



Major Oak, Sherwood Forest
(Robin Hood camped beneath it.)

To the commoner the oak was both sustenance and livelihood: providing acorns for feeding pigs and making bread; bark for tanning leather; pollarded branches as tree fodder for livestock in winter and fuel for domestic fires; sawdust for smoking meat and fish; oak galls for making ink; and wood for charcoal and hence for smelting iron especially here in the Weald where iron foundries abounded until the end of the sixteenth century. But the English oak, one of the hardest and most durable woods in the world, was most prized for its timber - as boards for flooring, support beams for houses and barns and most important of all, for an island nation, for ship-building.

'See that limb there,' said Ted, extending his arm to mirror an upwardly arching branch, 'split in two that makes a matching pair of timbers for the hull of a ship. And the genius of it was, you didn't have to kill the tree to do it. You could just take the limbs that suited what you needed them for.' The oak's very name in Latin, *Quercus robur*, resonates strength and until the middle of the nineteenth century shipbuilders relied almost entirely on oak, 'the wooden walls of Old England' carrying sailors around the globe, fuelling the expansion of the British Empire. The tree is saluted in the naming of eight HMS Royal Oak warships down the centuries, in the 'Hearts of Oak' march of the Royal Navy and even in a verse of 'Rule, Britannia'.

But beyond its historic associations, it is for biodiversity in the present day that Ted most bemoans its loss. 'You never see crowns like these in woods,' he said looking across at five or six trees, spaced generously apart, standing between us and the lake. 'Oaks need light and space.' Spreading horizontal limbs

in all directions to make the most of the sun, an open-grown English oak has six times the leaf cover of woodland trees. 'That's 360 degrees of niches and cover for wildlife,' he said. It supports more life forms than any other native tree, including over 300 species and subspecies of lichens and a staggering number of invertebrate species, providing food for birds including treecreepers, nuthatches, pied flycatchers, great and lesser spotted woodpeckers and several species of tits which nest in the tree's holes and crevices, or in the spreading branches. Bats roost in old woodpecker holes, under loose bark and in the tiniest of cracks. Its acorns - millions over a lifetime - feed badgers and deer in the run-up to winter, as well as jays, rooks, wood pigeons, pheasants, ducks, squirrels and mice, which, in turn, attract birds of prey such as owls, kestrels, buzzards and sparrow hawks, which may also nest in oaks. The soft leaves - 700,000 produced by a mature oak every year - break down easily in autumn, forming a rich leaf mould on the ground - habitat for scores of fungi including many colorful milkcaps, boletes, brittlegills and truffles.

— *Wilding* by Isabella Tree