

**THE NATURAL HISTORY
OF SELBORNE. PART I,
PP. 6 - 214**

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The Natural History of Selborne. Part I, pp. 6 - 214 by Gilbert White

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THE NATURAL HISTORY
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PART I.



THE
NATURAL **H**ISTORY
OF SELBORNE,

BY THE LATE
REV. GILBERT WHITE, A.M.
FELLOW OF GRIER COLLEGE, OXFORD.

WITH MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS AND
EXPLANATORY NOTES.

PART I.



LONDON:
BELL AND DALDY, YORK STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

1868.




THE NATURAL HISTORY
OF SELBORNE.
PART I.





LETTER II.

TO THOMAS PENNANT, ESQ.

N the court of Norton farm house, a manor-farm to the north-west of the village, on the white maln, stood within these twenty years a broad-leaved elm, or wych hazel, *ulmus folio latissimo scabro* of Ray,* which, though it had lost a considerable leading bough, equal to a moderate tree, in the great storm in the year 1703, yet, when felled, contained eight loads of timber; and, being too bulky for carriage, was sawn off at seven feet above the butt, where it measured near eight feet in the diameter.

* There are four species of elm in England, the wych elm, *ulmus montana*, of Smith, and the smooth elm, *ulmus glabra*, being the most common; many trees are recorded greatly exceeding that described in size. One, at the end of Church Lane, Chelsea, felled in 1745, was thirteen feet in circumference at the base, and a hundred and ten feet high; another at Boddington, in the vale of Gloucester, was eighty feet high, and sixteen feet in circumference. Evelyn also records one growing at Sir Walter Bagot's park, county Stafford, a hundred and twenty feet high, and seventeen feet in girth, which yielded fourteen loads of wood, or 8000 feet of boards and planks, and weighed 97 tons.—Ed.

This elm I mention to show to what a bulk planted elms may attain; as this tree must certainly have been such from its situation.

In the centre of the village, and near the church, is a square piece of ground surrounded by houses, and vulgarly called The Plestor.* In the midst of this spot stood, in old times, a vast oak, with a short squat body, and huge horizontal arms extending almost to the extremity of the area. This venerable tree, surrounded with stone steps, and seats above them, was the delight of old and young, and a place of much resort in summer evenings; where the former sat in grave debate, while the latter frolicked and danced before them. Long might it have stood, had not the amazing tempest in 1703 overturned it at once, to the infinite regret of the inhabitants, and the vicar, who bestowed several pounds in setting it in its place again: but all his care could not avail; the tree sprouted for a time, then withered and

* The Play-place, or Pleyster, *Locus ludorum*, is a level area near the church of about forty-four yards by thirty-six, which was granted, as White tells us in the "Antiquities of Selborne," to the prior and convent of Selborne, by Sir Adam Gurdon in conjunction with his wife Constantia, in the year 1271, in free, clear, and perpetual gift, — *liberum, purum, et perpetuum elemosinam*. It is now known as The Plestor, and continues, as of old, to be the scene of recreation for the youth and children of the neighbourhood. This Sir Adam Gurdon seems to have been a man of rank and property in the parish. He was a leader of the Mountfort faction in the reign of Henry III, and took part in the rebellion of that Baron, keeping up the war in Hampshire after his defeat and death; for it is related that, after the battle of Evesham, in which Mountfort fell, Gurdon fortified himself in the Hampshire woods, where he was pursued by Prince Edward, who attacked his camp, leaped over the entrenchments, and wounded and took Gurdon prisoner. With a generosity rare in civil wars the gallant young prince raised and pardoned the rebel chief, who became henceforth one of his most trusted servants. — Ep.

died.* This oak I mention to show to what a bulk planted oaks also may arrive: and planted this tree must certainly have been, as appears from what is known concerning the antiquities of the village.

On the Blackmoor estate there is a small wood called Losel's, of a few acres, that was lately furnished with a set of oaks of a peculiar growth and great value; they were tall and taper like firs, but standing near together had very small heads, only a little brush without any large limbs. About twenty years ago the bridge at the Toy, near Hampton Court, being much decayed, some trees were wanted for the repairs that were fifty feet long without bough, and would measure twelve inches diameter at the little end. Twenty such trees did a purveyor find in this little wood, with this advantage, that many of them answered the description at sixty feet.† These trees were sold for twenty pounds a-piece.

In the centre of this grove there stood an oak, which, though shapely and tall on the whole, bulged out into a large excrescence about the middle of the stem. On this a pair of ravens had fixed their residence for such a series of years, that the oak was distinguished by the title of *The Raven-tree*. Many were the attempts of the neighbouring youths to get at this eyry: the difficulty whetted their inclinations, and each was ambitious of surmounting the arduous task. But, when they arrived at the

* The oak which through so many ages sheltered this interesting playground has been succeeded by a noble sycamore, which now throws its broad protecting arms over it.—*Ed.*

† These noble trees still support the bridge near Hampton Court.—*Ed.*

swelling, it jutted out so in their way, and was so far beyond their grasp, that the most daring lads were awed, and acknowledged the undertaking to be too hazardous. So the ravens built on, nest upon nest, in perfect security, till the fatal day arrived in which the wood was to be levelled. It was in the month of February, when those birds usually sit. The saw was applied to the butt, the wedges were inserted into the opening, the woods echoed to the heavy blows of the beetle or mallet, the tree nodded to its fall; but still the dam sat on. At last, when it gave way, the bird was flung from her nest; and, though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground.

