THE WILD WAYS
OF THE OAK

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of the Oak
This oak is a tree. It has roots, a trunk, branches and leaves. It is a living body that grows, sways, and bends. It is a body that ages; that sheds its leaves, bark and branches. It is a body that splits, rots, and dies.
This oak is in a refuge. It grows in a hedgerow that once enclosed a field. Protected by its thorny neighbours: hawthorn, blackthorn, and bramble, the oak was not eaten. Now it advances into abandoned land. Foraging earthworms mend and tend its soil. Roots and their fungal symbionts creep beneath the earth. This oak provides refuge: little owls live in its hollow trunk, insects flit in its branches, and we climb to view, to sleep, and to escape.
This oak is a node in a network. Its roots feel their way across hard-worked farmland. Its acorns are vectors for its movement. Jays bury its seed, too plentiful to be eaten in even the harshest winter. Pigs come to scratch an itch, to wallow in the shade, and to feast on the mast. Peregrines perch and survey. As a node it is also exposed to infection, to ancient and novel diseases brought on the wind, by insects and by people. It is precarious in the face of the connections of global trade and mobility. It is a tree at risk: of sudden oak death, chronic oak dieback and the oak processionary moth.
This oak is in a cycle; part of a shifting mosaic of forest pasture. Acorns cast or buried in scrub find protection. They sprout, and like a cuckoo, growing amidst a thorny fortress, they avoid the browse and graze. They poke their crowns above, and grow fast to shade out and kill their nest of thorns. They spread their canopy, claim their space. At length they droop, they decay and fall. Light returns, pasture is created, thorns emerge. And so, a cycle continues. Disturbance ensures a balance in nature.
But this oak is different from all the others. Its cycle has its own rhythm, marked by the intensities of history. Its rise is shaped by the wind and the sun. It leans to balance, it reaches for light. Its branching is shaped by storms, droughts, lightning, and fire. It is etched by the munch, the bite, the peck, or the burrow of myriad dryophilus (or oak loving) beasties. The legacies of these different disturbance regimes are written into its rings.
And this oak has travelled, marching in sync with sheets of ice. Retreating in the cold, encroaching in the warmth. Following in the vanguard of plant pioneers, it moved a few metres a year. Voyaging up from its Ice Age bolthole on the Mediterranean, it passed through the swamps of Doggerland before the ice melted and the Channel opened up. This time it became British, oh-so-British. Its relatives sheltered kings, built ships for imperial adventure, fuelled furnaces for industry, and aged spirits. We sing its praises.
The Wild Ways of the Oak was developed from a workshop at the Knepp Wildland Project in Sussex involving David Overend, Sofie Narbed, Jenny Swingler and Scott Twynholm. The audio essay we produced is available at: http://makingroutes.org/.
The idea for this visual essay came from my collaboration with Rosie Fairfax-Cholmeley and Robin Wilson. This project was made possible by the support from the British Academy. Rosie cut the illustrations in lino, inspired by The Broad Oak, one of the largest and oldest oak trees in Wytham Woods near Oxford. An edition of 60 copies were letterpress printed by Richard Lawrence, 2020.

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Illustrations © Rosie Fairfax-Cholmeley, 2020
The Oak is entrenched in our cultural imaginations as a symbol of timeless strength and knowledge. It has given its wood to buildings and ships across the ages, its oak galls have provided the ink for writers, composers and artists and it is vital to our ecosystems. This book explores the Oak and its landscapes in words and images. This publication was funded by the British Academy.