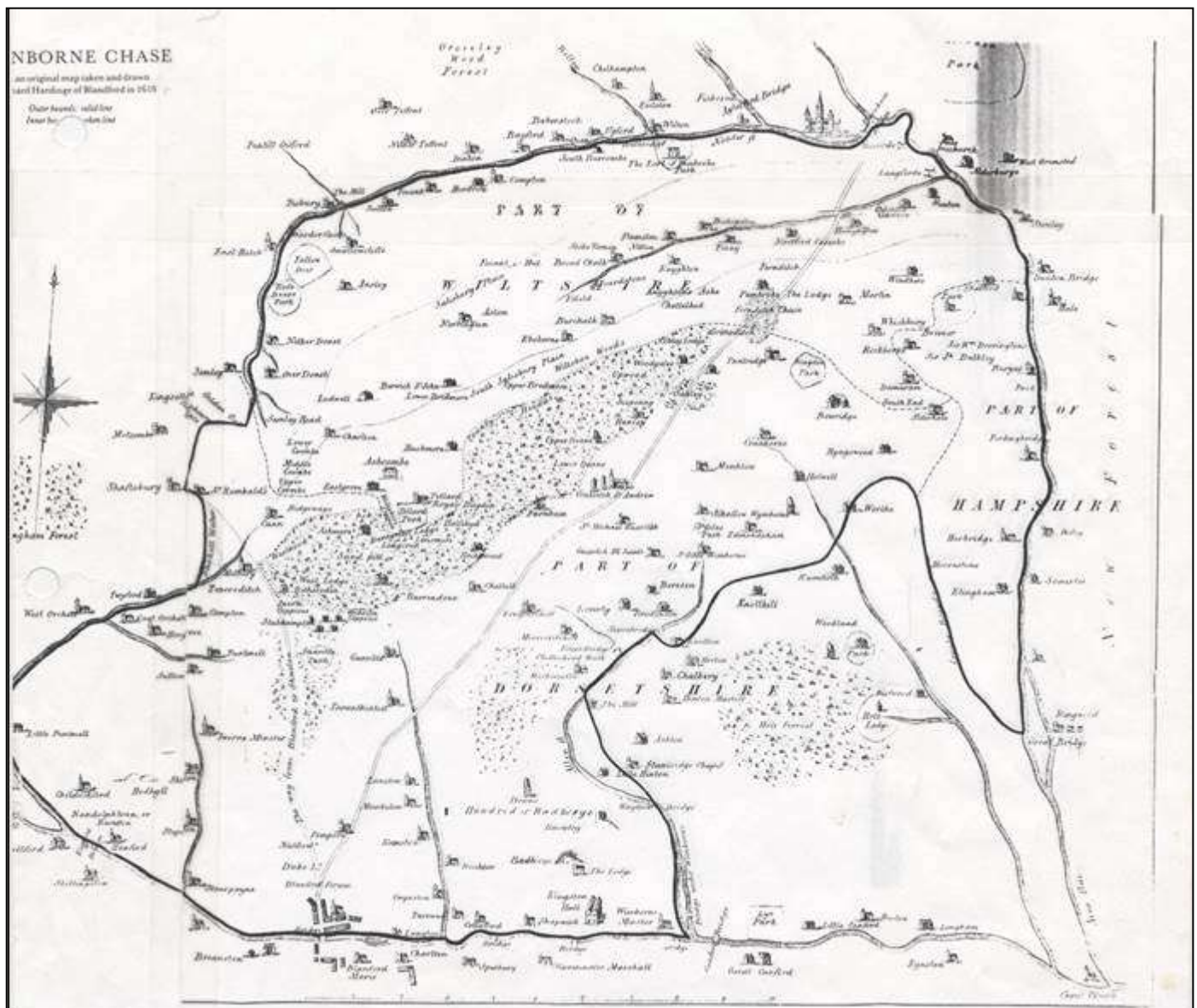


# Larmer Tree Gardens and The Larmer Tree

Peter Norton January 2014



## Larmer Tree Gardens, Tollard Royal, Wiltshire NGR: ST9421816885

The Larmer Tree Gardens, found on the ancient boundary between Dorset(shire) and Wiltshire, are regarded by some as the "Jewel in the Crown of Cranborne Chase". The pleasure gardens were created by the archaeologist and anthropologist, A. H. L.-F. Pitt-Rivers between 1880 and 1885, and at that time were known as the Larmer Grounds.

Within these grounds there stood the Larmer Tree, thought by many to have been a wych-elm, under which tradition states that King John (1189-1216) met with his huntsmen many times, and that the Courts Leet for the Liberty of Lavermere was held every year in September.

An original Latin document of 1439, found among the Marquis of Bath's papers at Longleat stated that: *In Tollard Royal, (South Wilts,) Sir R. C. Hoare (Chalk. 172) says, " There is, or till within a very few years past there was, a Court Leet of this manor with the Liberty of Lavermere, held in every year on the First Monday in the month of September. It is opened under a vast spreading tree called the ' Lavermere or Larmer Tree.'*

*Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine May 1872*

[http://archive.org/stream/wiltshirearchaeo13godd/wiltshirearchaeo13godd\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/wiltshirearchaeo13godd/wiltshirearchaeo13godd_djvu.txt)

### What does Larmer mean?

- The following extract is taken from the *Rethinking Pitt-Rivers project 2012*

*The etymology of the word "Larmer" has been much disputed. It was originally spelt Lavermere, which has been corrupted and abbreviated into Larmer in quite recent times. The termination mere is undoubtedly boundary, like the town of Mere. The spot is still the boundary of two counties and three parishes. But the first two syllables, Laver, or Lauer, as it is sometimes spelt in old maps, has been questioned. It was no doubt a boundary mark in the Chase, and was probably named from some shrub or plant that grew in abundance on the spot. Some have supposed it to be derived from the Anglo-Saxon Laur (Latin, Laurus), a laurel or bay tree. But the best derivation for it appears to be that suggested by the Rev. J.H. Ward, Rector of Gussage St. Michael, Anglo-Saxon Laefer, a bulrush.*

*Barnes, in his "Glossary of the Dorset Dialect," says that the term Levers, or Lever, is still used for the great yellow flag or its leaves (iris). It is retained in the word "laefer bottomed chair," a basket or rush-bottomed chair. This plant is still abundant in the woods and hedgerows. In an Anglo-Saxon charter of King Eadwig, 10th century, Mr Ward has found that in defining a boundary in this neighbourhood mention is made of Lafresmere, and immediately afterwards of the Mearc-treowe, or boundary tree, which probably refers to this place, and if so, it is the earliest mention of it on record. Rushmore was originally spelt Rushmere, and was no doubt like Lavermere, a rush boundary. Bridmore, close by, was spelt Bridmere or Britmere, and like Britford near Salisbury, probably referred to the boundary of the Britons.*

*It seems likely then, that these meres may have been the boundaries that separated the Saxons from the West Welsh, which, as Green in his "Making of England" has shown, lay somewhere in this neighbourhood for more than 100 years about the time of the 6th century. The old tree was originally a wych elm, a fragment of the rind of which was standing until it was blown down in the winter of 1894. [2] An oak tree had been planted in the centre of the rind after the centre had decayed. This has grown*

*up, and now remains the only representative of the Larmer Tree. Under the wych elm the Chase Courts used to be held for the settlement of all matters relating to the Chase. The members of the Court afterwards dined together at King John's House. A public hunt, like the Epping hunt, used to be held here during the time that the Court was sitting, sometime in September, when a stag was turned out and hunted. This was discontinued by Lord Rivers in 1789.*

<http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/primary-documents-index/16-second-collection-1880-1900/801-larmer-gardens-guide.html>

## **Was Larmer a wych elm?**

Elm wood was traditionally used to make coffins. Perhaps people who knew elms well were reminded of their own mortality when remembering the tree's reputation for dropping large boughs without warning on otherwise still, warm days.

From Puck of Pook's Hill – A Tree Song - Kipling 1906

Ellum she hateth mankind, and waiteth  
Till every gust be laid,  
To drop a limb on the head of him  
That any way trusts her shade.

For this limb dropping behaviour of elms to become part of folklore, it must have been common knowledge that they had a reputation of hurting or killing people, as well as damaging other things. Would people really take a chance of misfortune by meeting and taking decisions under a tree which 'hateth mankind'. One could ask whether court leets would have ever have been held under wych elms. We should also consider that the life span of elms rarely exceeded 300 years.

One of the reasons for meeting under trees in the 'modern' period (medieval to late 19<sup>th</sup> century) was to subliminally replicate ancient Pagan days when the pre Christian religion of these islands was all bound up with trees e.g. Ogham/Runic alphabet and decisions were always made under trees – in the presence of whatever deity lived in the surroundings. Paul Greenwood

## **First mention of yew**

It seems strange that it was not until 1932 that a yew tree was mentioned in relation to this site. In the December issue of *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, Herbert S. Toms (1887-1940), one of Pitt-Rivers' assistants from 1893-1896, wrote a detailed account during a visit in 1931, part of which is reproduced below.

### ***The Larmer.***

*My interest in the Larmer Grounds was concentrated on the Dell, for I imagined that this might have been the site of a pond which gave rise to the old name, Lafresmere or Rush Pond.*

*Having failed to obtain maps which would show the features of the Dell before they were modified by General Pitt Rivers in 1880, I determined, if possible, to get some description of the site from persons who were acquainted with it in their younger days.*

*I first interviewed Mr Charles Hayter, of Farnham, aged 67, who remembered playing in the Larmer Dell when he was a boy. "It was then overgrown with brambles, hazel and sand was occasionally obtained by*

*digging on the northern side." Hayter remembers one old man digging a shallow well-like excavation for this sand.*

*In the centre of the Dell there was red, blue and white clay (not excavated from but adjoining the sand deposit) the surface of which formed a puddle. This puddle held rain, the whole forming a small round pond.*

*At that time the keeper habitually hid in a neighbouring yew tree to shoot pigeons which came to drink at the pond. During the laying-out of the Larmer Grounds by General Pitt Rivers, the old pond was lengthened to its present area and the adjoining scarps modified.*

*On looking up "Laefer " in an Anglo-Saxon dictionary, one finds that the word served as a kind of generic term for the rush, reed, iris, and gladiolus, much in the same way as the word " rush " is now used by the country folk to include irises, rushes, and sedges.*

*If, as the evidence seems to suggest, there was an ancient pond at the Larmer which gave rise to the old English form of the name, then one may assume that there were true rushes growing in it.*  
[http://archive.org/stream/wiltshirearchaeo461932193/wiltshirearchaeo461932193\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/wiltshirearchaeo461932193/wiltshirearchaeo461932193_djvu.txt)

## **Decision making trees**

The pond at Larmer is an old and natural feature, an ideal stopping and meeting place in a horse-drawn world. People arriving by horse or carriage could meet under their 'decision making' tree while their animals would be looked after and refreshed.

Tradition states that King John (1189-1216) met with his huntsmen many times at the Larmer Tree and associations with the King and a yew tree is now thought by many to have played a part when the Magna Carta oath was taken beneath the great yew at Ankerwycke.

Another decision to be taken under a great yew was at Loudon castle, Ayrshire. In Hutchison's '*Old and Remarkable Yews trees in Scotland*' he states that the articles of the Treaty of Union with England were drawn up under the yew's deep shade.

In Pakenham's book '*Meetings with remarkable Trees*' the oath sworn by the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bothwell and others to assassinate Lord Darnley (Queen Mary's consort) was supposed to have been taken under the Whittinghame Yew in Scotland.

So is it possible that the old yew here was the original Larmer Tree, or a yew planted to replace an even older one?

## **The yew as a marker or boundary tree**

The following is from 1890, taken from '*King Johns House – Tollard Royal*' by Lieutenant-General Pitt-Rivers F.R.S.. F.S.A.

*All these " Meres " most probably have been boundaries either of the Chase, or of the Britons at the time that the West Welsh held this country against the Saxons. I have suggested that the first syllable of*

*Lauermere may be derived from the Saxon Laur t (Latin, laurus), laurel or bay- tree, and Dr. Sayce, to whom I have referred the matter, appears to approve of this derivation. Rushmere, he thinks, may have derived its first syllable from Ruscus butcher' s-broom, which grows abundantly in the Park at the foot of the old thorn trees. Nothing seems more likely than, at the time when the whole district was in forest, the boundaries should have received their names from any remarkable trees or shrubs growing on the spots named. That the Larmer was a tree boundary, is shown by the old wych elm standing there, but as this tree is not, in the opinion of Sir Joseph Hooker, who has seen it, more than from 300 to 400 years old, it may very likely have been preceded by conspicuous trees of another kind growing on the spot, from which the name may be derived.*

[http://www.archive.org/stream/kingjohnshouset00pittgoog/kingjohnshouset00pittgoog\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/kingjohnshouset00pittgoog/kingjohnshouset00pittgoog_djvu.txt)

Hunting in Cranborne Chase was carried out throughout the year, with deer hunting particularly between the months of June and February, so evergreen trees would be more of a marker, especially during the winter months when the green tree would stand out in the countryside, as is the case in many parts of Cranborne Chase.

Today the Larmer Tree Gardens still contains the natural pond, which was enlarged in the 1880s. It would have originally been an important feature in the landscape. It would have been prudent for it to have a marker, which may well have been the wych-elm that grew close to the pond, as described in previous paragraphs. However on the steep slope down to what has now become an ornamental pond, there grows an impressive female and evergreen yew. It has vast spreading branches and a minimum girth of 19' 3" (5.9m) around its lower bole in 2013. It could possibly have been 600 years old at the time the pond was enlarged and therefore of great significance. It does seem strange that there is no mention of it in historical records, although there are many even older yews on Cranborne Chase that have also received no mention in historical documents. Is it perhaps that the yew was so common as a boundary marker that there was no need to document individual trees?

So this yew might have been both a boundary tree and a site marker. It makes sense to plant as a marker a tree that is always conspicuous, but we should also not lose sight of the fact that to many people who planted them, this was a sacred tree, with the power to ward off evil, and in doing so protect wayfarers and also the people living within the yew boundary. The boundary where this yew is found is a significant one where the three parishes of Tollard Royal, Tollard Farnham, and Farnham meet.

Just a short distance to the east and still on a parish boundary lies Minchington Down. Minchington comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for nun, 'myncheon' and the chapel of Gussage St Andrew is found just to the northeast on the site of a Benedictine nunnery. So we might also consider an ecclesiastical connection with the planting of this yew?



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