
OGLETHORPE AND THE OGLETHORPE OAK

by Allen J. Coombes and W. Nigel Coates



On Friday March 11th, 1994, a young oak tree from Georgia in the southern United States was planted in the walled garden at the Meath Home in Godalming, Great Britain, to commemorate one of Godalming's most famous sons, General James Oglethorpe. This project, a result of collaboration between Hampshire County Council and Waverley Borough Council, was instigated by Waverley's Heritage Officer, Miss Geraldine Molony. The connection between this picturesque Surrey town and an oak from America's "Peach State" may seem rather tenuous, but the tree chosen for the planting was, very

appropriately, the Oglethorpe oak (*Quercus oglethorpensis* W.H. Duncan).

A few years previously, the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum, which holds the National Collection of Oaks, had managed to obtain seed of this distinct and unusual species collected in Georgia and were pleased to be able to donate a young tree for the planting. The place of planting was also significant, for the Meath Home was originally Westbrook Place, the home of James Oglethorpe.

James Edward Oglethorpe, reputedly the last person to shoot snipe in Piccadilly, was born in 1696, the son of Theophilus Oglethorpe, who that year had taken the oath of loyalty to William III and settled in Godalming, Surrey, where he had earlier bought the manor of Westbrook. The family were keen supporters of Jacobite cause, particularly James' sisters, Anne and Eleanor, who were involved in several plots, and there were even rumors that Prince Charles Edward secretly visited Westbrook to plan the 1745 rebellion. James himself kept aloof from such matters and after education at Eton and Corpus Christi College, Oxford, spent his early life as a soldier in Europe. He returned to Godalming at the age of 25 to take up his inheritance and succeed his brother as member of Parliament for the Haslemere division, soon earning a reputation as an ardent social reformer, particularly concentrating on the injustices of the prison system. He found time to interest himself in local affairs and is recorded as donating a guinea here and there to local causes, and he added to his estate by building a great wall of local Bargate stone to enclose a vineyard, which soon became well known for its white wine. Some years later the wall was pressed into use by the Oglethorpe sisters as a fortification to protect Westbrook in the event of Government reprisals following a possible Jacobite uprising; there is still a house nearby called the Little Fort.

Above Oval portrait of James Oglethorpe (reproduced with permission of Oglethorpe University Archives).

Meanwhile, the idea of forming a new colony in America had been suggested and Oglethorpe was one of the prime movers in the project. It would be named after King George II and would occupy the space between the Carolinas and the Spanish settlers in Florida - far enough south to grow grapes and to produce silk, for it was reported that mulberry trees to provide food for silkworms were likely to flourish in the area. Georgia thus became the 13th British colony in America. Godalming's wealth was founded on wool, so there were plenty of local people skilled in producing textiles, and some of these, with others attracted by national advertising of the opportunity to start a new life, made up the 120 settlers who sailed with Oglethorpe from Gravesend in November 1732. They reached their goal on February 12th (1733), still annually celebrated as Georgia Day, and within a few weeks had laid out the rectangular street plan of the city of Savannah. Each family was given three lots, space for a house, a 5-acre garden on the edge of the settlement and 45 acres in the neighboring countryside to be cleared for farming. On the edge of the town, Oglethorpe created the 10-acre Trustees' Garden to try to find the best conditions for growing mulberries and other plants, now acknowledged as the first agricultural research station in America.

In a letter to Sir Hans Sloane, dated September 19th, 1733, Oglethorpe apologized for not having time to "make a collection of such things as might be agreeable to one of your curiosity." He did, however, send specimens and some 38 collections are held in the Sloane Herbarium at the Natural History Museum (H.S. 316, ff. 40-48). Annotated with pre-Linnean names in Oglethorpe's own hand, these consist of a variety of mainly herbaceous plants but certainly include a specimen of poison ivy (*Rhus radicans* L.).

The Trustees' Garden had auspicious beginnings. With sponsorship from Sir Hans Sloane, the Society of Apothecaries, and advice from Philip Miller of the Chelsea Physic Garden, many plants of potential commercial importance were introduced, including white mulberries, oranges, peaches, figs, pomegranates, olives, vines and cotton, as well as vegetables to supply the needs of the expanding colony. Cotton and peaches still remain two of the major commercial crops of Georgia. Unfortunately, the garden soon became neglected and many plants were killed in a hard frost in March 1738. It continued to supply mulberry trees, which were available to planters free of charge, until about 1748, but was eventually abandoned and converted to residential use in 1755. A bronze marker, commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of the garden, was erected on the site in 1983.

The local natives, the Yamacraw tribe, responded favorably to the colonists' overtures of friendship and when Oglethorpe returned to England he took with him 10 of them, including Chief Tomochichi. They met the trustees of the colony, the King and Queen, and caused quite a stir in Godalming when their host took them to dinner at the White Hart.

On his second voyage, James was accompanied by the brothers John and Charles Wesley, family friends who were going to minister to the spiritual needs of the colonists and the natives. The government's idea of funds for running the new colony proved miserly and the estate at Westbrook had to be mortgaged to raise the necessary money to keep it going. Once back in Georgia, Oglethorpe founded the settlements of Frederica on the coast and Augusta further up the Savannah River; he then made one more quick trip to England to try to raise a regiment to meet the growing threat of Spanish invasion. The expected blow fell in 1742; the invaders were defeated at the battle of Bloody Marsh and driven back into Florida, for which achievement James Oglethorpe was rewarded with promotion to the rank of Brigadier General.

The next year he returned to England for the last time and married Elizabeth Wright, an heiress who lived at Cranham in Essex; they spent their honeymoon at Westbrook but then returned to London where the General made friends among the literary set, which included Doctor Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith. He did a little more soldiering in Europe in the service of Frederick the Great, then retired to Cranham where he died at the age of 88.

Portraits of Oglethorpe are surprisingly uncommon. That figured here, known as the "oval portrait," is undoubtedly the finest likeness of Oglethorpe in existence and is thought to have been passed down in the Carstairs family from a female friend of the General. He also was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1780 for the Duke of Rutland, but the original was destroyed in a fire in Belvoir Castle. The oval portrait, which was probably painted after the General's return from Georgia in 1743, is thought to show the General in his late forties and has an interesting history.

Much of the interest in Oglethorpe today is due to the work of Dr. Thornwell Jacobs of Oglethorpe University. Originally chartered in 1835 near Milledgeville, Georgia, as a living memorial to Oglethorpe, the University was destroyed in the Civil War but refounded by Jacobs in the early 1910s in Atlanta. Jacobs developed a keen interest in Oglethorpe and in 1922 visited key sites in England associated with him. On learning that the site of Oglethorpe's tomb was unknown, he resolved to return and discover it. Although the church of All Saints in Cranham, Essex, was demolished and rebuilt between 1873 and 1875, Jacobs visited the site in 1923 and found the tomb of Oglethorpe and his wife Elizabeth who died two years after him.

In 1924, Jacobs returned to England to purchase portraits of James and Elizabeth Oglethorpe and again in 1932 when the oval portrait was put up for sale in London by Captain Carstairs. Jacobs purchased this for \$5000 and together with a portrait of the first Earl of Egmont, first president of the Georgia Trustees, which he purchased at the same time, it was unveiled at Oglethorpe University in February 1933 as part of the bicentennial celebrations of the founding of Georgia. Later that year, Oglethorpe's image from the painting was reproduced on a commemorative stamp issued by the U.S. Post Office.

The revived Oglethorpe University in Atlanta was modelled on Corpus Christi College, Oxford, of which Oglethorpe had been an undergraduate member and which awarded him an honorary masters degree in 1731 for his work on prison reform. Jacobs commissioned a copy of the portrait by New York artist Charles F. Naegle, and together with Lewis Oglethorpe, a member of the General's family, and Oglethorpe's biographer Amos Ettinger, presented it to the College in 1934 after which they visited, amongst other places, Westbrook Place in Godalming.

There are still good contacts between Godalming and Georgia and mutual visits are frequent. The Friends of Oglethorpe has been established in Godalming since 1982 when a party of Americans unveiled a plaque in Godalming Parish Church to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Oglethorpe's departure for Georgia. For 1996, the tercentenary of Oglethorpe's birth, the City of Savannah proposed the restoration of the Trustees' Garden on its original site.

He is still honored in the State which grew from his colony; his statue stands in a square in the center of Savannah, the map of Georgia shows Fort Oglethorpe City and Oglethorpe County, while Oglethorpe University was founded in Atlanta. It would surely please the General's philanthropic heart to know that his house in Godalming has been run for 100 years as a home for epileptics, and it is good to record that last year it was presented with an Oglethorpe oak to grow in the walled garden that the founder of Georgia knew so well,



Westbrook Place circa 1800



Quercus oglethorpensis
 Painting by Siriol
 Shirlock from a plant
 in the Sir Harold
 Hillier Gardens and
 Arboretum

While James Oglethorpe's involvement with Georgia goes back more than 250 years, the Oglethorpe oak is a relative newcomer to the genus, described too late to be featured in *The American Oaks* by Trelease or Sargent's two-volume work, *The Trees of North America*, but in time to be included in a list of additions and corrections in *Les Chênes* by Mme. A.

Camus. It was originally noticed as distinct as late as 1940 by Wilbur H. Duncan of the University of Georgia in Athens, who, in the company of Professors G.N. Bishop and A.D. McKellar, found trees growing in abundance on Buffalo Creek near Lexington, Georgia. These trees had previously been thought to be *Q. imbricaria* Michx. (shingle oak) but further investigation by Duncan showed them to represent an unnamed species which he described as *Q. oglethorpensis*. An earlier collection made by T.G. Harbison from Elbert Co., Georgia, was also referred by Duncan to this species. The name does not commemorate James Oglethorpe directly, but Oglethorpe County, in which the tree were found and the type specimen was collected. In 1950 Duncan reported the finding of *Q. oglethorpensis* by Professor Bishop in Greenwood County, South Carolina.

The Oglethorpe oak makes a large tree to 25m (91 ft) or more in the wild, the young shoots sparsely covered with stellate hairs and glands at first, then becoming smooth and deep red in winter. The deciduous, elliptic to obovate leaves to 13cm (5 inches) long are usually without teeth and often with wavy margins, but can be slightly lobed, particularly on vigorous shoots of the second flush (as seen

in the illustration). They emerge bronze-tinged, becoming a rich glossy green, and remain on the tree late into autumn when they can turn briefly red then brown. When they first emerge they are dotted with short-stalked red glands above and with sparse stellate hairs, becoming glabrous, while the undersides are thinly covered with persistent stellate hairs. The acorns mature the first year and are ovoid, about 11mm long and 1/3 enclosed in the cup, which is sessile or shortly stalked. Although originally confused with *Q. imbricaria* Michx. (a red oak), the Oglethorpe oak is not closely related to that species and is, in fact, a white oak. It is considered by Duncan to be a relict species closely related to *Q. margaretta* Ashe, and a tree found by Duncan in Oglethorpe County., Georgia, appears to be a hybrid with this species.

Oglethorpe oak is of very restricted distribution in the wild with its main range in a few counties in the Piedmont of northeast Georgia and neighboring western South Carolina. It is found on poorly drained bottom land and neighboring slopes, uplands and stream terraces associated with *Acer rubrum* L., *Acer saccharum* Marsh. subsp. *leucoderme* (Small) Desmarais, *Celtis laevigata* Willd., *Fraxinus pennsylvanica* Marsh., *Quercus alba* L., *Q. falcata* Michx. and *Q. pagoda* Raf. (*Q. falcata* Michx. var. *pagodifolia* Elliott). In the wild it is susceptible to chestnut blight. Until an extensive study of its distribution by Haehnle and Jones, Oglethorpe oak was known from only 45 stations. They added another 100 to this, and considered that its absence from five of the previously recorded localities was due to land clearance for agricultural development. It was also suggested that although populations of Oglethorpe oak had probably not been seriously affected since its discovery, it was likely that prior to this, agricultural development had reduced the range of the species and its population density. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources describe it as threatened in the wild and its habitat has suffered clearance for agriculture and forestry.

Oglethorpe oak has also been reported from other States. The population found near Copenhagen, Louisiana, is, according to Dr. Kevin Nixon, *Q. sinuata* Walt. (*Q. durandii* Buckl.), but what appears to be *Q. ogelthorpensis* was reported by Wiseman from three sites in the Bienville National Forest, Scott and Jasper Counties, Mississippi.

In cultivation, both in North America and Britain this species is uncommon. Plants growing at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum date from two accessions, firstly, plants grafted onto *Q. robur* and planted in the early 1980s; and secondly, plants derived from seed collected in the Oconee National Forest in Jasper County, south of Monticello, Georgia in late 1988 by Marshall Adams. The Meath Home plant derives from the latter collection. In spite of its southern American origin, this species is proving reasonably hardy in cultivation and at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum ; the oldest specimens have made bushy plants up to 3.5m tall with a spread of 4.5m, often branching from just above the base.

In Britain young shoots of this species are frequently damaged by frost during winter, when temperatures typically reach -5°C (23°F) or below but this is probably due to the lack of sufficient summer heat to ripen the growth adequately rather than winter cold which can be just as or more intense in the southern United States. As a result of winter damage here the plants grow slowly and usually produce numerous young shoots in summer from the frost-damaged wood.

That the poor performance of this species in Britain is due to lack of summer heat rather than low winter temperatures is clearly shown by plants growing at the Morton Arboretum in Illinois. There, plants grown from seed collected in Greenwood County, South Carolina, have reached 3m (11ft) tall in 15 years. In the severe winter of 1993-94, following ideal conditions for wood ripening the previous autumn, little injury was incurred even when temperatures fell to -30°C (-22°F). However, growth that occurs late in autumn and does not ripen properly can be injured at temperatures of -19°C (-4°F). Also in Illinois, at Guy Sternberg's Starhill Forest, near Petersburg, this species grows slowly but has survived the coldest winters undamaged. Further south, Oglethorpe oak grows more vigorously and on the campus of the University of Georgia, Athens, 10-12 year old trees have reached 6m (22ft) tall and 5m (18ft) in spread with coarse, scaly bark; the leaves remaining until late autumn when they turn brown and (on these young trees) remain through winter. Planted trees can also be seen at the Oglethorpe County Courthouse, Lexington, Georgia.

Judging by specimens in the Kew herbarium, collected by Duncan near Lexington, Oglethorpe County, Georgia in 1942, this species comes into leaf much earlier in its native habitat than it does in Britain. Whereas at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboretum, it is normally well into May before the foliage starts to emerge, a flowering specimen (Duncan 4761) collected on April 18th, already had the young leaves opening while a specimen in full leaf (Duncan 5532) was collected on July 12th. In cultivation in Savannah, Georgia, the leaves emerge in mid-to-late March.

Although the Oglethorpe oak is unlikely to make a tree suitable for landscape use either in Britain or the United States, its historical associations with James Oglethorpe, as well as its rarity, make it of great interest. It should certainly be more widely planted, in the southern United States at least; what better way would there be to commemorate the tercentenary of the General's birth, in 1996. Oglethorpe oak is very rarely available from nurseries but in the United States plants grown from wild source seed can currently be obtained from Woodlanders Inc., 1128 Collecton Avenue, Aiken, South Carolina 29801. Goodness Grows Nursery, P.O. Box 311, Lexington, Georgia 30648, plans to have plants grown from seed collected by Dr. Wilbur Duncan, who named the species in 1940, ready for sale in 1996. Seed is sometimes obtainable on a small scale, as it was at the seed exchange following the First Oak Conference held by the International Oak Society at the Morton Arboretum in October 1994. ☛

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