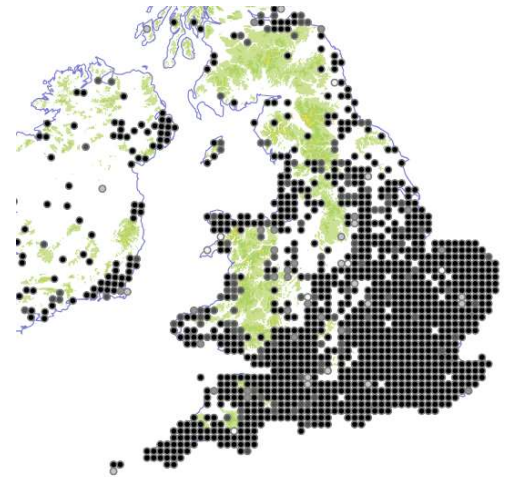


## Histon Wood and the Evergreen Oak

There is a small wood beside the Guided Busway, opposite the Histon Community Orchard and the Manor Field, known as "Histon Wood" or "The WI Wood". According to the information notice at the central entrance "Histon Wood was planted in 1994 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Cambridgeshire Federation of Women's Institutes in 1994. It was Joan Smail (1917 - 2001) whose inspiration created the wood. The land is owned by Cambridgeshire County Council County Farms Estate." The land was previously farmed for arable crops. A variety of trees were planted: mostly Hawthorn and Wild Cherry, but also good numbers of native Oak, Field Maple, and Sycamore.

During the pandemic years there was a botanical survey that showed the wood is now host to over 100 species of plants and trees. This includes new species arriving via natural processes and a developing ground flora typical of established woods in this area. But it isn't all good news! There is an unwelcome arrival.

The Evergreen Oak, also known as Holm Oak, or Holly Oak, (scientific name *Quercus ilex*), is a broadleaved evergreen tree from the Mediterranean region. It has dense foliage and reproduces via acorns like those of our native Oak trees. According to the Botanical Society of the British Isles (2020 Plant Atlas): "Seed production can be prolific, and it regenerates freely in parts of south-western, southern and eastern England. It has been cultivated since 1557 and was widely planted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was recorded in the wild by 1862. It can colonise natural habitats aggressively and replaces native vegetation." The distribution map from the 2020 Atlas shows almost complete coverage in our area (each black dot on the map is a 10x10Km square where Evergreen Oak is now found). The recent increased fertility and fast spread of this species is probably attributable to climate change.



The survey of Histon Wood discovered several hundred Evergreen Oaks that have been colonising the wood over the past five years or so. Many are small seedlings but there are some older trees of up to 3m. The coverage is fairly uniform throughout the wood. Given the reputation of this species it is to be expected that these youngsters will eventually come to dominate the entire wood. They will out-compete the existing developing vegetation with their dense evergreen foliage by excluding light so preventing the growth of any ground flora. Without some intervention Histon Wood is likely to become a monoculture devoid of its current interest and variability.

We can never know for sure how and from where these new trees originate. Jays are well known for collecting acorns and caching them for winter food and a likely scenario is acorns were gathered by a Jay, harvested from a local source, and cached in Histon Wood. If the bird didn't recover all of its store the acorns would be left buried ready to germinate into seedling Evergreen Oaks. There are some fully mature Evergreen Oaks in the village: outside the Firs House GP practice, on the corner of Poplar Close with Oak Tree Way (pictured), in Homefield Park, and in gardens between Station Road and Water Lane, any of which could have been the acorn source. Puzzling is that some other small woods in the area have only a few Evergreen Oak seedlings, and in some cases none. Perhaps Histon wood just happened to be the shortest flight!



Fortunately, this infestation is at an early stage and complete removal of the seedlings is possible, although challenging. HI Parish Council has discussed with the County Council and been given permission to remove of the invasive trees. It is intended to hold some work parties during the early months of 2024 to remove as many of the Evergreen Oaks as possible, hopefully all of them. Of course, this won't be the end of the story as there will be more acorns in the ground yet to germinate, and our local Jays, if they are the culprit, will still need to eat.