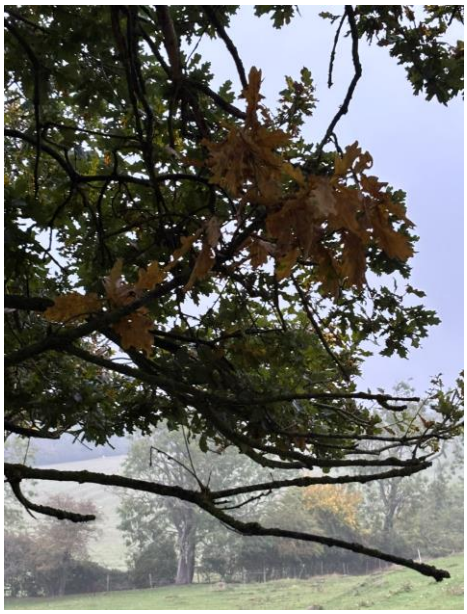
September: Roke, fall and hærfest



My word of the month is 'roke', for 'tis the season of stunning rokes in Welland valley. Nowadays roke is a regional dialect word, found particularly north and east of here, as befits its Viking origins – although, sadly, now forgotten in the Corby and Thorpe. Now, as then, it means a mist (the AngloSaxon's – and therefore Grettonian's - preferred word), rising from the land[1]. For the end of September is the beginning of John Keats's 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness', not yet full autumn but a time for apples, 'plumped hazels', and, 'later flowers for the bees', for Wordsworth's 'pensive beauty' anticipating John Clare's 'fall of an acorn on the ground, the pattering of nuts on the hazel branches as they fall from ripeness'.

Trees around the churchyard and on the slope to the Welland are on the turn as, with decreasing day-length, their leaves lose their chlorophyll – the green pigment that absorbs all the colours in sunlight and rainbows except green, and uses that light-energy to convert carbon dioxide and water into sugar and oxygen. It's the build-up of other chemicals in the leaves, usually masked by green, that make the leaves now appear yellow and red, before these leaves, cut off from the tree, brown, die, and fall to the ground.

This fall of leaves provided the season's name – fall – the word used in mediaeval England and which lives on in American English. In England, the early eighteenth century fashion became to use the French word autumn(e). And thus, fall fell out of favour. Earlier still, the word used was *hærfest*, as in the AngloSaxon poem:

Sumor sunwlitegost swegel byð hatost
Hærfest hreðeadegost hæleðum bringeð geres
wæstmas þa þe him god sendeð.

(Summer sun-lightest sun is hottest / autumn most-glorious brings men the year's fruits that God sends).

[1] In modern Scandinavia languages it often means smoke, and it survives in everyday modern English as the less romantic word, reek.

September: Roke, fall and hærfest

Bringing in the harvest was, of course, a hugely important community event, celebrated in different places at slightly different times according to the crops, usually with music, food, alcohol… and predictable consequences. Lammas Day celebrations (*hlafmæsse* or 'loaf mass') celebrated the first bread made from that year's corn. Events marking the end of *hærfest* became a bit more controlled in England in the 1840s, not least thanks to Parson Hawker, a Cornish vicar, who pretty much invented today's Harvest Festival, including singing (in English) the German hymn 'wir pflügen und wir streuen'. A probably exaggerated biography of Hawker, by Sabine Baring-Gould (a clergyman, but also an antiquarian, collector of folk songs and writer of hymns, including 'Onward Christian Soldiers'), has it that the parson was not only a wonderful, humane man, who battled against the infamous 'wreckers' of the Cornish coast, but a rather eccentric character who excommunicated his cat for mousing on a Sunday[2].

This is a 'mast year' owing to a particularly warm spring (remember?) and co-ordinated by the underground network of fungal mycelia through which trees talk to each other. *Mæst* is another AngloSaxon word meaning acorns, beech and other nuts, especially used to feed swine, and you can already see large numbers of acorns and beech masts both on trees and littering the ground – you can already feel the crunch as you walk. This not only leads to more trees ('from tiny acorns…' or as Geoffrey Chaucer put it, 'as an ook cometh of a litel spyr'), but provides extra food for wildlife – and in time provides food and shelter for still more wildlife. In medieval times, pannage in Rockingham Forest – turning out your pigs to eat the masts – would have been very important for fattening up swine that, salted and dried, would you through the winter; you would, of course, 'eat everything except the squeak.' Perhaps this tradition, of valuing and not wasting our food, is one we might reintroduce today?

[2] 'He was usually followed to church by nine or ten cats, which entered the chancel with him and careered about it during service. While saying prayers, Mr Hawker would pat his cats or scratch them under their chins. Originally ten accompanied him the church, but one, having killed and eaten a mouse on a Sunday, was excommunicated, and from that day was not allowed in the sanctuary.'