

Silverton Broad Oak

Working Group Report 1, May 2024



On 25th January 2024 we lost one of our favourite trees: a tree that had provided shade and shelter to people for hundreds of years. We do not know much about its history, nor its precise age, but it stood on the higher ground some 450 metres to the north-east of the old village centre. When the tree was in its prime it was outside of the village but every rector who lived in the Old Rectory (formerly on what is now Prispfen House), would have seen it as they went down Coach Road to the church of St. Mary's. The Old Rectory, of course, was also home to many servants and coachmen, etc. over the years.

Silverton was a very different shape on a map in those days with only the old part of village existing apart from some isolated cottages and farms. For the inhabitants of the then village, the Broad Oak may have been just another Oak on the near horizon. It was not until the middle of the 20th century with the development of Lily Lake and the formation of the Big Rec from former pasture land that the tree was truly part of the village. Once the school had been built in the early 1970s village children and their parents would have really started to have a relationship with Broad Oak. It became the uniform motif for every child that attended Silverton Church of England Primary School.

After the tree fell there was an outpouring of grief from Silvertonians present and past and near and far. The tree featured on West Country Live and there were articles in newspapers and magazines. The village Facebook page was inundated and Sheila Woodland received numerous emails from far and wide. On Monday 29th January, Silverton Parish Council held a Public Meeting. The Dorothy Granger Room was packed and many speakers voiced their ideas and hopes. Coming out of this meeting, The Oak Working Group was formed at the regular SPC meeting on Monday 5th February 2024 under Minute 113823. This group comprises: Councillors Sarah Cross, Olivia Kennard, Josh Wright, Parish Clerk, Sheila Woodland (acting in a personal capacity) with Miles Snowdon, David Wright, John Kingdom and Peter Kidd. Nikki Shaw was co-opted at a later meeting.

Since that SPC meeting the group have met regularly, both on-site and elsewhere. The group has defined its aims to be:

- ***To help memorialise the life of Silverton's much-loved Broad Oak Tree and its loss. To help provide a legacy in its name that will provide:***
- ***To enable the making of suitable and sustainable artefacts that will enhance the village.***
- ***To encourage interesting and educational studies based upon the tree and its life and place in the village and its society.***

A spreadsheet detailing all the comments and suggestions made by email and via the Silverton Community Facebook page has been aggregated together with contact details of numerous interested parties from various organisations. Many projects, both large and small, physical and intellectual, have been identified and many contacts have been noted. This information will be made available.

At the top end of the Big Rec are:-

1. The main trunk of the tree lying on its side.
2. A number (about 11) of large boughs of timber on Mid Devon's land.
3. A large pile of timber that represents the smaller pieces on SPC land together with some mulch and firewood.

The Group have recognized that it will be necessary to clear the pile of timber (3 above) so that SPC's land can be restored to its previous state. Because of the very wet winter it has not been possible to use heavy machinery until the summer when, hopefully, the ground will be much drier.

The Way Forward

Clearance of the wood on SPC land

In order to provide sawn timber for joinery projects, etc. it will be necessary to convert as much of the timber in the pile as possible into planks. This could be done in two ways:-

1. **Conversion at sawmill** - To transport the trunks using a forklift and lorry to a sawmill where it would be sawn into various thicknesses of oak. This would then be brought back to Silverton and stacked in a suitable storage location for air-drying (seasoning)
OR
2. **Conversion on-site** - To use a portable sawmill on-site into various thicknesses of oak. This would then be taken directly to the suitable storage location for air-drying.

It is considered that it would be preferable to convert on-site (Option 2). We feel this would allow the Community to see that "something is happening" and promote community involvement. It would also reduce the amount of transportation.

For certain projects, e.g. chainsaw and other carving it will be appropriate for the wood-worker to choose the timber "in-the-round".

Surplus timber not suitable for planking would be sawn using a chainsaw into lengths suitable for firewood. This could be made available to locals either free or at a lower-than-market rate.

All mulch would also be made available to locals either free or at a lower-than-market rate.

The land may then need to be brought back to good condition.

Wood on MDDC land

Some of the best timber is to the north of the main trunk on land belonging to Mid Devon. This timber was placed there by the contractors in a fairly random pattern. The reason was to tidy the site and place the timber boughs so they would not roll or otherwise pose a risk to the public. It was also stated that this may stimulate the ecology of the area. The Working Group feel that a large proportion of this timber is better suited to conversion into planked, usable, high-value timber. Other boughs would be suitable for chainsaw-carving and other sculpture. This would still leave a selection of split and other unsuitable boughs that would be ideal for the purpose of promoting an ecological area. This has now been agreed with Tim Jarrett (MDDC Tree Officer). Meetings with sculptors, etc. will be scheduled in the future.

Seasoning

Planked timber air-dries at a rate of about 1 year per 25mm (1") of thickness. So beams of 100mm thickness would be ready for use after about 4 years. In some situations, dependent on the relative humidity required, it may be necessary to either air-dry it for longer or kiln-dry the wood. The wood will be stacked off the ground with spacers between planks.

The Group have looked at suitable locations for seasoning and have found a site at Ash Farm. The owner, Andrew Baker, has agreed that our seasoning timber can be stored there for many, perhaps ten, years. Access to the site is good for tractor & trailer and/or lorries. Furthermore, Andrew is willing to make available a tele-handler as well as a tractor and trailer with drivers. At the site there is a pile of scaffold to make a covering structure for the seasoning wood. It will be necessary to purchase some connectors and roofing sheets. It is felt that the site is reasonably secure, not being visible from the road.

It will be important to catalogue the planks as they are stracked so that proper accounts can be kept.

The Brand

We have agreed that products and other items evolving from the Broad Oak Projects shall benefit from a physical brand burnt into the timber. This brand has not yet been purchased but it is available from www.outpostworkshop.co.uk/ at a price of £74.99 for a 40mm brand plus £74.99 for an electric branding heater.



It will be important to keep control of the branding iron. Other projects could also benefit from the Broad Oak "brand". Further research needed.

Selection of physical projects

Physical projects may include "for profit" which would mean that the Maker would be manufacturing e.g. furniture, which would be for sale at market rates. In these cases it would be appropriate for the Maker to pay the market price for the oak. Furthermore, if the Maker wanted the kudos of selling the product with the provenance of the timber having come from

the Broad Oak then it would appropriate for the village to charge a “branding fee” for that provenance.

“Not for profit” physical projects will use oak donated by the village and will be branded as being part of the Broad Oak Project. So far we have received various suggestions including a shelter for children waiting for the school bus near the bottom of Coach Road and carved bosses for the church ceiling. (See project list)

Intellectual projects

Various non-practical projects have been suggested and others are a combination. For example, Paddy Grey’s suggested Dendrochronological Tree Ring combines a cut slice of the oak mounted in an accessible location. Onto this are placed markers showing the year: e.g. 1588 – Spanish Armada. This could possibly be linked to a computer showing more detail than could be displayed on the slice. These tree rings are traditionally cut through the main trunk at a point about 1.2m above the old ground level but this would make it very large and unwieldy. An alternative would be a cut through the first branch of the main trunk. The oldest ring of this would not mark the “birth” of Broad Oak but it could be an acceptable compromise. There would be costs associated with such a project.

Costs and money

The main costs of the overall project are estimates based on David Wright’s spreadsheet. These estimates are as follows and exclude VAT:

Item	Cost	Asset	Value
Purchase of Heras fencing	£500		
Preparation of storage area (Ash Farm) including making a scaffold roof.	£1,600		
Conversion into planks	£3,000	Value of unseasoned planks 2024	£12,000
Site clearance costs	£500	Value of seasoned planks 2025	£23,000
Total	£5,600		

David Wright and John Kingdom have had on-site and phone conversations with various timber-milling contractors including Grantland Timber, J and V Lamport, Mark Baker and Scott Struthers. They feel that Scott Struthers will best meet our needs. His charges are reasonable at £600/day and he uses a band-saw as opposed to a chainsaw. This reduces the waste because a chainsaw kerf (the width of the saw cut) is substantially narrower with a bandsaw than a chain. Within his charges he allows for 3 saw blades per day.

The main “up-front” costs of the overall project are shown in the table above. This includes conversion of the timber into planks, their transportation and storagewhilst seasoning. In the longer term we predict costs associated with social projects as opposed to woodworkers using our wood to make their own furniture, etc. These will be dealt with later.

Logs and mulch

It has not yet been decided how logs and other surplus materials are to be distributed. Simplistically this could be by people turning up with their own transport and taking a fair amount. However, this will have potential public safety and liability implications. A possible solution may be to come to an arrangement with local log suppliers to collect the logs from the site and deliver. There will obviously be costs associated with this. Further discussion is needed. Similarly, the mulch will be available. Perhaps we can obtain some dumpy bags and arrange transport. It is suggested that once we know when the timber-milling contractor is starting then we can advertise in the village and via the Silverton Community Facebook page.

Funding

As we understand it the Parish Council has funds available to kick-start the project. The group hope that this can be agreed.

It has also been suggested that Crowdfunding using platforms such as **Crowdfunder** or **JustGiving Crowdfunding** would allow investors to buy into **The Broad Oak Project**. This may have the advantage of stimulating local interest.

It is probable that this could be administered through Silverton.ORG (DEVON) CIC. This is a registered charity which already helps Silverton bodies such as the Street Market and the Luvvies.

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