

## HAVE YOU SEEN A GOOD OAK LATELY?

by MILES BARNE\*

A new initiative aimed at improving the timber quality and shortening the rotation of native oak has been launched thanks to the far-sighted generosity of the Dulverton Trust. The oak project, part of the British Hardwood Improvement Programme, is managed by Peter Savill of the Oxford Forestry Institute. It calls for the identification of 200 outstanding individual oak trees growing in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Desired characteristics include straight clean stems and light branching.

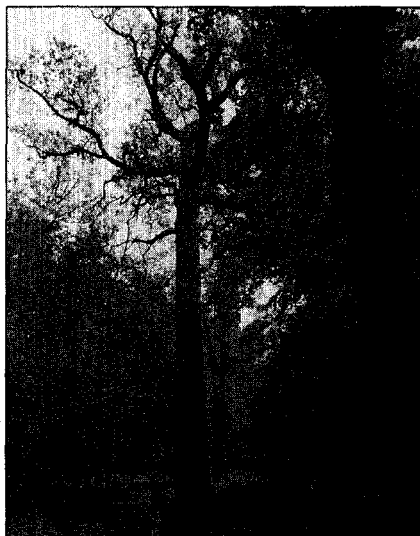
From this group, 100 individual mother trees will be selected for seed collection. The resulting seedlings will be dispatched as two-year nursery stock for planting out at 10 sites or breeding seedling orchards in the main oak growing regions of Britain and Ireland.

Each of the 100 families will be represented by some 350 plants, whose performance in the field will be closely monitored over the years. The less successful trees will be culled, leaving the best to breed naturally. In this way, only the progeny of those mother trees with the 'right genes' will be allowed to breed, while the progeny of those whose good looks are the result of silviculture or good luck will be removed. In turn, the progeny of these breeding seedling orchards should exhibit a significant genetic improvement, which will shorten the rotation, improve both the quality and the yield of timber, and prove less expensive to establish and maintain.

The first step in this programme is to identify superior mother trees. Any landowner or forester in the UK and the Irish Republic who knows of particularly good-looking oak is urged to write to Jason Hubert at the: Oxford Forestry Institute, Department of Plants and Sciences, Oxford University, South Parks Rd, Oxford OX1 3RB. Both sessile and pedunculate oak are of interest.

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*Miles Barne grows oaks renowned for their high-quality on the Sotterley Estate. He is chairman of the British Hardwood Improvement Programme's oak group.*



*The 200-year-old Sotterley Oak, from near Beccles in Suffolk, is famous for its size and good form. This is the kind of tree sought for the genetic improvement programme. Copyright: Miles Barne.*