

## **Bishop Martin Seeley writes...**

My wife and I recently took a walk through Staverton Thicks in Rendelsham Forest in the east of the county.

It was an overcast Saturday afternoon, promising not to rain in Ipswich when we left – with the washing on the line – but as we travelled east the drizzle began, so for stretches the walk was rather damp.

Fortunately for the washing, when we returned home we discovered Ipswich had remained dry.

Staverton Thicks is one of a number of significant remnants of ancient medieval woodland in Suffolk, and the park of which it is part includes what may be the most extensive tract of ancient pollarded oaks in Europe.

The park is an overgrown deer park, and apparently Mary Tudor, briefly Queen of France and Henry VIII's sister (not Mary Tudor, Queen of England and Henry's older daughter), went hunting in the park in 1528 with her second husband, Charles Brandon, the first Duke of Suffolk.

We wanted to walk there, though, not because of the human history but because of the trees.

The Thicks, the overgrown ancient woodland, includes huge gnarled oaks of immense girth, as well as what are said to be some of the largest holly trees in Britain, as well as some of the largest silver birch trees I've ever seen.

Oliver Rackham, the Bungay-born Cambridge ecologist and historian of British woodlands, described the Thicks as a "primordial forest" of oaks "of an unknown age, surrealistic shapes and improbable girth."

And the park is a remarkable expanse of many more immense sturdy oaks covered in burrs that enhance their ancient appearance.

There are over 4,000 oaks in the park, many more than 400 years old, and Rackham described the area as “a famous and awesome place of Tolkienesque wonder and beauty”.

The trees were cut from a relatively young age – when they were about 40 years old – with the upper branches cut down initially to heights of about 2 to 5 metres, and then cut again every fifty years up until about 200 to 250 years ago.

This pollarding produced denser canopies, and also kept the grass open to the light with reduced canopy spread – the trees are quite well spaced – presumably for the benefit of the deer and other livestock.

Despite the damp and the impending dusk, we spent some time walking along the paths through the Thicks and along the side of the park, stopping frequently just to take in the mysterious beauty of these extraordinary trees.

There is something about trees, and large old trees in particular, that speaks to us – or me at least – in these uncertain and perplexing times.

They have witnessed and survived the vicissitudes of the centuries and look set to do so for the centuries to come.

In fact, at 400 years, the Staverton Oaks are not the oldest in Suffolk – that distinction goes to the “Tea Party Oak” in Ickworth, some 700 years old.

And the oldest tree in the UK is the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire, estimated at an astonishing 2 to 3,000 years old so for which the younger estimate places its germination at the time of Christ, and its older estimate at the time of King David.

So they give us perspective, and for me the comparatively youthful Staverton trees certainly do that, and a perspective that both helps me properly locate my concerns and my place in the world, and also gives me hope.

So why am I thinking about ancient trees?

Because they help me in my relationship with God, and that sense of finding perspective, and deepening my sense of my place in creation, and most particularly, who Jesus is, through whom, as John's Gospel tells us, everything came and comes into being.

And because we are at beginning Lent, the Christian season of forty days (excluding Sundays) leading to Easter Day.

And while we think of Lent as a time to give things up, or take something up, the reason why we do that is not to lose weight, or to feel virtuous (the first may be a good thing, the second, not!).

Lent is a season to reflect on the fundamentals of who we are, our place in the universe, and so with our relationship with God.

So places where we can make those connections, that take us out of ourselves, that draw us into wonder, are places for us to find in Lent.

It is easy to give things up – even though we moan, or actually give things up because we have ulterior motives.

But the point of Lent is depth, honesty, truthfulness, growing in knowledge and wisdom.

And a place like Staverton, I have discovered, helps me do that. A place to ponder and to wonder, that puts me in a place where I find my place, and see beyond to the mystery and majesty of God.

