

# Pollard Willows

by BRENDA HOWITT

OUR lowland landscapes are all man-made. Sometimes it was done consciously as by the 18th century landscape architects, sometimes as a result of farming revolution, as happened when miles of chessboard hedges were planted at enclosure, although that process is now in reverse. Some aspects of the countryside grew gradually, like the rows of pollard willows in the river valleys. Farmers have for long planted willows and harvested their crop of poles. Whether growing in leafy luxuriance in a Trentside hedge, leaning solitarily beside an old pond, or marching in stiff rows before the bitter Fenland wind, they have become an intrinsic part of the river landscape. Yet they were put there for the most utilitarian of purposes.

In the south the White Willow (*Salix alba*) is the commonest pollard. It comes into its own in the Ouse Valley and southwards into Cambridgeshire, with its soft silvery foliage and graceful pyramidal shape. It is common enough in Lincolnshire too, but it is the sturdier green-leaved Crack Willow (*Salix fragilis*) with its heavy boughs and dark glossy foliage that is the more commonly planted pollard with us.

Many people profess not to like pollards. They say that they are mutilated miseries. To me they are fascinating. The gnarled bark writhes itself into a hundred gnome's faces, like those that frightened the mole when he ventured into the Wild Wood. Holes and hollows in the trunk make habitations for owls, and woodpeckers delight in prising insects from the loose bark. Eventually the holes become so large that an old pollard can split up entirely, forming two or even three trees where there was only one before.

The point of growing pollards, however, is not their beauty or otherwise, but their economic use. Pollards are cut every seven to ten years. One could not grow a new tree from a cutting in so short a time, even though willows are quick growing, so a pollard is like a living long term store of timber. Willow timber is light and very strong and had innumerable uses on the farm. To a certain extent it was used for hurdles, but the most important use was for fencing.

To lay a thorn fence you need a good supply of willow stakes five feet high and about three inches in diameter, which you drive in to hold the layered thorn at intervals of rather less than three feet. That is 30 stakes to the chain, if your mind works that way. When



Gaunt row of fenland willows at Pinchbeck.

the whole is laid a twist of fine willow should be run along the top, but this is a dying practice, we now more generally see a strand of barbed wire. Another strand of barbed wire, mounted on stout waist high willow posts, keeps the stock away from the new laid fence, until it is set.

Then willow is used for actual post and rail fencing in all those places where thorn will not grow, under the shade of trees, or where the ground is too wet. The heavy ends of the pollard branches, already developing fissured bark like the mature trunk, are used for posts, the lighter smooth barked lengths as rails. There is immense artistry and intense satisfaction in building a good willow fence. The poles are never straight and you must choose the right one for the job. This rail must be of a shape that will ram well back into the end of the thorn fence, another with a curve will make a fine bottom rail following the counter of the hollow ground. A third is just right to pass between the split trunks of a willow growing in the fence, from whose branches the poles have come. Half the skill of making the fence lies in accommodating it to the curving trunks of the hedgerow timber. When finished it will, like all local products, blend perfectly with the landscape which grew it.

Away from the farm willow timber had many uses, now generally superceded by metal or plastic. Because of its lightness it was used for artificial limbs, and more mundanely for packing cases and chip baskets. It made marvellous balls for coconut shies, so light they could seldom shift the prize. Willow bark was used for tanning.

Quite a different use for willows was as a substitute for quinine and a cure for ague. The old writers saw the hand of providence in the way the fens and marshes where the ague flourished also provide their cure. In time the active principle was isolated as salicin, 'a crystalline glucoside' and as salicylic acid, and later was synthesised and used in aspirin. Before this the salicin was produced from the bark, three pounds of dried bark made one ounce of crystals. Cattle understand that willow is beneficial. They quickly strip the bark from any poles left in the fields in spring, and love to pull down and devour the leafy branches.

If regularly cut a willow will live for a hundred years or more, the head, or poll, of the pollard constantly renewing itself. When left neglected the limbs become over heavy and soon break away at the weak spot where they join the trunk. In perhaps 20 or 30 years the whole tree is destroyed. Sadly, this is what is happening today as the demand for willow timber falls. The old pollards are decaying and beginning to disappear, and another subtle change is taking place in our landscape.



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