



## **ALDER- TREE OF THE WETLANDS**

Over damp cool meadows fall decaying rotting branches from aged trees with burrs and bosses, crooks and crannies, elbows and knees.

Biting insects circle stagnant pools, meandering rivers flood the landscape of coarse grass, sedges and rushes.

An abundance of green, prolific flowering plants grow, some of which are now rare like bog-asphodel, cranberry and sundew.

Ospreys glide overhead hunting for fish. Plovers, sandpipers and mallards winter in the warmer climes of Britain.

Such a landscape not tamed by man has always been under attack for the human need for food. It may be that these vast challenging places invoke a primitive fear of the unknown. To lose that element of the unknown as we have done in this country is to remove a creative wonder of life.

We hear of the terrible plight of indigenous tribes across the globe but as we explore the Alder and the wild untamed wetlands of Britain we can also uncover the misuse of land, the destruction of the commons and the taming of the countryside here in Britain.

Naturally about a quarter of Britain has been some kind of wetland, be it a bog, meadow, fen or marsh. These areas rather like the original wild wood, were large areas of wild countryside supporting many species. Starting with early land clearances in Mesolithic times our quest to cultivate the soil and tame the landscape has been indomitably pursued destroying valuable habitats without question.

*This darksome burn, horseback brown  
His rollrock high road roaring down  
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam  
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.*

*A windpuff- bonnet of fawn-froth  
Turns and twindles over the broth  
Of a pool so pitch black, fell-frowning,  
It rounds and round despair to drowning.*

*Degged with dew, dappled with dew  
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,  
Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern,  
And the bead bonny ash that sits over the burn.*

*What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*

**Gerard Manley Hopkins 1844-1889**

'Alder carr' is the name given to the habitats Alder creates along the waterways. Alder doesn't like stagnant anaerobic water or severe prolonged flooding but prefers moving oxygenated water and is associated with plants of fertile soil due its nitrogen-fixing properties. In a mixed wood it associates itself with Lime, Birch, Chestnut and Hornbeam growing in soils varying from 3.3ph- 7.3ph.

There are three main woodland types of Alder:

**Fen-** low level ground on floodplains of rivers and streams.

**Valley-** Growing along narrow fringes to streams or climbing flushed slopes especially in Western Britain.

**Plateau-** level uplands often on a watershed. Alder generally will colonize new sites, its seeds dispersed by water and to a lesser extent wind.

As land has been drained for farming the Alder tree has suffered and although it can grow in drier soils it's seed needs a prolonged period in water to germinate.

Our wetlands and ancient woodlands suffered immensely in the enclosure acts of 1750- 1850, the wild uncultivated areas seen as an affront to progressive civilization. The huge commons and wetlands such as the fens were affected and the landless poor suffered. The rural workers of our countryside that understood the land intimately are no different from the indigenous tribes across the world who were removed or denied access to their way of life.

A poet whose life was intricately linked with the time of the enclosure acts was John Clare, whose poetry implores us to care and love nature:

*And long, my dear valleys, long, long may ye flourish,  
Though rush-beds and thistles, make most of your pride;  
May showers never fail the green's daisies to nourish,  
Nor suns dry the fountain that rills by its side.  
Your flat swampy valleys unwholesome may be;  
Still, refuse of nature, without her adornings  
Ye are as dear as this heart in my bosom to me.*

**John Clare (1793- 1864)**

Alder is a tree of our ancient woodlands. We will now define what an ancient woodland is and look at the practices which define both traditional woodsmanship and modern forestry.

### **Definition of Ancient Woodland.**

'Ancient woodland' is a definite term used to describe a wood which one can date back to at least the beginning of the seventeenth century.

There are two reasons for this: -

- 1/ Woodlands were rarely planted in or before Tudor times (1485- 1603). When planted they were often the result of a gentlemen's hobby and had little impact on the natural woodland coverage. One example is Watling wood, East Sussex which was planted in 1602 consisting of 36 acres.
- 2/ A woodland that is over 350 years old and not been ploughed or disturbed at ground level is home to a wider and more specialist flora.

## Definition of Woodsmanship and Forestry

Early plantations were planted to enhance woodsmanship rather than replace it and continued the tradition of coppicing (cutting a tree down to ground level and allowing it to re-sprout). A mixture of species such as "mast of oke and beech, chats of ashe and bruised crabbes" were typical descriptions of trees planted. The English forestry tradition starts at the beginning of the seventeenth century fuelled by Arthur Standish, who wrote pamphlets on the subject at this time. Later the works of John Evelyn heavily influenced the creation of plantations through his book *Sylva*, written in 1664 with a focus on planting for timber rather than wood.

Timber describes trees which when cut are over 2ft in girth and therefore involves the clear felling of large trees which are then sawn to size, the main product of modern forestry. The word **wood** refers to trees that are cut and are less than 2ft in girth, not processed, just cut to the right size direct from the tree. Wood production is far less labour intensive and the product of traditional woodsmanship.

These terms are still employed today when describing products such as wood fires or timber buildings.

## Proving the age of a woodland

There are several ways to date woodlands. One can simply look at old maps and see if specific woodland is in existence, or look for ancient features such as wood or hedge banks. Written sources include Anglo-Saxon charters (800-1000), the Doomesday book (1086) and detailed land surveys from medieval times such as the hundred rolls (1270s) and the survey of the Bishop of Ely estate (1251).

Place names can also indicate the age of woodland depending on which period of time the name is linked to, for instance here are some examples of names for the Alder: *Alnus glutinosa* (Latin) Fearn (Ogham) Aler (Anglo-Saxon) Elri (Norse) Gwernen (Welsh/Cornish)

Local name indicators which are likely to mean Alder trees grew in that area include Cargate and Carrfell. A detailed knowledge of the woodland flora can also determine the age of woodland as certain species only

grow in ancient woods. These species are called 'ancient woodland indicators.'

## Folklore of Alder

*Alder, the van of warrior bands for thereof are the shields.*

*Shield of warrior bands.*

*Protector of the heart, the shield.*

*Guardian of milk.*

### Book of Ballymote 1391

The Alder is a beautiful tree which can develop into a large canopy tree up to 70ft high. In the spring the tree is striking producing reddish brown catkins and at the same time is laden with last year's tiny black cones. Fringing wetland habitats it stands as Spring goddess of fertility and hope which is perhaps why the Norsemen called March 'Lenct' ( to become Lent) which means 'the lengthening month of the Alder'.

The Alder is often thought of as a Faery or Elemental tree, an axis from which the elements flow and form.

Here are the ways it connects to the four elements:

**Water-** forms a valuable habitat known as 'carr' supporting much wildlife on wetlands or beside rivers and lakes.

**Fire-** Alder wood does not burn especially well but produces hot charcoal and gunpowder

**Earth-** The tree roots into the ground fixing nitrogen salts therefore enriching the soil around it.

**Air-** It has 'Royal' purple buds, the colour of the raven and therefore connects the tree to the raven-headed giant Bran or the Irish Goddess known as the Morrigan who also takes the form of the raven. Both deities have oracular powers of prophecy and protect the land from invaders. The wood has also been used to make whistles and pipes.

The kennings over the page instantly connect Alder to the shield which is made from Alder and the Willow, both trees of the water ways. The Lime tree was also used for making shields. This is due to the wood needing to be light, strong and flexible.

*Alder at the front line that foraged first...*

**Cad Goddeu (Battle of the Trees) Book of Taliesin 14th Century**

The quote over the page puts Alder at the front line in battle and in Celtic times it was the warrior's shield that went first into the battle. The courage needed to walk forward into a horde of armoured warriors must have been immense. That same courage can be used to face difficult times and emotions. The courage to sit with your feelings rather than fill your time with exciting pursuits is as difficult as any expedition to the North Pole!

This courage and the quality of not shrinking from a fight is further enhanced by Iubdan the leprachaun from the Ancient Irish Tales (T.P. Cross & C.Slover 1936) mentioned in previous booklets:

*Alder, very battle witch of all woods, tree that is hottest in the fight...*

Although the two key deities associated with Alder (Bran and Morrigan) are ferocious in battle they are ultimately guardians of the land. It is not therefore about shrinking from a fight but more about standing up for what you believe in and doing righteous action. This is explored in many Mythological texts as doing what is right is sometimes contradicting what you may feel is ethical.

Bran went into battle because his beloved daughter was being mistreated and his severed head ended up being buried at White Hill in London to protect the land from invasion.

The ravens are there to do his bidding and if ever they are to leave Britain will fall. The ravens currently reside at the Tower of London which brings this story into current times.

Bran is considered to be a formidable giant in Welsh mythology and as discussed in the Rowan section therefore puts him in that role of protecting our sacred land. In the stories he is depicted as a moving landscape of wood, mountain and lake bringing alive that incredible power recognised by the Celts of the land itself.

The female counterpart in Irish mythology is the Morrigan who in the First Battle of Moytura guards the land with unstoppable malice:

‘We will put an enchantment on the trees, and the stones and sods of the earth, and they will rise up and be an armed host against the fomor and put them to rout’

This image of the very earth itself coming alive and swallowing an army reaches into a primal memory of the earth’s power in the form of volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis.

In the stories we can see how these battles are connected to the very sanctity of the land. When invaders actions work in harmony with the land, new plains and rivers form and when the land is not considered, chaos is ensured!

This is maybe why the Roman armies confounded the Celts over a long period of time for their warfare cared not for the landscape or for acts of valour as heroic deeds were second to mechanical warfare and the land was utilised in whatever way the battle could be won.

This again brings us back to the guardians of the earth in Celtic stories for although they are formidable and take the form of terrifying beasts at times, their loyalty is to safeguard the land and test the heart’s strength and purity.

In the Rowan section I mention the Morrigan’s prophesy of what is to come and it is she that proclaims in the second battle of Moytura:



*Green growth after Spring, Autumn increase of horses,  
A company for the land, land with trade to its furthest shore;  
May it be mighty forested, perpetually sovereign.  
Peace high as heaven, life eternally.*

The Alder is considered to be the male counterpart to the Willow as they both preside over our waterways nourishing and supporting this vital system. The male aspect is further enforced in the trees' association with warriors.

The wood, as already discussed, was used to make a shield, and a fiery red dye obtained from the bark called 'roeim' (that which reddens the face) may have been used like woad to strike fear into the enemy. In the Welsh triads they speak of crimson-stained Warriors of the Alder Cult. Dyes can also be obtained from the flowers (green) and the twigs (brown).

*O Alder, thou art not hostile delightful is thy hue,  
thou art not rending and prickling  
in the gap wherein thou art.*

### **Frenzy of Mad Sweeney 1200 Irish texts society.**

However, let us also acknowledge the more gentle aspect to Alder and the waterways as the Morrigan calls for peace in the Battle of Moytura, and Sweeney (above) sings the Alder's praises.

The third kenning from the book of Ballymote refers to Alder as the 'protector of the heart'. The shield after all is first and foremost for protection (of the heart) encouraging us to go forth and is not a weapon as such.

The earth energy does indeed erupt and remind us how insignificant we all are but also reminds us of the small acts of courage and compassion that change the world. It is in the humble plants of natural regeneration explored in the Birch booklet we must put our trust. Nature's answers may seem ridiculously simple but are most effective.

I was overjoyed to witness an osprey flying over the wetlands of Arundel, West Sussex last year and this year the explosion of blossom, flocks of song birds and larger birds of prey has cheered my heart. There is much room for improvement but the conservation movement is now more effective than it has ever been. Wetlands are prized by a nation of birdwatchers. Britain is a major refuge for winter migrating birds as they especially flock here in extreme winters. One of our largest inland wetlands, the Somerset levels, sheltered up to 50,000 widgeon and 70,000 lapwings in the winters of 2010/11. Some species are rising whilst others are in decline due to wider issues but most certainly we are learning to care for these important habitats.

## **Farming and Conservation**

The final kenning refers to Alder as a guardian of milk. This is a recurring theme in Celtic literature as we begin to explore in the Rowan section. The connection of land, people and livestock was of such great importance and this tradition still lives on in local farming today.

The huge commercial farms disconnected from the sacredness of the land and livestock is an abomination of all that is dear to us. However our ancestors knew that the care and fecundity of the land went hand in hand with farming as some still do in modern times.

Grazing herds of cows, sheep and goats maintain important coastal habitats, species-rich ancient meadows, flower-rich mountain terrains and valuable acidic grasslands.

Good management creates habitats ideal for many species including corn bunting, lapwing and skylark. The hedgerows and wildflowers in turn create better quality meat.

The Downs near where I live depend on the sheep to keep the chalk hill landscape and to encourage the Adonis blue and Silver spotted butterflies. The Hebridean flock in Derbyshire help create a habitat suitable for 5000 orchids and the old English feral goats on the Isle of Wight also make a butterfly-rich grassland.

In other counties all over England grazing animals do the same job demonstrating the intrinsic link between farming and nature. To care for these animals and then kill them in the kindest way possible is to continue in the tradition of sanctity of the land and enable person, place and animal to work together in mutual respect. The key to this relationship is a balance and harmony for intensive grazing, overuse of machinery and sowing times all affect whether a species will thrive or decline as part of the farming system. It is also important to note this is all possible and happening in the modern world and doesn't need to be saved for niche markets!

The destruction of habitat from the Iron age to now has been immense, the Black Death slowed human progress down for a time but then came the enclosure acts of the 1800s followed by further destruction of ancient woodlands and drainage of wetlands in the quest to make every inch of the countryside productive. In our woodlands, conifers planted in the 1980s caused more damage than any airport runway or road may have done.

Since the 1990s the conservation movement has become a great force of positive change in this country and slowed this abhorrent destruction of important sites and has and is proven to be effective as many sites are saved and managed correctly.

The countryside as a whole still decreases under the constant pressure of our demands and now the next challenge is to support the small farmers that still maintain the old field systems, moors and fens. To support the import of mass-produced food no matter how fair-trade or organic it is, is to watch the last of our old farming traditions perish, and for our countryside to be preserved and carefully managed like a park or reserve extinguishes our direct involvement with the sanctity of the land.

Time spent with the Alder and the wild areas of Britain is well-spent, as is the constant quest to live from and with the land.

## The Uses of Alder

The Latin 'Alnus' may have been derived from the phrase 'Alor Amne' - I am nourished by the stream.

The leaves can help relieve weary feet and put into duvets and cushions etc., to give rheumatic relief. The leaves can also be used to tan leather and the bark can be placed on burns and inflammations including the neck if inflamed.

Alder wood is not durable unless immersed in water so is an ideal wood for water pipes, troughs, canal lock gates etc. Much of Venice is built on Alder piles and the wood in Britain would have been used as foundations for 'Crannogs' - villages built on waterways in ancient times.

The further exploration of waterways, and the history of woods will continue as we explore the beauty of willow.

## SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES FOR THE ALDER TREE

The alder tree is calling us to connect with the wild landscape and its guardians who can enable us to connect with the sacred landscape and become a guardian ourselves. It calls us to go forth protected by its shield and to face the challenges of life head on.

However, in order to take action, we first need to plant the seeds of change and wait for the correct conditions to bring them into the world. Carrying out 'right action' is only possible by considering the issue in hand and all who are connected to it for it is only when a certain course is shown to you it is time to go forward in confidence leaving doubt behind.

Here are a few questions to actively explore the themes related to the Alder tree :

What issues or changes do I need to put into place now?

What seeds do I need to plant for future projects?

How can I be a guardian of the sacred earth?

How can I listen to the earth and what she needs?

What is holding me back in taking action?

## **Deepening your connection to Alder**

To find an alder tree you may need to visit a wetland, river or stream although you sometimes find the tree on drier ground also. Sit with an alder tree or if this is not possible you can meditate on the themes above at home or by using the guided meditations below.

Connect with alder to understand the wild landscapes and the messages that the guardians of the land wish to share with you.

Always listen in a neutral space without trying to assume what they wish to share with you. If you ask a question, give it much thought and do not presume to know the answer it may well be unexpected and surprise you.

Even if you do not find the tree itself sit and be with the wetlands or a river or stream and meditate with the landscapes that are on the fringe of things where water meets land. These betwixt places are where we can connect with the otherworldly beings that are sharing this world with us. Be open and take the impressions that you receive.

Following on from the Rowan tree you are now visiting the beings in your world rather than going to theres.