



Photograph © Michel Brunner

Yew (*Taxus baccata*), growing in the mountains of Switzerland, estimated to be 1500 years old. It is one of many European champion trees that has been identified by Michel Brunner a member of the recently created European Champion Tree Forum (see pages 58 - 62).

The European Champion Tree Forum

In October 2010 a group of champion tree recorders, from all over Europe, met in Belgium, to exchange notes and discuss their findings. **CHRISTOPHER CARNAGHAN**¹ reports on this international meeting, its purpose and aims, and makes an appeal for members from other countries to join their group.

At the Tree Register we record, and thereby help to conserve, the most notable trees in the British Isles. Our unique data bank of these trees has been built up over many years and – we believe – is by far the largest of its type in the world. It now contains details of over 180,000 trees, of which we list some 40,000 on www.treeregister.org. In particular the register contains information on the largest specimens – the “Champion Trees” – of each species and cultivar that are known to grow in the British Isles, and also on trees of historical or cultural significance. A new enlarged edition of our *Champion Trees of Britain & Ireland*, written by Dr Owen Johnson, was published in June 2011 by the RBG, Kew.

The enjoyment of any notable tree is enhanced by knowing how rare or exceptional it is, either locally or nationally. And that knowledge can help in its conservation. Owners often have trees, which are far less common – or far

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A huge lime tree (*Tilia* sp.) in Austria.



The biggest Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) in the world with a circumference of 8m, in Switzerland.

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"The Cage Pollard" an exceptional specimen among many of the common beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) at Burnham Beeches in Buckinghamshire, England, an area that has been classified as an important conservation site because of its ancient trees.

more notable in stature or age—than they realise, and the Tree Register seeks to encourage their appreciation of them. Where possible we present the owners with labels to mark their Champion Trees.

Funded modestly by donations and the subscriptions of its 600 members, and run by volunteers, the Tree Register operates quietly "on a shoestring". However in 2004, in joining forces with the Woodland Trust and the Ancient Tree Forum (not-for-profit bodies active in the conservation of old woodlands and ancient trees respectively) to create the Ancient Tree Hunt—www.ancient-tree-hunt.org.uk—we obtained funding for a project that has proved very successful. We have been able to discover thousands of "fat, old trees" across the UK; in particular many new trees were recorded by

volunteers instructed in tree identification and measurement by experienced Tree Register members.

For some 15 years we have had limited and intermittent contact with a handful of fellow tree hunters from elsewhere in Europe. And through them we learned of organisations similar to our own, although it seemed that few were quite as focused as us on finding and recording all the finest trees in their countries, native as well as exotic. Surely, we thought, we would have much in common with our Continental *confrères* – not only knowledge and expertise but also our shared enthusiasm for finding great trees.

However it was not until 2008 that we started to search systematically for both organisations and individual enthusiasts. Some were easy to find but – even with the help of the Internet – it took many months to locate others, especially those enthusiasts who seek and record notable trees on their own. Early in 2010 we felt that we had made enough promising English-speaking contacts to plan a meeting, to get to know each other, to exchange information and ideas, and to discuss how we might co-operate in mutually beneficial ways. So we set about organising what we believe to be the first international meeting on notable trees in Europe, if not the world. And to give the meeting a clear identity we decided to call it the European Champion Tree Forum.

We are grateful to IDS member Philippe de Spoelberch, founder of the Wespelaar Arboretum in Belgium (www.arboretumwespelaar.be) and a keen student of notable trees, for inviting us to be the first users of its fine new Visitors' Centre. The Forum brought together some 35 experienced tree hunters from nine countries in northern Europe, each active in identifying, recording, photographing, and/or promoting the appreciation of notable trees in either a professional or amateur capacity. Several of them have created their own websites dedicated to notable trees in their own countries (or, in a few cases, to trees in several countries). Also present were members of the Wespelaar team and representatives of the Tree Register.

David Alderman, our Director, set a fine pace and tone for the Forum in introducing the aims and activities of the Tree Register. Then came speakers from Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Hungary, France, Switzerland and Ireland. Some presented the work of national societies or group projects while others talked about their own research and discoveries. There was plenty on recording and databases, and a wealth of splendid images, some familiar (great oaks in Polish forests) and others unexpected (massive black poplars in Hungarian wetlands). Time being short this was clearly only a taster of the many great trees scattered across northern Europe.

The societies and groups represented included Bomenstichting (the Netherlands, www.bomenstichting.nl), Beltrees (Belgium, www.dendrologie.be), the Tree Council of Ireland (www.treecouncil.ie), A.R.B.R.E.S. (France, www.arbres.org) and Champion Trees (Germany, www.championtrees.de).



Champion Strawberry Tree
(*Arbutus unedo*), Killarney,
Ireland.

We closed with a brief review of what we had learnt about each others' groups, and listed topics of mutual interest—such as international databases, finding funding for research and conservation, helping to establish new groups in countries without them—that could set the agenda for future meetings. We really want this to be a co-operative federal movement, initially informal (although we might have to begin thinking about a little bit of formal structure), started but not dominated by us. We are delighted that our German colleagues are planning to host the next Forum this October.

And we are very keen to develop contacts elsewhere in Europe, for example in Spain and Italy. So please let us know if you could advise or help us in this regard, or would like more information on the ECTF.

The European Champion Tree Forum will meet again in 2011 on Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 October at the Haerle Arboretum (www.arboretum-haerle.de), which is situated on the eastern outskirts of Bonn, in Germany; it will be hosted by the

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A giant sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) with a girth of 9.6m in the Swiss mountains.

German Dendrology Society, the German Arboreta Society (joint sponsors of the Champion Trees initiative -www.championtrees.de) and the Haerle Arboretum. The meeting will start with an informal get-together on Friday evening; on Saturday presentations will be made with time for discussion and on Sunday there will be an optional excursion to a number of champion trees in the vicinity of Bonn. For further information, please contact Dr Gordon Mackenthun: gordon_mac@yahoo.com

Note: Michel Brunner, whose photos taken in Switzerland and Austria are reproduced here by kind permission of his publisher, spends half the year hunting remarkable trees, mainly in the Swiss Alps. He is the author of three books of which the latest will be reviewed in the 2011 yearbook. To find out more visit his website www.proarbore.com (in German).