

## **Let's not lose the old White Willows!**

*An iconic tree along the river banks in the valley is gradually disappearing. Bridget Flanagan from the Great Ouse Valley Trust explains why and what we can do.*

We may be losing Veteran willow trees along the river without realising the impact of their passing. The White Willow, *Salix alba*, is a native species and a relatively common sight along the river. It is a medium to large deciduous tree growing up to about 30 metres tall. The trunk is stout and the general shape is often irregular and leaning. Its name derives from the white tone of the underside of the leaves which are covered in fine, silky white hairs. When the female catkins mature in the summer they scatter their tiny seeds to the wind and water wrapped in great froths of white down. You can often spot them floating down the river.

The White Willow is not a rare species. However, the heritage Veteran trees are one of the iconic natural features of our lowland river landscape, and these are at risk. These are the individuals that were previously managed as pollarded trees, with their branches lopped off at about four metres high on a cycle of some 8-10 years. This yielded a lot of straight branches that were used as forage, thatching or hedging materials. Over the years this practice created very characterful 'stumps' with a thicket of branches all growing from the top of the stump. All these branches grow from the same area at the top of the trunk. But if the branches are not regularly pollarded and are allowed to grow too big, there is too much weight there for the tree to support, and eventually this splits the trunk. As the branches continue to grow the tree is literally pulled apart and will fall to the ground. Branches will continue to sprout from the fallen trunk, but cattle grazing and general neglect will mean that the tree soon goes into a steep decline, and eventually dies completely.

It's true to say that throughout this process the split trunks and fallen branches are great wildlife habitats. Fungi, insects, birds and mammals will all use the tree, but in doing so will further its decline as they create and carve out their nests, shelters and holes. It is all part of nature's cycle. Except, as we know, our landscape is not entirely natural and relies on us to plant new trees, and manage the existing ones if they are to be there for the future. These are issues close to the heart of your Great Ouse Valley Trust.



A delightful river scene at Hemingford Abbots by Edmund Morison Wimperis (1835-1900). In the foreground is a veteran White Willow showing the pollarded branches and splitting trunk.  
(Courtesy Cambridge Fine Art)

**The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit [www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk](http://www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk)**

