

2023 - 24

YEARBOOK



**TREE
REGISTER**



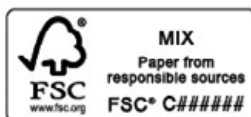
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Front cover photos all Owen Johnson except where mentioned.
Clockwise from top left: *Acer forrestii* at Hergest Croft; *Quercus petraea* hung with boots at Walcot Hall; *Magnolia obovata* at Borde Hill © Jim Gardiner; *Prunus* 'Horinji' at Longstock Park; *Plagianthus regius* at Bushy Park; *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' at Kenwood House; *Betula utilis* subsp. *albosinensis* 'Bowling Green' © Roy Lancaster; *Juglans regia* 'Pendula' at Castle Park, Frodsham.

Back cover photos all Owen Johnson except where mentioned.
Left to right: *Juglans x intermedia* 'Vilmoreana' at Hergest Croft
Prunus 'Shibayama' at Longstock Park; *Morus nigra* at Syon House © Peter Cole.
Bottom left: *Acer palmatum* 'Sango-Kaku' at Hergest Croft.

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YEARBOOK 2023 - 24



© Sir Paul McCartney.

We are very grateful to Sir Paul McCartney for his continued generosity in sponsoring our Yearbook.

Sir Paul is seen here, in 2021, with Jill Butler, Tree Register Trustee, in front of two Giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) he planted on his estate in 1994 with Tree Register joint founder, Vicky Schilling and our first Honorary President, Tony Schilling.



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◀ *Meliosma veitchiorum* in the Savill Gardens, Windsor. From seed collected in the wild, grown and planted by the late Mark Flanagan, who will be honoured by the Tree Register, Alan Mitchell Lecture 'From Seed to Champion Tree' at Windsor, in May 2024. Photo © David Alderman.

President's Foreword

The Earl of Rosse Honorary President of the Tree Register

I am happy to say that I have been involved with the Tree Register from the start, as a founding trustee in 1988, and this Yearbook shows once again how well it has progressed. This book is a feast of some of the great trees of our islands, all made possible by the country wide recording of our volunteers.

When I first came back to Birr Castle in Ireland, Alan Mitchell, that great tree expert, visited us, as did the Irish botanist, David Webb. We found that my father and grandfather had planted many rare and interesting specimen trees. It was, however, the great trees from the older plantings that were the most impressive in the landscape. It was an exciting time, and with Alan Mitchell's help we began to record and measure them. Thanks to the Tree Register it is wonderful to have these early records - and a few champion tree blue labels! Now, some 40 years on, we can see the continued growth on many of these trees, such as our great *Sequoiadendron* in the River Garden.

Since then, my interest in trees developed. On the first plant hunting expedition I went on I found myself sharing a tent with Thomas Pakenham, (now fellow Tree Register Trustee and Chairman of the Irish Tree Society) in the wilds of Szechuan. Our snores disturbed our Chinese guides, nervously huddled round the fire, unsure of their safety from the local population of Tibetans. Many of the seeds I collected on this and subsequent trips, are growing so well here at Birr that many are already Irish champions and I look forward to our collection being re-measured in 2024.



▲ Lord Rosse with Head Gardener, Shane Hollywood, and Birr Castles champion *Picea wilsonii*. Photo © Birr Castle Demesne.

It is very satisfying to find that you have a champion tree, the largest of its kind in all of Britain and Ireland, and one of ours was our enormous Grey poplar (*Populus x canescens* 42m x 628cm). In 2014 the public voted for this tree to represent Ireland in the European Tree of the Year. Sadly, and dramatically, it fell in a storm in the middle of the competition. It was allowed to go forward, having 'fallen for Ireland' but was however beaten by a Slovenean village oak tree!

We have left the poplar lying by the river with its impressive girth and length. We are encouraged now to leave trees where they fall, to become part of the landscape and home for the birds and the insects to use, but it still has its blue champion label!

This year, with climate change becoming more of an issue and many of our great trees under threat from storms in the winter and drought in the summer, we, more than ever, need to record the great and special trees which we have in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.



▲ The 42m tall Grey poplar (*Populus x canescens*) pre 2014. Photo © David Alderman.

I am delighted to be associated with the Tree Register and congratulate all who contribute to its important work and I very much hope you, our members and supporters, enjoy reading this, our first, Yearbook. I am sure it will become a useful reference for many years to come.

Introduction

By David Alderman

This is our first Yearbook, including a comprehensive illustrated report from our Registrar, with contributions from trustee's and volunteers, both professional tree experts and amateur enthusiasts. The interest in remarkable and champion trees has increased to a point where we felt unable to include all of the fascinating discoveries and information in our annual newsletter. We are also extremely grateful to Sir Paul McCartney for agreeing to continue supporting the Tree Register and sponsor the printing of this Yearbook.

With the challenges of climate change the Tree Register is helping to record the progress of many exotic species which may, one day, become more familiar in our parks, streets and gardens. This Yearbook will become an important reference explaining how different trees have established and are growing throughout Britain and Ireland.

The Tree Register is at the heart of the steadily growing public awareness of the vital role of trees in sustaining our way of life - in every positive sense. To quote Tree Register trustee and respected plantsman, Maurice Foster, "from our experienced hands-on pioneering volunteers, guided by our



▲ Honorary Director, David Alderman, awarding a champion tree label to Coton Orchard, Cambridgeshire, for their largest Bramley Apple, currently under threat from the development of a new road. Photos © Anna Gazeley.

honorary director and a registrar of unrivalled knowledge in the field and supported by the best qualified and internationally acknowledged group of trustee dendrologists anywhere, we work hard to play a leading role in setting that awareness trend. There is now no question that trees matter and our aim to put them front and centre stage is fully in tune with the times. You could in fact say we do not set the trend - **we are** the trend!"



▲ New Tree Register Trustee, Philippa Lewis, with David Alderman, by one of the great ancient yew at Newlands Corner, near Guildford, Surrey (June 2023). Photo © David Alderman.

We launch this new Yearbook as one of our aims to inform you better of our achievements and we in turn value your support as a subscriber, which enables us to continue and expand our work. In 2023 we warmly welcomed our new secretary, Celene Pickard, bringing a wealth of experience and contacts through her other role, as Executive and Membership Secretary for the Friends of the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge. We were also pleased to welcome long-time friend and volunteer of our charity, Philippa Lewis, who accepted the offer of becoming our latest trustee. Philippa has volunteered for the Tree Register for more than

20 years and her knowledge of the charity, as well as her professional qualifications as a senior environmental advisor, will bring new strengths and ideas to the board.

The Tree Register continues to be run by volunteers, its membership and sponsors are such an important part of the charity, ensuring that the valuable data it holds reaches a wider audience and tells the important story of our tree heritage.

We hope you enjoy reading this and helping contribute to its success.

Registrar's Report of 2023

Owen Johnson MBE VMM

Over the course of 2023, I added more than 10,000 sets of measurements to the Tree Register database, just as I have done for six of the last eight years; the Tree Register remains the largest database of its kind in the world.



But the Register is all about quality, not quantity. Every one of those 11,200 trees has been hand-picked, and is special for its size, its history, its rarity or its age. Rather remarkable in 2023 was the proportion – nearly 70% - of those records which represented trees found and measured for the first time, rather than updates of specimens we already knew about. Our team of volunteer recorders visited plenty of new towns and villages, and also spent time in gardens such as Hergest Croft where many of the best trees represent recently introduced species which are just reaching champion size. A little over 600 of the year's records were for trees which are now champions for Britain and Ireland.

This means that if the website were updated continually (it's actually updated once a month) you could log in every day of the year and expect to find the records of one or two new champions. Nearly a third of these champions were themselves new trees, 'discovered' for the first time; a third of the rest also represented specimens newly reaching champion stature, or instated as champions because the previous record-holder was found to have died.

At the level of country champions (for England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man), there were 1100 changes, and at

county level there were 3900 – meaning that a new (county) champion tree was found, recorded and assessed, on average, at least every couple of hours. The Tree Register is maintained entirely through volunteer effort, and I don't think any of our volunteers actually suffer from sleep deprivation, hyperactivity or even single-mindedness on the scale that those statistics might give you cause to expect. The entire database now covers 275,000 individual trees: if it was your full-time job to look at it, and you spent just ten seconds on each tree, it would take you half a year to review them all.

Anyway, enough of raw statistics. Although the Register is essentially a (very) long list of trees, trees are naturally photogenic objects, and most have tales to tell. This is the first year that our annual newsletter has been expanded to yearbook size, and I've relished the opportunities that this has presented to write a little more about the year's best finds, to share their pictures, and to guide you through our achievements in more detail.

Champions trees inevitably concentrate in larger collections, and among such during 2023 I revisited and thoroughly recorded the trees of Hergest Croft in Herefordshire, of Stanage Park in Powys, of the Winkworth Arboretum in Surrey, of Longstock Park in Hampshire, and of Syon Park in London. At the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, where the garden's own volunteers remeasure and update the



▲ This old Golden Bean Tree *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea' at Shadbolt Park, a small public park in Worcester Park, Surrey, is an example of a tree taking over in 2023 as national champion for girth after its remeasurement, combined with confirmation of the loss of the previous record-holder in a south London cemetery. By late September, the yellow of the leaves has faded.

records for Britain's most nearly comprehensive arboretum on a rolling basis, attention was directed to the remarkable collection of hardy oaks which was built up under the auspices of Allen Coombes: the Gardens now have 117 national champion oaks (out of 463 in Britain and Ireland as a whole; *Quercus* is just ahead of *Acer* as the largest genus on the database, in terms of the numbers of champions. In Cardiff, Anne and Steve Bell undertook a thorough revision of the trees of Bute Park, which is unquestionably Britain's foremost public park in terms of its rare and well-grown trees. The results of their work can all be seen at their wonderful Cardiff Parks website www.cardiffparks.org.uk/trees/bute



▲ Bute Park in Cardiff is the largest public tree collection in Britain.

Some big tree collections

Hergest Croft is among my favourite gardens, idyllically situated in one of the quietest and most picturesque parts of the Herefordshire countryside; the shelter provided by the Black Mountains to the west and the deep rich soils combine to create one of our best environments for tree growth.

The Douglas Fir *Pseudotsuga menziesii* provides something of a barometer for such conditions: the coastal form (var. *menziesii*) will grow just about anywhere in Britain but only when everything is just right does it begin to rival the giant sizes it can attain in its native Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. In a part of the Hergest Croft estate which few visitors see, by the footpath that goes down the precipitous slope north of the carpark towards the ruined cider mill, a group of Douglas Fir were planted in Yeld Wood around 1863. With

modern lasers to help me, I was able to confirm a height of 61m (to the ground on the upper side) for the tallest in this group, making it the third Douglas Fir to reach 200 feet in England. (The other two, just a couple of feet taller, are thoroughly well spread, at Cragside in Northumberland and at Dunster Woodlands in north-west Somerset.)

Trees have been planted at Hergest Croft for a century and a half, with the oldest and most impressive including a Caucasian Elm *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' planted by Richard Banks in 1878 in Workhouse Meadow (a private part of the grounds below the original Ridgebourne House), and the English champion Grand Fir *Abies grandis* at the top end of the 1890s conifer avenue through the Azalea Garden. But the first heyday of tree-planting here came in the 1920s when

▼ The garden at Hergest Croft in September, with *Acer palmatum* 'Sango-kaku' just starting its autumn colour.





▲ The base of the tallest Douglas Fir in Yeld Wood at Hergest Croft. It is impossible to find a position from which to photograph its full height.

William and Dorothy Banks utilised the shelter of Park Wood to cultivate the new trees coming from the mountains of China, which turn out to relish the rather cool, cloudy microclimate of the Welsh Marches. Two of the most spectacular of these plantings are the largest and tallest examples in Britain of Cox' Juniper, *Juniperus recurva* var. *coxii*. With help from Hergest Croft gardener and dendrologist Rowan Griffiths, I was able to record some new national champions in out-of-the-way corners of this wood, including a 19m Carolina Hemlock *Tsuga caroliniana* well hidden among the rhododendrons.



▲ This Grand Fir at Hergest Croft is the English champion for girth at 608cm; it is also an imposing 49.5m tall.

But Hergest Croft's eminence among contemporary tree collections is largely due to work of Elizabeth and the late Lawrence Banks since the mid-1980s, exploiting the second big wave of introductions of wild material from east Asia. Forty-five of the 130 national champion trees at Hergest today are trees that weren't even old enough for me to have measured them at all on my last visit, ten years before.



▲ *Juniperus recurva* var. *coxii* at Hergest Croft.



▲ Shasta Fir *Abies magnifica* var. *shastensis*, grown from seed collected by Lawrence and Elizabeth Banks in 1971 and one of the first framework plantings in their extension to the original Azalea Garden; it is now coning for confirmation and becomes the champion for this very rare fir.



▲ Champion *Alnus formosana* from BSWJ 1731, an elegant Chinese alder now 17.5m tall in the Azalea Garden at Hergest Croft.



▲ A brightly variegated and almost unique sport of Naya Nut *Torreyya nucifera* in the Azalea Garden at Hergest Croft, 6m tall.



▲ Champion Madrone *Arbutus menziesii* at Hergest Croft, 26.5m tall.



▲ An excellent form of Père David's Maple *Acer davidii*, grown from seed from SBEC 466 distributed by Roy Lancaster and planted in 1986 in the Maple Grove at Hergest Croft. It is named after the former RHS President Robin Herbert CBE VMH of Llanover Park, who passed away in 2023.



▲ *Acer forrestii* from RCM 98036, planted by Lawrence Banks in 2003 and photographed as a young tree in September 2013 when full of its magenta fruit.



▲ English champion Oregon Maple *Acer macrophyllum* in the Town Meadow at Hergest Croft, with a girth of 408cm.



▲ Champion Hybrid Walnut *Juglans x intermedia* 'Vilmoreana' planted at Hergest Croft in 1930 and now 28.4m tall.



▲ A dark-barked seedling of *Betula utilis* planted around 1920 at Hergest Croft and now repropagated under the clonal name *B. utilis* subsp. *utilis* 'Park Wood'. In a sheltered spot, it is the tallest Himalayan birch of any kind recorded in Britain at 24m. Birches grow particularly well in Hergest Croft's relatively cool humid summers and the collection now has 21 national champions for the genus.



◀ A group of maples given room to luxuriate in the Corner Cap field at Hergest Croft (on the visitor route between the main garden and Park Wood): *Acer caesium* on the left, planted in 1976 and already a champion; *A. miyabei* on the right, 74 years older. Between them, the bole of the national champion *A. diabolicum* is also visible.



▲ Champion Cut-leaved Walnut *Juglans regia* 'Laciniata' in the Corner Cap field, planted in 1912 and now with a spread exceeding 20m.

Not very far away but just into Wales, **Stanage Park** is a private estate with a rather similar arboricultural history.

Most of its champions were established early in the 20th century by Charles Coltman-Rogers, a politician and botanist who first described and named the Chinese fir *Abies forrestii*. Appropriately, Stanage has the Welsh champion Forrest Fir, a particularly rugged open-grown example planted in 1912 and now girthing 310cm.

The Coltman-Rogers family had links through marriage with the Williams dynasty of Caerhays Castle in Cornwall, and both collections feature many introductions by George Forrest, whose explorations of China they sponsored. Forrest's conifers demonstrably prefer the humid shelter of the Welsh Marches; Stanage now has champions for the spruces *Picea asperata*, *P. likiangensis*, *P.*

morrisonicola and *P. purpurea*, and for the pine *Pinus tabulaeformis*, while Caerhays excels in growing tenderer, broadleaved evergreens.

One such species with its champion in each of these gardens is the rather austere handsome Chinese stone-oak *Lithocarpus cleistocarpus*, whose long glossy leaves are silvered underneath. The Caerhays examples are better known and will have contributed to the assumption that this is a tender tree, but their sister at chillier Stanage, planted in 1920 in an avenue of oaks across an open field, has flourished equally well and is the tallest at 18.5m. (*Lithocarpus* is a difficult genus to identify and I believe that there are also flourishing examples of *L. cleistocarpus*, probably deriving ultimately from the same source and variously mislabelled, at Kew, Wakehurst Place, the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, and the Dundee University Botanic Garden.)



▲ Welsh champion *Abies forrestii* in Stnage Park.



▲ Superb growth of wild Sessile Oak *Quercus petraea*, 33m tall and 502 cm girth, in the very favourable conditions of Stnage Park.



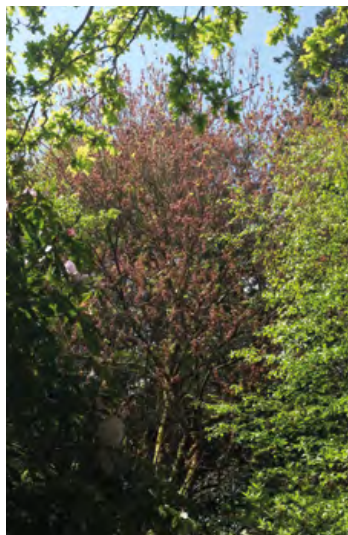
▲ Champion *Picea morrisonicola* from Taiwan, its crown covered in flowers at Stnage Park in May.



▲ The bole of the Welsh champion *Picea brachytyla* at Stnage Park.



▲ Champion *Acer flabellatum* 14m x 163cm in the Wood Bank garden at Stnage Park.



▲ Welsh Champion Horned Maple *Acer diabolicum* dense with purple flower in May at Stnage Park.



▲ *Lithocarpus cleistocarpus* with new leaves in May within the Helen Chubb Memorial Avenue at Stanage Park.

Winkworth Arboretum, whose trees I remeasured in August with Aidan Champion, is a younger collection, begun in the 1930s by Wilfrid Fox who was a local GP, but the light soils and warm but often dry summers of this part of Surrey encourage trees to live fast and die young, and many of Dr Fox's beloved maples and rowans have already failed.

One group still in the full vigour of youth is a trio of 'Dawyck' beeches on the Oak Bank, the best of them now marginally over 30m tall. This is one tree where many rival champions contend closely; the following month, David Alderman measured a 30.2m example in a private part of the Woburn Abbey estate in Bedfordshire.

► The picturesque topography of Winkworth Arboretum allows a privileged view from above of some tall flowering trees, such as this group of Sorrel Trees *Oxydendrum arboreum*.



▲ One rowan still thriving at Winkworth is this unusually tall and shapely example of the pink-fruited Chinese *Sorbus pseudohupehensis*.





▲ Champion *Castanea henryi* hidden away at the south corner of Winkworth Arboretum: a Chinese chestnut with slender leaves and a distinctively rugged bark.

Longstock Park in the Test Valley in Hampshire was planted under the auspices of Sir Harold Hillier in the mid 20th century and its tree collection is as eclectic as you might expect.

The magnificent Water Gardens open regularly and now include the tallest Cut-leaved Alder *Alnus glutinosa* 'Laciniata', while in the parkland around the house there are record examples of *Azara serrata*, *X Cuprocyparis ovensii* and *Zanthoxylum armatum*, among others.

▶ Champion *Prunus* 'Shibayama' at Longstock Park, flowering in April 2010.



▲ *Eucryphia x nymansensis* 'Nymansay' near the Dr Fox memorial at Winkworth, full of flower after a wet summer. The UK champion of this hybrid's more drought-tolerant parent, *E. glutinosa*, grows nearby.



Elderly champions surviving from the park's remarkable collection of Japanese flowering cherries include 'Ariake', 'Horinji' and 'Shibayama' (which Sir Harold will have planted under the name 'Hatazakura').



▲ *Prunus* 'Horinji' at Longstock.



▲ *Prunus* 'Ariake' at Longstock.

▼ A pair of champion Japan Peppers *Zanthoxylum armatum* at Longstock Park.

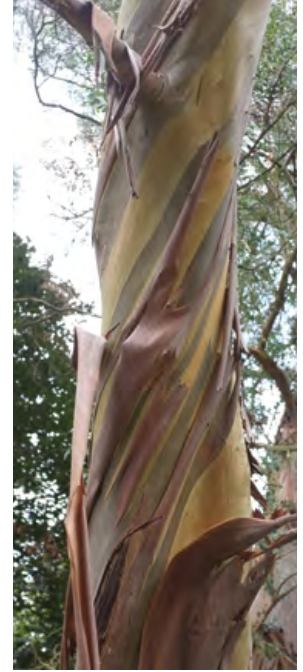




▲ A fine open-grown specimen of the Lawson Cypress *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Westermanni' at Longstock Park.



▲ This Scarlet Oak *Quercus coccinea* was planted in Longstock Park as recently as 1948 but has already become a new girth champion at 385cm.



▲ The colourful bark of a younger *Eucalyptus* addition to the public part of the arboretum at Syon, probably *E. stellulata*.

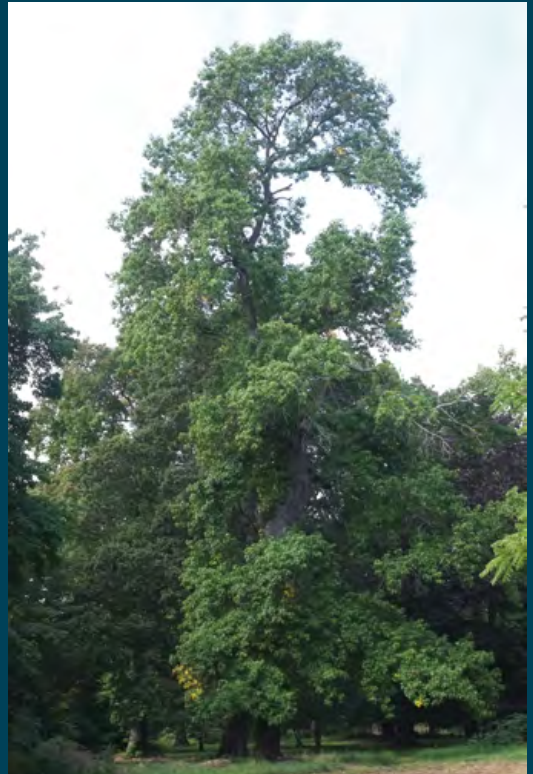
Syon Park stands in rivalry across the Thames from Kew; the estate has an even longer arboricultural history, and one mulberry may represent regeneration from a tree said to have been planted here in 1548 by William Turner, 'the father of English botany'.

The soils in this part of London derive from river deposits of sand, silt and gravel, and can vary in their qualities from hectare to hectare, with their capacity to retain water through summer drought seeming increasingly relevant; according at least to the growth of the trees, Syon enjoys some better patches of soil than does most of Kew, and the Park can boast a remarkable array of champions

for some quite common or at least large-growing species: Turkish Hazel *Corylus colurna* now with a girth of 336cm; Golden Rain Tree *Koelreuteria paniculata* 17m x 256cm; both the tallest examples (29m) and the biggest (335cm girth) of Sweet Gum *Liquidambar styraciflua*, growing near to each other; Black Poplar *Populus nigra* 36.5m tall (a rather upright specimen of cultivated rather than of truly wild provenance); Shingle Oak *Quercus imbricaria* 28.2m tall; Burr Oak *Quercus macrocarpa* 27m x 305 cm (but looking moribund); Water Oak *Q. nigra* 325cm in girth; and, by the private fishing lake, Swamp Cypress *Taxodium distichum* with a short trunk below branching 770cm in girth at 60cm.



▲ Champion *Taxodium distichum* at Syon.



▲ Tallest *Liquidambar styraciflua* at Syon.



▲ *Corylus colurna* at Syon.

New Towns

During my travels in 2023 I got to a few of the largest towns in England and Wales which still awaited exploration by anyone with an eye for rare and special trees. Interesting urban trees can be present – or not present – across a much wider geographical area and in a wider range of places, public and private, than is the case for any big arboretum, but over the years I've learnt where I'm likeliest to encounter them: the public park, the cemetery, the parish churchyard, and the streets around the town centre plus those with big, Victorian gardens.



▲ *Prunus avium* 'Plena' in Wrexham Cemetery.



▲ *Ulmus glabra* 'Camperdownii' in Wrexham.

An afternoon in Wrexham was both fun and productive. First stop, the cemetery, with a Double Wild Cherry *Prunus avium* 'Plena' which became a national champion for a few weeks until John Killingbeck and Alan Hunton found a bigger one in Durham, and which remains the Welsh record-holder. Then, on the walk towards Bellevue Park, the biggest Camperdown Elm *Ulmus glabra* 'Camperdownii' ever measured in Wales, a survivor of DED in the public garden by Victoria Road and 8m x 157cm girth.

Bellevue Park in the town centre turned out to have a range of unusual and well-grown trees of all ages, including new Welsh champions for Lombardy Poplar *Populus nigra* 'Italica', 35m tall and 437cm girth, a couple of luxuriant and usually large-leaved examples of the scarce poplar *P. x jackii*, the larger of them 25.5m x 302cm, a mature Nikko Fir *Abies homolepis* for winter interest and a fine old example of the cut-leaved Norway Maple *Acer platanoides* 'Dissectum', 13m x 186cm, tucked away in a corner shrubbery. Younger plantings included a



▲ Welsh champion Lombardy *Poplars*
Bellevue Park in Wrexham.



▲ *Acer campestre* 'William Caldwell'
Bellevue Park in Wrexham.

couple of Golden Beeches *Fagus sylvatica* 'Zlatia', Welsh champions for the large-leaved whitebeam 'John Mitchell', and three survivors from what may have been intended as an avenue of the superb but still quite scarce fastigate Field Maple *Acer campestre* 'William Caldwell'.

St Giles parish churchyard had a fine *Acer cappadocicum*, but this record has to remain an estimate since, for the reasons not immediately apparent to an English visitor, the entire churchyard was railed with iron and locked in the middle of the afternoon.

Acton Park on the northern fringes of modern Wrexham is a historic estate now in public ownership. The first tree I recorded here was the tallest Purple Plum *Prunus cerasifera* 'Pissardii' that I had ever seen, at 13m. Purple Plums are not generally trees that I think of as majestic, but every sort deserves its champion.



▲ Champion *Prunus cerasifera* 'Pissardii' Acton
Park in Wrexham.

Among Acton Park's older and perhaps more illustrious plantings are a new Welsh champion for Fern-leaved Beech *Fagus sylvatica* 'Aspleniifolia', 467cm girth, a fine surviving Exeter Elm *Ulmus glabra* 'Exoniensis' (14m x 145cm girth) and an interesting range of cultivars of native holly, including a 'Silver Queen' with a short but massive bole 250cm around, a new national champion for 'Crispa' 17m tall, and a 14m champion for another curiosity with small weak forward-pointing spines in a flat plane, for which I think 'Ciliata Major' is the correct name.

Scunthorpe has probably never been a town on many people's list of perfect travel destinations, and certainly not for dendrologists. But the soils around the Humber estuary are generally fertile and good for tree growth. I had first spotted the remarkable sprawling Russian Olive *Elaeagnus angustifolia* in the town's Kingsway Gardens from

the window of a rail replacement bus back in 2004, and finally getting around to measuring it in 2023 I found its three main limbs resting on the ground to give a spread of 20m and a girth, before the fork of the two more upright of the trunks at 50cm up, of 273cm.

Nearby, Woodlands Cemetery produced a co-champion for the golden leylandii X *Cuprocyparis leylandii* 'Castlewellan Gold', and Brumby Cemetery a co-champion for the Japanese cherry *Prunus* 'Hokusai' (as far as I could tell in June, with just one shrivelled bloom left on the tree).

This same trip took me on, that evening and the following day, to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. A coastal location, remote from much wooded country, has allowed a delightful range of elms to survive in Cleethorpes: I found a mature 'Vegeta' in Grimsby Road, while St Peter's Avenue in the town centre has fourteen early plantings of

▼ *Elaeagnus angustifolia* Kingsway Gardens in Scunthorpe.





▲ *Ulmus x hollandica* 'Vegeta' in Cleethorpes.



▲ *Ulmus* 'Regal' line in Cleethorpes.



▲ *Ulmus* 'Lobel' planting in Cleethorpes.

'Lobel' (plus one interloping 'Dodoens'); King's Road has a long line of 'Regal', ending in a single 'Clusius'. The best of several 'Sapporo Autumn Gold' was in Old Clew parish churchyard, 17m x 235cm. Another little tree in the Pier Gardens had me scratching my head before deciding it was *X Sorbopyrus auricularis*, a not very characterful hybrid of Common Whitebeam and Pear.

In nearby Grimsby, where I was joined by our Lincolnshire volunteer Kevin Stanley, more elms turned out to survive: an 'Exoniensis' 12m tall in Weelsby Road, a series of splendid 'Vegeta' in People's Park, an *Ulmus glabra* 'Pendula' in the Scartho Road Cemetery, a small but old surviving Wheatley Elm *U. minor* 'Sarniensis' in the Great Coates Industrial Estate (I spotted that one from the train as I was leaving), and, in front of the police station, two more 'Exoniensis' flanking a 12-metre specimen of the rarer *U. x hollandica* clone 'Dampieri'. This last group was clearly worthy of a photograph - which nearly got the two of us arrested.

I already knew that Grimsby's People's Park was celebrated as an example of a Victorian landscaped town-centre park - the sort of place where good trees often abound. A strongly weeping hawthorn



▲ *X Sorbopyrus auricularis* in Cleethorpes.



▲ *Ulmus x hollandica* 'Dampieri' at Grimsby police station.

near the bandstand was almost certainly planted, I decided, as the old selection 'Pendula' and becomes a worthy champion 13m tall. Nearby, Ainslie Park was half under water but the dry half included just about the finest Weeping Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Pendula' to survive in England. This clone is sadly is particularly vulnerable to Chalara Ash Dieback and disease seemed to be just getting hold of this example.

Grimsby's Scartho Road Cemetery provided the high point of my Humberside trip, with a wonderful array of well-grown and often uncommon trees in their prime. Those urban mainstays, the service trees (mostly *Karpatiosorbus* and *Scandosorbus* in the newest terminology but better known to

most of us as a section of the diverse old genus *Sorbus*) often get tasked with surviving in some really tough sites but luxuriate in Grimsby's soil and microclimate: the cemetery has a sequence of nine of the finest examples of *S. croceocarpa* that I've seen, with the new girth champion standing at 18m x 262cm. The best of three *S. latifolia* was also a new joint-champion, at 343cm girth, while Swedish Whitebeam *S. intermedia* was an impressive 272cm and Common Whitebeam *S. aria* a worthy 229cm. Near the Victorian chapel, an ash *Fraxinus excelsior* conspicuously grafted at one metre had small rather twisted or hooded leaves and is I think a survivor of the old clone



▲ *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Pendula' Ainslie Park in Grimsby.



▲ Champion *Sorbus latifolia* in Grimsby's Scartho Road Cemetery.

'Scolopendrifolia', and a new champion at 17m x 218cm. The labelled 'Scolopendrifolia' in the ash collection at Kew has reverted, except for a few low sprouts, and the only other places where I have seen this curiosity are at Aldenham Woods in Hertfordshire (with the foliage well out of reach for confirmation) and on the campus of Surrey University at Guildford, where it was propagated by the late Gordon Hartman. It remains to be seen whether we will have the luck or the will to preserve its unique genome as Chalara Ash Dieback runs its course.



▲ Small twisted leaves of *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Scolopendrifolia' in Grimsby's Scartho Road Cemetery.

A few interesting younger plantings seem set to maintain the Scartho Road Cemetery's arboreal interest, included a vigorous Aleppo Pine *Pinus halepensis*.



▲ Lincolnshire recorder Kevin Stanley admires one of several fine Willow-leaved Pear *Pyrus salicifolia* in Grimsby's Scartho Road Cemetery.

The Holy Trinity - Three of Borde Hill's magnificent magnolias

By Jim Gardiner VMH

I have been visiting Borde Hill since the 1970's, the first occasion to collect cuttings of wild collected *Rhododendron* species for the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh where I was working. This association has continued through to the present day as a visitor, Garden Council Member and Chairman as well as Garden Director. My interest in their plant collections has never wavered, always finding new plants of interest as well as becoming more familiar with 'old friends'.

Enthusiasm for magnolias goes back to my student days at Windsor, having such a magnificent and expanding collection at Borde Hill 'whets the appetite' when seeing them in all their glory. The great Asiatic magnolias introduced by E H Wilson in particular shine out like beacons during March and April but come back in May to the Garden of Allah, this hidden dell named in 1948 by Sir Ralph Stephenson Clarke for its sheltered and tranquil nature, is where you'll see three majestic trees christened The Holy Trinity.

They are indeed venerable specimens, the Chinese *Magnolia officinalis*, and the



south-east United States *Magnolia fraseri* were both planted in 1933 while the Japanese *Magnolia obovata* was planted in 1935. Measured in 2017, *Magnolia officinalis* was 13m x 237cm at 0.6m is a champion as is *Magnolia obovata* at 15m x 320cm at 0.4m on the short bole in 2015. *Magnolia fraseri* isn't quite a champion but nevertheless impressive for this species at 15m x 147cm at 0.8m in 2015.

In the Borde Hill archive is a letter dated 29th October 1932 from Stephenson Robert Clarke to Leonard Messel of Nymans, letting him know that Dandy (of Kew) had told Bruce Jackson the *Magnolia officinalis* seedlings Messel had given him were undoubtedly 'officinalis'. In the same letter SRC had reserved two *Magnolia hypoleuca* (now *M.obovata*) for Messel, 'they are nice young plants about 3 feet high and ought to have a shift this autumn'.



Both *Magnolia officinalis* and *Magnolia obovata* are magnificent foliage plants, obovate in shape reaching 46cm (18") in length and slightly glaucous on their undersides. Their creamy-white flowers with up to 15 tepals are seen sporadically in May, quite fragrant with an antiseptic scent and are cup then saucer shaped. Both have bright red fruiting cones which are flat topped on *M.officinalis*. *Magnolia fraseri* is known as the fishtail magnolia on account of their obovate-oblong sea green leaves having auriculate lobes at their base which turn a reddish-brown in autumn. Their small milky-white/pale yellow flowers are seen in May and have a subtle sweet scent.



▲ *Magnolia officinalis* in fruit at Borde Hill.

◀ Left to right: *Magnolia obovata* in flower and foliage; *Magnolia officinalis* in flower both at Borde Hill. All photos © Jim Gardiner.

▼ *M officinalis* *M fraseri* and *M obovata* left to right, at Borde Hill.

Jim Gardiner is a Trustee of the Tree Register and Vice President of the Royal Horticultural Society. Based at Wisley, Jim retired after a 28-year career at the society as its curator and director of horticulture. He is also a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee and author of several specialist books on magnolias.



London

London is so big, and in many ways so good for trees, that a day's exploring can also sometimes feel like a visit to a new city. I had previously missed this New Zealand Ribbonwood *Plagianthus regius*, tucked away in a corner of the Waterhouse Woodland Gardens at Bushy Park and the joint-tallest in Britain at 16m.



▲ Looking up in the crown of the tall *Plagianthus regius* at Bushy Park, West London.

Any numbers of outstanding trees can hide in London's private gardens. One example is this extraordinarily slender Italian Cypress *Cupressus sempervirens* which I spotted in Highgate, without the time to call or investigate further: already over 16 m tall but less than a metre wide, it is either a sport raised from a cone brought back from holiday, or an outstandingly example of the selections 'Green Pencil' or 'Totem Pole'.

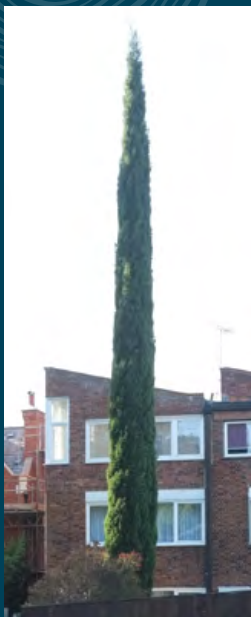
Clive Freedman, meanwhile, has reported a new tree-sized champion for *Ceanothus* (probably *C. arboreus* 'Trewithen Blue') in a back garden in Rowan Road, Hammersmith, 7.6m x 105cm

at 1m. This owes its vigour to being planted (in 1993) in a deep pit which its owner had filled with horse manure.

The Weeping Cypress *Cupressus pendula* (syn. *C. funebris*) is a tree which has failed with us to emulate the great sizes and attains in its native China, and which I used to assume was confined to a few collections. I found my first 'vernacular' London specimen, 6m tall, by the tennis court in Mountsfield Park in Lewisham back in 2014 and during 2023 I happened to spot three more: a pair in Barra Hall Park in Hayes and one in Streatham Cemetery. All are big bushes rather than real trees, but their very fine curtains of weeping moss-green foliage are certainly pretty.



▲ *Cupressus pendula* at Streatham Cemetery.



▲ *Cupressus sempervirens*
in Highgate.



▲ Veteran *Salix x pendulina*
'Elegantissima' at Arnos Park.



▲ *Salix x sepulcralis* 'Salamonii'
at Twickenham.

Weeping willows are trees which most people probably assume represent just one sort but which are really quite a complex group, rewarding detailed study; the Chinese *Salix babylonica* has passed on its weeping genes to various hardier crosses with European willows. Arnos Park in north London has a few survivors from a planting along the stream which I think are Thurlow Weeping Willow *S. x pendulina* 'Elegantissima', and which inherit larger and richer green leaves from the Crack Willow *S. x fragilis*. One of these is now completely hollow and is among rather few ornamental plantings which genuinely deserve to be called a veteran tree *S. x sepulcralis* 'Salamonii' is closer to the common Golden Weeping Willow but lacks the yellow twig colour; there are still plenty of old examples around London, with one by Twickenham's Riverside Walk, south of Cambridge Gardens, now taking

over as the tallest at 22m. Another rather weeping willow which I encountered as an apparently planted tree in an open field at the south-west end of Hampstead Heath seemed closer to the native White Willow *S. alba* and could represent the rather mysterious clone 'Tristis'.



▲ *Salix alba* 'Tristis' on Hampstead Heath.

Oxfordshire

Several big parks in Oxfordshire were also new to me this summer. The lovely gardens of Kingston Bagpuize House boast a delightful variety of ornamental trees in early maturity, including the champion *Albizia julibrissin* in the walled garden - first reported by Nick Macer in 2021 - and a new record for *Alnus incana* 'Aurea'. Oxfordshire county champions here include a grand Californian Nutmeg *Torreya californica*, a mature *Ilex macrocarpa* (one of those trees which looks nothing like the rest of its genus and not much like anything else and which always flummoxes me when I encounter it), *Quercus pyrenaica*, *Rhus potaninii* and *Pterocarya x rehderiana* among others.



▲ *Torreya californica* Kingston Bagpuize in Oxfordshire.



▲ Champion *Albizia* Kingston Bagpuize in Oxfordshire.

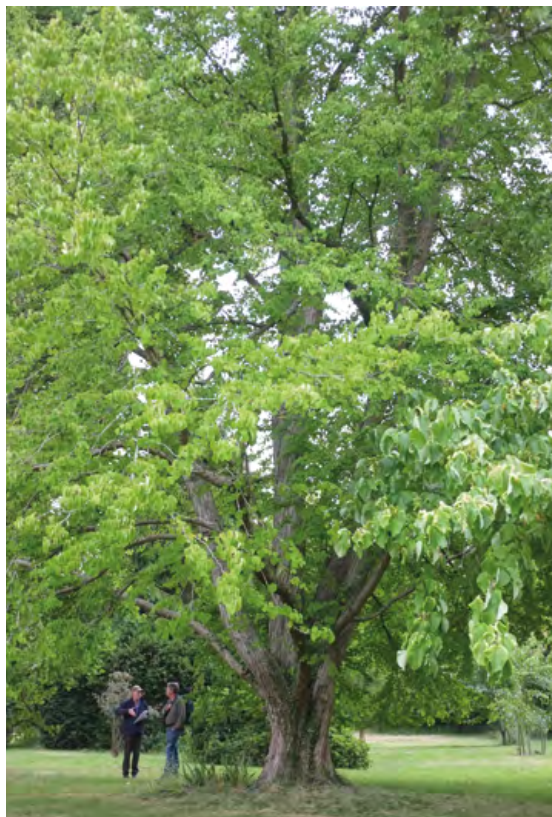
Pusey House also has a fine range of trees in early maturity including *Tetradium daniellii* 15m x 199cm, *Fraxinus velutina* 12m x 120cm and just about the best *Cladrastis delavayi* that I've seen outside Cornwall, 11m x 125cm. Outstanding among the older trees here is a London Plane *Platanus x hispanica* which was 754cm girth when Alan Mitchell last studied the trees here in 1980 but which is growing fast and now has a columnar and apparently single bole 950cm girth: the first London Plane in Britain to surpass three metres in trunk diameter. Growing on a private estate - which hosted its first trial garden open day for many years a little after my visit - it isn't a tree the owners want to publicise indiscriminately. This is the sort of privileged access to special information which your membership subscription buys - as well as covering the expenses involved in running a national charity.



▲ Champion London Plane at Pusey House.

Swyncombe Park in the Chilterns has a quite magnificent Katsura *Cercidiphyllum japonicum*, 18.4m x 263cm at 60cm on the single bole, and the slenderest Serbian Spruce *Picea omorika* I've seen, which makes it look much taller than its 25m; this was grown from seed collected near Sarajevo by G. P. Baker in 1949.

Another of the pleasant small surprises of dendrology came as I walked around Wallingford that morning prior to teaming up with forester and Tree Register volunteer Stephen Verge: a miniature arboretum in the town cemetery with mature specimens of Japanese Alder *Alnus japonica* 12m x 163cm and Californian Live Oak *Quercus agrifolia* 11m x 156cm, among others.



▲ *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* in Swyncombe Park.

Among the trees which Stephen showed me were a group of *Eucalyptus* he had planted as a forestry experiment on Bix Hill as small whips in 2002. After 21 years' growth, most of these were 30m tall and include a national champion for *E. obliqua* (30m x 123cm), an English champion for *E. regnans* (30m x 175cm) and Oxfordshire champions for *E. nitens* (32m x 220cm) and *E. delegatensis* (30m x 140cm).

This plantation reinforces the evidence – which might otherwise be dismissed as a statistical anomaly – that Oxfordshire is currently just about the best place in Britain to grow the majority of hardy *Eucalyptus*. Although a county with chilly winters and moderately low rainfall totals, the



▲ *Picea omorika* in Swyncombe Park.

growing season is consistently long and warm and the whole county is sheltered from maritime gales. The qualities of the soil must be significantly; but Geoffrey Cooper, with his private collection 19 or so *Eucalyptus* champions, is gardening on Oolitic limestone while the soil at Bix is clay-with-flints over chalk; Florence Park in Oxford with its fine grove of *E. dabrympleana* is on rich riverine soils and the Harcourt Arboretum (where *E. nitens* reached 21m in seven years, before freezing) is situated upon the county's narrow band of Lower Greensand.

All this contrasts informatively with Tom Hart Dyke's experience at Lullingstone Castle in north-west Kent, where the young *Eucalyptus* in his National Collection have consistently struggled with the local conditions, making them vulnerable to the frost in December 2022 which killed even some of the hardiest kinds to ground level. On my visit to Lullingstone I was however able to reward Tom with a couple of new champions for the older cultivars of holly *Ilex aquifolium* which clearly do



▲ *Quercus agrifolia* in Wallingford Cemetery.



▲ *Eucalyptus regnans* Bix in Oxfordshire.



▲ *Ilex aquifolium* 'Pyramidalis Aureomarginata' at Lullingstone Castle.

thrive in the local microclimate: the yellow berried f. *bacciflava* and the Egham Holly ‘*Pyramidalis Aureomarginata*’. The latter must count among the most ornamental hollies, with its spine-free yellow-margined leaves, its abundance of berries, and its spire-like shape in youth.

Over much of Britain, *Eucalyptus* and other trees from warm-temperate climates are in general enjoying our own rapidly warming conditions. At Holmhill Inclosure in the New Forest – where ancient woodland soils rich in varied mycorrhizal fungi help the growth of most trees - the tallest in a small plantation of Tingiringi Gum *E. glaucescens* made by the Forestry Commission 1980 was climbed and found to be already 41m tall (‘*Eucalyptus*’ in monumentaltrees.com). At Herstmonceux Castle



▲ The outstanding young group of *Eucalyptus dalrympleana* in Florence Park, Oxford.



▲ English champion *Eucalyptus urnigera* at Streatham Cemetery

in East Sussex, the larger of two *E. aggregata* has grown to an impressively sturdy 22m x 470cm.

At Streatham Cemetery in south London, much the best *E. urnigera* that I have found in England is 24m x 360cm. (It is easy to forget that most of

the *Eucalyptus* we can grow in Britain are mountain trees used to lots of rain year-round, and can find London’s drier summers stressful.) *E. leucoxylon*, a smaller plant grown in warmer climates for its vivid red flowers, has never really succeeded anywhere in Britain, but a youngster I spotted in July in Hove’s St Ann’s Well Gardens, 6m x 57cm, shows good promise.



▲ *Eucalyptus aggregata* at Herstmonceux Castle.

The Welsh Marches

A week spent in Shropshire in May included visits to several gardens which, rather than being 'new', were places where no-one had recorded trees for a long time. At the start of 2023, the 'oldest' champion on the Tree Register – in terms that is of its not having been observed for 45 years – was a specimen of the short-leaved yew *Taxus baccata* 'Adpressa' in the garden of Hawkstone Hall near Wem. Since yews are so long-lived I had felt moderately confident that this tree should still be there; Hawkstone Hall is now a country hotel and the historic gardens have been restored, allowing me to re-find it with ease.



▲ The Champion *Taxus baccata* 'Adpressa' at Hawkstone Hall.



▲ The crown of the champion Sugar Pine at Hawkstone Hall rises above other garden trees.

Also at Hawkstone, Alan Mitchell had recorded a record Sugar Pine *Pinus lambertiana* in 1992. Michael Frankis had reported seeing this tree more recently, but Sugar Pines in our country are particularly susceptible to Blister-rust *Cronartium ribicola*, so it was doubly pleasurable to find this specimen flourishing too. At 27m x 340cm girth it remains a mere shadow of the giants that grow wild in California and Oregon, and for some reason it finds our climate less congenial than do most of the conifers from that part of the world. But it is still impressive, with its dark dense foliage and its pale

brown cones longer than cucumbers. This same trip took me to Kyre Park in Worcestershire, where the national champion Fern-leaved Beech *Fagus sylvatica* 'Aspleniifolia' had not been measured since 1995. This was a tree featured as long ago as 1907 by Elwes and Henry in *The Trees of Great Britain and Ireland* (when it was 15m x 336cm), so it was clearly going to be nearing the end of its life. Some of the branches have broken off, allowing decay to enter the bole, but the tree is still a most impressive one, 23m x 615cm.



▲ Blossom on a younger addition to the trees at Kyre Park in June: *Sorbus (Alniaria) alnifolia*.

Another garden in this area to which I returned in September is Eastnor Castle – a prime example of those places where soil conditions and a long tradition of tree planting combine to create a cluster of champions for common or at least large-growing trees: Sugar Maple *Acer saccharum*; Incense Cedar *Calocedrus decurrens*; Shagbark Hickory *Carya ovata*; Atlas Cedar *Cedrus atlantica* (plus the tallest and largest in England for *C. deodara*); *Picea purpurea*; an American black oak (*Q. kelloggii* from California not *Q. velutina* from the eastern

States as previously assumed); and the original form of the hybrid Turner's Oak *Quercus x turneri* 'Spencer Turner', now a dramatic 28m x 458cm. It is probably true to say at the Welsh Marches have largely escaped the damaging gales experienced by many parts of Britain and Ireland in the last few years, and there have been remarkable few tree losses in this area so far this century.



▲ *Quercus x turneri* 'Spencer Turner' at Eastnor Castle.

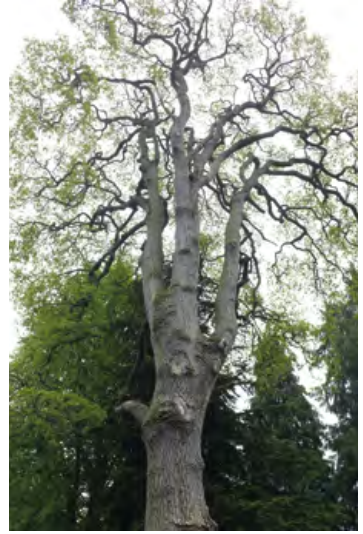
Oakly Park near Ludlow is a private garden where old and tall trees have also luxuriated in kindly conditions, with English champions for Eastern Hemlock *Tsuga canadensis* and the English girth champion for Western Hemlock *T. heterophylla* (which had lost its crown since my previous visit, except for some low branches).



▲ One of the largest *Cedrus deodara* at Eastnor Castle.



▲ English champion Eastern Hemlock *Tsuga canadensis* 545cm girth measured at 0.9m, at Oakly Park.



▲ The characteristic branching structure of an old Lucombe Oak *Quercus x crenata* 'William Lucombe' in the Arboretum at Oakly Park, 32m tall.

Burford House near Tenbury Wells (but just into Shropshire) is a younger collection, created in the 1950s by John Treasure as the show garden for his plant nursery, although the few older conifers here include a new English champion for Austrian Pine *Pinus nigra* subsp. *nigra*. I was impressed again and again by how shapely the garden's younger trees all seem to be, thanks presumably to careful pruning and also to each specimen being allowed room enough to develop. There are now champions for the very white-barked hybrid birch *Betula* 'Fetisowii', for the frankly rather ugly fastigiate larch *Larix kaempferi* 'Jacobsen's Pyramid' and for a very narrow version of Irish Yew which I think is *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata Robusta', among others.



▲ *Betula* 'Fetisowii' at Burford House.



▲ English champion *Pinus nigra* at Burford House.



▲ The perfect shape of this Tupelo *Nyssa sylvatica* is characteristic of many of the specimen trees in the garden of Burford House.



▲ *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata Robusta' at Burford House.

The Walcot estate near Bishop's Castle has fine trees of all ages, including some of England's biggest original Douglas Firs and champions for the Silver Hedgehog Holly *Ilex aquifolium* 'Ferox Argentea', both for height and for girth

In the Arboretum there is also a veteran Sessile Oak *Quercus petraea* which instead of acorns bears a crop of old and rotting boots; I was unsure of the correct place for such a tree, either botanically or on the Tree Register.



▲ Douglas Fir at Walcot planted in 1842 and now with a girth of 633cm.



▲ Champion holly 'Ferox Argentea' at Walcot.



▲ A young Dove Tree *Davidia involucrata* in full flower in the Arboretum at Walcot Park in May.



▲ A few of the hundreds of old boots carried by one veteran Sessile Oak at Walcot.

Another oak at Walcot which I (and other recorders) had previously overlooked is a picturesque old Downy Oak *Q. pubescens*, leaning over the drive at the bridge over the lake. At 18m x 421cm at 1m, this is exceeded in girth only by two survivors at Mount House in nearby Shrewsbury, which as it happens I'd revisited two days earlier. Mount House was Charles Darwin's birthplace, and I speculated to Robin Parish the owner of Walcot that perhaps there was some kind of family connection. Although it is native to northern France, only a hundred miles from where I'm writing this, Downy Oak has always seemed to be a collector's tree in Britain – differing only subtly in appearance from our two native oak species – and scarcely anything seems to be recorded about its introduction or early use.

I revisited this conundrum on a wet evening in the autumn; an hour's online research revealed that Walcot had been landscaped for Clive of India around 1774 by the Derbyshire-based landscape



▲ *Quercus pubescens* at Walcot.

architect William Emes, and that Emes had been a friend and associate of both of Charles Darwin's grandparents, the botanist and polymath Erasmus Darwin and the potter Josiah Wedgwood; he is credited with landscaping their respective estates at Radbourne Hall and Etruria Hall. Charles' parents Richard and Susannah had built Mount House around 1800 and are known to have stocked the garden with plants from their parents' collections, receiving help in this from Susannah's brother John Wedgwood - who went on to be the first chairman of the Horticultural Society of London, now the RHS. It therefore seems likely that Emes could have been using *Quercus pubescens* as one of his preferred landscaping trees.

Although some trees can preside as national champions for 45 years without anyone paying

them any attention at all, others may enjoy much shorter reigns. At Hergest Croft I recorded a 1979 planting of *Betula davurica* which was 17.7m tall and which took over from a 17m specimen of the clone 'Stone Farm' at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, but this was unseated the next day by an older 18m tree in another part of the Hergest estate. Then the following week David Alderman reported one of 18.4m within the Sixty Trees plantation at Ascott House in Buckinghamshire.

One species where the title of champion seems bound to change hands quickly is the Wollemi Pine *Wollemia nobilis*, since this tree was only discovered in 1994 and planted in Britain in 2005, and we now have lots of equal-aged examples all growing fast. At the start of 2023, the tallest measured ones were at Wakehurst Place in West Sussex and had

recently surpassed ten metres in height. Then, two 'originals' planted on the lake island near the Sackler Crossing at Kew were remeasured by Kew volunteers – you need a boat to get to them – as 11.1m and 11.3m tall. In the June of 2023, our Hampshire recorder Hugo Egleston found one at Hinton Park in Hampshire 11.4m tall. No sooner had I publicised this find as 'Tree of the Month' on the Tree Register website than Robin Jamie reported via our website that the larger of Richard

Ryder's planting of scions of 'King Billy' at his private pinetum in Devon was now just on 12m tall. The 'Dragon Field Pinetum' is a remarkable site because it is a thousand feet (330m) up on the south-eastern skirts of Dartmoor; though *Wollemia* clearly prefers the warmth of the south, it's not at all clear yet what combination of soil and microclimate is going to suit this species best in the longer term.



▲ Champion for a day: *Betula davurica* planted in 1979 at the Head of the Valley in Park Wood at Hergest Croft.



▲ Champion *Quercus pubescens* at Mount House, Shrewsbury.



▲ *Wollemia nobilis* at Hinton Park. Photo © Hugo Egleston.



Richard Ryder's plantings of *Wollemia nobilis* at his Dragon Field Pinetum in 2017.

One of my favourite trees

The champion Chestnut-leaved oak (*Quercus castaneifolia*)

By *Tony Kirkham MBE VMH*

Whilst Head of the Arboretum at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew I spent many an hour admiring this beautiful tree, from a distance and close up, walking slowly around the root crown admiring the colossal trunk and the deeply fissured grey-brown bark and the new bark with pink striations from the annual incremental growth that this denizen is still putting on.

Native to the humid forests of the mountains of the Caucasus and Northern Iran, it was first introduced to Kew in 1843 as an acorn and then planted behind the Water Lily House at the north end of the Palm House in 1846 probably by Sir William Hooker, the first director of Kew. Since then, it has enjoyed this open space and grown into a magnificent unrivalled champion tree of Britain and Ireland. Of the 14,000 trees in the arboretum at Kew, it is the fastest growing tree and the largest broadleaved tree in volume measuring 37 metres tall and over 30 metres wide with a girth of 8 metres.

It was one of few trees on that lawn that survived the Great Storm in 1987 and since then has lost one large scaffold on the east side of the crown. Its fast growth slowed down and the height and



spread reached what we thought was its maximum size, but several arboricultural operations of root invigoration around the root plate, first with the ‘Terravent’ and then with the ‘Airsade’ have proved us wrong. This process involves forcing compressed air into the root zone breaking up any compaction and allowing air and moisture to percolate down to the roots, de-stressing the tree and encouraging mycorrhizal activity. This with regular mulching has triggered another spurt of growth in the height, spread and girth and maybe before its 200 years arboreal birthday it will break the 40-metre mark. That’s why it is one of my favourite champion trees!



Tony is a Trustee of the Tree Register and created the blue champion tree label scheme first at RBG Kew and which the charity then adopted as its official labelling.

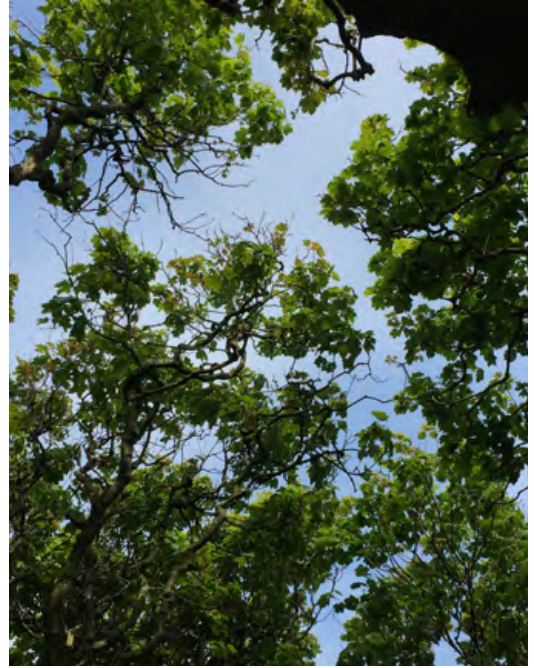


All photos: *Quercus castaneifolia* at Kew © Tony Kirkham

Some Islands

It is inevitable that volunteer measurers spend their time in areas which they already know or guess will grow trees well, at the expense of the more remote and windswept parts of these islands. In 2022 I had happened to mention to Helen Harrison, who spends parts of her summers in Shetland, that the database had no records at all from this archipelago. On her next stay Helen took up the challenge, recording more than 40 kinds of Shetland tree – including the Five-finger *Neopanax arboreus* planted around 1990 at Da Gairdins i Sand on the islands' Mainland, thriving at 16 degrees further from the equator than it does in its native New Zealand. This tree is one of several of Helen's records which are very probably the northernmost examples of their kind in the world. There are not, of course, any national or even Scottish champions on the islands, but a few trees have managed to grow quite old (Sycamore and Wych Elm apparently dating from 1760 at Gardie House on the isle of Bressay) or quite big (a Sycamore with a girth of 480cm near the base, in the sheltered garden of Flemington House at Kergord).

The Tree Register now holds records from sixty-three of the British and Irish Isles - including the two big ones of course, plus natural islands within lakes and rivers, but not manmade ones and also excluding places like Thanet and Oxney which are no longer islands at all. In April, I visited Guernsey for the first time in 17 years, and 36 years since this island – surrounded as it is by many miles of warm Atlantic water – suffered its last really damaging winter. The island's gardeners have been making good use of this mild interval, and I spent most of my three days there walking Guernsey's narrow



▲ Scotland's northernmost woodland was planted in the 1830s with a mix of Sycamore and Norway Maple within a walled cemetery at Halligarth on the northernmost island, Unst. Photo © Helen Harrison.

streets and noting and identifying whatever I could in its generally small private gardens. Norfolk Island Pine *Araucaria heterophylla* is popular as an ornamental across the subtropics, but coming as it does from a tiny frost-free South Pacific island it has very limited cold tolerance and no examples in our area made it through the winters of the 1980s. But, since my visit in 2006, its improbably perfect salt-tolerant pagodas have risen above the rooftops all over Guernsey. The tallest I saw was a 14.5m example behind the Earlswood Garden Centre in Vale, on the windswept north-west edge of the island.

I was also lucky to spot, above the top of a security gate in St Martin, what turned out be probably our



▲ Norfolk Island Pine 14.5m tall at Earlswood, Guernsey.



▲ *Acacia melanoxylon* on Guernsey.



▲ The champion *Washingtonia robusta* on Guernsey.

most established Blackwood *Acacia melanoxylon* outside Ireland, and was lucky too to be able to wangle my way in: at an imposing 17m x 202 cm girth, this tree must have survived the 1980s winters here. Palms of various sorts also abound on Guernsey; there are six 'old' *Phoenix canariensis* plus lots of youngsters now beginning to grow fast, younger *Washingtonia robusta* to 7.5m tall (to the growth point), plus a few young *Butia*, and in the Exotic Woodland Garden at Sausmarez Manor a couple of *Rhopalostylis sapida* from New Zealand, which are considered very tender.

During 2023 James Chambers from the Ancient Tree Forum has also been adding some new records for Jersey, a slightly bigger island with many more veterans. His finds include perhaps the stoutest tree on the Channel Islands, a massively burred oak *Quercus robur* on playing fields at Grainville with a girth of 795cm.



▲ One of half a dozen Canary Palms on Guernsey that weathered the severe winters of the 1980s, in a small front garden in Vale.

Recording around the country

As I accumulate the wisdom of years – or accumulate the years at least – I'm beginning to realise how much really useful tree recording can be done from the comfort of one's own chair. Google's Street View gives the opportunity to check the survival of trees visible from any road – and sometimes to identify new ones, such as Scotland's largest Hackberry *Celtis occidentalis*, which I happened to spot in 2021 as a street tree in St Leonard's Road in St Andrews, and which has now been measured by Judy Dowling at 11.4m x 133cm. The aerial imagery on Google Maps can also allow various trees to be identified, particularly golden-leaved ones which stand out in early summer imagery. Small-leaved Lime *Tilia cordata* is sometimes hard to differentiate in the field from some forms of Common Lime *T. x europaea* and, during winter, from our other native lime *T. platyphyllos*, but its habit of holding its flowers above the foliage across the top of the crown means that it turns a tell-tale creamy-yellow in aerial imagery taken around June.

Google Earth also offers multiple aerial images in chronological sequence, meaning that if you know the location of a tree you can check if or when it has died back or blown over. Whenever Google presents 3D imagery – this is mostly in urban areas – the height of any tree can also be measured within Google Earth, ideally to the nearest foot, by reading the stated altitude of open ground at the base and subtracting this from the altitude of the highest part of the canopy.

This sort of armchair dendrology can of course be undertaken by anybody, anywhere, and not just by committed volunteers with specialist measuring equipment who have the time to visit a tree in

person. Similarly, it may be easier – but equally valuable – for you as Tree Register members to photograph known champions and to upload your images to the website, or to file a comment when you notice that a champion tree has died.

I have used some of the above methods to supplement Helen's Shetland records and to add to the Register the northernmost tree in our region, which would seem to be a self-sown Sitka Spruce *Picea sitchensis* in the valley north of Valyie Croft near the northernmost tip of the northernmost island, Unst (60.82 degrees north). For the record, the southernmost tree in the Tree Register's home area is a Holm Oak *Quercus ilex* on Green Island Beach (Jersey), at 49.16 degrees north; our easternmost is a Tamarisk *Tamarix gallica* at Ness Point, Lowestoft, Suffolk (1.76 degrees east) and our westernmost an *Olearia traversiorum* by the cottage below St Gobnait's Well, on the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry (10.46 degrees west).

In the 2022 Tree Register newsletter I drew attention to an established Sitka Spruce recorded by Alastair Firth at an altitude of 990m on Stob Ban in the Mamores Mountains of Scotland. This may be our 'highest' measurable tree, but soon afterwards Sarah Watts published an article 'High Mountain Trees' in *British and Irish Botany* (5 (2) 167-179, 2023), citing reports of a seedling Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* at 1160m on Cairn Gorm noted by David Welch in 2003 and a Juniper *Juniperus communis* at 1200m on Ben Macdui noted some years earlier by Jim McIntosh. However, it should be emphasised that any 'trees' at this altitude are going to be adventitious seedlings which are likely to be finished off by a poor growing season,



▲ *Juniperus communis* at Barrisdale Forest.
Photo © Jane Sayers.

or a hungry sheep. The highest altitude for an established native tree, as reported by Sarah, would seem to be an Aspen *Populus tremula* at 706m near the summit of Stac na h-Iolaire, Cairn Gorm, as found by Gus Routledge in 2022.

A much more impressive Scots Juniper was found at lower altitude in September 2023 in Barrisdale Forest by Jane Sayers, Wild Pine Project Officer for the charity Trees for Life. With a single bole about 150cm in girth, this new national champion is partially uprooted and supported in the branches of an adjacent birch. Almost as impressive is the distance you need to trek to get to this remote part of Knoydart.

Another rather remote tree reported from the western Highlands in 2023 was a new Scottish champion Monkey Puzzle *Araucaria araucana* at Lochaline House in Morvern, with a girth of 403cm measured by its owner Heather Pearson.



▲ Copper Beech *Fagus sylvatica* f. *purpurea* in Sligo town. Photo © Shailagh Healy.

Shailagh Healy has begun to update the records of exceptional trees in equally windswept conditions of Co. Sligo in the west of Ireland, including the veteran Copper Beech in Sligo town, a joint champion for Britain and Ireland, and the biggest recorded Cut-leaved Lime *Tilia platyphyllos* ‘Laciniata’ in the grounds of Temple House.

The Ancient Tree Inventory, the Tree Register’s partnership project with the Woodland Trust and the Ancient Tree Forum, continues to supply a wealth of new records of our oldest trees. There are also plenty of surprises: what could count as individual Tree of the Year (although it had actually languished in that website’s annex of ‘unverified



▲ *Ilex aquifolium* in Hawnbury. Photo © Den Gregson.

trees' since 2021 and it wasn't until the start of 2024 that I spotted the report) is a vast new girth champion for Indian Horse Chestnut *Aesculus indica* in an overgrown garden in Great Barton, Suffolk, reported as 540cm by Simon Stockdale. Barton Park was the home of the palaeobotanist Sir Charles Bunbury who in 1851 was the first person to grow this species, seed of which had been sent from the Himalaya by his brother Henry. By 1904 the larger of Bunbury's original trees was 20m x 240cm, but the park was built over after this and its trees were assumed long gone.

Another surprise was a fine Raisin Tree *Hovenia dulcis*, photographed for the ATI in the garden of University College, Oxford, by gardener Sam Ronaldson – an interesting identification challenge from just a photo of its leaves. From the President's Garden in Trinity College, meanwhile, a new champion for Japan Pepper *Zanthoxylum piperatum* was reported by Caroline Boisset of the IDS.

Veteran natives entered on the ATI in 2023 which become new champions or joint-champions for girth include a low pollard Field Maple *Acer campestre* at Foy in Herefordshire, a Great Sallow *Salix caprea* at Llanveynoe in the same county – it's difficult to keep track of this species as bigger ones

of different growth-forms continue to be discovered – a Grey Sallow *S. cinerea* near Brockenhurst in the New Forest, a huge but collapsed Buckthorn *Rhamnus cathartica* on Mickleham Downs in Surrey, and a remarkable hollow Elder *Sambucus nigra* in Walsall's threatened Green Belt. Another *Salix caprea*, a lapsed pollard splitting apart near Llangattock in Powys, becomes a new Welsh champion. New Scottish champions from remote parts of the western Highlands include an ancient hollow pollard Bay Willow *Salix pentandra*, reported by David Elston at Badnaban in Assynt, and a remarkably spreading old Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra* near Caisteal nan Con in Morvern. The great Weeping Beech *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula' in Walcot churchyard in Lincolnshire was confirmed as a champion, and above Russell's Water in Oxfordshire Stephen Verge showed me a Whitebeam *Sorbus aria* which is difficult to measure in summer but is probably a new height champion, at around 24m.



▲ *Malus sylvestris* at Hornby Castle. Photo © Den Gregson

Volunteering together, Alan Hunton and John Killingbeck have now, apparently, run out of new record trees to find in Yorkshire. Their final highlights from 2023 included a collection of walnuts in a neglected part of the gardens of Wortley Hall near Barnsley, where *Juglans nigra* ‘Laciniata’ is the biggest example so far recorded for this spectacular but still very rare form.

Meanwhile, one final day at the Yorkshire Arboretum at Castle Howard for John and myself has pushed the tally of national champions within the county’s most impressive collection to 69.

Moving on to County Durham, Alan and John have found lots of good trees in an area traditionally believed to lack them. The county’s largest arboreta are modern ones, with planting at the Durham University Botanic Garden beginning around the 1960s. This collection now has champions for a couple of real rarities, *Eleutherococcus henryi*, a member of the ivy family from China, and *Pinus flexilis* ‘Vanderwolf’s Pyramid’, a selection of the American Limber Pine.

Nearby, an arboretum was established at Houghall Campus of East Durham College around the same time. During the 1990s, college lecturer Mike Hurst cultivated links with Hugh McAllister at Ness Botanic Gardens and with Lord Howick at Howick Hall, and received many rare plants which are now achieving maturity. Alan and John’s survey at Houghall has already quadrupled County Durham’s total of national champion trees, with records for *Acer granatense* from Spain and Morocco, for *Crataegus schraderiana* from Greece, for *Sorbus decora* from northern North America, and for *S. (Karpatisorbus) hajastana* from the Caucasus, among others. The site is a good one for tree growth, and two of the earliest plantings



▲ Dr John Grimshaw MBE VMM, Director of the Yorkshire Arboretum, with a particularly floriferous *Acer cissifolium* from EHOK 139 planted in 2001 and now the Yorkshire champion.



▲ National champion *Sorbus (Alniaria) folgeneri* in full flower at the Yorkshire Arboretum in June 2023.

here are already national champions: *Prunus avium* 'Plena' 371cm girth (planted in 1962) and *Sorbus* 'John Mitchell' at 202cm (planted in 1973).

Dryderdale Hall, in the shelter of the Pennines, was found to provide County Durham with a few impressively large local champion conifers, including Norway Spruce *Picea abies* 37m x 308cm, Sitka Spruce *P. sitchensis* at 45m, and Noble Fir *Abies procera* to 41m x 537cm. In terms of girth this last example is second in England only to the remarkable tree in woodland at Huntington Park in Herefordshire which now has a girth of 620cm, but is admittedly less than a mile from the Welsh border.

John Killingbeck has also helped to clarify the differences between the two fastigate White Poplars, *Populus alba* 'Pyramidalis' and 'Raket', and has even managed to record new champions for both, the former in Gainsborough parish churchyard in Lincolnshire, the latter along the drive to a water treatment works at Barmby-on-the-Marsh in the East Riding of Yorkshire. 'Pyramidalis' is the less silvery tree and its older leaves are less likely to be lobed.

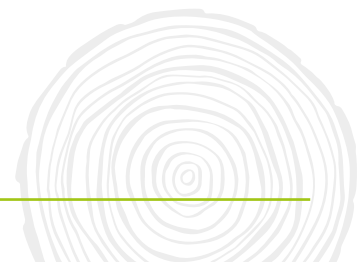
With the help of a Vicky Schilling Bursary, Kevin Stanley continued his survey of Lincolnshire churchyards, recording a new champion in Westcliffe Road, Ruskington, for that fine upstanding street tree the Bastard Service, *Sorbus* (*Hedlundia*) *thuringiaca* 'Fastigiata'.

Peter Coles completed his Bursary-assisted study of veteran mulberries around England, a byproduct of which was the installation of a new height champion from Greenwich Park in London, 11.6m tall according to Google Earth imagery.



▲ *Abies procera* at Dryderdale Hall.
Photo © Alan Hunton 2023.

In Surrey, Aidan Champion found the tallest Manna Ash *Fraxinus ornus* to be measured in modern times, drawn up to 24.8m among beeches in Abinger Rough - an unexpectedly wild spot (for a planted tree) near Abinger Hammer. He also refound the oldest known Weeping Deodar *Cedrus deodara* 'Pendula', in a pinetum associated with Wotton House near Dorking; its existing record was already 23 years out of date when Aidan was born, and it is now a national champion with a girth of 294cm.





▲ The tallest Manna Ash *Fraxinus ornus* in Abinger Rough. Photo © Aidan Champion.

A new champion for Persian Ironwood *Parrotia persica* – both height and girth – was reported from a long-neglected estate at Gatcombe on the Isle of Wight via Tom Christian, at 18.4m x 217cm. It is unlike the common wide-spreading form of *Parrotia* which is usually grown, and has a darker brown bark and a sturdy, upright habit.

Paul Wood's fascinating blog [The Street Tree](http://TheStreetTree.com) thestreettree@substack.com sometimes highlights trees I've yet to add to the Tree Register, including a new Scottish champion for Himalayan Pine *Pinus wallichiana* in the grounds of Astley Ainslie Hospital in Edinburgh.

Recording champion trees is a matter of keeping an eye open both for what you already know, and for what you don't. At Castle Park in Frodsham, Cheshire, in May, John Weightman and I spotted a walnut *Juglans regia* with a curious drooping habit. Neither of us could remember offhand whether a weeping selection of this tree existed, but we recorded it anyway. It turns out that *J. regia* 'Pendula' has been named, but that no mature examples of the variant had ever been measured, making this one a champion by default.



▲ *Cedrus deodara* 'Pendula' at Wotton House. Photo © Aidan Champion.



▲ *Juglans regia* 'Pendula' at Castle Park Frodsham.



‘Incomparable infructescences’: *a sketch of two trees with prominent chains of fruits in summer.*

By Maurice Foster VMH

Since the hornbeam *Carpinus fangiana* was first described in the journal of the Arnold Arboretum in 1929, it has been found across South Central China: Yunnan, Sichuan, Hunan, Guizhou and N. Guanxi, and was introduced into cultivation from several sources in the 1990s. It has unusually large leaves for a hornbeam, in cultivation up to 8cm wide by 24cm long on vigorous juvenile sterile shoots. But its most remarkable feature, that has created high demand for it in arboreta, is its conspicuous female ‘catkins’. These are the numerous, pendent, pale green infructescences, tail-like agglomerations of papery bracts, each sheltering a seed at its base. In 2019 at White House Farm they averaged 29cm in length, but this is variable, and seems to be dependent on the availability of moisture at a particular stage of development. Its unflattering vernacular name is the ‘Monkeytail hornbeam’. At 10 years from planting on rather poor stony acid soil at White House Farm in Kent it has made a neat upright tree of 8m on 3 trunks. Arguably the most ornamental species in an already beautiful genus, in July, covered in its female ‘catkins’, it is a spectacular tree for a cool temperate arboretum

Pterocarya insignis was first collected by Wilson in 1908 in Sichuan, and recorded as a species,

which according to Collins Latin Primer, translates as both ‘distinguished’ and ‘conspicuous’- both adjectives readily applicable to this easy, accommodating, hardy tree. It was reclassified as a variety of *macroptera* in 1998. A seedling planted in 1995 at WHF has grown to over 12m in a light, stony, rather dry soil. Seedlings of a Kew collection (SICH 1205) at Howick, Thenford, and Wakehurst have all grown at a remarkably similar rate, despite differences in soil and climate. The ‘catkins’ form a pendulous chain of small winged nutlets and can reach up to a metre in length. A good fruiting specimen displays its magnificence for weeks with delightful flourish: another of the most spectacular trees we can grow.

Maurice is a Tree Register Trustee and the owner of White House Farm Arboretum, Kent, with many plantings of known wild provenance. Maurice is a most respected plantsman and author of *The Hydrangea: A Reappraisal* (2023).

▲ *Carpinus fangiana*.

▶ Nick Foster and a *Pterocarya macroptera* var. *insignis*. All photos © Maurice Foster.



Climate change

I really hope that the Tree Register never does become comprehensive and completely accurate: it would mean that we would no longer have anything to discover or update. One group of trees where it seems particularly true that we'll always be met with new surprises is the Japanese flowering cherries – they're planted here, there and everywhere, in considerable variety, and they grow fast and die rather quickly. New champions are likely to be encountered completely by chance as you walk or drive around; I spotted this Winter Cherry *Prunus x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis' in suburban Kent in the spring of 2023 as I walked back to Walmer railway station. At 306cm girth (at 50cm up, the narrowest point on the stock) it's substantially the largest, and can therefore be presented as a champion with more confidence that is the case for most of these cherries.

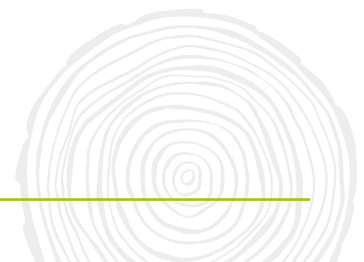


▲ Champion Winter Cherry in Deal.

Equally impressive is a fast-growing example of *P.* 'Ukon' a couple of miles away in Eastry churchyard, 311cm in girth as reported for the Ancient Tree Inventory in the same month. A splendid Yoshino Cherry *P. x yedoensis* also reported for the ATI in West Mersea in Essex, 303cm girth, could be confirmed by reference to aerial photos taken at the right time. Meanwhile, the champion Great White Cherry *Prunus* 'Tai Haku' which I first chanced upon back in 2001 at St Michael's Community Centre in East Wickham, London, continues to flourish unrivalled; its bole is now 282cm girth at its narrowest, and its spread is a full 14m.

Another reason why the Tree Register can never be considered complete is that the conditions in which our trees have to grow are changing, sometimes faster than the trees themselves can cope with. Our data therefore measures quite precisely the ways in which our climate is getting warmer, and the rate at which new pests and diseases are propagating.

Good evidence for Climate Change was a new champion for Loquat *Eriobotrya japonica*, found by chance by Alan Hunton and John Killingbeck in a front garden as far north as Doncaster in South Yorkshire, 127cm girth. European Olive *Olea europaea*, which just a few decades ago was considered almost impossible to grow in Britain, is now everywhere in front gardens and growing fast; a new benchmark for height is 10.8m, at Lewisham's Old Mill Gardens in October.





▲ *Eriobotrya japonica* Doncaster.
Photo © Alan Hunton.



Bull Bay *Magnolia grandiflora* from the southeastern United States is another tree to appreciate our warming climate, with new records established during 2023. The champion for girth is now an early Victorian planting at 'Villa Magnol' in St Peter Port, Guernsey, 288cm girth at 130cm just before the bole forks, and the tallest is one of a pair of luxuriant trees in the garden of Arundel Castle, West Sussex, 14.5m x 264cm.



▲ The *Magnolia grandiflora* at 'Villa Magnol' on Guernsey c.1916 and in 2023. Photo © Bishop family collection.

◀ Champion *Magnolia grandiflora* at Arundel Castle.



At Leonardslee in West Sussex, Ron Kemeny and gardener Elliot Chandler have recorded some trees from the American Deep South beginning to flourish in our climate for the first time, and helped in this case by light sandy soils which warm quickly in spring. The largest of two Spruce Pines *Pinus glabra* in the garden is 10m x 120cm, and a young Overcup Oak *Quercus lyrata* is 4.2m x 43cm.

At Knightshayes in Devon, a young Mexican silver fir was confirmed by Keith Rushforth as his introduction of *Abies colimensis* (KR 647). Planted as recently as 1994, it is now 25.4m x 261cm as measured by Aidan Champion, and is one of the most heat-dependent (and tenderest) members of a genus that generally prefers cooler, humid places. Other introductions of *A. colimensis* to Britain made at around this time all seem to have failed.



▲ *Abies colimensis* in Knightshayes. Photo © Aidan Champion.



▲ *Metasequoia* GOLD RUSH at Lime Cross Nursery.



▲ Poplars planted in the mid 20th century in Arundel Great Park and now 44.8m tall (far left) and 43m (right).



▲ The private ravine known as the Dingle at Vivod in Denbighshire grows several of Wales' tallest trees, including this Copper Beech *Fagus sylvatica* f. *purpurea* 37m tall.

Varieties which were once newcomers can now be recorded as quite big trees; in 2023, the first known planting in the UK of *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* GOLD RUSH ('Golden Oji'), at the Lime Cross Nursery near Hailsham in East Sussex, was already 16.7m tall.

Some hybrid poplars which became popular for forestry use in the mid 20th century are already represented by some huge trees, but identifying them in the field is an art which we are still mastering. A male clone much like the old 'Serotina' but leafing out a fortnight earlier is

probably 'Gelrica'; this summer Aidan Champion notched up a potential champion for girth in a group near Stratton in Dorset, 36m x c.425cm, while I measured a slender example under the dam of the Swanbourne Lane in Arundel Great Park, West Sussex, which is a remarkable 44.8m tall. Next to this, a couple of female clones both 43m tall may be the clone 'Florence Biondi'.

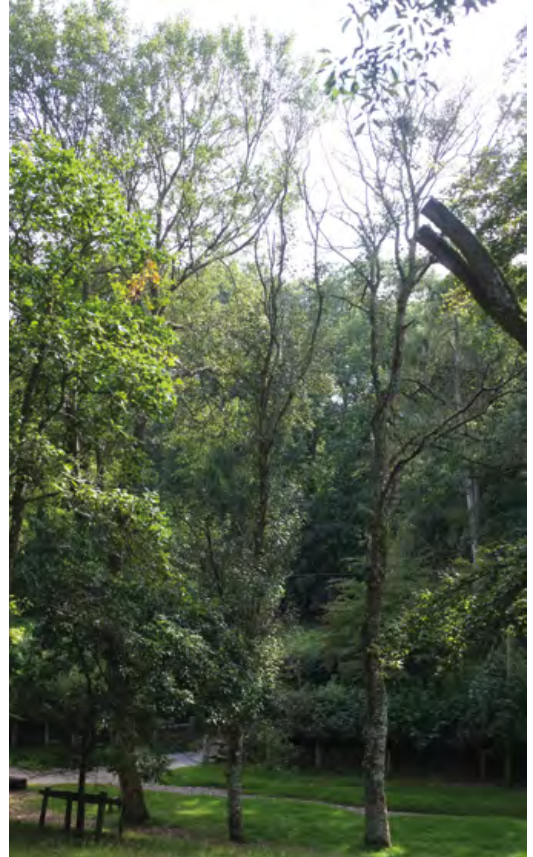
In the dingle at Vivod above Llangollen (Denbighshire), home to many of Wales' tallest trees, a group of 'Balsam Spire' have reached 42.5m.

Pests and diseases

Chalara Ash Dieback has so far had only a small effect on our populations of the biggest and rarest *Fraxinus*. Large wild trees are the likeliest to withstand the disease, at least in the medium term; they tend to be spreading and open-grown examples which therefore escape infection from trees next to them. Ashes standing singly in the less humid air or urban landscapes can also avoid Chalara, and most exotic ash species, even though they are potentially vulnerable, tend to be seen as street trees or in collections which are often within towns. I have yet to observe major infections on a Manna Ash *F. ornus* or a Raywood Ash *F. angustifolia* 'Raywood'; the current girth champion for 'Raywood', in Abbey Meadow, Abingdon, is flourishing and reached 3m girth this summer.



▲ *Fraxinus angustifolia* 'Raywood' in Abingdon.



▲ Chalara on *Fraxinus excelsior* Diversifolia Group at Hergest Croft.

Not far away, the champion Arizona Ash *F. velutina* in Oxford's South Park seemed to be reaching the end of its life, but not obviously through infection. A curious demonstration of how well individual ashes can withstand Chalara infection was provided to me by a group of three Single-leaved Ash *F. excelsior* Diversifolia Group in the Haywood Common field at Hergest Croft: genetically identical, growing in the same conditions and the same age. In September 2023, one showed hardly any signs of disease, one was visible infected, and one was nearly dead.

Each year, fewer and fewer specimens remain of the older clones of elm which are vulnerable to Elm Disease, though fine old trees continue to be discovered for the Ancient Tree Inventory and many of the disease resistant forms bred since the 1960s are now mature plants in their own right.



▲ Most years involve at least one visit to check on parts of the remarkable population of surviving elms in Brighton and Hove, which include this short street (Dyke Road Place) planted with the yellow-leaved Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra* 'Lutescens'. (The cars parked here don't have to be yellow too, but it helps!).

Elms tended in all their variety to be taken for granted until the current epidemic of Elm Disease struck in the 1960s; *Ulmus minor* 'Hoersholmiensis', a Field Elm selected in Denmark in the 1880s for its good form, curious pinkish bronze autumn colour and long, elegant leaves, was one of many clones which remained practically unknown to botanists in the UK. In 2023 an online conversation with a fellow enthusiast in the Netherlands made me realise that some beautiful mature elms which I had seen in the West Midlands 19 years earlier, but had not been able to name, could have been 'Hoersholmiensis'. Elm expert Pascal Pascaleff duly went in search of them, and found one still thriving beside the Birmingham New Road in Coseley/

Bilston. Pascal was able to confirm that this is, indeed, 'Hoersholmiensis' – perhaps supplied in the early 20th century by the nearby Handsworth Nurseries – although the clone does not in general seem to have much resistance to Elm Disease. This Coseley tree became the new UK champion.



▲ Foliage of *Ulmus minor* 'Hoersholmiensis' in Coseley. Photo © Pascal Pascaleff.



▲ *Ulmus minor* 'Hoersholmiensis' in Coseley. Photo © Pascal Pascaleff.

Sometimes, you discover a tree just too late to see it in its glory. In Grimsby's Ainslie Park in June, Kevin Stanley and I measured for the record a weeping Wych Elm *Ulmus glabra* 'Pendula' which must have been the finest in Britain for a few years at 11m x 305cm girth, but which now stood dead. Another dead hulk in front of Keylands House in Brentford in west London looked as if it must have been one of 25 or so specimens of the strange single-leaved ash *Fraxinus angustifolia* 'Monophylla' known to have grown as old trees in London's parks and gardens; today, just eight of these veterans survive.



▲ *Quercus suber* at Arundel Castle.



▲ East Sussex champion *Pinus montezumae* at Highlands Rose Farm, Dallington.



▲ English champion *Abies pinsapo* at Longden Manor, Shropshire.



King John's Oak

By Jill Butler

The origin of the name for this extraordinary oak is obscure, but it was already named King John's Oak (KJO) on the 1st Epoch Ordnance Survey maps produced in the mid-1800s. Nearby in the same Mediaeval deer park are two other named trees – Lord Arundell's Oak and the Chaseland's Oak which makes the relatively small Shute or Woodend Park in East Devon also rather exceptional.

▲ Top: King John's Oak, exposed after undergrowth had been cleared in 2016. Photo © Julian Hight.

There are many named King Oaks in England, but only two named specifically after the notorious King John. Now that the (true) Conqueror's Oaks have died, King John's Oak is the oldest Royal named tree that is still alive, although sadly not very vigorous. Some years ago, scions were taken from the tree and were successfully grafted to perpetuate KJO's unique genome. Some of the successful trees have been planted out in a special arboretum for similar named grafted trees, such as the Pontfadog Oak, in Windsor Great Park.

King John's Oak

This pedunculate oak has a girth of over 11m which makes it one of the most special trees in the UK and across the range of oaks in Europe, but it is the form of the short, squat tree that is one of its most unusual features. The lower, huge lateral branches arise low down on the trunk and reach out to over 17m all-round the tree giving it a distinct medusa-like appearance and providing evidence that it has been grown in this open landscape all its long life.

KJO is not just significant as a very rare ancient oak, but also for at least one of the associated species which it hosts. The fruit bodies of one of a decay fungus on its trunk have been used to identify it as *Phellinus wahlbergii*. Outside the tropics this is an exceptionally rare fungus, so far only known from about 6 other trees in England and all on trees that are in mediaeval Forests or Parks such as Windsor Great Park or the New Forest.

For all these reasons it is one of my top trees.

▲ Top: A recent view of King John's Oak, cleared around and with a protective electric fence.

► Right: The exceptionally rare fungus *Phellinus wahlbergii* found on King John's Oak.



Jill is a freelance expert advising on ancient trees, specialising in old growth, forest, wood pasture and parkland trees. Jill became a Trustee of the Tree Register in 2019 after retiring as Ancient Tree and Woodland Conservation Officer at the Woodland Trust. It was Jill's drive and enthusiasm for old trees twenty five years ago that created what is now the Ancient Tree Inventory.



My favourite tree

Betula utilis ssp. *albosinensis* 'Bowling Green'

By Roy Lancaster CBE VMH

Like many another plantsman when requested to make this choice I have no out and out favourite so the tree I have chosen to write about should simply be regarded as one of many!

For a start, as the accompanying images demonstrate, there happens to be a fine much admired specimen growing within easy reach of my home in the Winter Garden at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens near Romsey in Hampshire. Planted in 1995 as a grafted specimen it had been supplied by Thornhayes Nursery in Devon, established by Kevin Croucher an experienced and gifted propagator. I recall visiting this nursery a couple of times in its early years and was much impressed by its range and quality of stock which included a goodly selection of *Betula* species and cultivars some of which were not readily available elsewhere.

My first meeting with this particular birch however, goes back to September 1974 when at the invitation of the late Sir Harold Hillier who was

then my employer, I accompanied him on a "plant-hunting" mission to Cornwall. He had a hunch that some of the older, famous gardens there whose tree and shrub collections had been enriched by the likes of E.H. Wilson, George Forrest, Frank Kingdon-Ward and others might contain species which due to circumstances had never been named or else had since been neglected and forgotten.

Over three days, with the permission of their owners, we visited just four collections Trewithen, Caerhays, Lanarth and on the last day (29th September) Werrington Park where we were welcomed by Commander A.M. Williams. On meeting us he kindly gave us a tour of the immediate garden around the house before leaving us to explore further afield. Harold had visited the garden in the past and he had specific trees in mind from which he had requested material for propagation. One of these was a Chinese birch grown from a Wilson introduction (No. 4106) seed of which he had collected in the Min valley near Wenchan, W. Sichuan, China at an altitude of 2600-3600m in October 1910.

▲ Birch *Betula utilis ssp. albosinensis* 'Bowling Green' in the Winter Garden at The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Hampshire. Photo © Roy Lancaster.

My favourite tree

Wilson described the trees as being from 13-33m tall with a girth of 1.5-3.6m and with orange bark. The Werrington tree we located in an area which had previously been used as a bowling green though it was then no longer apparent. I remember marvelling at the rich peeling bark of the stem and main branches though sadly and unusually, I made no note of its size, nor did I have a camera to photograph it. With secateurs we were able to obtain a reasonable number of sturdy shoots before moving on to another wooded location, a good walk away from the house where we collected scions from another peely-barked birch which entailed me having to climb onto Sir Harold's back while he slowly straightened up, enabling me to reach the lowest branch and then the main canopy! Our first attempt came to nought when Sir Harold lost his footing sending us both tumbling but undeterred we tried again and this time I succeeded in hauling myself into the crown and obtaining the necessary material.



We also collected material of several other trees including *Sorbus caloneura* (Wilson 956), *Sorbus megalocarpa* (Wilson 596) and we were a happy if tired pair as we headed for home to deliver our goodies to the Hillier propagators.

Betula utilis ssp. *albosinensis* I was fortunate to see for myself in the wild many years later in September 1986 when I accompanied a group of plant enthusiasts to Sichuan, north of Songpan in the Jiuzhiagou National Park where at 2900m we saw many beautiful specimens of this birch in mixed woodland with *Picea asperata*, *Juniperus saltuaria* and *Acer giraldii*. No wonder Wilson spoke and wrote so passionately about this territory,

All photos: Birch *Betula utilis* ssp. *albosinensis* 'Bowling Green' in the Winter Garden at The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens, Hampshire. Photos © Roy Lancaster.



As for the cultivar name 'Bowling Green' I have no knowledge as to who chose this though I have a sneaking suspicion that its presence perhaps on a label indicating its location may simply have been misinterpreted as its given name. I cannot imagine it would have been approved by Wilson.

In common with most if not all birches, its golden yellow foliage in autumn contributes to its ornamental qualities.

Roy is a Trustee of the Tree Register, a freelance writer, broadcaster, lecturer and garden advisor who has enjoyed a distinguished career as a plantsman and botanical explorer worldwide.



The ancient Mulberry orchard at Syon House¹ By Peter Coles

An extract from Peter's Vicky Schilling Bursary Report which is available in full on the Tree Register website.

Syon House, in Isleworth, on the Thames in SW London, (opposite Kew Gardens), is the ancestral home of the 12th Duke and Duchess of Northumberland and has been in the Percy family since 1594.

To the rear (west and north-west) of the house, nine veteran Black Mulberries may be found in the private grounds of the Duke and Duchess. Thanks to Syon's Head Gardener, Christopher (Topher) Martyn, I have been able to record and photograph these trees several times since

2016. I was joined by Laurence Elvin (one of the volunteers who excavated the site of Syon Abbey between 2005 and 2013 and who is part of the Syon Abbey Research Associates (SARA), a group continuing to investigate the history of the site. He determined approximate Ordnance Survey coordinates for each of the nine surviving trees in the mulberry orchard with a hand-held GPS. He was then able to plot them on a modern map, which could be compared with historical maps, using QGIS mapping software.

The house and grounds are situated on the site of Syon Abbey, a Bridgettine monastery for men and women built in 1431. The abbey was closed in 1539 during the Dissolution of the monasteries

under Henry VIII. After the Dissolution the estate was granted to Edward Seymour, 1st Duke of Somerset and Lord Protector to the young Edward VI. Somerset demolished most of its buildings in the late 1540s and built a new house in the Renaissance style on the site. When Somerset was executed for treason in 1552, the house and estate passed back to the Crown under Queen Mary (who briefly restored the monastery there) and then to Elizabeth I, who granted a lease to Henry Percy, 9th Earl of Northumberland, in 1594. In 1604 James I granted him the freehold, which the Percy family retain to this day.

From the mid-16th century to the mid-18th century the grounds were landscaped, with a formal, walled garden to the east and south of the house and later remodelled by Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, when the walls were removed. William Turner, Somerset’s physician, listed various species in his “Names of Plantes” (1548/9), which he found in Syon’s



▲ Mulberry in unknown location in Syon Park in 1907.

garden, but he does not mention mulberries. There is no evidence, however, for any mulberries at Syon at that date, or that the monastery had mulberries.

Archives in the Percy family (9th Earl of Northumberland) have a record of the purchase of 10 mulberry trees and 6 quince trees in March 1604 – the year before the Earl was sent to the Tower (where he lived in style for the next 17



▲ Mulberry in Syon Park (Loudon, 1844).

¹ With thanks to the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland and to Earl Percy for permission to reproduce these details. The details presented here are not for general reproduction without permission.

years), accused of involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. Forty years later in 1645 there is a bill for 6 mulberry trees and, in 1646, another six were purchased. If all survived, this would mean as many as 22 mulberry trees growing at Syon, up to 10 (the 1603 order) could be up to 416 years old.

Some in the orchard are certainly very old, having layered massively. Two may have been mounded as the main stem(s) began to collapse. Today, the central bole of these trees has almost disappeared, leaving a ring of mature phoenix stems. A solitary tree is shown in old images as leaning over and propped up, which could be the tree in the meadow, once part of the formal walled garden.

Henry Philips records having seen very old mulberry trees at Syon in the early 19th century¹ where the orchard is today: “The interior of these trees is so entirely decayed, that the timber has so far returned to its native earth that it will crumble

in the hand; yet its branches, that are supported by props, are so well nourished by means of the bark, that the fruit and the foliage appear as luxuriant as those of the youngest trees.” This description suggests a tree that could have been 200 years old at the time, and so date to the first decade of the 17th century, for which we have archival support. Philips thinks they could date back to 1548, during William Turner’s time as physician to Lord Protector Somerset, but extensive documentary research by John Adams and Stuart Forbes² finds no support for this and no mention of mulberries at Syon by Turner.

Nineteenth-century writers refer to a very old tree, with spreading branches touching the ground, suggesting a tree that could easily have been over 200 years old 170 years ago.

1. Henry Philips (1821) Pomarium Britannicum p.255.

2. John Adams and Stuart Forbes (2015), The Syon Abbey Herbal.

The Vicky Schilling Bursary

Peter’s survey of mulberry was made possible by the support of a Tree Register Vicky Schilling Bursary.

The Vicky Schilling Bursary is primarily aimed at giving enthusiastic people the chance to travel in the UK and Ireland to discover and record trees or help update and improve data already held on the Tree Register.

Funding of up to £1,000 per project is available for successful applicants whose project is approved by the Bursary Committee.

If you would like to apply, please discuss your project first with a member of the committee who can guide you towards submitting a successful application.

Contact the Tree Register on Tel: 01234 768884 or email: info@treeregister.org

Three of the nine mulberry recorded by Peter Coles in Syon Park in 2023. Please note that all nine mulberry are described in the original report available on the Tree Register website.



Mulberry No.1

Growing in the meadow behind the house, in a wooden fenced enclosure. A recumbent multi-stemmed phoenix spread over a wide area with two polar opposite new crowns. The garden team have recently removed the brambles, nettles and elder that had severely invaded the tree.

An ‘outlier’ relative to the orchard, its location corresponds to a kink in the wall of the 16th century formal garden / 1607 “Cherrie Garden”.



Mulberry No. 5

Of pollard-like form and situated in the private orchard at the rear of the house by the tennis court. It has one layering limb. It is near to the site of a wall between Cherrie Garden and Newe Orcharde (1607).



Mulberry No. 7

Probably the oldest *Morus nigra* in the orchard (early 17th or even 16th century) and on a mound. It is on the site of 1607 “Cherrie Garden”. A phoenix tree with mature layered stems. Several layered stems overlap with an adjacent tree, which may be a phoenix scion of this one.



The hidden garden of Temple House, Co. Sligo, Ireland

By David Alderman

Co. Sligo, in the mid-north west, is not the first county in Ireland that springs to mind when talking about notable trees. Only 5 Irish champions can be found in its gardens, which local conservationist, Shailagh Healy, believes is probably due to a lack of recording. It was Shailagh who was my guide on this trip and on a rare, (according to Shailagh) sunny, summers morning, she drove us along the serpentine drive towards Temple House, an impressive Georgian property where we were met by owner, Roderick Perceval.

The Perceval's have been at Temple House for 350 years and were responsible for originally building the house in 1760. Between the house and a shimmering lake stands the remains of a castle, established by the Knights Templars in the C12th. The Perceval's rebuilt the castle before building their new modern family home nearby. The oldest parkland trees are believed to be contemporary with the house along with extensive native woodland recorded as being planted in the 1700's.



▲ The old castle, originally built in the C12th.
Photo © David Alderman.

▲ The arboretum SW of Temple House.
Photo © David Alderman.



▲ One of a pair of previously unrecorded *Thujopsis dolabrata*, at Temple House. Photo © David Alderman.



▲ Taking various measurements of the Temple House 'Fairy Thorn'. Photo © David Alderman.

It was one such tree we had specifically intended to re-measure. The county champion Sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*), on the lawn at the back of the house. The tree had first been recorded as part of the Tree Register of Ireland project in 2000 and Shailagh was keen to see it. Roderick told us that original 1863 plans for the Italianette terraced garden show an outline with the note “for conservatory when the tree falls”. Today, there was no sign of the tree, or a conservatory, and Roderick confirmed the tree had blown down in 2010, fortunately not causing any damage. There currently appears to be no obvious replacement for this county champion as old Sweet chestnut are rarely seen here.

Expecting guests arriving, Roderick had to leave us but not before describing areas on the estate which may interest us and the freedom to explore, for which we were most grateful. Below the house, avoiding two robot lawnmowers, was a potentially old tree, a Common yew (*Taxus baccata*), whose sprawling low limbs suggested great antiquity but it probably originated as a formal clipped bush, similar to those at Crom Castle. From here, we entered an area of tree planting that felt typical of the late Victorian period, a time when there was known to be extensive development on the estate. We were joined by Bruno, one of the Percival's dogs.



▲ Shailagh Healy measuring the champion Cut-leaved lime *Tilia platyphyllos* 'Laciniata' at Temple House. Photo © David Alderman.

In this area, overhanging the fence of the park and nearest the old castle, we re-discovered the Irish champion Cut-leaved lime (*Tilia platyphyllos* 'Laciniata'). Showing few signs of reverting to a more normal leaf shape, it was good to find one champion tree still standing and growing well. Wiggling the tape measure beneath ivy stems we settled on 325cm, confirming it as, not only, the biggest specimen in Ireland but also in all of Britain.

Almost completely hidden, it was a surprise to find a gate leading to an immense walled garden covering approximately 0.7 hectare (1.7 acres). Unmanaged for many years there are still fruit trees here which warrant a detailed survey to identify varieties, if not already undertaken? Standing outside the entrance were three tall and bushy Irish yew (*Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata'). We measured what we considered to be the best which was 12m tall and 476cm girth, just above ground level. A new, and justifiable, county champion. We could have spent another hour or two here but decided we had seen enough to suggest another visit from the Tree Register of Ireland.

After thanking Roderick, we left by the long drive between two Common lime (*Tilia x europaea*) referred to as "The Guardians" by the current family. We stopped to measure a particularly fine looking ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), 24m x 528cm, with no obvious disease. From here we saw a small lone hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) in an open area of the park, with a fence around it. We will have to ask the significance of this tree but presumed it to be one of the many "Fairy Thorns" of Ireland. One surprise, on reaching this isolated thorn, was noticing the Lungwort lichen (*Lobaria pulmonaria*) on its trunk, an indicator of ancient woodland in the east of Britain, although more frequently seen in the west.

► The Fern-leaved beech *Fagus sylvatica* 'Asplenifolia' below the garden of Temple House. Bruno walks away, unimpressed!
Photo © David Alderman.





Volunteer Spotlight

Ron Kemeny

– Sussex

From his north London roots, Ron spent some of his working life in the USA but not before enjoying a short time at Kew Gardens in the mid 1970's. "It was a job I got by pure chance" recalls Ron, "I had moved to Cornwall with friends but couldn't get a job I enjoyed and so returned to London hoping to work with trees. And where else to go to but Kew Gardens and one morning I just turned up at the gate and asked if there were any job vacancies. By luck they were short-staffed on the tree gang and I was quickly recruited and began a very happy time climbing trees under the guidance of an experienced and very likeable, supervisor. There was little health and safety in those days, a pair of steel toe-capped boots and a simple harness is ALL I remember. But suffering with a bad back made me realise I wouldn't be able to do this work forever and I went to Merrist Wood to get some management experience."

It was only after returning to the UK and retiring in Sussex that Ron re-connected again with trees. "I bought the Champion Tree book and joined the Tree Register out of curiosity to find which trees of note were near to me and that I could visit. I finally made contact after discovering some old birch on Harrison's Rocks in East Sussex and sent photos to the email address on the website. I received such positive and enthusiastic responses from David and Owen that I was inspired to go and measure some trees near where I lived. Ron's first

Discovering that I could contribute positively to this remarkable database of trees was very exciting and so began my new hobby!"

recorded tree was a Scots pine in 2016 and he has now recorded some 2,500 trees including almost 1,000 county champion trees. Ron has embraced technology and uses a Smart phone to help locate trees to re-measure and he records all information directly onto his phone. Using mapping supplied by the National Trust he systematically found and updated the trees of Sheffield Park, East Sussex and discovered several more champions in the process. "I enjoy the learning process of trying to identify the trees I find, although that can equally be very frustrating! I often get corrected by Owen after seeing my photos but I like to think I am getting better!"

Ron's next project, in 2024, is tackling the vast collection at Wakehurst Place. Discovering new champions is very much part of this but finding the existing champions is his first priority. With the help of staff at Wakehurst, Ron has mapped many of the trees and has begun the process of updating the information recorded from previous surveys. When asked why he likes recording for the Tree Register, Ron replies, "I like keeping active and knowing I am contributing to an important national database gives my visits a real purpose. And, I really enjoy the challenge of measuring a particularly difficult tree. Clambering over branches takes me back to my younger days at Kew, but feels safer and yet is keeping me fit!"



Ron, with *Magnolia campbellii*,
at Wakehurst Place, West Sussex (Feb. 2024).
Photo © David Alderman.

◀ An example of *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' of characteristic habit at Royal Victoria Park, Bath.



TREE OF THE YEAR:



Zelkova carpinifolia 'James Gordon'

Some of you may already have noticed that most of the Caucasian Elms *Zelkova carpinifolia* on the Tree Register are now listed under a new name, as the cultivar 'James Gordon'.

Zelkova was one of the genera of trees which I revised during 2023 for the IDS's web-based project treesandshrubsonline.org (TSO). I have been greatly helped here by the knowledge which I have built up over my decades of volunteering for the Tree Register, and by my familiarity with thousands of individual specimen trees around Britain; in the case of the Caucasian Elm I started to realise that all the old ones I knew were so much like each other – and so unlike the tree as photographed in its native forests in the Caucasus and northern Iran – that they must surely all belong to a single selection, for which no name had ever been published. Above a soon deeply fluted bole, great numbers of branches arise at steep angles and often fuse. (This inosculatory tendency, along with the species' naturally durable timber, helps to make this a much more stable and longer lived tree than most with narrow, weak forks.) From this central scaffold, the minor branches arch out precisely to the horizontal, so that the fine twiggy is much more graceful than that of most upright-growing trees. In summer, densely clad in the species' small dark leaves, the crown is neatly egg-shaped; with its short stem and billowingly serrated outline, this habit delightfully suggests the shape of each



▲ The deeply fluted bole of a mature 'James Gordon' shows off the prettily flaking bark of *Zelkova carpinifolia* to maximum effect. This example in the private Workhouse Meadow at Hergest Croft was planted in 1878.

Zelkova carpinifolia 'James Gordon'

individual short-stalked oval leaf. In winter, the architecture of the major branches becomes visible, recalling a giant urn on a pedestal or – as that bluff Yorkshireman W.J. Bean memorably if less flatteringly put it – ‘a monstrous besom’. One conspicuous example leans at the base, in College Road in Dulwich in South London, but this must be because it heaved in some long-forgotten storm. If the specimen has taken advantage of an open situation, or been damaged as a sapling, it can branch from the base; the one in the meadow below Kenwood House in London is the largest such example. The Welsh champion, on the golf course of St Pierre Park near Chepstow, is slightly windswept and unusual in being as broad as it is tall.

Careful research also tends to bring to light the ways in which garden writers tend to repeat one another’s mistakes, rather than studying the earliest available sources for themselves. In the case of *Zelkova carpinifolia*, my primary source, Bean’s *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles*, informed me that the species had first been ‘introduced to France in 1760’.

This time, my research revealed that the year was right, but not the country. In a book about trees grown at Kew in the 1780s, *Hortus Kewensis*, William Aiton was able to narrate the details of the introductions of many new trees which had occurred during his own lifetime. In the case of the zelkova – Aiton knew it as ‘*Ulmus nemoralis*’ – the introduction was apparently made by James Gordon, to his Mile End nursery in East London in 1760, making *Zelkova carpinifolia* the first tree from the Caucasian biome to be grown in Britain.

Gordon was one of his generation’s most respected botanists, though he published nothing himself; he had been the first person in Britain and to grow Chinese trees such as Maidenhair Tree *Ginkgo biloba* and Pagoda Tree *Styphnolobium japonicum*, which had worked their way westwards across Europe, as well as the south-east European Silver Lime *Tilia tomentosa*, and he was the first European to import several North American trees, including American Elm *Ulmus americana*. Writing nearly a decade after Gordon’s death, Aiton also claimed that ‘*Ulmus nemoralis*’ was an American species – which can be taken to imply that Gordon did



▲ *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' at Kenwood House.



▲ *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' at St Pierre Park.



▲ The most conspicuous of the four old *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' at Kew is this tree in the generic collection next to the path from the Brentford Gate.

not happen to tell Aiton where he got his plants from, but not necessarily that Gordon himself was unaware of their Iranian origins.

Although Aiton was primarily interested in the cultivation of trees in what was to become the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, his reference to '*Ulmus nemoralis*' does not mean that the species was planted at Kew in 1760. However, specimens at Kew described by John Loudon in *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* in the 1830s (this time under the name '*Planera richardii*') were already so large that they must have been planted very soon after this, and were presumably supplied by Gordon. These original trees were not, as is often assumed, the big ones which currently grow at Kew near the Brentford Gate and in the private 'Paddock' behind the Library; in the early twentieth century the biggest specimens stood near the Order Beds and near the Main (Elizabeth) Gate, and have

long gone. From their growth rates, the two largest survivors may be no older than another pair in the Pagoda Vista, which are known to date from 1868.

In *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* Loudon also described trees at Syon whose stature suggested that they must be about as old as the oldest at Kew. It is tempting to assume that the gigantic Caucasian Elm which still grows near the statue of Flora here is one of these originals, but this has grown so fast in the years since 1905 that it could be considerably younger. However, the current rapid growth might be explained by this tree's production of 'reaction wood' in response to the crown's partial collapse in 2002. A similar response can be observed in the single even bigger specimen growing in what are now the suburbs of Worlingham in Suffolk, which was first recorded by Maynard Greville in 1956; this was pollarded in 2016 after dropping a branch on an adjacent bungalow, when its girth was just eight metres (and when I found its dense canopy of foliage was just the thing to shelter under during a summer storm). Loudon's 1830s portrait of one of the zelkovas at Syon was engraved in summer, when the dense foliage conceals the characteristic branch structure of all of the old trees that grow in Britain today, but its outline is typical for a mature tree of this clone.



▲ *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' at Worlingham.

Zelkova carpinifolia 'James Gordon'



▲ The trunk of the largest *Zelkova carpinifolia* to survive at Syon Park in west London may be one of James Gordon's original plants.

Britain via France must have been coloured by a brief monograph *Mémoire sur le Zelkoua, Planera Crenata* published by the French botanist André Michaux in 1831. Michaux was apparently unaware of the tree's history in England, but stated with confidence that the largest and oldest in France, Italy or Germany was one grown by Louis-Guillaume Lemonnier at his private arboretum near Fontainebleau in France, which was destroyed along with the garden around 1820 when it was 23m tall. Michaux estimated that this tree had been planted in or before 1765, while Lemonnier had not begun his arboretum until about 1762: this makes it seem unlikely that Gordon could have sourced his zelkovas from a cultivated population on the near continent, but very likely that the continental population had itself originated from Gordon's nursery.

Michaux stated that 'many' zelkovas were planted by the Comte de Dijon at the Château de Poudenas in south-west France in 1789. In the 1830s, a single survivor here was portrayed in winter for *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* and clearly belongs to the same fastigate clone as today's old trees. The length of its bole is unusual – Lemonnier's tree was also described by Michaux as being clean-boled for six metres – but this would be a natural feature if the 'many' original trees had been set in a close plantation, or if the survivor had benefitted from high pruning – a task which the Comte's foresters are likely to have undertaken in the case of a species rumoured to produce excellent timber.

All of the oldest surviving zelkovas in western Europe - which share the same shape and all seem likely to have originated from James Gordon's nursery - grow on their own roots. This may have



▲ The current representative of *Zelkova carpinifolia* at Wardour Castle in Wiltshire is this fine example of 'James Gordon', 32m tall in 2006.



▲ Fastigate suckers surround the remnant of the old *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' at Beauport Park, East Sussex, which blew down in 1987.

contributed to the general idea that they were seedlings and represented the typical, wild shape of *Zelkova carpinifolia*, but this a fairly easy tree to raise vegetatively from cuttings and root suckers. One question which cannot be answered with any confidence is whether Gordon originally obtained seed, and was fortunate enough to find one vigorous fastigate seedling which was the plant he chose to propagate, or whether he imported living material which had already been selected further east for its strong upright growth.

Contemporaneous examples of clones introduced to England vegetatively and quickly and widely distributed include the Lombardy Poplar *Populus nigra* 'Italica' and the English Elm *Ulmus minor* 'Atinia'. Michaux stated that *Z. carpinifolia* had been introduced to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in 1786 in the form of a four-year-old sucker, while the huge tree at Tortworth Court in Gloucestershire was raised as recently as 1903 as a sucker from the older trees at Wardour Castle.

Loudon reported that by the 1830s the traditional method of reproducing *Zelkova carpinifolia* had become to graft it on English Elm. No old grafted trees seem to survive; this can readily be explained by the hypothesis that such grafts were

less robust, and also by the particular susceptibility of the rootstock to Elm Disease. As late as 1985, *Z. carpinifolia* was sourced from Hilliers nurseries for the Bishop of Winchester's arboretum at Wolvesley in Hampshire as a graft at the base on some unidentifiable elm, and has grown poorly. It seems quite unlikely that any zelvokas were successfully raised from seed within western Europe during the earlier stages of the species' establishment in cultivation; Loudon observed that in France at this time, the fruit always dropped before the seed was ripe.

Like the Caucasian Wingnut *Pterocarya fraxinifolia* and the Persian Ironwood *Parrotia persica* from the same Caucasian forest communities, *Zelkova carpinifolia* can sucker very profusely. It is more manageable in this respect than the wingnut, and the suckers usually only arise in abundance after acute stress or the loss of the parent plant. Beauport Park near Hastings was one of England's foremost arboreta through the nineteenth century but large parts of the estate have hardly received any management since then, and now provide a fascinating laboratory in which to study the long-term behaviour of naturalised exotic trees. A large zelvoka here blew down in 1987; 36 years on, the dead branch structure remains largely intact, as a testament to the durability of zelvoka timber, whilst a grove of fastigate suckers about 30m wide has successfully outcompeted the native seedling trees which have otherwise colonised this corner of the estate. (Because they have grown up in close competition, these suckers, up to 17m tall in 2023, lack the massed forks of single older specimens.)

At Tortworth Court this suckering habit has been successfully exploited to create a neat hedge around the parent specimen, on ground too dry and shaded for much else to flourish.

Zelkova carpinifolia 'James Gordon'

A 2014 genetic study of the different haplotypes of *Zelkova carpinifolia* in cultivation showed that all these early trees represented part of the eastern (and largely Iranian) population of *Zelkova carpinifolia*. This was expected: although the western, Caucasian and Anatolian population lies geographically closer to England, these mountains were effectively *terra incognita* to western Europeans until later in the eighteenth century, while the Iranian forests lie quite close to the main route of the Silk Road westwards through Tehran to Istanbul. One other outstanding tree from these same Iranian forests, the less hardy *Albizia julibrissin*, had already made this journey, and was introduced to Italy from Istanbul by Filippo degli Albizzi in the 1740s.

In Britain, the oldest surviving *Zelkova carpinifolia* which does not seem to represent the clone 'James Gordon' forms part of an arboretum planted in 1935 as an extension of Alexandra Park, a public park in Hastings. The source of these trees – which also include the first known public planting of *Fagus sylvatica* 'Dawycck' – is likely to have been the Hillier nurseries. The zelkova, growing on its own roots, had a sprawling, multistemmed and frankly unprepossessing habit and was only about 18m tall when it blew down in 2014. Parts of the collapsed crown have continued to resprout, while a thicket of crooked suckers has grown up from the roots. (The blame has to partly lie with me that this specimen was featured in the 1988 *Supplement to Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles* as *Z. sinica*, a species which had also been planted in this arboretum; my teenage misidentification will have swayed the opinion of Alan Mitchell when I showed the tree to him in 1983. For anyone familiar with the habit of 'James Gordon', 'wild' forms of *Z. carpinifolia* are liable to be misidentified, or simply overlooked.)



▲ A spreading rather than fastigiata *Zelkova carpinifolia* in the Bluebell Woods at Kew.

A more vigorous spreading example of the species is 1979.15668 in the Bluebell Woods at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, which was 20.5m tall in 2022 and which from its growth rate was probably planted, from an unknown source, around 1950; perhaps of the same age, and well placed to show its widely domed habit, is 1973-11550, growing outside the Gardens on Kew Green in front of the Director's House (Tree Register 2023). Whether any of these youngsters will ultimately attain the stature of the largest 'James Gordon' in cultivation seems moot: 'James Gordon' may well have been selected for its exceptional vigour as well as for its habit.

Along with the Lombardy Poplar *Populus nigra* 'Italica', which had coincidentally reached England a year or so earlier, *Zelkova carpinifolia* 'James Gordon' is perhaps the finest as well as the most vigorous erect-branched tree which we can grow.

(From this category we now have to discount the Wheatley Elm *Ulmus minor* ‘Sarniensis’, sadly vulnerable to Elm Disease.) Although a tree whose ultimate spread can exceed 30 m is scarcely suitable for many of the spots which fastigate trees are expected to fill, *Z. carpinifolia* ‘James Gordon’ offers perhaps the ultimate specimen for a large-scale and long-term formal feature. Its comparative scarcity can be attributed to the lack, until now, of a cultivar name and the failure of most garden writers to realise that *Z. carpinifolia* does not always grow like this: anyone hoping to cultivate ‘James Gordon’ and receiving instead a plant raised from seed is likely to be disappointed – although they will at least be assisting the cultivation more of the potential genetic diversity of a species which is now threatened in the wild.

As the oldest specimens of ‘James Gordon’ steadily die from old age or blow down, this variant seems bound to become scarcer. However, it is an easy plant to reproduce, either from transplanted suckers or from cuttings. During the third quarter of the twentieth century at least one nursery was supplying ‘James Gordon’ unnamed but top-grafted onto *Zelkova serrata*; examples of this rather bizarre (and unnecessary) creation survive in England at Danson Park in south-east London and at Brueton Park in the West Midlands.

The Tree Register holds about 120 records of surviving *Zelkova carpinifolia* ‘James Gordon’. Most of these are old trees; a few are promoted suckers from a previous generation, with Laleham and Halliford Parks near the Thames in Surrey boasting many such. Nearly half have trunks at least a metre thick (314cm girth), and half are more than 20m tall; the tallest, 33m in 2023, stands by the Lady Margaret Gate into the Oxford University Parks. There are fine old trees on the

private Rostrevor estate in Co. Down and at the Irish National Botanic Garden at Glasnevin, Dublin; this specimen has recently been propagated under the name ‘Glasnevin’. In Scotland, growth is slower, and no surviving specimens have been documented in recent years. The only introduction to the Channel Islands may have been a youngster recorded at the Durrell Wildlife Park on Jersey in 1989, since lost. One in the private Wilderness at Syon has a badgers’ sett among its roots; another here was noted by Maynard Greville as ‘full of bomb splinters’ in 1951, but does not survive. Examples not obviously connected with stately homes or big public parks include trees now in small suburban gardens in Hilperton Road, Trowbridge, and at Berkeley Court in Guildford; one in the Irish countryside near Toureen in Co. Tipperary; a younger one outside Pershore High School in Worcestershire; and a fine tree in the churchyard at North Pickenham in Norfolk.



▲ *Zelkova carpinifolia* ‘James Gordon’ grafted at Danson Park, London

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