.

One way of telling the difference between the two trees is that the bark of the hornbeam is furrowed, as if with swollen veins, whereas the beech is smooth. The flowers come about the same time as the leaves in April and May and unless carefully looked for will not be seen. These are yellowish male catkins, very similar to those of the hazel, while the female catkins are

much longer and looser. The fruit grows in bunches and are small brown nuts enclosed in a leafy, three-lobed 'scale'. The seeds ripen in October or November and like the beech, the leaves often remain on the tree throughout the winter.

The hornbeam has the hardest wood of any tree in Europe. It is yellowish-white, tough and hard, yet it is light and flexible. Craftsmen have made little use of it for furniture or cabinet-making because it is too hard – their tools were blunted so quickly that much time was wasted in re-sharpening them. Nevertheless it has been used for heavy-duty purposes in making agricultural tools, portions of pianos, cogs and pulleys.

Although the wood is extremely tough it burns well and before coal became the major source of energy, hornbeams were regularly coppiced and pollarded to provide wood and

charcoal for fuel. It also had a specific use for bakers because on a Saturday the ovens would be fuelled with this wood and, due to its slow burning, the oven would be hot enough for baking on Monday morning. This avoided criticism from the Church about working on a Sunday, whilst allowing the baker to go about his normal weekday business.

Staff or Wand

Although there appears to be no references to the hornbeam in folklore, the tree does have a certain rarity value and can probably be credited with the same attributes as the beech. Its greatest symbol would be strength. A bread or biscuit flavoured with nuts would be an appropriate offering.

Magical properties

A hornbeam wand attracts luck,

healing, wisdom, divination, clairvoyance and longevity. It helps restore after mental fatigue and promotes feelings of good taste and making life as comfortable as possible; encourages a reasonable and disciplined life although it fosters mistrust of most people – ‘Trust None!’

Guessing the Age of the Woods:

Pollarding and Coppicing

Many of the woods that were once pollarded or coppiced are extremely ancient. Trackways across the marshy areas of Somerset were built of poles

that have been identified as coppiced alder, ash, holly and hazel dating from 2,500BC. Trees of many different kinds, with oak probably dominant, indicate old woodland. All the trees are native though sycamore may have been introduced at a much later date. Trees of one kind (such as oak or beech) growing close together with tall trunks, perhaps planted in rows, indicates high forest plantation more than 100 years old.

If the woodland is old it was once either coppiced or grazed. If the woods were grazed (ie. used as wood-pasture) the trees would have been pollarded, so look for old pollards and a lack of variety in ground plants as clues to old wood-pasture. Look to see if there is nothing but grass under the trees; this suggests that grazing continues. Wood-pasture is a dead tradition but some old northern coppice woods are now used for

sheltering and grazing sheep.

Look for signs of previous coppicing: perhaps there are 'many-trunked trees' growing from the site of the old coppice stools. The main point is that a wood that was being coppiced 100 years ago is likely to be an old wood. The small-leaved lime tree is another good indicator, while the Midland hawthorn shows that the old coppiced area has never been anything but woodland.

Pollarding

When visiting a wood you should look for signs, particularly in the shapes of the trees, that tell of the history of the wood and what it has been used for in the past. Pollarding refers to trees that have been cut to produce successive crops of wood at a height of between 6-15 feet above the ground so that grazing animals cannot reach the young shoots. Pollarding is carried out on

wood-pasture and hedgerows rather than on trees in the woods.

From an historical perspective, pollarding allowed livestock to graze the common land of the parish, which often included woodland. As a result, this type of wood-pasture developed its own appearance. It has a bare, grassy floor (for the animals destroyed the spring flowers and undergrowth) and the trees were well spaced out because the livestock also ate many of the new saplings. Supplies of poles could still be obtained by cropping the branches of the trees at head height and this became known as 'pollarding' from the word meaning head.

Old pollarded trees can still be seen today and although the technique has all but died out, it has been well documented since Anglo-Saxon times. Apart from wood-pasture, many old pollards can be found in hedges, in farmland as boundary markers, or

along water-courses (pollarded willow or poplars).

Coppicing

The word coppice comes from the French word *couper*, meaning to cut. When young trees are cut back to the ground they quickly sprout a head of shoots which grow about six feet high in a year and then begin to thicken. The resulting tree is called a coppice.

After about seven to fifteen years the shoot of the coppice used to be cut to provide a supply of poles, staves and brushwood. Scattered throughout the coppices were the standard trees that had been allowed to grow unhindered until they reached an age of about 70-150 years when they were felled for timber.

The most obvious signs of past coppicing is the presence of many trunked trees growing on the site of old coppiced stumps. It was important in

past times to keep livestock out since they would destroy the young shoots and so the wood was often surrounded by a ditch with a large bank inside, which was often fenced. The remains of the bank and ditch can still be seen in places.

Another clue to woods that were once coppiced is the abundance of spring flowers. The regular cutting of the coppices allowed plenty of light to reach the woodland floor, and this encouraged the growth of the plants. Woodland flowers are slow to spread and so their presence in large numbers is an excellent indication that the wood is ancient and was once coppiced.

Ivy (*hedera helix*)

Ivy is a species of climbing or ground-creeping, woody evergreen that on suitable surfaces (rocks, trees and walls) can climb up to sixty feet or more above ground level. It can be found in all urban, woodland and rural environments and has the ability to wander freely, linking tree to tree, completely cover buildings, or form dense thickets that block out the light and restrict passage. The Roman agricultural writers much recommended ivy leaves as cattle food, but they were not relished by cows, though sheep and deer will sometimes eat them in the winter. The broad leaves being evergreen afford shelter to birds in the winter, and many prefer ivy to other shrubs, in which to build their nests.

It flowers in October and November, pollinated by and

providing nectar for late-flying insects, including the larger butterflies. Ivy is not really a tree and is classed as a woody climber, along with honeysuckle and traveller's joy; but unlike them, its stem is often four to six inches thick. Ivy is common in all deciduous woods except open birch woods. The ivy is evergreen but the leaves do sometimes go yellow; the berries form soon after the flowers and are often eaten by the birds before they turn black.

Ivy is very hardy; not only are the leaves seldom injured by frost, but they suffer little from smoke, or from the vitiated air of manufacturing towns. The plant lives to a great age, its stems become woody and often attain a considerable size – ivy trunks of a foot in diameter are often to be seen where the plant has for many years climbed undisturbed over rocks and ruins. Its great value is as an ornamental

covering for unsightly buildings and it is said to be the only plant which does not make walls damp. It acts as a curtain, the leaves from the way they fall, forming a sort of armour and holding and absorbing the rain and moisture.

Much has been argued as to whether ivy climbing trees will harm the tree or not; the consensus in Europe is that they do not harm trees significantly, though they may compete for ground nutrients and water to a small extent, and trees with a heavy growth of ivy can be more liable to wind-throw. Similar concerns are expressed about damage to walls. Here it is normally considered that a soundly mortared wall is impenetrable to the climbing roots of ivy and will not be damaged, and is also protected from further weathering by the ivy keeping rain off the mortar. Walls with already weak or loose mortar may however be badly

damaged, as the ivy is able to root into the weak mortar and further break up the wall. Subsequent removal of the ivy can be difficult, and is likely to cause more damage than the ivy itself.

Although all parts of the ivy are poisonous, the berries were taken as a purgative; an infusion of the leaves was recommended for rheumatic pains, bronchial complaints and whooping cough. Applied externally as a poultice the leaves were used to treat burns, scalds, sores, wounds, painful swellings, bruises, neuralgia and sciatica. Culpeper said that 'the yellow berries are good against the jaundice, and a drunken surfeit' and that they 'prevent and heal the plague'. The plant is poisonous in large doses although the leaves are eaten with impunity by various mammals without any noticeable harmful effects. The

leaves and fruits can, if ingested, cause breathing difficulties and coma; the sap can cause dermatitis with blistering and inflammation. Though not, generally, a key component of the 'soporific sponge' once used to achieve anaesthesia for the performance of surgery, ivy does feature in one of the earliest recorded recipes. The precise origin of the sponge recipe is impossible to determine, but one of the first published accounts is found in the *Antidotarium of Nicolaus Salernitanus*, by Nicholas of Salerno, printed in 1470.

The wood when (and if) it attains a sufficient size is used by turners for making small objects, but being very soft is seldom used except for whetting the knives of leather dressers. It is very porous, and the ancients thought it had the property of separating wine from water. English

taverns once placed over their doors a carved sign of an ivy bush, to indicate the excellence of the liquor supplied within.

Ivy has been a sacred plant since pre-Christian times; Pliny noted that it was used 'by the people of Thrace at solemn festivals to decorate the wands of the fertility god, 'Father Liber' (Dionysus or Bacchus), and also the worshippers' helmets and shields. During the Middle Ages the plant was reputed to be 'the enemy of the vine' and would therefore prevent drunkenness – hence wine would often be drunk out of porous ivy wood cups. The Greek priests presented a wreath of ivy to newly-married persons, and the ivy has throughout the ages been regarded as the emblem of fidelity. The custom of decorating houses and churches with ivy at Christmas was

forbidden by one of the early Councils of the Church, on account of its pagan associations, but the custom still remains.

Because the ivy (along with the mistletoe) has such strong associations with the oak it also represents **Elemental Fire**, and the sacred ivy was one of the earliest woods used as a fire stick. The online *Encyclopaedia of Herbs* says: 'Ivy is grown to grow up the outside of the home to act as a guardian and protector. It is worn or carried by brides to bring luck to the marriage. It is a symbol of friendship and fidelity'. Traditional witches used ivy symbolically as a Goddess Tree to aid fertility and bring good luck, especially when coupled with the Holly King; since wherever it is grown or proliferates, it guards against negativity and disaster.

Although it was believed to be a protective, magical plant, in some

areas of England it was considered unlucky to bring it into the house. Together with the holly, ivy was connected with the Roman Saturnalia and other winter festivals to mark life's continuance and coming rebirth in the spring. It was also connected with inspiration and poetry and if one were to lie down under an ivy tree, it could 'bring about a sleep from which there was no awakening'.

Staff or Wand

It is possible to produce an interesting coiled-serpent wand from the main stem of an ivy plant but the wood becomes very brittle when dry and too fragile to use for anything other than ceremonial rites. On the other hand a token holly wand can be entwined with ivy and given as a wedding gift to ensure marital bliss and harmony. A libation of wine would be a suitable

offering.

Magical Properties

Ivy is a fine wand for protection, good against wayward spirits and angry elementals; ensures success in business and all new endeavours. Promotes determination, strength, optimism and spiritual growth.

Juniper (*juniperus communis*)

Juniper – our only native member of the Cyress family – has the greatest world range of any conifer. It arrived soon after the last glacial period and spread throughout the British Isles as far north as the Orkneys. Except for the

Chiltern escarpment where there is quite a lot of juniper scrub, today it grows mainly in Scotland and southern England, usually as a low growing shrub; there are also a few scattered locations in Ireland, north Wales and northern England.

Its habitat, however, is mixed. In southern England, where it is in decline, it grows on the chalk-down grasslands, especially on steeper hillsides where the soil is shallow. In Scotland it is found in native Scots pine forests, birch woods and on heather moorland. On high mountains it sometimes forms low-growing scrub just above the tree line. Of the juniper, poet Laurence Binyon wrote:

*“The slope is darkly sprinkled
With ancient junipers,
Each a small secret tree:
There not a branch stirs.”*

The juniper grows slowly, its branches densely packed with narrow needle-like leaves arranged in whorls of three. In some ways the juniper resembles the yew and they frequently grow together on the steep-sided ridges and combs on southern downland. In some parts of Wales it is referred to as the 'dwarf yew'. The juniper 'flowers' in May or June, producing both male and female cones. In autumn the female cones swell to form a hard green berry which remains on the bush for two or three years, gradually ripening into fleshy, blue-black berries, coated with a greyish bloom like the sloe.

Despite its small stature, the timber from the juniper is extremely tough and was in demand for decorative veneers. After a good polish the wood gleams a rich red colour. In the Lake District the wood made the charcoal that was used for gunpowder.

Famed for its medicinal uses, Pliny wrote that the juniper “even above all other remedies, is warming and alleviates symptoms”. Roman physicians prescribed it for pains in the stomach, chest and side, flatulence, coughs and colds, tumours and disorders of the uterus. Some even suggested smearing the body with an extract from the seeds as a protection against snake bites. Culpeper recommended the berries for a great variety of ailments ranging from an antidote against poisons and a defence against plague, to strengthening the brain and curing ‘*wind from any part of the body*’. The 16th century herbalist John Gerard said, ‘*a large dose will lead to gripings and gnawings in the stomach but without causing either constipation or diarrhoea*’.

Its country name of ‘bastard killer’

arose from eating of the berries to procure an abortion.

Juniper oil has also been shown to contain high levels of isocupressic acid, which is known to be an abortifacient. It is believed to have been used for this purpose in humans in the past – hence, gin, which is flavoured with juniper, is referred to as ‘Mother’s Ruin’. Juniper berries should not be taken during pregnancy, or by those with kidney problems. In modern herbalism juniper is used internally to treat cystitis, urethritis, kidney inflammation, rheumatism, gout, arthritis and poor digestion with wind and colic. Externally it is used for rheumatic pain and neuralgia. There is an additional warning that it may cause skin irritation and allergic responses.

For culinary purposes, in medieval times, oil of juniper, made from the sharp-tasting berries, was used to flavour liqueurs (notably gin), and

added to marinades, stews, sauces and certain meat dishes. The berries can be added to pickles, game, patés, ham and pork. The wood was burned to smoke preserved meats; and the berries also yield a brown dye.

In classical times the branches were burned as a purifying herb in temples; in Britain branches were strewn on the floors to sweeten the smell of rooms, and burned to cleanse the air of disease and infection, especially during epidemics. Incense made from juniper leaves and berries would obviously be ideal for cleansing or banishing rituals. In more recent times, juniper was favoured by those involved in the illicit distilling of spirits because the dry wood burns with very little smoke.

Sprigs of juniper should be hung over the doorways at Beltain and

Samhain to keep out any negative energies or troublesome spirits. The incense can also be used for divinational purposes for seeing into the future.

Staff or Wand

In many parts of the country juniper was considered a powerful protection against ‘witches and evil spirits’, so a wand from its wood would make an ideal ‘blasting rod’ for banishments. The wood was also used for the handles of daggers and could be used as a handle for a witch’s knife – and as such should be associated with **Elemental Fire**. An ideal offering when taking wood would be a slice of raw meat or a libation of gin!

Magical properties

The juniper tree is considered a protective tree and it is unlucky to cut

it down; a wand would attract an abundance of healing properties, particularly in the elderly.

Lime (*tilia cordata*)

Small-leaved lime or linden trees are tolerant of most soil conditions and can withstand hard pruning, which is why they are most commonly found in the streets of our towns and inner cities.

According to research carried out by Cambridge University, however, although natural lime trees may not be a very familiar sight for most of us, the ancient limes in the north-west of England have a very interesting history and are probably well over 1000 years old. From the pollen records it is

abundantly clear that the lime was the dominant tree species in the forests of England and reached their maximum extent around 5,500 years ago.

The pollen records also show that the area in which high frequencies of lime occurred, when the forest cover was at its greatest, coincides with the natural location of the tree today. The Lake District, where ancient limes can be found, is now known to be the northern-most limit of the tree's original distribution.

Lime trees began their decline shortly after the major decline in elm, which began about 5,100 years ago, and is thought to have been associated with forest clearance and introduced woodland grazing. Today, many ancient limes are found in particularly inaccessible locations, which is probably why they have survived the various forest clearances of the past. Evidence of limes being in a location

in the past can be traced by place names. For example: Linsty Wood, where the limes were a ‘conspicuous feature in the 10th century, as the name contains the Norse elements ‘lind’ and ‘stigr’, meaning a path where the lime trees grow [*The Tree Book*]. The small-leaved lime trees found in natural woodland also mean that the woods themselves are old.

Lime trees can look just as impressive in winter with their bare branches as the can in summer, cloaked in leaves. The timber is prized for its pale colour and its suitability for carving, turning and musical instruments. As Percival Westell wrote in his book on *Trees*:

“True we all love the honeyed scent of the limes on a warm summer day, and so do the countless legions of bees who croon among its wealth of flowers for hours at a stretch. We also

admire its early autumn coat of yellow. But is it is not as well to look at the lime when one can see its pliant branches in winter bearing their tight reddish buds, each one, when rain falls or hoar frost melts as the sun shines, being like a diamond at anchor?"

In modern herbalism, the flowers of the lime are used as a sedative, a relaxant, an anti-spasmodic and a vasodilator (an agent that widens and relaxes blood vessels) and with their mild, pleasant taste, lime flowers are among the most popular herbal relaxants. The flowers produce an aromatic mucilaginous herb that is diuretic and expectorant; it calms the nerves, lowers blood pressure, increases the perspiration rate, relaxes spasms and improves the digestion. Taken as an infusion for hypertension, hardening of

the arteries, cardiovascular and digestive complaints associated with anxiety, urinary infections, feverish colds, influenza, respiratory catarrh, migraine and headaches

Warning: Lime flowers develop narcotic properties as they age and should only be collected when first opened. Infusions made from old, stale leaves can sometimes cause sensations of drunkenness.

Despite the lime's impressive history as an indigenous tree and its multi-layered medicinal uses, it is surprising that the lime does not play any significant part in British folklore apart from the belief that lime flowers cured epilepsy if the sufferer sat under the tree. Perhaps with its associations of healing it should represent **Elemental Air**.

Staff or Wand

Cut the staff or wand as a gift for a healer since the tree's beneficial properties are of paramount importance. Pour a libation of a linden flower infusion sweetened with honey.

Magical Properties

Also known as basswood, lime/linden wands are used for creative endeavours, star magic, enlightenment, love, attraction, healing, and enchantments.

Field Maple (acer campestre)

Field maple can be found in woodlands and hedgerows throughout England, often growing as an 'under-

storey tree'. Its distinctive paired leaves are five-lobed, downy when young and a dark green when mature. Unlike the other species of maple, the foliage does not turn scarlet in autumn, but remains an attractive bright yellowish-green, retaining its leaves for several weeks up to December. It is widespread in southern and eastern England, but less common in western and northern counties. Although it is generally a small tree, it can grow to a height of thirty feet if left to its own devices.

The leaves are much smaller than the more easily recognised foreign species and can often be mistaken for sycamore. The trunk is covered with pale greyish-brown bark which in older trees is furrowed with a series of cracks; even the twigs develop ridges of gnarled bark. The field maple flowers in May or June, shortly after the leaves have unfolded, producing

clusters of small greenish-yellow blossoms.

Maple wood was highly prized by wood-turners and cabinet-makers who specialised in fine articles, as it could be cut so fine as to be almost transparent. The pale brown timber with its well marked grain is still valued by craftsmen. In ancient times it was used for making harps like those found in ancient Saxon barrows, including the Sutton Hoo burial.

Like many members of the acer family, the field maple produces a sweet sap in the spring that can be used for making wine or maple syrup. The brilliant autumn colours displayed by maples result from the unusually high concentration of sugar in the leaves and sap. Sugar can be extracted from the wood by boiling and Culpeper recommended decoctions of the leaves

or the bark for ‘strengthening the liver’.

There is very little recorded about the maple in British folklore and yet again, the tree has been around for a very long time. Pollen records show that around 5000 years ago, the areas of heavy, or calcareous soil were in all probability, dominated by ash, hazel, maple and elm.

Was the maple a sacred tree in England in pre-Celtic times and, like the alder and aspen, conveniently overlooked when it came to constructing the Tree Alphabet on which much of today’s tree-lore is based? Records trace it back to the Neolithic period and its use as a fodder tree; *mapuldur* was its Old English name. Maple-wood tables were valuable collector’s items in the Roman world, one being sold for its

weight in gold – so why is the tree absent from our native tree-lore?

Like the alder and aspen, using the maple for magical working is a matter of experimentation but as it is said to bring ‘expansive happy energy’ to ant situation, it may possibly be associated with **Elemental Air** and **Elemental Water**. If we gather the glorious ‘guinea-gold’ coloured leaves for the autumn equinox, perhaps the tree could begin to play a part in a traditional Harvest Home celebration.

Staff or Wand

The wood from the roots of the field maple, with its beautiful swirling pattern of veins, shows up well when polished and it is unlikely that you would be able to cut more than a small wand from the tree. In other cultures the maple symbolises positive thinking and the use of intuition, and so a wand

made from it could be used to direct meditation. An ideal offering would be a sweet syrup.

Magical Properties

Some cultures primarily use maple wands for spiritual healing. It enhances intellectual pursuits, acquiring knowledge, and communication; spells concerning art, beauty, binding, and abundance should contain this wood.

Mistletoe (*viscum album*)

High overhead, in the winter branches of oak, hawthorn, poplar and apple trees it is possible to locate the tangled mass of the mistletoe with its pale leathery foliage and white, shiny berries. Mistletoe is a parasite -

neither tree nor shrub - that spreads by birds trying to dislodge the sticky seeds by rubbing its beak against the textured bark of a nearby tree. Within a sheltered crevice the seed sprouts root suckers that penetrate the bark and invades the tree's inner tissue. By drawing nourishment for the sap, the mistletoe can develop into a sizeable bush, some three or four feet wide.

It is not surprising that a plant of so curious a habit and form should have been revered by the early settlers in the British Isles. The Celts found the evergreen growing on their sacred oaks, and probably concluded that mistletoe must hold the life-force of the tree during its winter 'death'. Their ritual of oak and mistletoe was a religious ceremony, known from a single passage in Pliny's *Natural History*, and which has helped shape the image of the druid in the popular imagination ever since. Speaking of

mistletoe, he writes:

“We should not omit to mention the great admiration that the Gauls have for it as well. The druids – that is what they call their magicians – hold nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and a tree on which it is growing, provided it is a hard-timbered oak [*robur*] Mistletoe is rare and when found it is gathered with great ceremony, and particularly on the sixth day of the moon Hailing the moon in a native word that means ‘healing all things’, they prepare a ritual sacrifice and banquet beneath a tree and bring up two white bulls, whose horns are bound for the first time on this occasion. A priest arrayed in white vestments climbs the tree and, with a golden sickle, cuts down the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloak. Then finally they kill the victims, praying to a god to render

his gift propitious to those on whom he has bestowed it. They believe that mistletoe given in drink will impart fertility to any animal that is barren and that it is an antidote to all poisons.”



In *The Flowering of Britain*, Richard Mabey remarked that in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, the heart of mistletoe country, echoes of these beliefs persisted into the early years of the last century.

“Mistletoe has a natural south-westerly distribution in Britain, but its concentration in the border counties also has something to do with the great numbers of orchards in the area ... and it may have been the constancy of this relationship that kept fragments of the old fertility rites alive. In Herefordshire the boughs were

brought into the cottages and farmhouses on New Year's Eve, and allowed to hang there for the rest of the year, to ensure good luck and a heavy crop."

The use of mistletoe in herbal remedies and medicine probably has its origins in prehistory. The earliest archaeological evidence comes from Lindow Man, a Roman-era bog body where analysis of his stomach contents revealed a few grains of mistletoe pollen. Herbals and *Materia Medica* publications from Aelfric and Dioscorides onwards continue to feature mistletoe as a medicinal plant, with most concentrating on its fertility symbolism (which may have more to do with the plant's appearance than its chemical properties) and on its value in helping nervous illnesses, particularly epilepsy. The great herbals

of the 15th to 17th centuries all include these claims, often stressing (and depicting) the value of mistletoe on oak – a direct echo of Pliny’s writings many centuries before. By the 18th century these claims were beginning to be backed-up (to some extent) by research, including a famous study by Sir John Colbatch in 1720, investigating mistletoe’s effects on epilepsy. At that time he wrote:

“ ... that there must be something extraordinary about that uncommon beautiful plant, that the Almighty had designed it for further and more noble uses than barely to feed thrushes or to be hung up superstitiously.”

In order to discredit the pagan beliefs, the early Christian missionaries fostered the belief that the mistletoe’s

timber had been used to construct Christ's cross! But mistletoe had become such an integral part of the Midwinter festivities that have persisted down to the present day. In addition to its own inherent medicinal properties, the plant was reputed to possess those of its host tree. And, although poisonous, it was prescribed for heart diseases, high blood pressure, rheumatism, gout, nervous disorders and tumors. Culpeper said that it was so highly esteemed by some that 'they have called it *Lignum Sanctae Crucis*, wood of the holy cross, believing it helped the falling sickness, apoplexy, and palsy, very speedily, not only to be inwardly taken, but to be hung at their neck'.

Throughout the world the various species have been held in similar awe, and it was the mistletoe after which Sir James Frazer titled his monumental study of comparative folklore, *The*

Golden Bough.

Staff or Wand

Sufficient wood doesn't present itself often but it is a good choice for wands and ritual implements, especially those used in Druid healing rites invoking the powers of the mistletoe:

Uil-ioc! Draoidh-lus! Sùgh an Daraich! Amulets and talismans made of mistletoe speed healing and offer protection. It was believed by the Norsemen that Loki was able to kill Balder with an arrow fashioned from mistletoe wood. Rooted eerily above the earth, the plant is associated with **Elemental Air** and a libation of white wine would make a suitable offering.

Magical Properties

Because mistletoe is an 'in between' plant – neither herb nor tree – growing

between earth and sky, and its growth and season follows no rules, it is a plant of deep magic. It is a powerful gateway or talisman to the Otherworld and most famous for its healing properties, including Faere magic. It could well be considered a 'key' to the mysteries of the other world, which is why it was so revered by the Druids.

Pendunculate Oak (*quercus robur*)

Sessile Oak (*querncus petraea*)

There are two native oaks in Britain, the pendunculate and the sessile oak trees make up one tenth of all English woods. The trees can be told apart by

the overall shape of the tree and by the leaves. The oak may not come into leaf until mid-May and there may even be a second bursting of leaves known traditionally as the 'Lammas budding' since it tends to coincide with the Lammas festival on 1st August.

When growing in the open, the pendunculate oak is gnarled and tends to have lower, more horizontal and wide-spreading branches, so that the main trunk is hidden beneath a mass of boughs and leaves. The leaves themselves are pale green with two obvious ear-lobes at the base, with deep indentations all round. The sessile oak has a straighter, less gnarled trunk, with the branches growing from higher up. Its leaves are dark green, have no 'ear lobes' and the indentations are not so deep.

Of all British trees, the oak supports the widest variety of insect and other vertebrate life and more

fungi are associated with the oak than any other native tree. “Like a crowded high rise block, the oak is inhabited at every level: birds and squirrels build nests in the crown; insects such as wasps, moths, beetles and weevils devour the leaves; ivy, mistletoe, lichens, mosses, algae and fungi invade the branches and bark; birds, insects and mammals feed on the acorns. Even the roots of the young oak are sought out by such insects as weevils and, as the oak lets in quite a lot of light through its leaves, flowering plants grow underneath it” (*The Ever-changing Woodlands*).

From the historical perspective, oak woods covered much of Britain in medieval times and our ancestors quickly discovered that oak made good fuel. Oak was used extensively for ship building – hence ‘*hearts of oak are our ships*’ – and for supporting beams in country cottages. From the Middle

Ages until the 18th century people drove their pigs into the oak woods on common land to feed on fallen acorns – and such grazing rights still exist in the New Forest. Acorns were eaten as food in times of famine and were roasted and ground to make a substitute coffee. The bark and galls are also used in tanning and dyeing.

Medicinally, a decoction of bark was taken for diarrhoea, varicose veins, haemorrhoids and enteritis, and as a gargle for sore throats. Externally it was used to heal wounds and staunch bleeding. The oak gall (or oak apple) was also prescribed for haemorrhoids, as well as bleeding gums. Culpeper wrote that ‘the water that is found in the hollow places in oaks is very effectual against any foul or spreading scabs’.

In modern herbalism the bark is

used to produce a bitter antiseptic that reduces inflammation and controls bleeding. It is also taken internally for the same conditions mentioned above. The bark is removed in spring from trees 10-25 years old and dried for use in decoctions and liquid extracts.

The oak has featured in most of the major folk-beliefs. Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, maintained that “The worship of the oak tree or of the oak-god appears to have been shared by all the branches of the Aryan stock in Europe.” The tree also appears to have a great affinity (or attraction) for lightning and is sacred to all storm-gods such as Jupiter and Thor. The Dagda carried a club made from an oak tree, and the Horned God, especially in his guise as Jack-in-the-Green with his foliate mask (as good of green and growing things) made up

of oak leaves and acorns. In Welsh the tree is called *pren awyr* which means 'celestial tree' or 'tree of heaven'.

The close grain of the timber means that the wood burns slowly and gives out a lot of heat. But it was its association with the gods of lightning that gave the oak its associations with **Elemental Fire, Earth and Water**. Oak was also the sacred wood burnt by the Druids for the midsummer sacrifice, kindled by rubbing together two oak sticks. The fires of Vesta, Roman goddess of the hearth and home, were kept eternally burning, fed by oak. Magical need-fires were started with a brand of burning oak; and the Yule log lit at the Winter Solstice (a piece of which should be kept to light the next year's fire) was oak.

There is such a wealth of magical lore associated with oak trees that could take up a book to itself. Both oak

wood and the acorns can be carried as amulets of protection – those acorn-shaped pulls on window blinds are there to protect the house from evil and lightning strikes. When gathering leaves, acorns or bark always leave an offering as the oak is the home of all manner of entities and this will guard against giving offence. Oaks are part of the sacred triad and it is part of traditional British Old Craft to say that you come from ‘*the Land of the Oak, the Ash and the Thorn*’.

Oak trees have very strong and protective auras that can be used to boost your own physical or mental strength. Approach the tree in an attitude of warmth and openness, tell it what you want and then get as close to the tree as you can. Wrap your arms around the trunk; place the flat of your palms against the bark; or sit down with your back up against the bole. You may be able to feel an exchange of

energies, or that you in some way begin to merge with the tree. If the results are positive, keep this as your own special tree and make some form of payment in return for the energies you've drawn off.

You can also use this oak as the starting point for outdoor communication with other entities. This special 'relationship' with the tree can open doors to the spiritual and mystical lands of Otherworld. Passing between two oak trees can result in a very profound experience if you are in the right magical frame of mind, as this can take you into another realm of reality.

Incense made from oak is reputed to clear the mind and encourage mental powers. This would be extremely useful for anyone undertaking a period of study or meditation.

Staff or Wand

A wand or staff of oak is ideally suited for personal protection – especially if you are suffering the attentions of unwanted entities. Use the wand to draw a protective circle around yourself and you will be perfectly safe. In addition to truth, steadfast knowledge and protection, an oak wand brings vitality and long life. A libation of mead would be appropriate when cutting the wood.

Magical Properties

To the ancient Celtic people the oak was the protector, provider, and benevolent king of the trees. Utilized as a healing wood and very well grounded considering its strong connection to the earth. This wood helps centre the mind, allowing it to focus on the task at hand and ignore distractions. Oak magic help promote

both observation and intuition; inspires bravery, presence, leadership skills, prosperity, and strength.

The Hearth Fire

As Eric Parker wrote in *The Countryman's Weekend Book*: “Of wood as a blessing in country places there is more to be said... Of wood fires in open hearths, of the ease and speed of lighting them, or the spirit and gaiety of their flame, of the gradual and thorough warmth they give to a room, of the happy sounds of their crackling twigs, of the beauty of the lighting and shadows cast by their flickering, and of the faint, comforting scent they send through the house ...”

And some woods are better for
burning than others, as is reflected in
this traditional country rhyme:

*Beechwood fires are bright and
clear*

*If the logs are kept a year
Chestnut only good they say*

*If for long it's laid away
Make a fire of elder tree*

*Death within your house will be
But ash new or ash old*

*Is fit for a Queen with a crown of
gold*

Birch and Fir logs burn too fast

Blaze up bright and do not last

It is by the Irish said

Hawthorn bakes the sweetest bread

*Elmwood burns like churchyard
mould*

Even the very flames are cold

But ash green or ash brown

Is fit for a Queen with a golden

crown

*Poplar gives a bitter smoke
Fills your eyes and makes you choke
Apple wood will scent your room
With an incense-like perfume
Oaken logs, if dry and old
Keep away the winter's cold
But ash wet or ash dry
A king shall warm his slippers by.*

Pear (*pyrus communis*)

The common pear is now extremely rare in the wild and is not universally accepted as being a native species. Oliver Rackham, expert on the British countryside accepted it as such “partly

because of its widespread occurrence as isolated trees in remote places, which does not suggest planting." Old single trees are also found in relics of ancient woodland and pear charcoal has been widely reported from Neolithic sites, as well as being mentioned in medieval documents.

A wild pear can grow to a height of 50 feet and sometimes has thorny branches. The white blossom appears in early May and is visited by various different insects. Pear wood is hard and fine-grained and on the rare occasions when it is available, it is highly prized by wood-turners and cabinet-makers. It has also been used for making a wide range of musical instruments.

In the Middle Ages pears were used medicinally 'according to the differences of their tastes: for some pears are sweet, others fat and unctuous, other sour, and most are

harsh, especially wild pears'. All, however, were taken to 'bind and stop the belly'. Culpeper claimed that wild pears were very effective if 'bound to green, i.e fresh) wounds', preventing inflammation and effectively healing 'sooner ... than others' and reducing inflammation.

It would appear that most medieval pears were hard cooking fruit and depending on the variety, were either eaten raw or cooked. They were also made into preserves, jams, puddings 'and sometimes comfits'. Perry, a cider-like drink made from pears, may have been introduced into England by the Normans. Although the pear appears in Anglo-Saxon charters and was listed by Aelfric in his tree list, there is little available by way of folklore – but is said that to dream of a pear tree is a good omen.

The British wild pear is the ancestor of the perry pear tree which

was native to the three counties of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcestershire, and probably also introduced by the Normans. A large imposing tree, a mature perry pear has been recorded as being over 250 years old.

Staff or Wand

As pear wood was prized for its fine-grained timber, a wand would be a fine gift for a close friend but it appears to have very little, if any, magical significance and therefore it is difficult to ascribe any elemental influences to it.

Magical properties: Pear wood is associated with **Elemental Earth**, very grounded and also inspiring and creative. This type of wood is best used for healing, and will appeal

mostly to those who have a passion to heal. This wood would not be useful for spiritual exploration, such as astral projection, divination, etc., but is extremely useful in earth-centric matters. It brings a creative, inspiring energy to the home. This wood is also excellent for use with money and prosperity spells.

Black Poplar (*populous nigra*)

Grey Poplar (*populous canescens*)

The two native poplars are the black and the grey, although there is some argument as to whether the latter is an

indigenous species. The black poplar is a fine, tall tree and, like the alder, is a lover of moisture. It may be found growing in damp meadows keeping, if it can, close to a ditch or stream where its long roots can stretch out to their full extent; water-seeking as they go – this being a tree of **Elemental Water** and **Elemental Fire**. These large roots can be a major threat to buildings and drainage systems when planted too close to them.

Modern management of the rivers and river banks have eliminated the poplar's natural habitat because this tree is the 'last shadow of the vanished flood-plain wildwood'. On the plus side, poplars have been known to regenerate by the fallen branches, or trunks taking root in the mud to allow suckers to grow from the roots damaged by rivers in flood.

Even if it grows where there is no shelter, this tall giant of a tree that

reaches a height of 50 to 80 feet, manages to withstand the gales of winter and requires great force to upset it. "A heavy fall of snow may cover it with a mantle of white and make it seem top-heavy, yet our experience is that it is a warrior and rarely comes to grief except through old age," wrote Percival Westell in *Trees*.

When the poplar is full grown it has a strong massive trunk with deep furrows in the bark. There are few branches, if any, within easy reach, but those several feet above the ground are large and strong. The natural regeneration of the tree requires male and female poplars to grow in close proximity to each other but this now rarely happens in England and Wales.

The sticky, sharp-pointed yellowish buds of the red male catkins appear in winter, developing into long hanging catkins. The flowers add a touch of colour to the bare countryside for just a

couple of days in early April, before the leaves begin to break. These fall to the ground before the shooting of the glossy, heart-shaped leaves and are known in some areas as the Devil's Fingers, where it is believed to be unlucky to pick them up. The fluffy catkins on the female tree produce a white down that drifts away like fragments of cotton wool; the tree retains its flowers as these form the fruit which ripens in May. The female catkins are shorter than the male, are greenish in colour and do not droop.

The timber from the poplar is light but tough, and was used to make wooden shields because it absorbs shock and resists splintering. It was also used to line the bottom of carts and for the floors of oast houses where hops were dried, while the bark was part of the tanning process. In more modern times it provides the wood for items needing to be robust but light

weight – artificial limbs, toys, wine crates, pallets and interior joinery.

Poplars are closely related to willows and the bark similarly contains salicin, which reduces inflammation and relieves pain. Medicinally it is used internally for rheumatoid arthritis, gout, fevers, lower back pain, urinary complaints, digestive and liver disorders, debility and anorexia. Externally it can be used to treat chilblains, haemorrhoids, infected wounds and sprains. Older cures include using the juice to ease earache, while the crushed buds, mixed with honey were given as treatment for sore eyes. An ointment dating back to medieval times which includes poplar buds as the main ingredient was used for reducing inflammation and bruising.

The poplar is another tree that doesn't appear in the Tree Alphabet, though the related aspen does. This is surprising because the red catkins would have drawn attention to the leafless tree in the spring – unless it was a pre-Celtic sacred tree. Many rural superstitions associate the poplar with the same Christian overlay as the aspen and in some places it shares the same name of 'shivver-tree' because of its trembling leaves.

It also shares the aspen's ability to cure agues and fever. A Lincolnshire remedy states that a sufferer should cut off a lock or hair and wrap it around a branch of a poplar tree, saying:

*My aches and pains thou must now
take,
Instead of me I bid thee shake.*

He or she should then go straight

home, speaking to no one on the way, after that they will be free from ague forever. Some sources state that it is necessary to fast for twelve hours before attempting this charm.

Despite the poplar's omission from folklore, superstition and wort-lore, there's no escaping the fact that the tree features in the recipes for witches' flying ointment. It is known how some of these preparations were made because a number of English and Continental writers in the 16th and 17th centuries described the methods. All the recipes contained extracts from strongly poisonous plants such as aconite, deadly nightshade and hemlock, together with cinquefoil, sweet flag, poplar leaves and parsley, mixed with soot and some sort of oil.

Staff or Wand

It has long been believed that poplar

wood gave protection from disease, bringing protection and endurance. Poplar wands have an incredibly diverse energy, allowing it to be an all-purpose wood for magical workings. And as poplar leaves were supposed to be one of the ingredients in the witches' flying ointment, this would be an ideal wood with which to make a stag for sabbat meetings. Because of the problems in obtaining a suitable piece of wood, the acquisition of such a magical tool would be a quest in itself. Make sure you leave a suitable libation or offering for such a valuable gift.

Magical properties

The diversity of the energy in this wood makes it useful for evocation as well as banishment rituals. It is also strong with the elements of hope, rebirth, and divinations.

Rowan (*sorbus aucuparia*)

The rowan or mountain ash loves moist soil, although it can be found growing in both woods and gardens. It is common throughout the British Isles, except for the Midlands and central and southern Ireland. In Scotland, the burns and lochs, and the becks of the Lake District provide a spectacular backdrop for one of our favourite trees. It often grows singly, although in the north of Scotland there are naturally occurring rowan woods.

In the spring the delicate flowering branches bear a wealth of creamy-white blossoms that develop into

coral-red berries in late summer. The leaves of the rowan have from eleven to nineteen 'leaflets' with tiny saw-like edges, which turn brown, red and yellow in the autumn.

Rowan is also one of those trees that were held to cure illness and the sufferer was told to take a lock of their hair and push it into a slit in the bark; as the bark heals, so will the patient. Saxon apothecaries continued this belief by using special spoons made from rowan wood to stir their potions.; while the berries can be made into rowan jelly, a useful preserve that can be eaten as a jam or as an accompaniment to roast meat during the Yuletide festivities.

Traditionally, the rowan is among the plants most positively protective against malevolent witchcraft and evil

spirits. It is reputed to have been one of the sacred trees of the Druids (because it is so often found in and around stone circles). It appears in early Scandinavian myths and the wood was used in the construction of Viking ships to protect them from harm at sea. In Britain there was apparently no situation the rowan couldn't handle:

The hags came back, finding their charms

*Most powerfully withstood;
For warlocks, witches, cannot work
Where there is rowan-tree wood.*

An old Celtic name for the tree is *fid na ndruad*, or the wizard's tree, as it has a highly significant role in popular magic. *The Sacred Trees of Ireland* tells us that sprigs of rowan were 'hung in the house to prevent fire-charming, used to keep the dead from walking, and tied to the collar of a

hound to increase his speed'. The sprigs were considered to bring good luck and to protect the occupants from ill-wishing and the Evil Eye – hence the Celtic salutation: *Peace be here and rowan tree!*

In Lincolnshire, rowan twigs were pushed into the thatch and hayricks to stop them catching fire. Both hearths and wells might have rowan placed around them, while it was thought that a rowan near a house brought both good luck and protection; to cut it down brought misfortune. In England generally, the tree is either considered to be lucky or unlucky. The most often quoted superstition is that rowan crosses were used to ward off the evil intentions of witches, but in witch-lore the little rowan crosses tied with red thread were charms to avert negative energies from entering the house. Another protective charm for the home is to tie several thin strips of rowan

into a hoop that can be hung on an outside wall. This can be made into a decorative wreath to suit your personal taste.

Again rowan trees were planted near houses to protect them against malignant entities – especially those of the dead – and in Wales, rowan trees are often found planted in churchyards to stop the dead from walking. This is obviously one of those old superstitions that has been ‘borrowed’ from traditional folklore since those of the Old Ways have no fear of the dead.

The belief in the protective powers of the rowan was so strong that the Church found it easier to absorb the superstition than suppress it. As a result, most of the folklore handed down through the ages records the rowan as being anti-witch when in fact, in representing **Elemental Fire**, the rowan is one of the Nine Woods of the Beltaine fire. It is used as an

ingredient of the magical bale-fire to attract beneficent spirits and other entities and for shamanic workings.

In Celtic traditions it was known as the Tree of Lugh, the sun-god, and was sometimes called *luisiu* – meaning ‘flame’, possibly because of its brilliant red berries and orange leaves, which can give the appearance of fire in the autumn woodland. The rowan is also sacred to the goddess Bride, patron of poetry, blacksmiths and healing. Around Imbolc it was looked upon as a wishing-tree, when red ribbons should be tied to a berry-bearing branch and the secret wish whispered to the tree.

If ‘normal’ folk used rowan to guard themselves against witches, witch-lore recommends that the same spells be used as protection against the Faere Folk. This is where folklore becomes confused because to the Church and ordinary people, witch and faere was

one and the same. Those rowan crosses used to protect home and livestock, were recommended by witches to protect their own goods and chattels from being stolen by the Faere Folk.

The conviction in the ability of rowan to deal with ‘unquiet ghosts’ also transcends all beliefs. Disruptive spirits and negative energies in the home can be controlled by using an infused wash or incense made from the wood and the berries. This method can be used effectively by anyone being troubled with nightmares or disturbed sleep patterns – or hang a sprig of rowan over the bed. This does not apply to vampires, since it was a rowan stake that was driven through the heart of any undead suspected of nocturnal wanderings. Charm bags traditionally contain a miniature stave of rowan wood for protection, together with a few berries.

Staff or Wand

Rowan always works best in a personal way because it responds best if frequently handled. It is therefore the ideal wood to choose as the handle of a magical knife, or cut for a staff or wand. It is also used instead of hazel for dowsing, while cattle herders cut their droving stick from rowan wood in the belief that it would fatten their animals. Leave some rowan jelly in thanks for your gift.

Magical Properties

Rowan possesses an ancient magic that opens up the mind of the user to new possibilities and understandings by enhancing innate psychic abilities. In Celtic mythology the rowan is called the Traveller's Tree because it prevents those on a journey from

getting lost.

Scots Pine (*pinus sylvestris* var. *scotia*)

Apart from the yew and juniper, the Scots pine is the only native conifer in the British Isles. The true Scots pine, which once formed extensive tracts within the ancient Caledonian Forest in the Scottish Highlands, is considered to be a distinct variety. Pollen records reveal that the Scots pine was the first tree to reappear when the Glacial Period ended. Whole pine trees and pine stumps can still be found preserved under peat bogs all over Britain, mostly dating from the Boreal period, around 9,000 years ago, when

dramatic climate changes inundated the land and submerging the trees. In some places, the remains of pine stumps can be found on the foreshore where the sea level has risen and swamped the coastal forests.

The Scots pine is recognisable by its pyramidal growth that distinguishes it from the flat-topped planted pines in the south. The pine seed has been extensively exported from Scotland during the past two to three hundred years to be planted in other parts of the country. Although the native pine woods of the Caledonia Forest have been extensively cleared and fragmented during historic times in a similar way to the lowland oak woods.

The tree does best in peaty soil but it thrives where there is sand, or even on a barren hillside, and it likes moisture. This is, of course an evergreen, and when the hills and woods are covered in snow, the strong

trunks and higher branches with their dark green leaves stand out in relief against the wintery surroundings. Sometimes we can see a clump of several trees growing together on top of a hill; they were thought to bring good luck, and the trees' imposing silhouette against the sky line make them an attractive feature in the landscape.

All over the world the Scots pine is thought of in folklore as a symbol of fertility, longevity (it may live for a couple of centuries or more), and good fortune. In old age the trees lose their elegant shape as the lower branches fall off and they become flat-topped and sometimes rather stricken-looking. There is also some evidence to suggest that single pines or small clumps, may well indicate the site of a 'ley line' and particularly a 'node' point – a place where two or more ancient track-ways intersect. This appears to be especially

true if the trees are located on the top of a hill and visible for some miles.

Until the Middle Ages much of the Scottish Highlands were covered with forests of Scots pine but from the 17th century onwards deforestation took its toll and today the native pine woods of Scotland survive only as pathetic remnants. To see the trees at their best you should go to places such as Glen Affric in Inverness-shire, the Ballochbuie district of Aberdeenshire, or Rothiemurchus on the north-eastern slopes of the Cairngorms. These Scottish pine forests, where pines of all ages and sizes grow amid majestic scenery of mountains and lochs, support a rich variety of wildlife.

Wordsworth extolled the virtue of the Scots pine, especially in the winter or by moonlight. And if you listen carefully beneath a cluster of pines when a gentle wind is blowing, you may hear secrets being told:

*Stalwart and strong these sentry
pines*

*Stand out on the frontier line,
Guarding the gates to wonderland,
Whispering all the time.*

If you want to learn a simple lesson of how to tell the difference between a fir and a pine, remember that the leaves of the pine grow in pairs. They resemble two long green needles joined at the base. Search beneath a Scots pine and you should find several pairs of leaves that have fallen. These pairs grow in circles close together so that the twigs look like bottle-brushes, whereas the firs have shorter, less bunchy-looking leaves.

And pine cones do *not* forecast weather as is popularly supposed. They open and close as the weather changes from dry to wet, not in advance of the change. The cones open

when it is dry so that the wind-borne seeds have a chance to scatter. Were they to open during wet weather, the rain would carry the water-logged seeds straight down to the tree's roots.

Scots pine leaves, young shoots, buds, oils and tar are utilised in modern herbalism. These properties produce a bitter, aromatic, warming herbal that acts as an expectorant and diuretic; improves the blood flow locally and has a tonic effect on the nerves. It is also strongly antiseptic. Pine is used internally for urinary and respiratory tract infections, and gall bladder complaints.

Externally it can be used in the treatment of arthritis, rheumatism, sciatica, poor circulation, bronchitis, catarrh, sinusitis, asthma, pneumonia, neuralgia, acne, fatigue and nervous exhaustion. The oil is used in

aromatherapy for similar complaints. In addition the oil and tar are added to disinfectants, bath preparations, detergents and preparations to stimulate hair growth. It should not, however, be given to patients with allergic skin conditions.

For the Scots people, the pine has a history of spiritual and inspirational significance that can be traced back to pre-Christian Celtic and Pictish cultures; it is the Clan totem of the Grants and the MacGregors. Recent research also indicates that Scots pines were planted along the old drove-ways in the south of England during the 18th century as route-markers during snowy weather,

Pine is associated with the **Winter Solstice** and the rebirth of the sun. The cones, resin, oil and wood can be used in spells and incense to increase

fertility/virility, but also as a protective element to reverse negative energies. It is also a good addition to a purification ritual.

Staff or Wand

Pine is very strongly associated with the powers of all the Elements, and a wand or staff made from its wood can be a powerful aid when pathworking in the spiritual winter forests and with the Wild Hunt. The wood makes a sturdy protective staff to ward off all negative entities and vibrations. A resinous wine would make an ideal libation.

Magical Properties

A diverse wood that draws from all the **Elemental Earth, Wind, Fire and Water.** Excellent for healing, protection, purification and dispel work.

Trees in the Hedgerows

It's not just the woods that can be dated from the variety and number of different species. British hedgerows have their own history and this is also chronicled by certain tell-tale signs. Old hedgerows were probably originally planted to mark ancient boundaries to estate and parishes, for example. The majority, however, were planted in the 18th and 19th centuries to enclose patches of land in order to establish ownership or control livestock.

Hawthorn is the most common tree to be found in the hedgerow, although many include blackthorn and holly. Other species arrive as seeds – dog rose and ash soon appear while others like hazel and field maple are slow to colonise. A hedge planted as pure hawthorn slowly acquires additional

species as it gets older and scientific studies of the species diversity of hedgerows in relation to their age (where this can be reasonably accurately dated from historical records) have shown that there is more or less a direct relationship between the number of species established in a hedge and its age.

As a general rule one new species colonises the hedge every 100 years, so that a two-species hedge could be 200 years old, and a ten-species hedge 1000 years old.

Spindle (*euonymus europaea*)

Spindle is a small deciduous shrub native to the UK and across Europe,

and can be found most commonly on the edges of forests and in hedges, scrub and hedgerows. It thrives best in chalky soils and is less common in Scotland. Mature trees grow up to 10 feet and can live for more than 100 years. The bark and twigs are deep green, becoming darker with age, and have light brown, corky markings. Twigs are thin and straight and a peculiar feature is that new spindle shoots are round, soon becoming square, and then round again as they expand and mature.

The leaves are shiny and slightly waxy, and have tiny sharp teeth along the edges, turning a rich orange-red before falling in autumn. The spindle is an hermaphrodite, meaning each flower contains both male and female reproductive parts. Flowers have four petals growing in clusters, in May and June, and are pollinated by insects. After pollination flowers develop into

bright pink fruits with bright orange seeds, which resemble popcorn. Cultivated forms of the tree are also grown in gardens for autumn colour .

Spindle timber is creamy white, hard and dense; it is easily worked and fulfils many uses. In the past it was used to make 'spindles' for spinning and holding wool (hence its name), as well as skewers, toothpicks, pegs and knitting needles. On the Continent it is used for making pipe-stems, and an excellent charcoal is made from the young shoots, which artists approve for its smoothness, and the ease with which it can be erased. It is also employed in the making of gunpowder.

The fruits were baked and powdered, to treat head lice, or mange in cattle; they yields a good yellow dye when boiled in water, and a green one with the addition of alum, but these dyes are

not fast. The berries attract children, but are harmful, for they are strongly emetic and purgative: they have proved fatal to sheep. The bark, leaves and fruit are all injurious, and no animal but the goat will browse upon them. The fruit is given three or four as a dose, as a purgative in rural districts; and the decoction, adding some vinegar, is used as a lotion for mange in horses and cattle. The reaction involves diarrhoea, vomiting and stimulation of the heart; larger doses can cause hallucinations, loss of consciousness and symptoms similar to meningitis. In old herbals it is called skewerwood or prickwood (the latter from its employment as toothpicks); Chaucer, in one of his poems, calls it *gaitre*.

Its botanical name, *Euonymus* is from the Greek, *eu*, meaning ‘ good ’ and

onama, meaning ‘ name ’ . This is said to have meant ‘ lucky ’ . However, in some areas, it was also thought that if the spindle flowered early, an outbreak of the plague was likely. In allusion to the actively irritating properties of the shrub, its name *Euonymus* is associated with that of *Euonyme*, the mother of the Furies. It was a tree sacred to the Celts and listed in the Tree Alphabet.

In Scott Cunningham’s *Encyclopaedia of Magic Herbs* he lists the spindle tree as being used in an infusion of the bark for hex-breaking, and when carried it brings courage and success in all undertakings. From a magical point of view, the lesson learned from studying this plant is that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, or things change from positive to negative, and so on, which comes from having hermaphrodite flowers. It is associated with **Elemental Water**.

Staff or Wand

The craft of spinning has deep archetypal associations for women and ancient goddesses and a wand cut from the spindle tree, or an antique spindle made from this wood, would be an ideal gift for a priestess. The wand should be paid for by silver coin.

Magical properties

Spindle wood energises the soul and promotes understanding of the Self's true nature and needs, accessing shadow-self energies in an integrated and positive way. Spindle increases security.

Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*)

Of all the species of tree that are native to Britain and Ireland, the strawberry tree is one of the rarest in the wild. In Britain it no longer exists in its native state, although it is commonly planted in parks and gardens as an ornamental tree. Only in a few isolated areas in southern Ireland can the strawberry tree still be seen growing naturally.

This is a small evergreen, not usually more than 33 feet high, that has dark, gloss leaves with toothed margins, and bunches of drooping creamy-white flowers like small bells tinged with pink. As the flowers die away the previous year's fruits are finally reaching maturity. The dull reddish-brown outer layers of flaking, fibrous bark peel back to reveal the more brightly coloured inner bark

which may suggest **Elemental Fire**.

Occasionally the tree has a single centre stem but, more often the stem divides above ground so that the plant resembles a large bush rather than a tree. Strangely enough, the tree belongs to the Heath family (such as bilberry and ling, often called heather) but, unlike them, it will grow in chalk – though it prefers a sandy soil.

The fruits are edible, though they taste watery and insipid. The Romans found them equally unappetising, a fact referred to in the plant's Latin name – *arbutus unedo* – the word *unedo* is a contraction of *unum edo*, which means 'I eat one'. As the Roman naturalist Pliny explained in the 1st-century AD, 'The fruit is held in no esteem, the reason for its name being that a person will only eat one.' In some European countries around the Mediterranean,

however, the fruits are made into a delicious liqueur.

Two hundred years ago the strawberry tree was much more plentiful, but large scale felling for charcoal has taken its toll. The best place to see the tree in its natural habitat is around the Lakes of Killarney where it can be seen growing on cliffs and rocky slopes – and where the trees have reached a considerable age. The tree regenerates itself by putting out new shoots from the fallen main stem; as a result it is extremely difficult to arrive at a precise age for any individual tree.

There is little folklore associated with the strawberry tree, although it is the first of the seven Shrub Trees (less important than the seven Chieftain Trees and seven Peasant Trees) of medieval Celtic lore where it was listed as *caithnei* in Old Irish. Its

leaves and flowers were believed to be an antidote to poison and plague in the 17th century.

Staff or Wand

Because of the rarity of the wild strawberry tree anyone attempting to cut wood for a wand or staff deserves to be strung up from it!

Magical Properties

There is little folklore associated with the strawberry tree, although it was listed as the first of the seven shrub trees in the medieval lore of Ireland.

White Beam (sorbus aria)

The whitebeam gets its name from the white underside of the leaves, which comes from their coat of felty hairs that help to check water loss – a useful feature on the dry limestone soils on which the tree often grows. In the wild, the whitebeam is found chiefly on the chalk of central, southern and south-eastern England. Its main strongholds are the Chilterns, where it can be found in scrub thickets, open woods, clearings and along hedgerows, and the steep slopes of the South Downs.

In May or June the tree displays an impressive coating of white, five-petalled flowers that have clustered in loose bunches. By October the berries have ripened to a rich shiny scarlet that hang heavily on the twigs. Although not poisonous to man, the berries are not very palatable, so can be left to the squirrels, hedgehogs and voles.

Despite the fact that it is recognised as one of our native trees, it does not

appear to feature in British folklore. According to the entry in *Trees in the Wild*, little is known about its post-glacial history because it grows in chalk and, unlike peat, chalk does not preserve pollen records. It is a common sight throughout southern England and less frequently at scattered sites in northern England and Scotland. In Ireland the same species can be found in Galway, but rarely elsewhere. Some authorities have raised doubts as to whether the whitebeam is a native tree as there are other species that are much more widespread.

Staff or Wand

The wood is hard and pale yellow, and suitable to be cut for a staff or wand. From the way this tree shimmers from green to silver as the leaves turn with the breeze, it suggests an association

with **Elemental Air**.

Magical properties: same as the rowan being of the same family

The Forest Layers

The efficiency of the woodland ecosystem depends on how much of the sun's energy can be utilised by the green plants and converted into carbohydrate. The tallest trees of the wood that form the 'canopy', are the first to receive the sun's rays and what grows beneath this layer depends on how much light can filter through to be tapped by other more lowly plants. In beech woodlands there is very little

but oak and ash are relatively light shade-casters and a lush growth of plants can exist beneath them.

Immediately beneath the canopy will be tall bushes and small trees, which form the second or 'shrub-layer' of the wood. Growing beneath the shrub-layer is a mass of herbaceous plants that form the 'herb-layer'. Many of these come into flower early in the year, or have developed large flat leaves to make the most of what light is available. The lowest layer of all is the 'ground-layer' of mosses and liverworts. These remain green throughout the year and are actively growing even in winter.

Vine or Bramble (*rubus*

fruticosus)

Although grapevines typically come to mind when discussing ‘vines’, it was more likely the blackberry vines that captured the imagination of the ancient Celts. Blackberries (or bramble) have been eaten in England since at least Neolithic times but the grapevine was introduced into Britain by the Romans, and since the Druids classified anything with a woody stalk as a tree, they therefore listed vines among the sacred Ogham ranks. Used widely in medieval monasteries, the bramble wasn’t cultivated as a garden plant because it has always grown profusely in the wild.

Blackberry vines, with their long, thorny stems are a common sight arching along English lanes and hedgerows, scrambling over fences, spreading quickly to make huge impenetrable barriers if left untended.

They grow well in almost any soil, particularly a sandy one, in sun or shade, but like most plants, they will flower (delicate pink and white flowers from June through to September) and crop (August and September) better if they find some sunshine. The shrub grows abundantly in all parts of the British Isles and harvesting the fruits in late summer and autumn is often considered a favourite pastime. It can also become a nuisance in gardens, sending down its strong suckering roots amongst hedges and shrubs. Many consider it a weed due its tendency to grow in neglected areas and its sharp, tough thorns which can be hazardous to children and pets.

Medicinally, bramble leaves were used as an astringent and tonic; for dysentery, diarrhoea and haemorrhoids; as poultices to treat

burns, swellings and ulcers; and as an infusion for stomach disorders. Externally they were used as a mouthwash and gargle for sore throats and gum inflammations. Culpeper recommended the leaves to be used in a lotion for sores 'in secret parts'. Crawling backwards, or being dragged backwards through a bramble thicket was an ancient remedy for boils (clearly a case of the cure being worse, or almost as bad as, the affliction), and gave rise to the saying: "Looks like you've been dragged through a hedge backwards" for being a mess or untidy. Bleeding caused by the thorns could be stemmed by rubbing the freshly-crushed leaves on the scratches.

In the medieval kitchen, the blackberries were eaten fresh or cooked; and made into jams, jellies, syrups, cordials, vinegar and wine (the fruit was also used to improve grape

wines). The leaves were added to herbal teas. The 16th century herbalist, John Gerard suggests in his *Great Herbal*, a recipe of blackberry leaves that had been first boiled in water with honey, alum and a little white wine to make a mouth rinse for ‘fastening’ the teeth. The fruits also yielded a blue-grey dye, and the root an orange dye.

British folklore tells that blackberries should not be picked after Old Michaelmas Day (11th October) as the devil (or a Pookie) had made them unfit to eat by stepping, spitting or fouling on them. There is some value behind this legend as wetter and cooler autumn weather often allows the fruit to become infected by various moulds such as *Botryotinia* which give the fruit an unpleasant look and may be toxic.

In the Druid perspective, the vine

earned its symbolism from its growth patterns. They recognized the vine grows opportunistically, and would dig in wherever feasible in order to gain a strong foothold to assure its own growth. The vine is a theme repeated over and over in Celtic art. Interconnections and winding vines are commonly seen on tapestries, writings, knot work and carvings. This indicates the symbolism of connection, eternity, and diversity (branching and expanding in new directions). Lastly, the ever-watchful Celts also recognized the vine's predominant growth formation is in the shape of a spiral. This has long been considered a sacred symbol for consciousness, development, renewal and growth. The bramble was associated with the Goddess Brigid – the Celtic goddess of healing and poetry, and the Welsh moon goddess, Ceridwen – for inspiration. The bramble is also associated with the

Autumn Equinox and Elemental Earth.

Staff or Wand

Split bramble stems were traditionally used as binding material for straw in production of lip-work basketry, such as lip-work chairs and bee skeps, and sometimes used to protect other fruits such as strawberries. Apart from the actual root of the plant, it would be almost impossible to obtain enough wood to make a wand but it is not impossible. Leave an offering of jam or fruit jelly if you take any wood.

Magical Properties

Bramble wood provides strong protection of the home and is useful for spells concerning money or prosperity; also healing and protection. Brambles provide cover and protection for the

conservation of wildlife in its native habitat, while the flowers attract nectar-feeding butterflies and hoverflies, so might be useful if working with wildlife.

Wild Service Tree (*sorbus torminalis*)

In England, the wild service tree is regarded as an indicator of ancient woodland, although there is very little written about it in books on the subject. It is a small to medium sized tree with a wide crown. The leaves are unlike those of any other members of the *sorbus* family (like hawthorn and rowan) and for this reason the tree can easily be mistaken for a maple. It is a

colourful tree in autumn when it is covered with small brown berries. There is what is known as the 'bastard service tree', which is fairly common in city streets and parks. This is a cross between the rowan and the service tree of Fontainebleau – itself a hybrid of whitebeam and wild service tree.

There is brief mention of the wild service tree in the herbals where the berries are said to have health-giving properties, and a cure for colic; while an infusion made from the flower-stalks and leaves 'is incomparable for consumptive bodies and cures the green-sickness of virgins'. Apart from that, there is no apparent mention of the tree in folklore, or in any of the usual texts governing tree-lore. Because the tree is related to the *Sorbus* family, it is reasonable to assume similar magical propensities can be associated with the leaves and berries.

The fact that the tree is of ancient lineage and infrequently included in later tree-lore also suggests that it was another important Faere tree. And like the alder, it was probably a sacred tree to the indigenous people of Britain.

Staff and Wand

The wood is fine-grained and valuable. Having been used for pistol and gun-stocks in the past, it could rightly claim to represent **Elemental Fire** – just like the hawthorn and rowan. A wand made from wild service wood should be highly prized and not given or received lightly. A suitable gift should be left in its stead.

Magical Properties: same as the whitebeam and rowan being of the *Sorbus* family.

Willows

There are five native species of willow although the aromatic **Bay willow** (*salix pentandra*) is rarely found these days in the wild. Also called Black Willow or Sweet Willow.

Crack willow (*salix fragilis*), of *The Wind in the Willows* fame, are usually seen as a gaunt, pollarded trees, hock-deep in water, their naked branches reaching skyward like antlers;

Goat willow (*salix caprea*) or Pussy willow, whose catkins provide a veritable banquet for brimstone butterflies and bees in March, when

there is little other forage for them. Also known as Sally or Palm willow and which often replaces the traditional palm in Church on Palm Sunday;

Grey willow (*salix cinerea*) or Sallow grows on fens and marshes, in damp woods and by stream and ponds as a shrub or small tree. Also referred to as Pussy willow in some areas;

White willow (*salix alba*) or Cricket-bat willow is a native of river and marsh, having silver felted leaves that stream dramatically in the wind.

The earliest record of willow's use by man was in Neolithic times when causeways of willow branches were laid across boggy ground to provide a safe path. By medieval times, in addition to making baskets, fish-traps, fences and coracles, willow was used

in tanning, as fodder, to attract bees, to make artist's charcoal, to produce purple dye, and to prevent erosion along the banks of rivers and ditches. The downy covering of the seeds was used as mattress stuffing.

Later, in days when every lowland English village had its basket maker and its 'withy' beds, Richard Jeffries wrote: "An advantage of willow is that it enables the farmer to derive a profit from land that would otherwise be comparatively valueless, to provide arable farmers with market baskets, chaff baskets, bassinets and hampers. This willow harvest is looked forward to by the cottagers who live along the rivers as an opportunity for earning extra money" [*Country Illustrated* vol 4. No 47]. Today the willow is popularly used to make bio-degradable coffins for woodland burials.

All willows belong to the large family of *Salix*, which has between

350 and 500 species, depending on the source you consult. This confusion arises because hybrids occur together with parent species and because the willows themselves are variable. In the lowlands all over the British Isles, willows are the most characteristic tree in the landscape, lining the banks of rivers large and small, from the Thames to the Shannon.

Medicinally, the bark of the white willow was used to alleviate pain, relieve headaches and reduce fevers. It was also used to treat rheumatism, arthritis, internal bleeding, inflammations, gout, heartburn, colds, nervous insomnia, digestive problems and stomach complaints. Externally, it was applied for burns, sores, cuts and skin rashes. Culpeper wrote: *“The leaves are bruised and boiled in wine, and drank, stays the heat of lust in*

man and woman, and quite distinguishes it, if it be long used."

In modern herbalism, the bark of the white willow is collected from young branches during the growth period. Willow is anti-inflammatory, analgesic, antipyretic, anti-rheumatic and astringent. Interestingly, some of the willow's active constituents, while sharing the pain-relieving effects of aspirin, have a more sustained action in the body and fewer side effects. Although these claims have not been proved clinically, the indications are strongly supported by the fact that the bark was used in a similar way to aspirin long before the invention of the drug.

In folklore the willow was associated with sorrow and lost love. Sprigs were sometimes worn as a sign of mourning; or by those who had been forsaken in

love, hence the words of the old folk-song: "*All around my hat I will wear the green willow.*" The willow is listed in the Celtic Tree Alphabet and is referred to as one of the Peasant Trees, bearing the name *saille*. In Celtic times, groves of willow were frequented by those who wished to learn eloquence, or be granted visions, prophetic dreams or inspiration.

Because of the willow's association with rivers and prophecy it is representative of **Elemental Water**. It is usually the bark of the tree that is used magically in incense, but a bundle of twigs can also be used to call upon **Elemental Fire**. The twigs should be lit from a special fire or consecrated candle and then plunged into consecrated water. This is known as a 'fire potion' and can be used for magical cleansing. To increase the potency, add an infusion of an appropriate herb. The potion may be

drunk, or applied as a compress of cotton wool to increase psychic powers. This is the poor witch's answer to the blacksmith's 'thunder water'.

Staff or Wand

Willow is one of the woods from which to make the traditional magic wand. Willow wood is the very essence of magic, not just the mere making of a tool into a magical one, willow makes the tool magical; and a great tool for divination. This should be cut from the tree with a single blow, having first asked the tree for its permission and a suitable offering made. Shaman, necromancers, sorcerers and enchanters were all said to favour wands made of willow because it can be used to command the spirits of the dead. Willow wands are strong in the cycles of life dealing with

death and rebirth, change and the Will.

These magical associations were obviously well-known as existing folklore claims that using a willow staff to herd animals is guaranteed to 'drive them to the devil'. Using a willow wand to renounce your baptism was said to guarantee that the devil will grant you supernatural powers. These are, no doubt, throw-backs to pre-Christian times when willow was acknowledged as being the 'badge' of the cunning folk.

Magical Properties

Willow can add vital energy to the sick and elderly; and some say that burning willow can soothe and guide the souls of the recently deceased. Willow will align itself to the inner Will of the practitioner that shares its energy; the stronger the Will, the more effective the wood. Willow is extremely useful

in healing, love spells and rituals involving emotion. It strengthens the third eye.

Wych Elm (*ulmus glabra*)

English Elm (*ulmus procera*)

Not too long ago, most people would have considered the English or common elm to epitomise the English countryside. Immortalised by Constable in his painting of *The Cornfield*, this stately tree has been decimated by Dutch elm disease, and the smaller wych elm is now more widespread. Elm had reached southern England by 9,500 years ago, spreading west to Wales and eastern Ireland: it

reached northern Scotland by 6,200 years ago. There was a dramatic decline between 5,500 and 5,000 years ago, which some authorities believe to be caused by some earlier form of Dutch elm disease, although the trees did recover.

The wych elm is a native tree occurring in woods and beside streams mainly in the west and north of Britain, especially in hilly districts. Historically, elms were coppiced and pollarded and in some counties, enormous old pollards can still be seen. There is, however, considerable disagreement about the classifications and some claim that both the wych and the common elm are native species. It is certainly the common elm that appears in the medieval herbals.

The wych can also be distinguished from the common elm by a number of characteristics. Wych elms are not as tall and grow in irregular shapes up to

100 feet. The lower branches start to arch from nearer the base of the trunk, while the upper branches appear twisted. The dull grey or blackish bark is smooth when young but turns brownish-grey, fissured and ribbed in mature specimens. On the wych elm the dense clusters of reddish-brown flowers appear in March and April before the leaves, and note that the wych elm's flat fruit has the one seed in the centre of the fruit, not above the centre as in the common elm where the flowers are brightly coloured with crimson or purple anthers and white filaments. The leaves are bright green; rough above and downy and rough on the underside.

Oliver Rackham writing in his *History of the Countryside*, devoted a whole chapter to the tree and observed that elms are 'the most complex and difficult trees in western Europe, and the most intimately linked to human

affairs'. Traces have been found to record that early Neolithic sites showed evidence of elm wood being used for all manner of purposes. Giraldus Cambrensis wrote in the 12th century that the Welsh longbow was made of elm, instead of yew as in England. The timber had many domestic uses including coffin-making. Elm was one of the timbers used for water pipes, and excavations have revealed surviving stretches of old mains during modern building work. Elm piles were laid under bridges and buildings, including old Waterloo Bridge and today, when available is still used in boat-building.

In medieval times the leaves of the elm were used in ointment for burns, wounds and haemorrhoids, and in a decoction for skin inflammations, while sap from the branches was

reputed to cure baldness. Culpeper wrote: "*The leaves or the bark used with vinegar, cure scurf and leprosy very effectively: the decoction of the leaves, bark and root, being bathed, heals broken bones.*" The inner bark of slippery elm, or red elm (*ulmus rubra*) was used as a laxative and, as a convalescent drink, to soothe sore throats and intestinal upsets.

In modern herbalism, the common elm may be used in lotions for skin complaints but is no longer of major importance since the demise of most English elms from Dutch elm disease. Wych elm, or as it is called in southern England – wych-hazel, is also used in a lotion or ointment which is particularly effective against burns. Most modern preparations come from the slippery elm, whose inner bark is stripped from the trunks and larger branches in spring, dried and powdered for use in decoctions, liquid

extracts, ointments, poultices, powders and tablets. Medicinally, it is used internally for gastric and duodenal ulcers, gastric, colitis and digestive problems in infants. Externally for sore throats, coughs, wounds, burns, boils, abscesses and chilblains. It is often added as a soothing element to cough mixture.

Elm was one of the plants chosen by Dr Edward Bach for his flower essence remedies for inspiration. The remedy is made by infusing the flowers of slippery elm in the sunlight for four hours. The dose is four drops, four times a day, under the tongue. Because the bark contains a trace mineral valuable to the brain stem, a tincture of slippery elm has been found useful in treating depression.

With all these water associations it would be logical to assume that the

elm represented Elemental Water but, in fact, it is aligned with **Elemental Earth** and **Elemental Air**. Considering another name for the tree is *elven*, perhaps it should not surprise us that the elm is a tree of the Faere Folk, and that anyone taking its wood should leave offerings of wine or mead, or small silver coins for them.

Because of its associations with Elven or Faere Folk, the site of an elm is thought to be a gateway to Otherworld. Incense made from the wood can be used to encourage inspiration and boost confidence. Thin pieces placed in a pouch will give the wearer the gift of eloquence.

Staff or Wand

Should you be fortunate enough to acquire sufficient elm wood to make a wand or staff, this can be used in magical workings to gain inspiration

and insight – but beware of its Faere powers. The use of the elm wands is strong in magic concerning passage through death and phases of life and rebirth. An offering of white wine or a silver coin would be a fair exchange.

Magical Properties

Elm adds stability, grounding and focus to spell workings for endurance, fertility, horticulture and invocation of the Goddess.

Yew (*taxus baccata*)

Last, but certainly not least, the common yew must be the most

fascinating and mysterious, if not oldest, of all our native trees. The yew is said to be the longest-lived tree in Britain, some having lived for more than a thousand years. Yew trees are usually solitary but the best place to see them is the famous yew wood at Kingley Vale, near Chichester, which is regarded as the finest in Europe.

The yew likes limey soil and there is an island on Loch Lomond that was once covered with them, from which bows were supplied, because its hard flexible wood was the best for the purpose. The English longbow was made of yew and some of the oldest weapons that archaeologists have discovered are made from yew and date from Palaeolithic times – about 250,000 years ago! A yew spear found in Essex was estimated to be some 150,000 years old.

This is a dark, brooding evergreen tree that reaches a height of 15 to 50

feet; the trunk is massive because of the numerous shoots joining together. The shade beneath a large yew is extremely dense, which means that not enough sunlight filters through to allow any green plants to grow. Although Percival Westall thought it: “A beautiful tree in winter or early spring when small scarlet fairy lamps hang about its dark green cloak”.

The long flat leaves are poisonous and so are the seeds and bark – the crushed seeds were once used as an arrow poison. The small male flowers appear in clusters but the female flowers are solitary. These develop into a hard olive-green seed inside a red fleshy cup which the birds enjoy as they are sweet and full of syrup. Pliny wrote that the tree was ‘so toxic that even wine-flasks for travellers made of its wood in Gaul are known to have

caused death'. While Gerard claimed that the English yew was not poisonous, he wrote: *"In most countries, it hath such a malign quality, that it is not safe to sleep, or long rest under the shadow thereof."*

In medieval medicine yew was used as a purgative, and to treat heart and liver diseases, gout, rheumatism, arthritis and urinary infections. Later Culpeper wrote: *"Though it is sometimes given usefully in obstructions of the liver and bilious complaints, those experiments seem too few to recommend it to be used without the greatest caution."* Smoke from the burning leaves was supposed to repel gnats and mosquitoes, as well as rats and mice.

Despite being highly poisonous, the yew has always been surrounded by legend and is a symbol of immortality.

Many of our ancient yews are to be found in churchyards and if they are well over a thousand years old then they are more than likely marking pagan sites of worship. With the arrival of Christianity, these sacred sites were taken over and churches built to obliterate them. Before the arrival of this new religion the yew was looked upon as a sacred tree and the symbol of everlasting life; after that time the tree was denigrated to mean something sinister or dangerous. To bring cuttings of yew into the home was said to lead to a death in the family.

Many ancient yews are found growing on what are known to be ancient burial sites dating from the Neolithic, Celtic and Saxon periods. Studies concerning the alignment of church buildings in relation to ancient yews has suggested this indicates the age of the sites and gives a minimum

age for the trees. Where the church is west or east of the yew, the site is Celtic; where north or north-east of it, Saxon; and where south of the yew, Neolithic. The yew is also one of the Celtic Chieftain Trees, out of which were carved warriors' breast plates, dagger handles, and the sacred brooch worn by the kings of Ireland to be passed on to his successor.

Yew leaves can be used in pouches and incense to contact the Mighty Dead, and the incense smoke is a perfect aid to divination, or answers that can be sought by scrying, or the pendulum. Because yew is representative of **Elemental Earth**, it can also aid communication with earth elementals, particularly those that safeguard treasure – material and magical. **Warning: Incense containing yew should only be used outside or in a well-ventilated room as inhaling too much may be dangerous.**

Staff or Wand

A staff or wand of yew should be treated with great care as it acts as a bridge between the worlds. Because it is a tree of weaponry it has a martial aura to it and very often the only payment for taking yew wood is blood. A pin-prick will suffice and it is a price worth paying as the wand as a magical tool appears to work better once it's been 'blooded'.

Rods or staffs of yew are associated in legend with many magical powers and used as a dowsing rod, the yew can direct the bearer to recover missing treasure or property. In Gaelic legend, the 'white wand' was a special tool cut from yew which gave the bearer incredible magical powers, being associated with the 'spell of knowledge' – a magical working to give the enquirer access to Otherworld

and the realms of Faere. Unfortunately, this could also lead to the death of the enquirer if their intentions are not pure. The Scots believed that a man could denounce an enemy while holding a yew wand, and prove his case because those hearing his complaint would be able to see he was telling the truth.

With its Otherworld connections, yew was also a protector of the spirits of the dead, and carved yew wands were often placed in the coffins of country burials – this later became a belief that it would prevent the dead from walking.

Magical Properties

Known as ‘the witches’ wood’ and the wood of death, it draws off the **Element of Water** as well as **Elemental Fire**. It is a powerful symbol of death and reincarnation; often associated with sorcery and dark magic, and yet yew is excellent for

rituals and divination. Working with yew can reveal the past, bringing wisdom and renewed spiritual strength.

The Wildwood

Historically the term ‘wildwood’ is the name given to the forests as they were some 6,000 years ago, before human interference. The pollen records for that time confirm that the elm made up a substantial component of the wildwood, along with oak, birch and lime.

On a magical level, the Wildwood refers to those strange, eerie places that remain the realm of Nature and untamed by man. It is the Otherworld

of unearthly and potentially dangerous beings. This is the realm of Pan and the Wild Hunt. In modern psychology it refers to the dark inner recesses of the mind, the wild and tangled growths of the unconscious. Here among the trees we are never sure that what we see is reality or illusion, and the nearest most of us come to experiencing it is through that wonderful passage in *The Wind in the Willows* where Mole is lost ...

“... he penetrated to where the light was less, and trees crouched nearer and nearer ... Everything was very still now. The dusk advanced on him steadily, rapidly, gathering in behind and before, and the light seemed to be draining away like flood-water ... Then the whistling began ...”

Mériém Clay-Egerton wrote
extensively on the subject of trees and

produced some extremely evocative pieces relating to Wildwood experiences, which were sadly, left unpublished at the time of her death. Here she describes the strange half-light that anyone who walks in the Wildwood will immediately recognise ...

“I was always glad to go deeper into the apparent gloom because I would be beyond one of the woodland’s outer barriers ... To me this was a place that had obviously been held as a sacred area for so very long now that it had in its turn breathed this very atmosphere itself, and so projected this onto the mind which was prepared or conditioned to be both sympathetic and empathic to various woodlands and their forms of existence ... It resembled what I might envisage as a naturally constructed ‘cathedral’. Here lived

and breathed holiness and beauty
...”

It is impossible to describe the sensations of the Wildwood, but no one who has walked there can remain unchanged by the experience.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

Disposing of wands, stangs and staffs

Like the witch's knife, the wand is also a very personal magical item and should be treated as such, especially if it is one no longer in use. Should it be necessary for any reason to dispose of a wooden wand, staff or stang then an ideal solution is to return to the mother tree (or one of the same species) from which the wand was cut and bury it deep down among the root system. Staff and stangs can be cut to neutralise their power and then either burned and

the ashes scattered around the roots of a tree of the same species; or the short lengths pushed deep into the ground by the roots. It is not a good idea to use any magical equipment belonging to another witch unless it has been bequeathed to you by its owner.

Summary

The majority of other trees now growing in the British Isles are those introduced by man because of their practical use or purely for their beauty. The Romans brought the edible chestnut and walnut trees; in later years the Norway spruce, cedar of Lebanon, horse chestnut and sycamore became naturalised.

Additional species of trees were not all the Romans brought with them: they also introduced the formal calendar. At that time, the Celts occupying most of the British Isles, had only two seasons – summer and winter – a calculation still reflected in the altering of the clocks to comply with British Summer Time. Their livestock was taken out to pasture at the beginning of summer (Beltaine) and brought back to their winter shelter as the season grew colder around Samhain.

These seasons, the books tell us quite categorically, fell on 1st May and 31st October respectively but this fails to observe that the original Julian calendar (augmented in 45BC) was soon out of alignment, having to be modified several times before the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582. This resulted in a further eleven days being removed completely. These

changes meant there was a lot of political and religious ‘put-and-take’ in agreeing what should be moved and what should be left out, but what is not generally taken into account is the naturally occurring phenomena of *precession*.

The sun and moon exert a gravitational pull on the Earth’s equatorial bulge, causing the planet to ‘wobble’ in a very slow cycle, which we now recognise as ‘precession’. This is a slow, almost circular motion, which returns to the same place every 26,000 years. In the history of man, precession has produced some strange anomalies, often bringing about drastic changes in seasonal calculations — which is confirmed by historians and archaeologists who make it their business to study such things.

We also know that weather conditions have changed drastically over the past five hundred years, and

that the only things that remain constant are the solstices and equinoxes – and the steady, relentless tramp of Nature. Calendars offer a sense of purpose and identity – a feeling of belonging – but how useful are they to the outcome of magical working? The answer is not very, if the calendar fails to synchronise with the *natural* tides and energies.

There are now eight main festivals in the witches' year – but what if there are really only four? The Vernal Equinox, Summer Solstice, Autumnal Equinox and Winter Solstice. What if precession has caused the civil and astronomical calendars to move so far out of alignment, just as it has done with other cultures whose history dates back 6,000 years? It makes far more sense if the Celts, for example, celebrated Beltaine at Spring Equinox; Lughnasad (the feast of Lugh, the sun-god) at Summer Solstice; harvest and

the year's end at Autumn Equinox and still observing the Mid Winter festival at Winter Solstice.

As George Ewart Evans points out about country folk in *The Pattern Under the Plough*: “Many of them cherished beliefs – beliefs, moreover that they acted upon – dating from a period well before the coming of Christianity ... surviving into the 20th century, unobtrusive yet resilient in a rural underground that, during the time the old traditional society flourished, was rarely suspected much less disclosed.” They worked according to the seasons and not by any church or civil calendar.

Neither does Nature work by any set calendar, which means that it isn't always possible to celebrate ‘bringing in the may’ on the 31st April if Nature decrees that the blossom will not appear until the third week of May! The two main agricultural festivals

were held in the spring and at the end of harvest; and it is significant that they have been associated with witchcraft whose chief celebratory rites they were – and it is doubtful whether these, too, were governed by any civil calendar or saint's day.

Country people and true witches still synchronise their workings by Nature's own way of telling the seasons – and that includes reading the signs of the trees as our ancestors have done for 7,000 years.

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