

Brightlingsea's eucalypts

A brief summary by John Purse

The many old Cider Gum (*Eucalyptus gunnii*) trees around the small coastal town of Brightlingsea, Essex are survivors of many hundreds of seedlings planted by Mr John Bateman from 1887. These trees have attracted much interest over the intervening years, and this is reasonably well documented. However, there is confusion about their origin, as Mr Bateman left two differing accounts of the original seed source. In the first account¹ he said that the seed was from trees of a friend in Negrete, Argentina. In a later account² he said that they were supplied from a friend in the extreme south of Tasmania. A more recent second-hand account ascribes the source to New Zealand!

Mr Bateman planted out a population of seedlings in the autumn of 1887. Most of these thrived, and flowered for the first time in 1892. Seed was collected from this population, and both seed and seedlings were evidently very freely and widely distributed, not only around Brightlingsea but throughout southern Britain¹. By 1902, some 900 trees had been planted around Brightlingsea alone, and more than 200 still survived in 1963³. The losses appear mainly to have been due to windthrow, and even today many of the eucalyptus crowns in the woods of Gravesend and The Belt (west of the church) are in fact invigorated branches or epicormic shoots of trees that evidently blew over years ago. More recently, many trees have also been felled to make way for new housing.

Mr Bateman recorded an early and unusual instance of eucalypts responding to good soil fertility. Referring in 1899 to one of the trees from the local seed planted in the churchyard, he said: 'The best I have.....has got his roots into a grave, whose tenant died of small-pox, and it enjoys the situation hugely...'¹.

The continued existence of some of these old trees is not just an historical oddity: their long and documented existence highlights points that are relevant to any efforts to promote planting of eucalypts in Britain today.

The most obvious point is the evident cold-hardiness of the species. Mr Bateman himself noted that some trees were damaged by the severe winter of 1894/95. These trees lost a year's growth, but recovered fully¹. The same type of response was noted following the prolonged severe winter of 1962/63 (which froze the sea locally and killed established *Cupressus macrocarpa* outright): trees looked dead until late May 1963, when new growth re-appeared throughout the crowns³.

The second important point is that there is no evidence of any natural regeneration of eucalyptus, despite the trees being able to produce viable seed. Most of the surviving trees are in or adjacent to woodlands that are now neglected and contain many gaps that would be conducive to regeneration. The lack of regeneration of eucalyptus should not surprise us, given that most eucalypts in Australia only germinate following bush-fires, but the evident lack of weediness in Essex provides re-assurance on this aspect of environmental impact.

References:

1. Letter from J. Bateman *in* The Gardener's Chronicle, 1st April 1899, pp202-203
2. Letter from J. Bateman *in* The Garden Vol 61, 15th February 1902, p110
3. Howard Venison, 'A famous Essex Eucalypt collection'. *Gardeners Chronicle Gardening Illustrated*, 23rd November 1963, pp370-371 and 376 (this article lists references to other accounts of Brightlingsea's eucalypts).

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