



Viewpoint

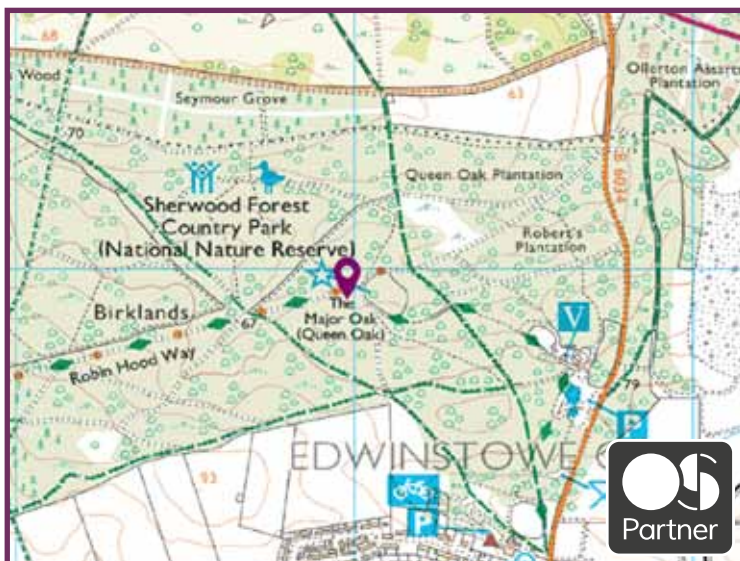
Supporting a legend



Time: 15 mins

Region: East Midlands

Landscape: rural



Location:

The Major Oak, Sherwood Forest,
Edwinstowe NG21 9HN

Grid reference: SK 62053 67902

Getting there:

Follow the signed paths from the Sherwood Forest
Visitor Centre, about 10-15 mins walk

Keep an eye out for:

Carvings and sculptures in old tree stumps beside
the paths

Sherwood Forest is world-famous as the hideout of heroic outlaw Robin Hood. Folklore says that Robin and his Merry Men hid in these woods from the Sheriff of Nottingham and slept inside this giant hollow tree - the Major Oak.

Thanks to these legends the Major Oak is a major tourist attraction. In 2014 a public survey by the Woodland Trust voted it 'Britain's favourite tree'. The tree also tells another tale.

**How does the Major Oak reflect our relationship
with Britain's woodland?**



Take in the Major Oak's immense size. With a girth of 10 metres, the trunk is as wide as a bus is long. This is Britain's largest oak and has been standing for 800 to 1,000 years - outliving the Plague, Civil War and Industrial Revolution.

Today metal poles support the branches while a fence stops us walking upon and damaging the tree's roots. Surgeons even paint the bark to prevent decay. Preserving this tree arguably helps to preserve the Robin Hood legend. The tree's condition - literally propped up and held together by human aid - also reflects Britain's woods.

Sherwood Forest is classed as Ancient Woodland, a wooded area dating from before 1600. When the Major Oak was still an acorn, Sherwood was a royal hunting park that spanned almost 116,000 acres from Worksop to Nottingham. Today it covers just 1,050 acres. Its shrinking size is not unique. Around 6,000 years ago trees covered 90% of British land - today this is down to 10%, with Ancient Woodland only 2%.

Why have our trees disappeared? Some have been wiped out by infections, like Dutch elm disease and Ash Dieback. Others are eaten away - the Major Oak's hollow trunk is due to hungry fungi. The major cause for decline though is us.

Deforestation is usually linked to countries like Brazil or Indonesia but we Britons have decimated our woodland too. Over the centuries forests were cleared for farmland, housing and timber; Sherwood's oaks built navy ships and Lincoln Cathedral. Trees are still a source of fuel, and household objects from furniture to paper. Britain's timber industry is now worth £8.5 billion.

The value of trees is more than financial though. Trees are vital to our environment. They absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere plus provide shelter and shade. Trees also support wildlife. Hundreds of creatures live in the Major Oak alone, from bees and butterflies to birds and bats.

Many woodland areas are now protected by law. Environmental agencies look after our trees and encourage the timber industry to plant new ones. There are currently 3 billion trees in Britain, 47 for each of us. Survivors like the Major Oak are a reminder of our ancient landscapes and the way we have treated them.

A surprising source

Sherwood Forest has supplied more than timber. During the Second World War, Britain became desperately short of oil. Military planes and ships relied on overseas oil and the German navy could cut off the supplies. After a nationwide search for domestic sources, oil was found under Sherwood Forest.

Incredibly, Sherwood oil was higher quality than Middle Eastern crude. The war meant there weren't enough working men available to drill it out, so volunteers were drafted from the southern USA. Many of them were housed in a nearby former monastery.

The Sherwood wells were kept top-secret for many years. They closed in the 1960s after the discovery of North Sea oil.