

## **Transcript: Exeter Tree Tales Podcast**

*Treelands Podcast Mini-Series*

*Hosted by Lewis Winks with Guy Shrubsole as guest.*

### **Intro:**

Welcome to this Treelands podcast. This mini series was developed by the Lestari in association with Stellaria Media in 2023 on behalf of Forest Research as part of their work to explore the cultural and social value of trees outside of woodland. Despite making up around a fifth of the tree cover in Great Britain, trees outside of woodland, particularly in rural and peri urban areas, remain an understudied part of the treescape. This project is funded and supported by Defra as part of the Nature for Climate Fund program of work. You can find out more information about the project by following the links in the show notes. We hope you enjoy listening.

*Around there...Around there, and then here we're going to see how low down we have to cross. I mean, I wonder if we want to just cross there anyway, because that's where one of the descriptions is from. It's a question of how far upstream we have to go to get across as well, to get across the actual Tavy because there is the prime location...*

**Lewis:** So I'm up on Dartmoor today with Guy Shrubsole, author and campaigner. Guy recently authored the book 'The Lost Rainforests of Britain'. And I'm pleased to be up here on Dartmoor with Guy today. And we're here for a bit of an adventure: the quest for the legendary Watern Oak. Sounds exciting. Can you tell me a bit more about what is the Watern Oak and why are we going there?

**Guy:** So the Watern Oak is this semi legendary solitary twisted tree, an oak tree that once existed, we think high up on Dartmoor along the Tavy Cleave, because it shows up in various old documents and various accounts from the Victorian period. But it's, I think, a fascinating insight potentially into Dartmoor's lost ecosystems, lost habitats, lost trees in what is otherwise a very treeless landscape today.

**Lewis:** So we're going to follow the river up the valley now to the Tavy Cleave. Luckily for us, I think the river is a good navigational aid, but it does feel like we're entering some of the most remote parts of Dartmoor today.

**Guy:** It's very remote.

**Lewis:** It's got an air of a quest about it.

**Guy:** Definitely!

**Lewis:** So, do you think this river is going to be crossable because there's been quite a lot of rain in the past few days

**Guy:** Yeah, of course. I mean, I'd like to get them at all costs if I'm honest.

**Lewis:** At all costs! ... First bits of drizzle... We're just ducking out of the wind here and we're actually standing in a stream.

**Guy:** So this is interesting, there's an island in the River Tavy here, and you can see that the vegetation growing on it is very different to what we have on the heavily grazed hillsides either side of it. There's lots of willow trees, there's rowans. There's this rich understory of - I think that's wood rush possibly - but certainly heather, might even be some blueberries in there and quite a lot of bracken. And it's just a really telling indicator that these are the sorts of plants and trees that can grow here high up on Dartmoor and they would be on the surrounding hillsides were it not for the density of sheep and other livestock grazing here.

**Lewis:** I'm just looking around and I can see the fairly barren in terms of vegetation hillsides. There's lots of scree slopes, but really I can't see any trees away from the river.

**Guy:** I think what's interesting is that I'm pretty sure I've seen old photos of Tavy Cleave where it was even more barren and even more clearly overgrazed. But what might have been happening down this valley over the last 20 or 30 years is that there may have been a slight reduction in grazing compared to the days of what we call hedgerow payments under CAP, the Common Agricultural Policy, when there was a real drive to intensify food production and payments to the farmers per head of livestock. And I think maybe what we're seeing here is the slow regrowth of vegetation, again, on the most hard to reach places like the boulder fields, the steep sided hills here and of course on the island. But they're only surviving and clinging on this little island that none of the sheep can get to because of the fast flowing Tavy all around it.

**Lewis:** So we're looking for the Watern Oak. Is it possible that the Watern Oak could have been on one of these islands?

**Guy:** Oo interesting! Well, we've got various bits of documentary evidence of the Watern Oak. It doesn't look like it's growing right in the river in some of that documentary evidence. But certainly in terms of why a big oak tree like the Watern Oak survived must have been an interesting set of circumstances that allowed it to grow into this big striking tree that existed in the various stories that have been told about it.

**Lewis:** Perfect, a cup of tea.

**Guy:** Ah nice! Cheers!

**Lewis:** Cheers!

**Lewis:** So what's the deal with the Watern Oak Guy?

**Guy:** It's been intrigued me for some time because it appears in a number of maps and old books about Dartmoor dating back to the start of the 19th century. I got researching this because I was researching my book 'The Lost Rainforest of Britain' and looking at evidence for when Dartmoor was less of a treeless landscape than it is today. I came across these references to the Watern Oak, and one of the earliest references is in the first edition

Ordnance Survey map of Dartmoor, which was first engraved and surveyed in about 1809, around the time of the Napoleonic wars. And, you know, you look at this expanse of Dartmoor and it shows Wistman's Wood, but mostly it shows this massive treeless moorland, except when you look along Tavy Cleave, there is this one little note where it says 'Watern Oak'. Spelt O A K. And if you look at today's Ordnance Survey maps, you'll see that it's changed its spelling to Watern Oak O K E. And the other interesting thing about the 1809 Ordnance Survey map - the original one - is that next to the words Watern Oak is a little tiny engraving of a tree. It seems to be growing on the side of one of the tributaries of the Tavy River.

**Lewis:** So as you say this is an engraving, this one here?

**Guy:** Yeah. So you can see how they've tried to represent - they didn't have the kind of modern methods of showing contours, but they tried to show the steepness of the hills with the hatching that they put in here and see the Tavy river snaking down through the moor. But this lovely little tiny Watern Oak symbol.

**Lewis:** Somebody has gone to the trouble of actually engraving an oak symbol onto the map. They'd decided that this is a notable feature in the landscape.

**Guy:** Yeah. Wistman's Wood is shown on this map. But for example, there's no mention on the map of Black Tor Copse or Pile's Copse, the other two upland oak woods on Dartmoor.

**Lewis:** So presumably that's because of all of the myths and legends associated with Wistman's Wood, and it's in popular culture at the time?

**Guy:** Indeed, Wistman's Wood, I think, was seen as early as the 17th century as, quote, 'one of the wonders of Dartmoor', the wonders of Devon even, and was seen as worthy of inclusion in, you know, countless guidebooks and travelogs and maps as well. But obviously also by this early mapmaking stage, they were seen to be merit too, to including the Watern Oak on here. Now, obviously, we can say, well, 'was it actually a thing?' Is it just a corruption of some other meaning? There are other places on Dartmoor referred to as 'oak', like Okehampton, that could be named after oak trees or some have suggested it's something to do with 'oke', meaning 'fast flowing river'. But obviously the river here is called the Tavy. There's the Rattle Brook. There's no of the nearby rivers or watercourses that are called 'oak' or 'oke'. So I think this stands alone as a feature in this part of Dartmoor.

**Lewis:** So that map is from 1809.

**Guy:** Yeah.

**Lewis:** Are there any other records? How does it evolve over time? Do we know whether it continues on Ordnance Survey maps as they're kind of reprinted and so on?

**Guy:** Well, I mean, the next editions, there's this wonderful online resource, the National Library of Scotland's Old Historical Ordnance Survey maps. But it's quite frustrating because actually you try and look for the old Ordnance Survey maps of the middle of Dartmoor, and

they don't seem to exist. They either haven't been catalog or perhaps no one ever even survey this far inland, I'm not sure. I kind of feel they must have been, but there is kind of a slightly less detailed map from the late 19th century, and it does still show the words Watern Oak spelt 'OAK' on here, there's no representation of the tree. And strangely, where the label has been, it seems to have moved from the South bank of the Tavy to the northern bank, which is right where we are right at the moment and doesn't seem to make any sense. I'm not quite sure why that's happened, and I think that's actually an error because there are a few other references to Watern Oak in some of the various guidebooks that were written about Dartmoor in the Victorian period. One of the references is in the Reverend Rose 'Perambulation of Dartmoor', which I think was first published in 1848, and he talks about how the Tavy flows north of Fur Tor and Watern Oak, therefore it must have been on the southern bank. Then there's another reference, this time from 'Handbook for Travellers in Devon and Cornwall', published in 1856, published with John Murray. It doesn't seem to have a named author. But this time it talks about the solitary tree called Watern Oak along the narrow gorge of Tavy Cleave and beyond it in the south east in the direction of Cut Hill. So they've been quite precise.

**Lewis:** These travellers through this landscape have taken the time to know where this tree is.

**Guy:** That's right. There's two more and I think they give us a sense of why the Watern Oak stood out. This is from 1867, so further on into Victoria's reign. It's an account that was actually published in the Exeter and Plymouth Gazette by a couple of people who'd gone for quite a long walk over Dartmoor, and they describe ascending Amicombe Hill and then saying that they could look down on the infant Tavy winding through Tavy Cleave, Tavy Wain and Tavistock, and beyond it ie on the southern bank, Watern Oak: a solitary tree backed by the abrupt crags and lofty peaks of Fur Tor. The last reference, though, is perhaps the most romantic, but also I think gives us the greatest sense of why there was value placed upon this solitary tree. So this is an antiquarians book, John Page, who wrote 'An Exploration of Dartmoor and its Antiquities' in 1895, and he recounts again talking about the Tavy Cleave – "midway is the solitary wind twisted tree called Watern Oak, which has been so often hailed with delight by the moor man lost in a fog", which I think is a wonderful little description, but also gives this, I think, the answer to why people cared about the Watern Oak because it was an aid to navigation and in the relatively treeless landscape of Dartmoor, when you're lost in a fog, you really need every aid to navigation that you can get. So, imagine stepping through the fog and seeing the Watern Oak and going, 'Oh, I know where I am, at last I can get my way home'.

**Lewis:** Please tell me that you've managed to use all of that archival research to try to pinpoint where exactly we might find the Watern Oak?

**Guy:** Well, I mean, I have actually Lewis, yes! Because there's actually that number of different descriptions seemingly from different directions, you can almost triangulate the position of the Watern Oak. And so we tried to do so, on this map here, unfold it - it's the Modern Ordnance survey map. So, it shows there was an oak that seemingly on the wrong side, I would say, of the Tavy and I've taken the positions of the different descriptions where

people were looking from - their vantage points - and tried to draw lines from one vantage point to another.

**Lewis:** And it seems like they're kind of converging on a section of the Amicombe Brook.

**Guy:** It's not perfect. I'm afraid it's produced more of a Bermuda triangle than a sort of X marks the spot. Hopefully we won't get horribly lost in trying to find it. But I do think there is a general area where I think they must have been looking, which is very slightly further along than where we are at the moment, but not very far. I mean, I think obviously we should also mention that there may be nothing there at all. This may be a tree that lived in the Victorian periods and throughout the 19th century, but has sadly since decayed.

**Lewis:** So we're searching for ghosts really?

**Guy:** Well, we are searching for the ghosts that haunt the landscape of Dartmoor.

**Lewis:** I'm just following Guy up this hillside. It's turned into a bit of a scramble up some quite large boulders to what looks like a small collection of oaks. I mean, they're all very low to the ground to tell how many, perhaps a handful. But it's really weird because obviously none of this is shown on the map.

**Guy:** If you look at Google aerial imagery, it's very hard to tell what you're actually seeing. Are you just seeing a load of bracken? So you really have to come here to see how the landscape is developing. I'm really starting to wonder what the source of all the acorns that must have sprouted to form these oak trees. I think we should go and have a look under that, because that looks like a really intriguing kind of low canopy.

**Lewis:** Let's do it. Let's have a look and quite enticing, isn't it. We could just glimpse through the leaves there.

**Guy:** And I can see the branches of the oak trees are covered in lichens, so we're going to get a bit closer to see what sort

**Lewis:** Is it through here? It's hard to know which way to go in isn't it! There's a little way in here.

**Guy:** Amazing, wonderful.

**Lewis:** The canopy of this little copse is perhaps only a meter and a half above our heads, and we stood on the ground. It's really very, very low profile.

**Guy:** These oaks are so small, so horizontal they almost look pressed into the boulders, all these snaking limbs here. Absolutely wonderful.

**Lewis:** Even some young oak saplings, or maybe maybe an offshoot of one of these oaks. And it's hard to tell even how many trees are here, but no more than half a dozen. It's quite

hard to gauge the age of trees like this that are so windswept. The whole thing of how many arms width around the trunk probably doesn't really count for the stunted oaks I imagine.

**Guy:** Yeah. And the dating that's been done of some of the old oaks in Wistman's Wood, they found it really hard to figure that out literally without cutting them down, which they did do in the Victorian period. They cut one of them down and counted the rings. They didn't find it was particularly old, like 150, 160 years old. But obviously some of the trees there are probably considerably older than that.

**Lewis:** There's a very big tree here, very sinuous branches.

**Guy:** And on these branches, if you just look behind you Lewis, look at these wonderful lichens. I think this is probably *Hypernegrina garter*, which is one of the characteristic lichens only found in temperate rainforests, and particularly on more acidic bark like these sorts of oaks. And I think this this crustose, this white crustose lichen, or whitey green is some sort of, possibly a *cudbale*.

**Lewis:** These are partly the indicators that we're in a temperate rainforest zone where once they would have been perhaps more groves and trees and woodlands like this.

**Guy:** Absolutely. And I'm really surprised to see this here, because not on any map, not obvious from aerial photography and exhibiting all the characteristics of the wonderful old trees you get in the much, much better-known Wistman's Wood. So are we looking at here the kind of a small relict of an upland oak quite similar to these, but which isn't on any map.

**Lewis:** And then themselves, these trees, the single oak trees, are indications that that obviously this is a place where oaks like to live.

**Guy:** Absolutely. And they can live when left to their own devices. And there is a kind of weight of grazing pressures that we see on the wider moor.

**Lewis:** Onwards... How's it looking up there for a crossing?

**Guy:** Up across these boulders.

**Lewis:** Okay. So there to there... The Brook crossing was a success.

**Guy:** Well, I mean, the adrenaline is still thumping from the slipping and sliding on those rocks! But we're cross now, and we have the oak in our sights. Well, I'm not going to call it the Water oak yet because we're not sure what it is.

**Lewis:** Is that it?

**Guy:** It's more or less in the right position. It's on the southern side of the Tavy, which is what everyone else seems to have agreed on until the end of the Victorian period.

It's very exciting. That is the closest I think that we've seen yet to what could be Watern Oak.

**Lewis:** It's looking good... Okay, we're right up next to the river now. And on the other side of the fast flowing water is a, oh, a couple of oak trees actually. It's actually a couple, isn't it?

**Guy:** Actually, it's two living oak trees and one trunk that appears to be stone dead. They certainly look very gnarled, twisted, windblown as the descriptions in the Victorian period would have had it.

**Lewis:** But are they are they old enough to have been big trees in 1809?

**Guy:** That seems unlikely, doesn't it? It looks like these could be perhaps once again the descendants, the children of the Watern Oak, but still very lovely and, you know, certainly very, very much more of an obvious navigational aids in a landscape that is utterly bereft of trees where we are now.

**Lewis:** Yeah, well, if I was walking down over the crest of the hill behind me and I had that oak tree in my sights, I'd certainly set a compass bearing on it, I think.

**Guy:** Yeah, set a course for home, you know, after you've been wandering through the fogs on a wintry day on Dartmoor.

**Lewis:** Here we are, if we're in the right place. There is an oak here.

**Guy:** I think that is an exciting find. It's very exciting. I think there is one more place we should look, though. I think we should cross over the Tavy and look just beyond that hill and see if we can see anything over there as well.

**Lewis:** Okay, let's go.

**Guy:** All right.

**Lewis:** So why do you care about the Watern Oak Guy?

**Guy:** I think it speaks to a wider concept in ecology, which is this idea of ghost woods and ghost trees. And this is an idea that was coined by the ecologist Ian Rotherham. It's really about looking for the evidence for woods that are no longer there in the landscape, but they're still discernible through things like indicator species of plants that generally only occur in woodland, but you might sometimes find them on the open moor, or the historical evidence for these species, these woods, these trees in maps, in documents and so on. And I think the Watern Oak is a navigational aid not just for people who are trying to cross the moor in the past, but it's a navigational aid for us today in trying to reconstruct past ecosystems and past landscapes. You know, Dartmoor ostensibly is this wide open, quite treeless landscape. But when you start looking at it and looking at the place names in it and old maps or documents, you start to find all these trees and woods sprouting up out of it. And some of them are quite obvious that things like 'Birch Tor', there aren't any birch trees on Birch Tor, but we can assume that at some point in the past there may have been.

**Lewis:** And it's interesting, isn't it, that these trees, I think, are kind of clinging onto these river valleys. We're sat right next to a tree here, which is very much standing on its own, but also is not marked on any maps. I suppose there's something about these trees that exist are also ghosts in some ways, because they are not marked on the map, but yet the only tree that's marked in the map we think might not exist anymore. So we've got this sort of strange paradox in that what we can see that is here is not mapped, not documented, but what is well documented is what is missing.

**Guy:** Absolutely. I mean, you know, I love maps, but they also do sell the landscape short often. There are things that get left off, you know, the fact that the base colour of those maps, I'm sure, for reasons of economy, of printing and ease of reading, is white. But, you know, vegetation is not often white. It can be a rich landscape of grasses and so on that are completely, you know, occluded by this sort of use of this blank space in the map. And similarly, I don't think even the best Ordnance Survey maps are necessarily always very good at capturing the sort of eco tones that the sort of transitional habitats that go between: here is some high forest, close canopy forest, and here is an open stretch of moor. But what about all those bits in between, the scrub, the bilberry bushes and the small dwarf oak trees that we are starting to encounter here, and the hawthorns and all those sorts of things. Where are they in a cartographic imagination and in and in the popular imagination? They sort of have been erased from it.

**Lewis:** I guess the question is then, are these solitary trees on the frontier of something which is an expanding group of trees and eventually woodland on Dartmoor, or are they the last remnants of woodland that's being lost?

**Guy:** Well, that's it. That's really interesting, and I think, you know, are we looking at a tide going in or out? So, you're looking at some things like the Watern Oak, you know, that's a solitary tree attested to on old maps and in old Victorian antiquarians guidebooks. You get the sense that it's so unusual to see it - it's so rare to be seeing it in the landscape - that it is it's being recorded as almost like the last survivor of its kind. All of its neighbours have gone, they've died being nibbled away. Whereas I think maybe what we're starting to see on places like the Tavy nowadays is the tide coming back in: the resurgence of vegetation, the trees are starting to get away again, breaking through, not just remaining as over-nibbled saplings, but starting to flourish and thrive again. And that's to do with grazing pressures and perhaps our changing climate as well.

**Lewis:** So whether the Watern Oak is indeed still with us or whether perhaps we're seeing some of its children here on the landscape, the fact that there's this story of an oak and an oak which people noticed is important maybe for what might lie ahead for Dartmoor?

**Guy:** That's right. I mean, I don't see searching for ghost woods as being just some sort of slightly ghoulish quest to unearth dead bodies. It's actually about, you know, resurrecting the idea of these past ecosystems. It's about saying these are the soils in which trees and woods once grew and perhaps they could again.

**Lewis:** So the rains coming in again now.



**Guy:** Yeah, a lovely Dartmoor day.

**Lewis:** We're standing in what feels like a vast landscape that stretches into what has become a bit of mizzle mist. In the distance we've got Fur Tor silhouetted over there and the Tavy just in the background.

**Guy:** We're standing in a place that's marked on the map as Pinswell to the west of Fur Tor and it's the area which on the original Ordnance Survey map, the 1809 map, is meant to be where the Watern Oak once stood. Now, I can't see a single tree here for miles and miles and miles in every direction. And it's a huge expanse of purple moor grass and not very much else, maybe a tiny little bit of heather here in there. So I'm not sure whether we're going to find a still standing Watern Oak, if that is indeed where it once grew or whether it's long since collapsed into the bog.

**Lewis:** We've had a good walk today.

**Guy:** Yeah, it's been fantastic. Rather wet now.

**Lewis:** Did we find Watern Oak?

**Guy:** I'm not sure we did, but I think we saw some very tantalizing signs of where it could have been and what could have inspired the stories and maps and documentation about it. We were going in search of a ghost. I'm not sure we found it, but I think what we may have found was perhaps much more interesting as well. We found all these wonderful living oak trees much further up the Cleave, much further up the moor than I expected. You know, you don't get many oak trees high up on Dartmoor. That's why any mention of them is unusual, it's something that's remarked upon and is recorded and is valued. So what we did find, I think, is perhaps even more interesting because I think it's not just about the last relict specimen of what might have once been a much more forested Dartmoor. But actually we found resurgent trees, scrub, small rowans and some quite big oaks.

**Lewis:** Yeah, and the story is still there, and it is amazing that we went on quest for an oak, which we didn't find, but the story still exists and the Watern Oak is still on the map.

**Guy:** It's still very much on the map, and I love the mystery of it. I love the sort of tantalizing nature of it and when we were standing there in the middle of this very bleak expanse of purple moor grass, looking up at Fur Tor, looking around for, you know, what we'd hoped might be, I don't know, a stump, a fallen trunk of this legendary tree. But I think I take more hope from the fact that actually further down Tavy Cleave, we found some spectacular snake-limbed, lichen-clad, moss dripping oak trees. Very, very beautiful in their own right. There's this sense of Dartmoor being haunted by the trees and the woods that we as humans have cut down and got rid of and deforested over the centuries over the millennia. But there's another story starting to unfurl on Dartmoor, which is sort of a resurgent forest of trees coming back, springing back to life. And that's what I think we've seen today.

**Lewis:** Well Guy it's been brilliant, I really enjoyed the walk. Thank you so much. And should we get back to the car and get going, maybe go to a pub?

**Guy:** Maybe we should do that and dry off. Thanks a lot, Lewis, cheers.