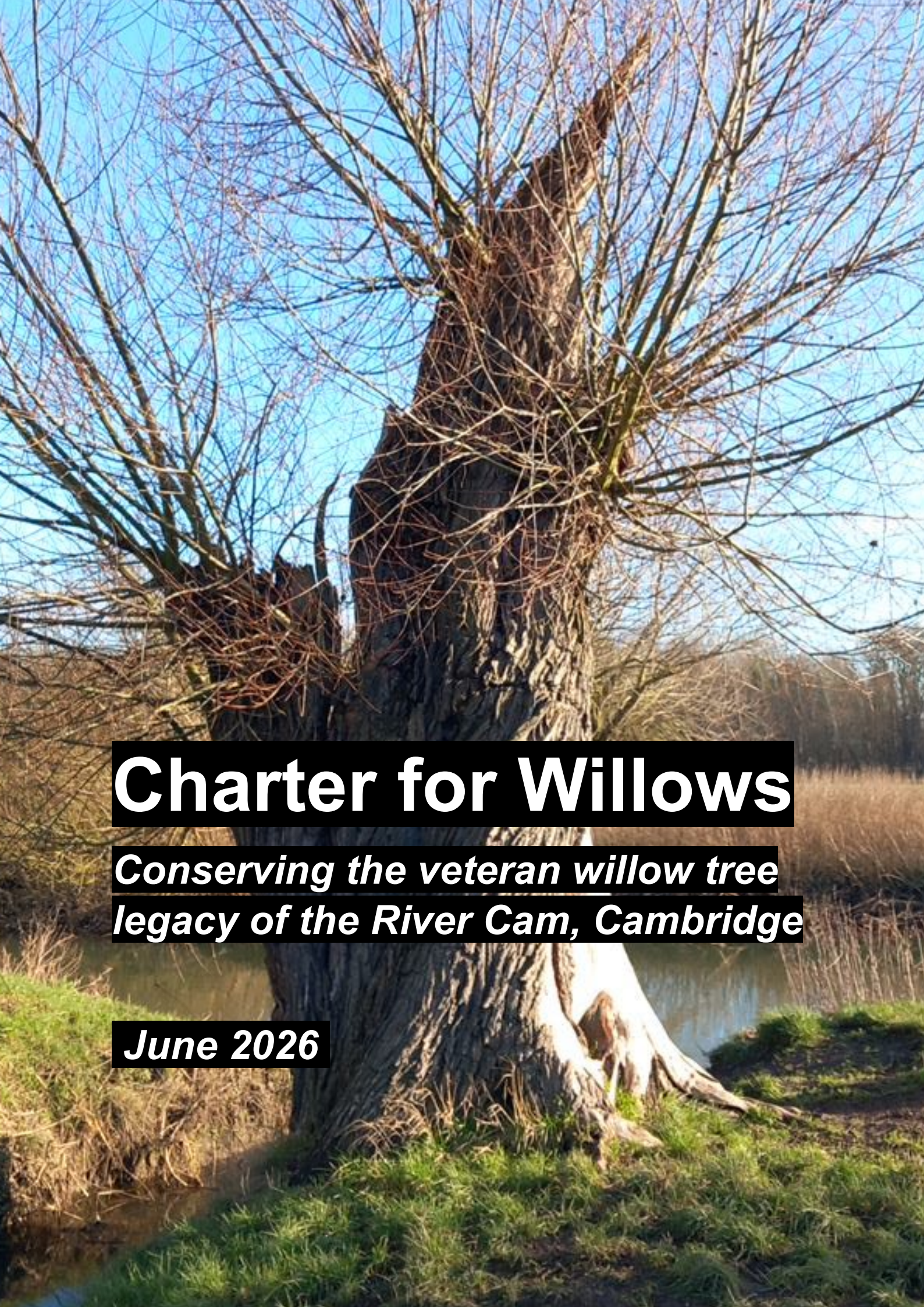


Charter for Willows

Conserving the veteran willow tree legacy of the River Cam, Cambridge

June 2026

Acknowledgements

This Charter document, and supporting documents, has been prepared with funding provided by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund. The funding has been allocated to Cambridge City Council as part of a number of projects under the River Cam CAN project umbrella. One of these projects is the DiversiTREE project which aims to *"develop and encourage the sustainable management of the veteran willow tree resource amongst third party landowners and managers, along a 10km section of the River Cam."*

This Charter has been prepared for Cambridge City Council to support the delivery of their DiversiTREE[1] project to encourage the sustainable management of the River Cam's veteran tree willow population.

Publication

This document was published in June 2026 by Cambridge City Council in collaboration with Lanpro.

Contents

[1] Link to DiversiTree Project webpage: https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/diversitree-project

Why a Charter?

The city of Cambridge and its surrounds have a rich cultural heritage linked to willow trees.

Cambridge is part of an ancient lowland fen, a landscape that was once dominated by flat open vistas and impressive wetlands and waterways teaming with life and providing a natural home for the willow tree.

Historically, local people relied upon willow for firewood, construction and medicine. Willow was grown, harvested, used and cared for as part of the local population's daily lives. Thankfully today, Cambridge still retains a distinctive population of long-established willows, many the result of successive generations of planting and traditional management, a living legacy now in need of our collective stewardship to protect their ecological, cultural, and historical value.

This Charter draws on recent survey work to present information about Cambridge's surviving willow population, bringing to light some of the amazing individual ancient and veteran willows that persist and the unique habitats and landscapes they contribute to. It sets out principles and guidance for the ongoing management of the willow tree population along the River Cam and encourages collective action to secure the future of these trees in the heart of the city.

This Charter is underpinned by evidence from the recent veteran willow survey, which confirmed the presence of 33 individual veteran willows and 10 groups of veteran willow trees (as well as many more possible veterans) and identified 57 key sites for action. These findings highlight both the scale of the resource and the urgency of acting now to ensure continuity into the future.

We encourage residents, landowners and land managers to sign up to this Charter, to pledge their support for Cambridge's willows and take part in preserving an important part of the city's rich cultural heritage.

The following sections outline the value of Cambridge's willows and the principles guiding their long-term care.

River Cam - A veteran, hollowing willow beside the River Cam at Sheep's Green Local Nature Reserve

The Wind in the Willows

The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame (1908) - *"In midmost of the stream, embraced in the weir's shimmering arm-spread, a small island lay anchored, fringed close with willow and silver birch and alder. Reserved, shy, but full of significance, it hid whatever it might hold behind a veil, keeping it till the hour should come, and, with the hour, those who were called and chosen."*

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban by J. K. Rowling (1999) – *"The wand-light showed him the trunk of a thick tree, they had chased Scabbers into the shadow of the Whomping Willow and its branches were creaking as though in a high wind, whipping backwards and forwards…"*

Pocahontas – Grandmother Willow **Old Man Willow – The Lord of the Rings**

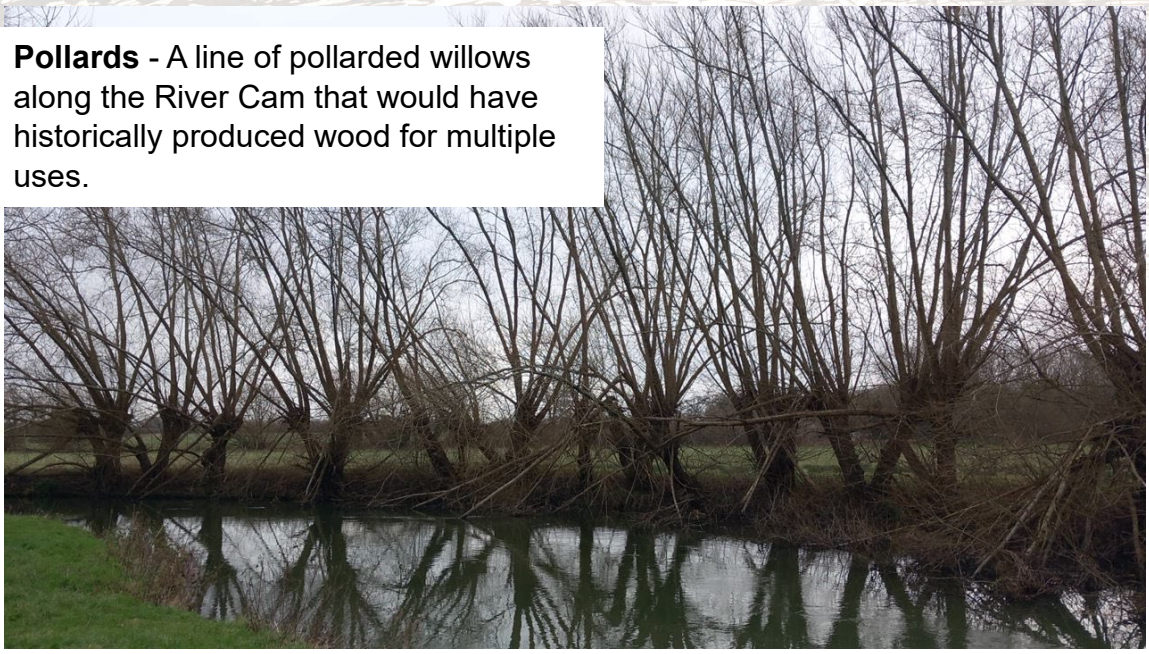
Social and Cultural Value of Willow

Willows are at home in the water, and for the people of the Cambridgeshire fens, the obvious choice of tree to tend and use to support their daily lives.

Willows grow fast, respond well to pruning and provide flexible, lightweight and water-resistant wood. These properties meant that willow wood was ideal for basket weaving, charcoal production and the production of fish traps, bowls and spoons[2]. Willow wood was also used in the construction of wattle-and-daub houses and tanning, whilst the bark was harvested for salicin, a pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory compound which today is used in aspirin.

To encourage such a useful tree, communities historically planted willow beds known as withies or osier holts. In these withies, trees were coppiced (cut at the base) or pollarded (cut at 2-4 metres height) to encourage new small diameter woody growth that could be harvested cyclically. Trees were also planted in lines called willow rows, many of which still remain today along the River Cam. Willow was so useful that Cambridgeshire was previously a major withy production area until many withies were lost to land drainage from the 1600s.

Pollards - A line of pollarded willows along the River Cam that would have historically produced wood for multiple uses.



[2] Rotherham. I. D. (2022). Willows in the farming landscape: a forgotten eco-cultural icon. Biodiversity and Conservation, 31 (10), 2495-2513.

Today, the willow trees along the River Cam continue to provide benefits to residents and visitors alike through their graceful beauty, contribution to the city's landscape, provision of shade on a hot day and a home for birds that in turn enrich the soundscape along the River Cam. The willows are also an integral component of important Local Nature Reserves open to the public including Sheep's Green, Coe Fen and Paradise Nature Reserve. They are a common, if not dominant tree in many public open spaces including Grantchester Meadows, Jesus Green, Stourbridge Common and Ditton Meadows.

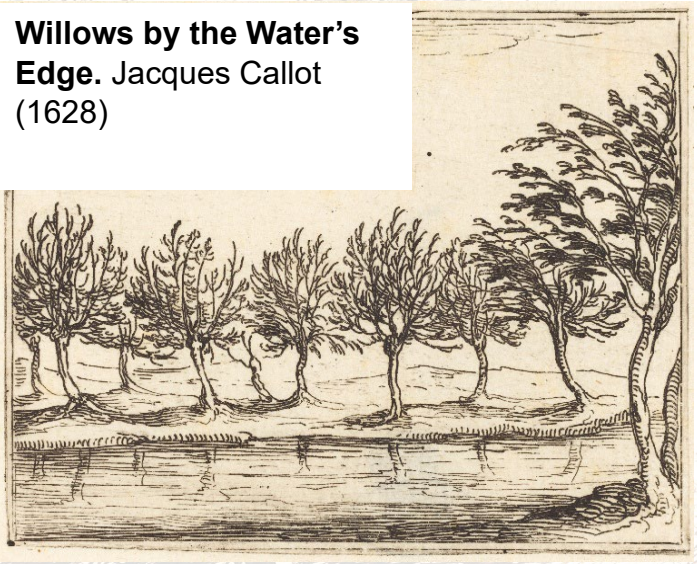
Whilst the use of willow for charcoal, construction and whittling has declined, willow is still used today for willow weaving crafts and the production of cricket bats. In a farming context, willows provide sheep with much needed zinc and cobalt minerals to supplement their diet[3]. The tree also inspires the production of local art, appears in riverside photography of the River Cam and can be found referenced in local place names such as Willow Walk, Willow Court, Willow Crescent and Willow Place.

Willow forming a key part of a Local Nature Reserve. This willow has started to 'walk' and is protected from damage by a circle of dead hedging.

[3] Kendall, N.R., Smith, J., Whistance, L.K., Stergiadis, S., Stoate, C., Chesshire, H. and Smith, A.R. (November 2019). Tree leaves as supplementary feed for ruminant livestock. The Woodland Trust.

Heritage Value of Willow

Willows are part of an ancient lowland fen landscape that once stretched from South Yorkshire in the north, to Cambridgeshire in the south[4]. In Anglo-Saxon charters for the fens, willows are mentioned as the most commonly named tree[5,6].

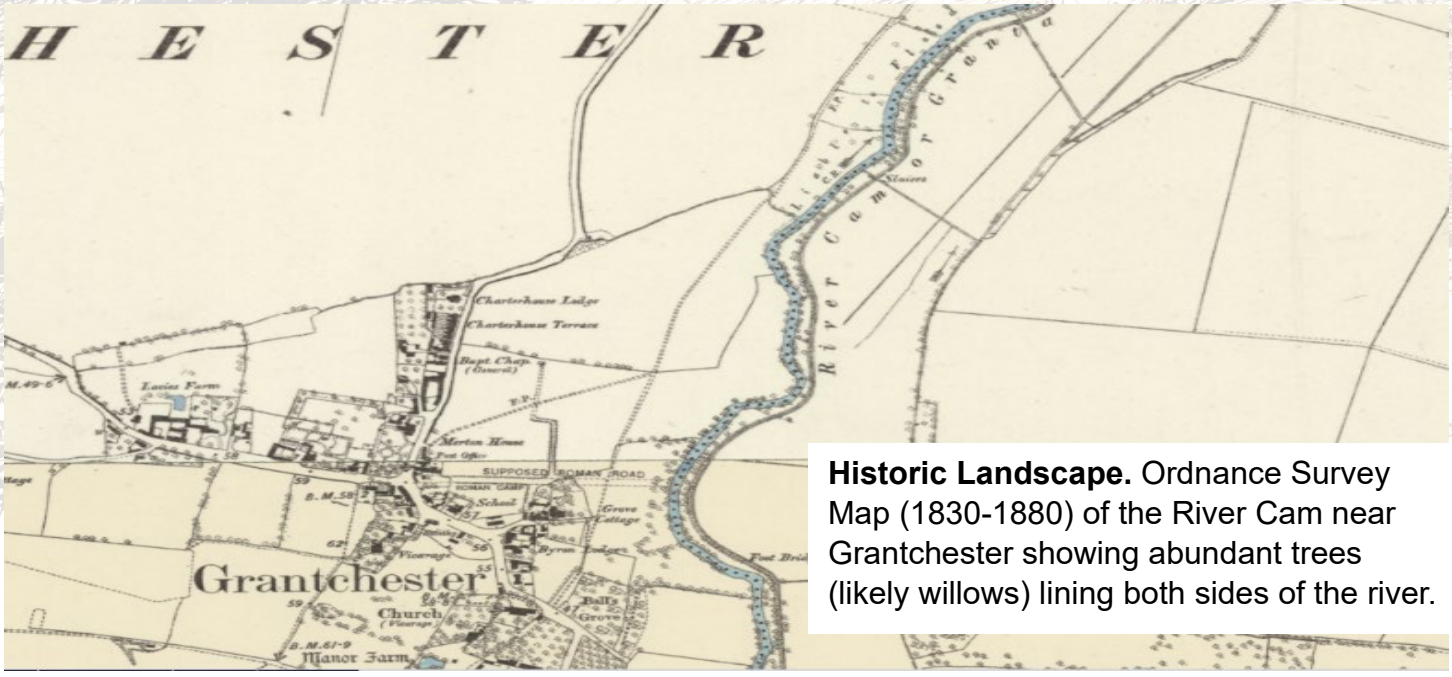


Willows by the Water's Edge. Jacques Callot (1628)

Willows thrived in the fens, and historical maps of the River Cam from mid 1800s show a river bordered by abundant trees in very similar locations to where willows still exist today (see below)[7].

Unfortunately, much of the fens was lost following landscape-scale drainage efforts from the mid-1600s which saw the digging of long straight waterways to drain the water from the land into the rivers and the sea[1]. Consequently, much of the habitat of the willow tree disappeared and combined with a decline of traditional wood uses in daily life, the abundance and distribution of willow trees in the local landscape decreased.

Within the UK, some of the willows that remain today are located on archaeological and landscape features that pre-date the 'Great Drainage' suggesting that willows can live to exceed 400-500 years in age[8].



Historic Landscape. Ordnance Survey Map (1830-1880) of the River Cam near Grantchester showing abundant trees (likely willows) lining both sides of the river.

[4] Rotherham, I.D. (2013). The Lost Fens: England's Greatest Ecological Disaster. The History Press.
[5] Rackham O (1986) The history of the countryside. Dent, London
[6] Rackham O (2003) Ancient Woodland: its history, vegetation and uses in England, 2nd edn, Dalbeattie, Castlepoint.
[7] National Library of Scotland. OS Six Inch, 1830s-1880s (county layers). Available at: https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/#zoom=15.8&lat=52.18440&lon=0.10144&layers=257&b=ESRIWorld&o=100
[8] Rotherham. I. D. (2022). Willows in the farming landscape: a forgotten eco-cultural icon. Biodiversity and Conservation, 31 (10), 2495-2513.

Environmental Value of the Willow

BIODIVERSITY

Willows produce abundant catkins in early spring that provide a valuable source of pollen for bees and other insects. Many species of moth also feed on white willow leaves such as willow ermine, eyed hawkmoth and red underwing[1]. Along riversides, the root systems of willow provide a complex and sheltered habitat in the riverbank that are often favoured as breeding or sheltering sites for otter or water vole.

As willows age, they produce standing and fallen deadwood that support saproxylic fungi and invertebrates.

Due to their relatively fast growth, willow wood often splits and cracks to create niches and decay features that can support water-associated bats such as Daubenton's bat *Myotis daubentonii* as well as nesting birds.

Excitingly, since 2009, willow trees are increasingly being reunited with beavers in re-introduction projects. Beavers use young willow shoots as an important food source in the autumn and winter and as a construction material for dams. The excellent regeneration capacity of willow is likely a direct result of this ancient co-evolution with beavers.

Fungi. Fallen and standing deadwood provide food for fungi. Silverleaf fungus *Chondrostereum purpureum* pictured here.

Birds and bats. Decay features, hollows, splits and cracks in branches and stems all provide bat roost and bird nesting opportunities.

URBAN COOLING

Within the context of the city of Cambridge, willow trees along the River Cam provide urban cooling through the shade they cast on hot sunny days, helping the city to adapt to a changing climate with hotter summers. They can also help with mitigating air pollution, capturing particulates on their leaves and absorbing carbon dioxide.

CARBON STORAGE

As with all trees, willows store carbon in their woody stems, branches and roots, locking away atmospheric carbon for the lifetime of the tree. As a fast-growing tree, willow accumulates carbon quickly.

RIVER HEALTH

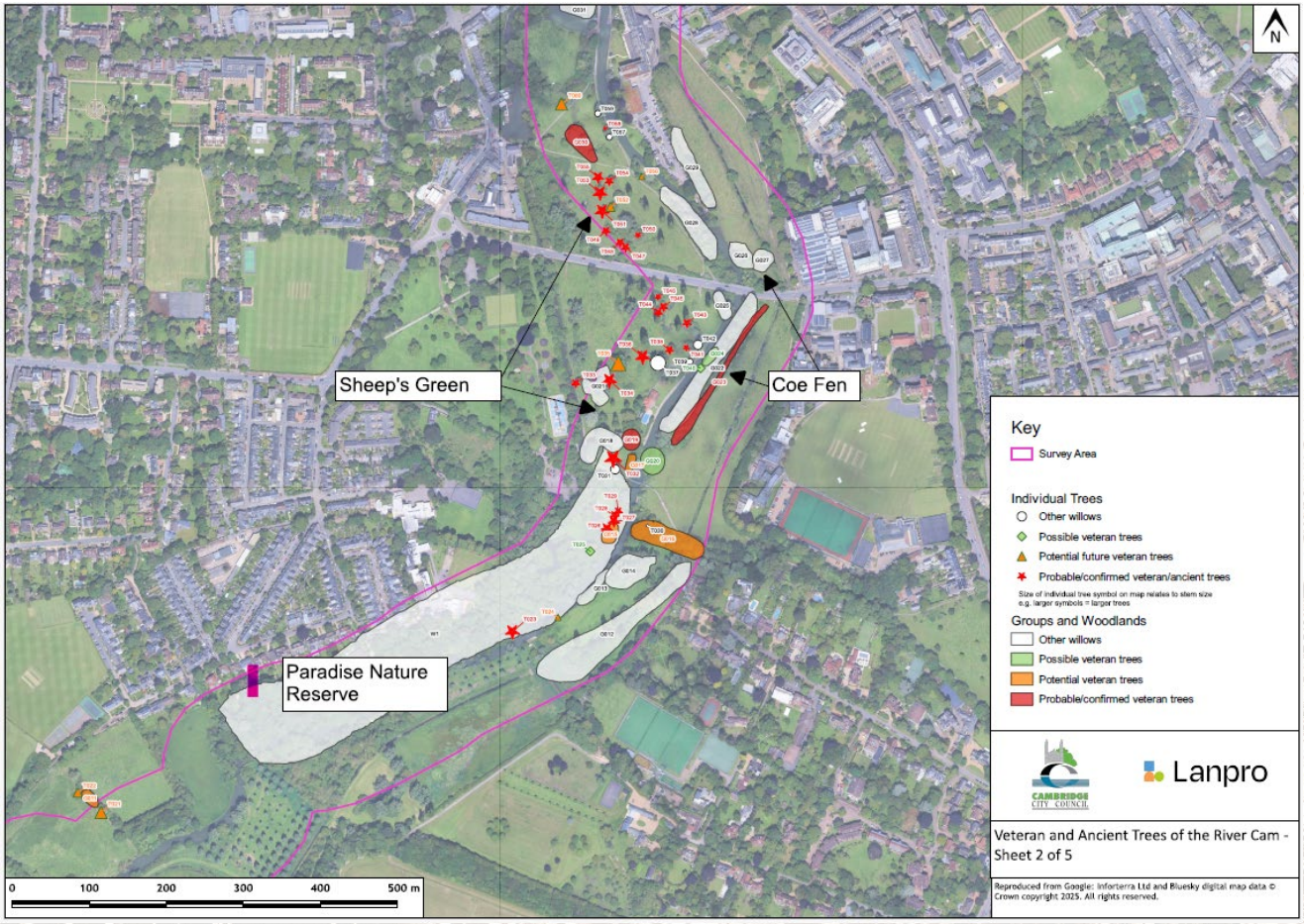
The Rivers' Trust emphasises[9] the importance of trees near rivers and the multiple benefits they can provide to aquatic ecosystems.

For example, trees that fall into rivers are incredibly important for introducing habitat variation, creating pockets of slower moving water that create shelter for fish and aquatic invertebrates to breed. Overhanging canopies can also provide shade on hot days, reducing the temperature of the water and the risk of drought.

Tree roots can help to stabilise riverbanks and play a role in absorbing nutrients from nearby arable or pasture fields, mitigating the amount of nutrient input and eutrophication of river systems.

[9] The Rivers Trust. Planting Trees for Water. Available at: https://theriverstrust.org/our-work/working-with-nature/trees-for-water

Veteran and Ancient Willow Trees of the River Cam



Survey Results

An extraordinary number of willow trees live along the River Cam. A special few are considered to be ancient – trees that have survived beyond the typical life span for their species. A great many more are considered to be veteran – those with exceptional value by virtue of their age, size or condition.

Along a 10km stretch of the River Cam, from Grantchester in the south, through the heart of the City and to the A14 in the north, a total of 33 individual willow trees were confirmed as ancient or veteran during surveys in 2024 to 2025 and a further 11 groups of trees were found to contain ancient or veteran willows (see one of the five survey results maps above). The largest tree recorded was a hollowed, gnarled specimen at Grantchester Meadows, with a stem measuring almost 2 metres in diameter (see title page).

Significant concentrations of ancient and veteran trees were recorded at the Local Nature Reserves of Sheep's Green and Coe Fen. Historical pollarded willow rows were frequent in the northern section of the River Cam towards the A14.

The UK has 18-20 native willow species depending on the taxonomic source consulted. Along the River Cam, the most frequently recorded species were white willow *Salix alba* and crack willow *Salix fragilis*. Occasionally, weeping willows *Salix babylonica* were recorded as well as osier *Salix viminalis.*

Full results of the 2024-2025 willow survey along the River Cam are provided in a separate Tree Survey Report[10] along with maps showing the distribution of ancient and veteran willow trees along the river as well as all other types of willows including those with the potential to become veteran in the future

Summary of Tree Survey Results

	Individual Trees	Groups of Trees	Woodlands
Probable or confirmed ancient/veteran trees	37	11	0
Possible ancient/veteran trees	5	9	0
Future potential veteran trees	16	17	1
Other trees (i.e. not veteran or ancient)	55	62	3
Total	**113**	**98**	**4**

Over the page are some visual examples of the types of veteran willow trees encountered along the River Cam.

[10] Lanpro. (May 2025). Tree Survey Report – River Cam Veteran Willows.

What do Veteran Willow Trees Look Like?

MAIDEN TREE

A naturally grown tree without much previous human intervention or pruning.

LAPSED POLLARD

Trees that were historically pollarded at 2-4m height but have not been cut for many years. Without this management, they may be more prone to structural failure, including partial or complete collapse.

MANAGED POLLARD

A tree that is cut regularly at a height above ground level to promote new growth.

PHOENIX REGENERATION

Trees that have fallen and regenerated from the base or elsewhere ‘to rise again’.

Why are Ancient and Veteran Trees Important?

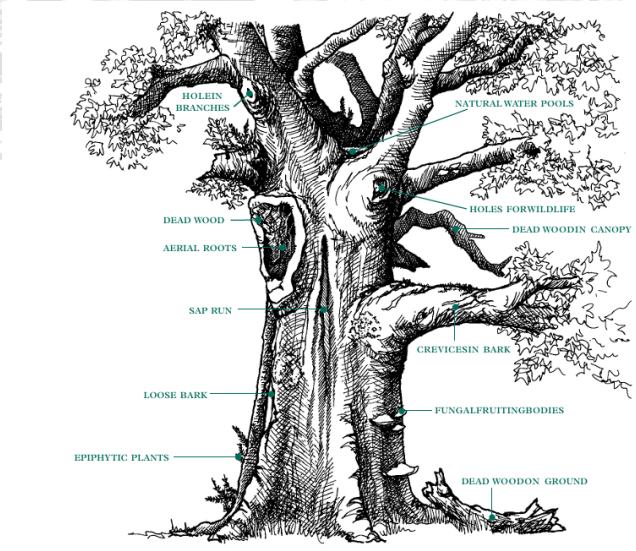
Oliver Rackham – *"ten thousand oaks of 100 years old are not a substitute for one 500 year-old oak".*

Whilst the quote above, from the great landscape historian Oliver Rackham, relates to oaks, the same can be said of any species of tree including willows. Ancient willow trees are important for a number of reasons. Arguably, the three most important are:

1. They are **historical features in their own right**, physical landmarks that remind us of our past relationship with willow and the lost fenland landscapes they epitomise.
2. They are **remarkable survivors**, surviving a succession of extreme weather events, pests and disease and changing environmental conditions, making their genetics extremely valuable for the conservation of the species group.
3. **Extraordinary habitat and biodiversity value**. Due to their great age relative to others in their species, habitat features have been able to accumulate in ancient willow trees such as stem hollowing, woodpecker holes, large and small diameter standing and fallen deadwood, fungal decay, cracks, splits and ancient partnerships within the soil-based bacterial and fungal partners. Together, these accumulated features create a wealth of opportunities for invertebrates, fungi, birds and bats, creating a diverse living ecosystem in a single tree.

Whilst veteran trees may not be old, they are equally valuable because of their diverse range of habitat features and corresponding value for biodiversity. Instead of accumulating these features over a long time like ancient trees, veteran trees have produced these habitat features through surviving environmental challenges such as lightning strikes or fungal decay which has similarly led to hollowing, deadwood, cracks, splits and an overall structural complexity comparable to ancient trees.

Habitat Features of Veteran Trees[11]



[11] Image taken from: Read, H. (February 2000). Veteran Trees: A Guide to Good Management. English Nature. Page 14.

Ancient and Veteran Willow Tree Management

Each Tree is an Individual

Every ancient and veteran tree is a unique individual, with a particular history and a particular set of environmental conditions around it. As such, bespoke management for each individual tree is vital and should follow a detailed individual assessment of the tree by a professional arboriculturist with veteran tree management experience.

This assessment should include answering the following questions:

- Is the tree in active management (e.g. pollarding, coppicing or a crown reduction cycle)?
- If so, how has the tree responded to previous pruning or how have nearby similar trees responded?
- What is the current structural and physiological health of the tree?
- Are there any environmental factors affecting the tree? For example: soil compaction, nearby buildings or footpaths, vandalism, livestock, riverbank erosion or overshadowing by adjacent trees.

Management Justification

Before embarking on any form of ancient or veteran tree management, it is important to consider the reasons why management may be required. By doing so, this can then inform what management actions (if any) are required and proportionate. Reasons for management may include:

- To manage an established health and safety risk;
- To preserve the longevity and structural integrity of a tree in order to conserve certain habitat features; or
- To address a site-specific concern such as overhanging branches inhibiting pedestrians, cyclists, boats or vehicles or for example, adjacent younger trees beginning to overshadow a veteran or ancient tree.

It is important to note that some trees do not require management for management's sake, particularly those that may never have received any previous management (e.g. maiden trees).

Management Options

Once the individual tree has been assessed and the justification for management established, this can then inform what options may be available to achieve the management objective.

Given the sensitivity of ancient and veteran trees to pruning, particularly maiden trees or lapsed pollards, pruning is often a last resort and the following management options should be considered first.

Management Justification	**Management Options**
Health and safety risk to the public, for example a risk to the public or buildings or other infrastructure.	Can the footpath, bench or other infrastructure be moved from underneath/near the tree? Can access to the tree be limited to reduce risk, for example by allowing grass to grow long under the canopy, establishing a dead hedge around the tree or roping/fencing it off? If a branch or stem is at risk of falling, can supports be installed such as A-frames, mounded soil or bracing to alleviate the risk? Can branches (including dead ones) be reduced in length instead of removed?
To preserve the longevity and structural integrity of the tree.	Can the environment around the tree be improved? For example: the staged removal of overshadowing trees (e.g. halo-thinning), reduction of compaction from people or livestock, mulching to improve the rooting area and reduce soil compaction, limiting access to the tree to deter vandalism, staged severing of ivy stems to reduce wind loading on a decayed stem and promote new growth in the inner crown
Site specific concerns such as encroaching branches or competing nearby trees.	Can access to the tree be altered by re-routing pedestrians, cyclists or other infrastructure? Can nearby trees be removed in stages (halo thinning) and new tree planting sited away from existing ancient and veteran trees? Can any non-veteran trees be pruned preferentially to improve access?

If the management objective cannot be met without pruning then pruning work will need to be carefully planned and undertaken by an experienced arborist and likely phased over many years, as part of an individual tree management plan. Monitoring must be built into the management plan in order to observe the tree's response to the work and adapt management where necessary.

Trees in Active Management

Many willows along the River Cam are in active management, either cyclical pollarding, coppicing or crown reductions. Once pruning has started, it is important that this management continues (provided the tree remains in good health) so that the pollard or coppice does not become 'lapsed' (see page 9 for an example of a lapsed pollard).

The cessation of pollarding or coppicing can lead to the growth of large stems which are more liable to break out, compromising the overall structural integrity of the tree and leading to the premature loss of the veteran or ancient tree and its associated habitat features.

All tree work must follow best practice guidelines including British Standard 3998:2010 'Tree Work – Recommendations'[12] as well as established best practice for ancient and veteran trees provided by Natural England[13]. Tree work must be undertaken by an experienced, insured, qualified arborist[14].

POLLARDING

Branches that have grown after the previous pollard cut should normally be cut at their base and just above the previous pollard point to prevent damaging the protective anti-bacterial and anti-fungal defensive layer established by the tree following the previous cut.

Selective cutting of branches may be undertaken if required, whereby only some regrowth branches are cut in each cycle in order to prevent dieback and decay in the stem.

Pollarding must be undertaken cyclically and always with due regard to the tree's previous response to pruning.

COPPICING

Trees in active coppice management can continue to be managed by cyclically cutting regrown stems near the base, just above the point of the last cut.

CROWN REDUCTION

Trees that have been recently crown reduced should generally continue to be crown reduced cyclically to maintain the smaller crown.

It is important that the crown of the tree is reduced in proportion to its original shape, so that the overall 'balance' of the crown is not altered.

A crown reduction is achieved by pruning back branch tips to suitable secondary branches to reduce the overall height, spread and volume of the crown. Useful guidance on crown reductions can be found in British Standard 3998:2010.

For veteran and ancient trees, crown reductions may need to be 'phased' whereby much smaller reductions in branch length are made over a number of years (often 10-30 years) in order to monitor the tree's reaction to each phase and slowly over time achieve the ultimate required crown reduction. For veteran and ancient trees, phased crown

---

[12] BSI Standards Publication. (December 2010). British Standard 3998:2010 'Tree Work – Recommendations'. ISBN 978 0 580 53777 6

[13] Natural England (1st February 2000). Veteran Trees: A Guide to Good Management. Information Note 13. Available at: https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/75035

[14] Arboricultural Association. Tree Work – Choosing Your Arborist (Tree Surgeon) – Help and Advice. Available at: https://trees.org.uk/Trees.org.uk/media/Trees-org.uk/Documents/CYA/Choosing-Your-Arborist-Lft-25-web.pdf

reductions may specifically aim to encourage the development of a smaller crown which is lower in height, helping the tree to maintain structural integrity. Where a smaller lower crown is the aim this is often referred to as 'retrenchment pruning'.

Trees Not in Active Management

For trees not in an active cycle of pollarding, coppicing or crown reduction, pruning work is often a last resort due to the sensitivity of maiden trees or lapsed pollards/coppices to pruning. Other management options, such as those included in the table on page 12, should be considered first.

If pruning is still required to meet the management objective, it can often be because:

- The tree is at risk of collapse due to heavy stems/branches that may subside over time;
- To encourage a smaller lower crown that is less susceptible to wind damage and uprooting;
- To restore the tree to an active cycle of pollard management; or
- To alleviate the risk of collapse of an individual branch.

Management options for such situations can include selective reductions of dead or live branches to improve their stability or phased crown reductions to reduce crown size and weight and encourage lower canopy growth. Sensitive phased crown reduction work has been successfully carried out on veteran willows at Sheep's Green[15].

Veteran trees which are lapsed pollards or maiden trees should not be pollarded unless survival is deemed possible after a programme of phased crown reductions and monitoring has been completed.

[15] https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/veteran-tree-management-on-sheeps-green-and-coe-fen#:~:text=The%20site%20is%20home%20to,willow%2C%20hawthorn%20and%20poplar%20too.

LEGISLATIVE, WILDLIFE AND GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to undertaking any tree management, it is important to consider any legislative or wildlife considerations first.

Legislative considerations include:

- Checking whether the tree is protected via a Conservation Area designation or Tree Preservation Order – if so, a notification or application to the Local Planning Authority will be required prior to work being carried out. The protection status of trees in Cambridge can be checked here[16].
- Checking whether a felling licence is required – see Forestry Commission guidance[17].

Wildlife considerations include:

- Bird nesting – All wild bird species (not game birds) are protected by The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Tree work must not disturb or destroy nesting birds. The nesting bird season is generally considered to be from mid-February to mid-September.
- Roosting bats - All British bat species are protected by Regulation 43 of The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended). Disturbance or destruction of a roost (even if the bat is not present at the time) is an offence. Advice from an ecologist can be sought to ascertain whether a tree has bat roost potential and whether further bat surveys, mitigation and compensation may be needed in order to legally undertake tree work.
- Other protected species – veteran and ancient trees can support rare invertebrates, fungi, plants or lichens that may be protected from killing or injury under Schedule 5 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). A survey by an ecologist may be required prior to tree work to ensure legal compliance.

General considerations:

- **Pruning of veteran and ancient trees is best avoided in spring and autumn**. Combined with likely bird nesting restrictions, tree pruning is often best undertaken in the winter months.
- **All deadwood is immensely valuable** and should not be removed without reason. Deadwood can often be retained in situ through reducing its length. If deadwood must be removed, it should be preferentially retained at the base of the tree to provide fallen deadwood habitat for invertebrates and fungi.

[16] https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/map-of-protected-trees

[17] https://www.gov.uk/guidance/tree-felling-licence-when-you-need-to-apply

MANAGING VETERAN TREE POPULATIONS

Where a population of veteran trees exist in a location such as the River Cam, it is equally important to consider the trees as individuals *and* as part of a population.

Populations of veteran and ancient trees can support rare species that rely on a local abundance of the niche habitats that these trees provide. Some of these species may have limited abilities to disperse (such as lichens or some invertebrates) and as such, the co-existence of many veteran trees in a specific area may be vital to the long-term survival of that dependant species.

With this in mind, those caring for ancient and veteran trees should be mindful of the landscape-scale retention of certain habitat features present in veteran trees such as wood mulch within hollowed stems or branches, large diameter standing and fallen deadwood and aerial water pockets.

In addition to the geographic spread of these habitats within veteran trees, it is also important to consider the temporal consistency of these habitats. Veteran trees do not survive forever, and it is therefore vital that early mature and mature willow trees are retained in order to create the veterans of the future, providing continuity of habitat for associated flora, fauna and fungi.

Tree planting of new willows can play a part in helping to create future mature and subsequently veteran willows.

As part of the survey of the River Cam undertaken in 2024 and 2025 (as reported on page 7), a total of 57 areas were identified along 10km of the River Cam where willow planting may be possible. Planting opportunities ranged from spaces for individual trees to groups of trees and new willow rows. Further information and maps of identified planting opportunities can be found in the Tree Survey Report[18].

In some of the locations suggested, existing ancient and veteran willow trees may already be present. In such cases, new planting should be located away from the crowns of veteran and ancient willow trees in order to ensure that those trees are not compromised in the future by shade.

The long-term conservation of veteran willow populations depends not only on retaining existing veteran and ancient trees, but also on maintaining continuity between generations. Candidate veteran trees, future veteran trees and succession planting all play an important role in bridging continuity gaps that can otherwise develop because of the long timescales required for veteran tree development.

Succession Planting Opportunities. An example of a stretch of the River Cam where willows of the future could be planted.

[18] Lanpro. (May 2025). Tree Survey Report – River Cam Veteran Willows.

Statement of Charter Principles

Thank you for your interest and attention in learning about the importance of the incredible population of willow trees along the River Cam. We hope that through reading this Charter that you feel informed and inspired to take action to conserve and protect these trees in whatever way you can.

As part of the publication of this Charter, Lanpro will be hosting a series of workshops and events on behalf of CCC to raise awareness of this work and galvanise collective action to promote the sustainable management of the River Cam willows. We very much hope that you will attend and use the opportunity to ask questions and receive support and inspiration on how to move forward collectively to secure the future of willow trees.

To signify your support for this work and commitment to the following principles, we encourage you to sign this Charter below.

Principle 1. Conserve and protect the ancient and veteran willow trees of the River Cam

Take action to promote the retention and longevity of existing ancient and veteran willow trees along the River Cam through recognising their existence and value and undertaking sensitive, practical management activities to promote tree longevity.

Principle 2. Conserve the veterans of the future

Existing young, semi-mature and mature willow trees, if protected, will one day have the chance to become the veterans of the future. By protecting all willow trees along the River Cam you commit to ensuring that future generations of people and wildlife can enjoy and live with veteran willows. By protecting all willows, you also commit to maintaining the ancient fen landscape of Cambridge, preserving the link to our past and all the social, cultural and heritage value of willow trees.

Principle 3. Establish New Willows for the Future

Take opportunities and action to secure the veterans of the future by planting and maintaining new willow trees along the River Cam. New willows will be planted in appropriate locations and care taken after planting to ensure that the new trees survive and thrive.

Principle 4. Communicate the Importance of Willows

Tell others what you have learnt! Friends, family, colleagues. The more we know about our environment, the more we care what happens to it. Commit to taking opportunities to share with others about what you have learned in this Charter, enriching others' experience of Cambridge and appreciation of the natural world around them.

Principle 5. Get Involved with Tree Management

Engage with like-minded people, other landowners and managers, professional Arboriculturists and ecologists to take whatever action you can to manage willows sustainably. Be that organising or participating in community work parties to undertake coppicing, pollarding or other tree management, creating dead hedges or log piles, using the products of willow pollarding for crafts or art to help re-incentivise pollarding practices or collectively bidding for funding to implement tree management or planting.

Support for Charter signatories – why sign up?

Practical Advice and Guidance

By signing up to the Charter, landowners and land managers can access practical support from Cambridge City Council to better understand, protect and manage ancient, veteran and future veteran willow trees on their sites.

2nd Phase Surveys

Where landowners agree, the Council may be able to undertake a 2nd phase veteran tree survey using the DiversiTree project's survey methodology and provide site-specific observations relating to veteran trees, continuity gaps, succession opportunities and potential management considerations

Cambridge City Council Tree and Biodiversity Officers have completed training in recognising and managing ancient and other veteran trees, covering:

- veteran tree characteristics
- ageing processes
- decay
- fungi
- roots and mycorrhizae
- survival strategies
- irreplaceable habitat value
- associated species
- management options and key threats, and
- continuity planning, succession planting and veteran tree management.

While the Council's site visits would not replace a professional arboricultural assessment, such as one undertaken by a VetCert-qualified practitioner, officers can provide an initial indication of whether ancient, veteran or future veteran trees may be present and advise on appropriate next steps.

The DiversiTree survey methodology does not seek to formally identify, verify or designate ancient trees. Where specialist assessment, management planning or formal recognition is required, the Council may recommend seeking advice from an appropriately qualified arboricultural specialist.

Funding and Partnership Opportunities

The Council may also be able to help partners identify, apply for and secure funding for sensitive veteran tree management, protection works and succession planting.

Information gathered through 2nd Phase Veteran Tree Surveys may also support future funding applications by providing an evidence base for management works, succession planting and veteran tree conservation projects. The surveys can help identify priorities, develop project proposals and create "shovel-ready" schemes that may be better placed to attract external funding when opportunities arise.

In some cases, funding opportunities may be more attractive when pursued collectively through a network of Charter signatories rather than by individual landowners acting alone. By working together, partners can demonstrate landscape-scale benefits, habitat connectivity, coordinated veteran tree management and long-term continuity planning across the River Cam corridor. This collaborative approach may help strengthen funding applications and increase opportunities to secure investment for veteran tree conservation, succession planting and associated habitat enhancement projects.

Work planned for 2026 at Grantchester Meadows, funded through the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund, shows how partnership projects can support land owned and managed by different organisations, with funding awarded to Cambridge City Council to install 15 rustic cattle guards to protect newly planted willows on land owned by King's College and managed by Cambridge Past, Present & Future. Similar collaborative opportunities may arise for Charter signatories where suitable funding becomes available.

Sign the Charter for Willows

We welcome two types of signatories:

- Landowners, managers and organisations within the project area – those who own or manage land containing willows along the River Cam corridor in Cambridge.
- Supporters and stakeholders – individuals, organisations, or community groups who share an interest in the conservation of veteran trees or who care for similar trees elsewhere in the city.

Register your interest via our Expression of Interest Form (EOI) and we will invite you to sign up to the Charter - visit Cambridge City Council's website for the DiversiTree project at https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/diversitree-project where you will find a link to the online EOI form and further details about how to get involved.

Please note that completing the Expression of Interest Form does not mean you have signed the Charter. It simply lets the project team know that you would like to find out more or get involved.

Those who go on to sign the Charter will become part of a growing network of people and organisations committed to protecting, celebrating and renewing Cambridge's living willow heritage.

Glossary

Tree Form/Habitat Descriptor	**Definition**
Managed Pollard/Pollarding	A tree that is regularly cut at a height above the ground (typically higher than a coppiced tree) to promote new growth. The practice was historically used to allow animals to graze without damaging the new branches. The height of the cut would depend on the type of grazing animal; for example, higher cuts were needed to protect branches from cattle, while lower cuts would suffice for sheep.
Lapsed Pollard	Lapsed pollards are trees that were once regularly pollarded but have not been cut for many years.
Willow Row	A willow row refers to a line or grouping of willow trees that are planted or naturally growing in a row or line. These rows of willows are often used in a variety of contexts, such as for boundary marking, windbreaks, or aesthetic purposes. In some cases, willows in rows are regularly coppiced or pollarded for their wood, leaves, or other uses, especially in historical contexts.
Maiden Tree	A maiden tree is a tree that has grown naturally without significant human intervention, other than possible minor tree surgery. It typically has a trunk that extends from the base to the upper crown.
Coppice/coppicing	A coppiced tree is cut near ground level, allowing new shoots to grow from the base, or "stool." These trees are typically cut in cycles to produce sticks or poles, with the cutting frequency depending on the desired size. While the new growth is often young, the stool itself can be very old.
Coppard	Trees coppiced and then later pollarded (or bundle planted trees later pollarded)
Phoenix	Phoenix regeneration refers to a process where a tree, after significant damage or decay, regenerates from its base or elsewhere from previously dormant buds. This type of regeneration can occur after the tree has fallen or experienced damage such as branch loss, storm damage, or natural decay, and is an important mechanism for the tree's survival and continued growth.
Woodland	Land with more than 25% cover of trees that are more than5m in height. Includes plantations, semi-natural woodland, coppice, coppice with standards and wet woodland.
Probable or Confirmed Ancient Trees	A living tree that has passed maturity, lost apical dominance, shows some degree of crown retrenchment and has a stem girth at 1.5m height exceeding 4.5m for members of the Salix genus. Many trees under the survey scope may have been historically managed that crown retrenchment may not be clearly identifiable.
Probable or Confirmed Veteran Trees	A living tree which has at least four or more veteran features of the following and at least two of the key features marked in bold: • **Significant stem hollowing (more than 30% of stem cross-sectional area)**

Tree Form/Habitat Descriptor	**Definition**
	• **Significant hollowing of main scaffold limbs (more than 30% of limb cross-sectional area)** • **Variety of sized standing/fallen deadwood** • Natural crown retrenchment • Water pockets • Decay holes • Physical damage to trunk • Flaking bark • Sap runs • Cracks/crevices • Fungal fruiting bodies • Epiphytes (moss, lichens, ferns, ivy, flowering plants) • Live stubs • Layering
Possible Veteran Trees	A living tree that possibly meets the criteria for a veteran tree as above [for probable/confirmed veteran trees] but where it may not be possible (for example due to lack of access/visibility) to confirm the presence of relevant criteria for example the extent of hollowing in stem or scaffold limbs or it is suspected that previous tree management has removed one or more key features.
Possible Ancient Trees	A living tree that possibly meets the criteria for an ancient tree but where it may not be possible due to lack of access/visibility to confirm a stem girth greater than 4.5m or where the tree's form is ambiguous but great age is suspected.
Potential Future Veterans	A living tree which has three veteran features listed above [for probable/confirmed veteran trees] for probable/confirmed veteran trees and only one of the key features marked in bold.
Crown Reduction	An operation that results in an overall reduction in the height and/or spread of the crown of a tree by means of a general shortening of twigs and/or branches, whilst retaining the main framework of the crown.
Retrenchment Pruning	A form of crown reduction, intended to encourage development of the lower crown, which emulates the natural process whereby the crown of an ageing tree retains its overall biomechanical integrity by becoming smaller through the progressive shedding of small branches.
Crown	The main foliage-bearing part of a tree.
Stem	The principal above-ground structural component of a tree that supports the branches.