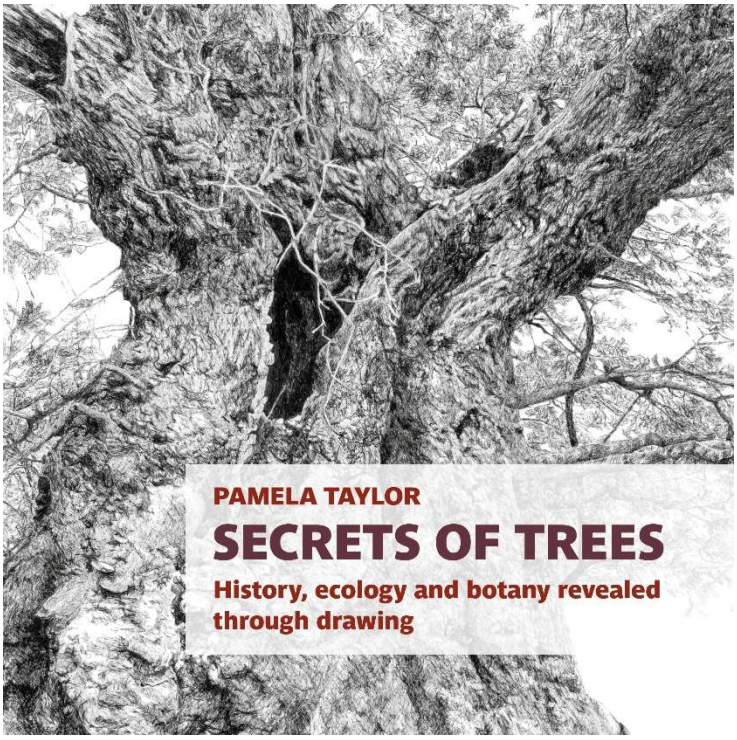

Secrets of Trees: History, ecology and botany revealed through drawing

Botanical Art Portfolios series

by Pamela Taylor

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Pamela Taylor is a fellow of the Society of Botanical Artists, a founder member of the Association of Botanical Artists and a fellow of the Linnaean Society.

This book:

- Showcases Pamela Taylor's exquisite pen and ink drawings of trees, including specimen trees from Burnham Beeches, Windsor Great Park, and other locations in Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Hampshire.
- Explains the fascinating natural processes that go on, unseen, around us every day and the key parts trees play in forming our diverse and beautiful countryside.
- Explores the history of individual trees and their locations
- Includes advice on how to overcome artistic challenges such as managing perspective, portraying delicate details, and taking time to observe.
- With spotlight sections for artists on useful equipment, drawing leaves and creating field sketches

Pamela writes: Living close to Burnham Beeches and Windsor Great Park, I have a wealth of ancient trees on my doorstep and therefore no shortage of inspiration and subjects to draw. As an artist, I find beauty in all stages of the life of a tree. A fully mature tree in which the canopy has had enough space to grow without competition from neighbouring trees is a beautiful and rare sight. Its perfection speaks for itself. Most trees reflect their struggle for life; the way the branches twist, the presence of gnarled dead wood and craggy bark, all contribute to make the tree the individual that it is today, and frequently a wonderful, interesting character to draw. The finished drawing will be a unique reminder of the tree at that moment in time, reflecting its history and often raising questions about how it came to be the tree it is in its present form. Drawing any plant makes me look at the subject in incredible detail, so as I complete my study, I find I have come to know and understand the specimen in great depth – both botanically and artistically. While I'm drawing, I think about the plant I'm capturing on paper and this frequently stimulates me to inquire about the specimen. Sometimes close observation leads me to discover more about the botany and ecology of the species but at other times I find myself investigating its history. Just what I discover is different for each plant that I draw, and in the following chapters there will be much to interest artists, botanists, ecologists and historians, as well as those who just enjoy natural history and the beauty of the world around them.

Contact **Anne Nolan** for more information, or to request a review copy: anne@tworiverspress.com.

Sample page spreads from *Secrets of Trees* by Pamela Taylor

CHAPTER 2

English oaks: mature, ancient and staghorn

Choosing your viewpoint

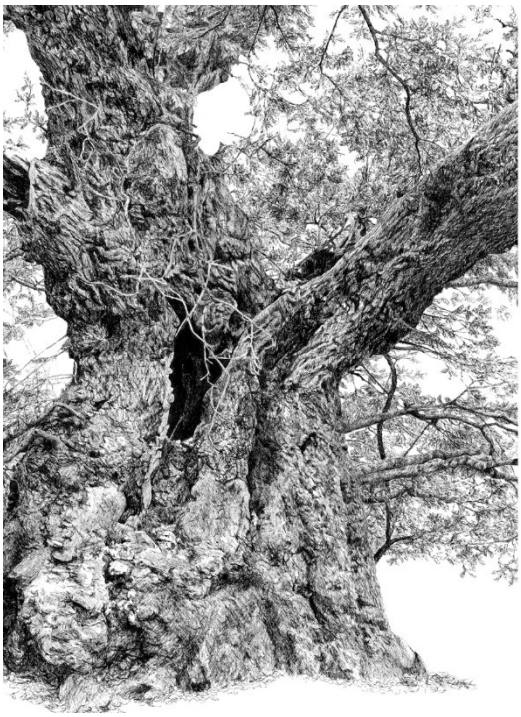
Oaks (*Quercus* sp.) grow throughout the British Isles and since earliest times, their strong, durable timber has been much prized for building houses and ships. Their shape and form, from windswept miniature trees just a few metres tall on Dartmoor to majestic specimens in lowland Britain, are wonderfully varied but instantly recognisable features of our countryside and fantastic subjects for the artist.

There are two species of oak native to Britain – the pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*) and the sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*). Although their leaves are slightly different in shape, both have the typical lobes of oak. The main difference between the two species is in their acorns: those of the pedunculate oak are stalked whereas the acorns of the sessile oak are not. Pedunculate oaks are more common on heavier soils, whereas the sessile oak is more tolerant of light, sandy soils.

When an acorn germinates, no seed leaves emerge from the embryo. Instead, a shoot pushes up through the soil and begins producing lobed oak leaves. The root, or radicle, also emerges from the acorn and begins to push its way down into the soil to ensure that the seedling will be properly anchored. As the sapling begins to grow, its roots will penetrate the ground to roughly the same depth as the stem protrudes above ground. The roots spread through the soil and absorb the water and nutrients that the sapling needs for growth. Quite soon, the roots

Facing page:
Mature Oak (*Quercus robur*)
Dorneywood, Buckinghamshire (2019)

will encounter the fine white threads, or hyphae, of soil-dwelling fungi. There are numerous fungi living in the soil – some are parasitic and cause plant diseases, some are saprophytes and break down dead plant and animal matter, and others form an envelope around the outside of the tips of roots and help the seedling tree to absorb the nutrients that it requires to grow. Such associations between roots and fungi are called mycorrhiza, or more specifically, ectomycorrhiza, because



and the term veteran is sometimes used to describe trees that are intermediate between mature and ancient.

Rising from its mighty bole, the Druid's Oak in Burnham Beeches is a wonderful example of an ancient oak. In 2001 its girth measured a massive 8.89 m. Much of the heartwood has rotted away and there are some dead branches in the reduced crown. The soft, decaying wood provides shelter and food for many invertebrates as well as nesting sites for birds such as woodpeckers. The tree supports many species at the bottom of the food chain that complete their entire lifecycles within its trunk and canopy – this ancient oak has become an ecosystem in itself. Mosses and algae have colonised and, in some areas, smothered the bark. In places there are lichens, which have increased in abundance as the air has become cleaner during the last fifty years. Capturing the varied textures of these features makes the Druid's Oak a wonderful and interesting subject. In order to do justice to the trunk, I decided that this part of the tree should be the subject of my drawing. That way I would be able to show the form and character of this wonderful ancient tree much better than if the trunk was partly hidden by the branches in a portrait of the whole tree. Trees can be so large and complex that you can't capture everything about them in one drawing!

Dendrologists have assessed the Druid's Oak to be 500–1000 years old, with a likely age of about 800 years old. When it was in its prime, several hundred years ago, growing in the open, wood-pasture common, the Druid's Oak may have been similar in size to the Dorneywood Oak. Indeed, a postcard from the first decade of the twentieth century does show that the tree, then called the Old Druid, had a more spreading crown than the tree we know today.

The decaying wood of ancient trees feeds a whole secret world of micro-organisms that release nutrients back into the soil, to be absorbed by the roots

Facing page:
Trunk of Druid's Oak (*Quercus robur*)
Burnham Beeches, Buckinghamshire (2019)

TRADE SECRETS

Making a field sketch: a crack willow at Dorney Common

Before I start any drawing, I study the tree and think about how I shall draw it. What are its special features? Where do the branches come off the trunk? Do any of them cross? These are just a few of the questions I ask myself and the sort of information that I need to make an informed field sketch. When finished, my sketch will not be a detailed portrait of the tree but a working diagram showing the main branches, the angles at which they grow and which ones are in front – especially where the limbs cross.

Tools

A major problem of measuring in the field is making sure that all your measurements are the same scale so that the finished sketch is in proportion. I use a ruler held vertically at arm's length to measure height. When I make subsequent measurements, it's essential that they are made in the same vertical plane.

I take a folding stool for sitting on while sketching. I find a position where I can view the tree that I wish to depict in such a way that the whole tree, or the portion that I intend to draw, fits comfortably within the vertical length of the ruler held at arm's length. I use A4 cartridge paper for making field sketches of trees. This size of paper is ideal when using a 12 inch/30 cm ruler for measurements.

Facing page:
My field sketch of a crack willow pollard at Dorney Common – a working diagram showing the main branches and all the measurements I needed to complete my drawing in the studio.

TRADE SECRETS

Measuring up

My first measurement is the whole tree from soil level up through the trunk to the top of the tree. I call this my reference measurement (labelled AB on the sketch).

If I'm just drawing part of the tree, such as the willow pollard shown here, the first measurement will be from ground level up through the trunk to a specific, easily identified location in the canopy. In the case of my willow pollard this is the crossing branches.

To ensure subsequent measurements are in the same vertical plane, I check that when I'm holding out my arm, my reference measurement (AB) is the same as when I initially recorded it.

I then move the ruler to the right or left to make subsequent vertical measurements (CD and EF on the field sketch).

A similar procedure is repeated to get horizontal measurements, but this time using the width of the tree as the reference distance and measuring the length to the right or left of the vertical reference line (AB) on the trunk.

The points that I measure are the main forks in the branches and where branches cross. Having located these, I sketch in the trunk and branches, noting which ones are in front and any other particular features which will be useful for my portrait of the tree.

Facing page:
Crack willow (*Salix* × *fragilis*) pollard
Dorney Common, Buckinghamshire (2015)
My drawings capture just one, specific moment in the life of a tree.