

Big Wood Fungi

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On Saturday 22 October we were very fortunate to have David Humphries, Trees Management Officer for Hampstead Heath, to guide us among the fungi of Big Wood.

Though co-author of the Arboricultural Association book 'Fungi on Trees', David introduced himself as "not really a field mycologist." However we saw little to justify such modesty as he pointed out at once two fine fruiting bodies of the Beefsteak Fungus, *Fistulina hepatica*, at the foot of an oak – a tree on which this bracket fungus specialises. Moreover white growths on the older specimen displayed fungi that in turn specialise in feeding off other fungi.

Fistulina, which colours heartwood brown, evoked the distinction between brown and white rots of wood, with tannin-rich trees such as oaks offering resistance to some brown rots. David noted the contrast between the decades over which a fallen trunk of English oak, *Quercus robur*, may host fungi (and many other organisms) with the three years over which fallen trunks of faster-growing Turkey oak, *Q. cerris*, entirely disappear. Another contrast in resistance was provided by ring-

porous woods such as oak with, for instance, diffuse-porous sycamore.

From experience born of the Great Storm of 1987, David explained how standing trees hollowed out by fungal attack might in fact gain the flexibility to resist storm damage, though this was little appreciated at the time. Indeed the rich soil from degraded heartwood might encourage the tree to develop new roots within the base of its own trunk.

From the fungi that attack living trees, we moved on to saprophytic fungi that grow on dead wood or on soil. We saw the Clouded Funnel, *Clitocybe nebularis*, in the leaf litter, with a warning that not all who eat it have a good experience. On a fallen oak trunk we saw the mature dark ears of the Black Bulgar, *Bulgaria inquinans*, with the attractive brown cups of its immature stage nearby. By eating the sapwood of fallen trees, *Bulgaria* serves to loosen the bark. Such delamination gives habitat to many invertebrates – and food for the birds that prey on them.

Clitocybe and *Bulgaria* exemplified two major fungal groups: the Basidiomycetes that drop their spores into the breeze from visible gills or pores and the Ascomycetes that spit their spores out from microscopic tubes. On the other hand, *Fistulina* and



Photo: Maria Schlatter

Bulgaria illustrated the concept of succession: particular species of fungi succeed each other at particular stages of the life and decomposition of trees.

Soon we came upon other Ascomycetes: pretty pink Jelly Ear, *Auricularia auricula-judae*, growing on hazel twigs as well as on the more familiar elder, and bright Yellow Stags Horn, *Calocera viscosa*. Then came the Basidiomycete Blushing Bracket, *Daedaleopsis confragosa*. David contrasted the rings of timber, reliably annual and the foundation of tree-ring dating, with the rings of this perennial bracket fungus which reflect only growth spurts at quite random intervals of time.

It is satisfying to see in Bigwood the growing population of the Wild Service Tree, *Sorbus torminalis*, but these too may weaken and high up on one we saw a tell-tale white cluster of *Pleurotus*, the delectable oyster mushroom. Healthy-looking oaks also betrayed fungal activity to David's eye: blue stains where bark was missing, the signs of the

Green Elfcup fungus, *Chlorociboria aeruginascens*. Here at least was a fungus that adds value to its host timber. The colourful blue-green wood was much valued in Tunbridge Ware marquetry.

Lifting the bark on a huge fallen trunk revealed the sinister black bootstraps of the Honey Fungus, *Armillaria mellea*, notorious killer of timber trees and able to glow in the dark. Nearby were its characteristic yellow toadstools – and those of the Sulphur Tuft fungus, *Hypholoma fasciculare*, very similar but quickly distinguished by David through its flat top. David told of the affecting romance between two young mating types

of the closely related *Armillaria ostoyae*. Meeting among the Oregon forests in pre-Homeric times, they have begotten the world's largest living organism, some 31,500 tonnes of fungus covering nine square kilometres.

This short account omits many of the valuable and entertaining insights that David brought to Big Wood. We are most grateful to him.

This was the latest in the series of walks in Big Wood that are organised by the Friends of Big Wood and led by experts. More information can be obtained by visiting friendsofbigwood.com where details of previous fungal surveys and other matters can be accessed.



HoneyFungus, *Armillaria mellea* (Photo: Julian Glaser)

THIS YEAR'S HGS TRUST MEMBERS' WINTER LECTURE WILL BE Neo-Georgian Architecture: Survival or revival in the twentieth century

Delivered by Dr. J. Holder, University of Oxford

7pm, Tuesday 13 December 2022, Henrietta Barnett School, Central Square. Refreshments provided.

We are delighted to have Dr Holder delivering this year's event, and we hope to see as many of you there as possible.

Dr Holder's recent books cover Arts and Crafts architecture, as well as the subject of this year's lecture.

This event is FREE to all HGS Trust Members, and we have sent personal invitations to each member by post.

If you have not received one, please contact us via mail@hgstrust.org or 0208 455 1066 as your membership may have expired.

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Non-members are welcome to attend, but we will make a charge of £5 on the door per attendee.

If you are not currently a member and would like to become one, please download a membership form from www.hgstrust.org, or you can sign up on the door.

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