



# A Short Guide to the London Plane

by Robin Hull

## **A short guide to the London plane.**

Despite the fossil record of the plane tree going back 115 million years, the tree we know so well as the ‘London’ plane came into existence only around the middle of the seventeenth century. It became immediately popular amongst tree-planting enthusiasts. Two London plane trees were presented to the Bishop of Lincoln, possibly before 1663, and these are both still growing at Buckden Towers, Cambridgeshire; there is another London plane, sometimes cited as the oldest specimen growing in this country, that was planted at Ely Palace in 1680 by Peter Gunning, the Bishop of Ely from 1675-84.

All these trees are, therefore, over 330 years old, whilst the oldest examples of London planes growing in central London are generally considered to be those in Berkeley Square, thought to have been planted in 1789, making them 220 years old. One of these trees hit the headlines in 2009 for being valued by the London Tree Officers Association at £750,000, Britain’s most valuable tree, (shown in the centre of the front cover). The London planes planted at Highbury Fields<sup>1</sup>, Islington, shortly after it became a public open space in 1885, are a little over 120 years old and form a remarkable series of interlocking avenues.

I.M.Chengappa<sup>2</sup> sums up our knowledge of the longevity of London planes:

“The species was formed by hybridisation in the 17th century, and is therefore only about 350 years old. Thus all London planes are under this age. The

---

<sup>1</sup> The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), <http://www.cabe.org.uk/>, has evolved a method of assessing the monetary value of parks and green spaces, a method which incorporates the London Tree Officers Association’s CAVAT system for assessing the value of trees. Highbury Fields was a recent CABE case study and was valued overall at £53M.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Chengappa has created a website devoted to plane trees growing in Greater London. It is a rich source of information on all types of London and other planes growing in the Capital, <http://www.aranya.co.uk/planes>. Mr. Chengappa mentions plane trees growing at Highbury Fields: “This site contains many mature and interesting trees. There are quite a few uncommon forms of

oldest known trees show no signs of senescence, and no reliable figure for their old age has been established.”

The London plane, *Platanus x acerifolia*, (also *Platanus x hispanica* and *Platanus x hybrida* – all three botanical names are in common use but all refer to the same tree), is a hybrid created by crossing the Oriental plane, *Platanus orientalis* with the Western plane, *Platanus occidentalis*. The hybrid was most likely a natural result of the two parent trees being planted close to each other. There is no certainty as to whether the hybrid occurred naturally in Britain or whether it was first brought here from Spain. The name *P. x hispanica* was based on the supposition that it occurred in Spain. Seedlings are variable, distinguished particularly by their leaf shape and overall form, amongst planes growing throughout London and across the world. Some of these have a closer similarity to the Western plane while others are more like the Oriental plane and variants can be found that cover the full spectrum between the two parent trees.

Although its common name is the London plane, a city where it has been planted in profusion, the species grows in large numbers all over Europe, in Australia and in North and South America – in the city of New York its leaf is used as the symbol for the Parks Department. It has been planted so widely because it has shown itself to be an ideal urban tree, providing moderate shade in the hottest season, its appearance – bark, leaves, fruit and silhouette – offering visual interest throughout the year, being robust in the face of compacted soil,

---

London plane on the east side, such as near the Ronalds Road / Highbury Cres. junction. Some seem to be quite similar to, or may be a form of *orientalis*”, and he identifies on the accompanying plan a tree on Highbury Crescent as, “One of a number of trees on this side of the park of a variety of the hybrid plane that rather resembles the oriental plane. This might be the best specimen of this type in the park”.

At St. Mary Magdalene Church, Holloway, he finds the gardens are, “notable for some large trees of the form *Pyramidalis*, including the very large and widespreading tree in the center (rear) of the churchyard”.



pollution and dry or wet weather, and tolerant of wide differences of heat and cold, although it does very much prefer hot summers. It is also decidedly tolerant of urban man who has learned the species can be pollarded and pruned on a regular basis to suit a range of circumstances and needs; on the other hand, an individual tree may come to need particular arrangements to give it some support for its development, as with the one shown below at Arundel Square, where Islington council has re-built part of the wall to accommodate the expansion of the stem of the particularly fine tree that complements the nearby terraced houses.



*A London plane at Arundel Square, N7.*

At a time of concern for the effects of climate change, the London plane seems well-suited to what may come upon us in the near future and the well-established specimens we see in London streets, parks and gardens should do well in coming years. It is particularly important that they do so, as the London Assembly pointed out in its Report *Chainsaw Massacre*<sup>3</sup>, because the many large, broadleaf trees in our cities are the ‘green lung’ upon which we rely; they make an enormous contribution to reducing the islands of heat which build up in hot weather by shading our streets and all, otherwise exposed surfaces.

The London plane varies in the height to which it can grow, depending

---

<sup>3</sup> *Chainsaw massacre: A review of London's street trees*, was published in May 2007, by the London Assembly Environment Committee. It can be downloaded from <http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/reports/environment.jsp>

on the particular variant and the conditions in which it lives, but it is likely to reach 50 metres or more in this country. The current champion in Europe, growing at the Bryanston School Estate in Dorset, is 48.5 metres tall, (most recently re-measured in 2008), and it is living alongside several others that have reached more than 40 metres in an avenue planted in 1749 to mark the centenary of the execution of Charles I <sup>4</sup>.

More regularly, the taller London planes have grown to 30-35 metres. The tallest at Highbury Fields are up to 22-23 metres at present. Depending on which London plane one looks at, the stem of the tree may be tall and relatively slender with branches not beginning until the tree reaches a considerable height or, in the case of specimens pollarded a few metres above the ground, the stem may be very thick. The tree at Ely has a girth of over nine metres, the largest in the British Isles,



*A London plane with notably large girth at St. Mary Magdalene Gardens, Holloway.*

---

<sup>4</sup> Measurements and notes for these trees and for the ones at Ely and Buckden Towers are from The Tree Register, <http://www.treeregister.org/>, a registered charity engaged in collating and

and one of the planes in St Mary Magdalene Gardens, Holloway, is notable for its girth of over 7 metres.

Many plane trees have been pollarded, deliberately cut down leaving just a stem that rises only a few metres above the ground. This is usually done before the tree reaches any great age, as in the example at Camden Square. It is a way of stimulating the tree to produce branches at a lower level than it would otherwise do. This rarely happens naturally to the London plane which, before the storm of 1987, was thought so strong as never to be blown down; that night a mature tree of very considerable size in a garden in Horsell Road, snapped off at quite a high



*A tree pollarded early in its life, at Camden Square, NW1.*



*A mature tree snapped off by the storm of 1987, at Horsell Road, N5.*

---

updating a database of notable trees throughout Britain and Ireland by organising a volunteer network of over 50 tree measurers who update historical records and discover over 2,000 new trees worthy of inclusion each year. The database contains details of more than 150,000 trees.



level. I watched in amazement that it could withstand such a battering as it swayed violently from side to side, but in the morning it was down. The photograph taken in 2009, gives an idea of how it has regenerated its branches, demonstrating that even old trees will flourish after such a disaster.

Just as surprising, perhaps, is that when cut off very low to the ground, planes sprout new shoots that become mighty branches; the examples from Agar Grove and Blackstock Road show the start and the full development of this process and there are many more such multi-stemmed plane trees across London.



*New growth produced by two London planes in the same year as their cutting off at very low level, at Agar Grove, NW1.*



*A fully developed London plane many years after it was reduced to near ground level, at Blackstock Road, N4.*

Parks and gardens planted with London plane trees like the ones on the cover photo enhance our life in the city. Commuters, residents and visitors enjoy the green oasis away from the bustle. The great old trees are full of light and colour and let the sunlight play through their leaves providing dappled shade for those who seek it. These trees and their counterparts along busy streets complement our buildings and create a uniquely British urban landscape. We are fortunate that with their expected life-span and their resilience these remarkable trees will be with us for generations to come.





Written and published in electronic format by Robin Hull, Islington, London, 2009.