StratFire: the Use of Elm

Thanks to Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, Stratford has long been associated with the Forest of Arden and its mighty oak trees. While few survive to the present day, some of those that do are over 1,000 years old. This means that, even in Shakespeare's time, there were some very mature trees around the town. But these were not covered by Forest Law, which would have protected them.

It's not known exactly when deforestation began, but even in the sixteenth century, it was understood that the Forest of Arden had been diminished from what it had been. This was due to enclosure and later logging, in particular to meet the demands of the navy for wood to build ships to defend England against the Spanish fleet.

But when fires struck Stratford in the 1590s, the town was fortunate to have another ready source of timber to use in making repairs. It's understood that, at that time, some 1,000 elm trees encircled the town, growing on good arable land and usually planted in hedgerows. These were felled long ago, but the One Elm pub in Guild Street is a reminder of the last one standing!

While oak is harder than elm wood, and therefore better for outdoor purposes, elm has an interlocking grain which makes it much tougher and very hard to split, meaning that it holds nails and screws well. For these reasons, even before the fires, elm was a highly desirable material amongst the carpenters of Stratford who used it for internal joinery and to make furniture – particularly chairs with curved backs. Elm was also used for coffins and water pipes because of its water-resistant properties when wet. Strong and durable, elm was the obvious choice for making repairs to properties in High Street and Chapel Street after the fires of the 1590s.

This is borne out by the number of samples of elm found during the StratFire Project. Unfortunately, however, unlike oak, dendrochronology (carbon-dating) techniques can't be used to establish the age of elm timbers. Instead, a different technique – isotope testing – has to be used.