

## **A Tree: Stephen Cardew**

Ashley checked the map.

No, the path did go straight to the tree. At a slight angle, maybe 70/80° to where he was facing. It would have been good to be able to see what lay beyond, but the tree stood on the skyline. It would have been reassuring to see the grass downtrodden or a waymarking yellow arrow to point the way. It would have been handy to ask someone. But no. All he had was the map and the tree.

Ashley looked at the tree.

It was possibly 100/150 yards away. It was an oak - he was sure of that - with its broad rounded canopy and abundant mass of green summer leaves. Its topmost branches were waving in the breeze, signalling to him. To the left of the field, and nearer to him, was a small copse, mostly comprising beech and lime trees but no oaks, as far as he could see. So where had the acorn come from, all those years ago?

Ashley approached the tree.

He trod the virgin grass, questioning how an acorn could be borne from some far-distant parent-oak and end up here, on this ridge, then take root and grow? Alone. It was as if the other trees, those in the arboreal community of the copse, had sent the oak out ahead to alert them to danger. And there he was, standing sure on the ridge - the sentinel oak.

Ashley circled the tree.

The bark felt gnarly and protective, forbidding engagement. He dragged his hand across its harsh ripples, sensing its resolve to withstand any intrusion, any threat to its inexorable, imperceptible growth. He stopped and stared up at the top branches. What height had it achieved, he wondered. 80 feet? The lowest limb, however, was nearer at hand and substantial.

Ashley climbed the tree.

At first, it was hard to lever himself up and onto the branch but then it became easier, almost as if the tree had grown in ladder-esque fashion. Within moments, he was 30 or 40 feet up and paused to rest astride a branch, with his back to the trunk. The breeze was stronger here and he felt the tree shift its position, but he felt safe in the squeeze of branch and trunk and his thoughts drifted off and along.

Ashley fell from the tree.

The branch gave way suddenly and Ashley fell like a ball bearing in an arcade machine. His body rotted where it lay and its nutrients fed the tree's roots and, in time, the branch grew back, with all the tardy vigour of its former self. The tree was, once again, alert and ready. Ready to do Gaia's bidding.