



Very large *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula' behind *Nothofagus antarctica*.

## Urban Treescape \* 8 July

Dendrologist OWEN JOHNSON led a day in Hastings devoted to the problems and opportunities of cultivating rare trees in public urban places.

In many ways we had found the ideal venue: Alexandra Park is perhaps the foremost public park in England for its rare and champion trees. During my introduction to the day, I explained how a small Borough, several of whose wards are among the most chronically deprived in the UK, should have inherited such a resource – plus the responsibility of looking after it.

Alexandra Park had first opened in 1864 as St Andrews Gardens, but twelve years later the town Corporation approached Robert Marnock to design a much larger garden worthy of Hastings' status at this stage as one of Britain's foremost seaside holiday resorts. Marnock's earlier commissions had included the Sheffield Botanical Gardens, another urban park with a legacy of outstanding trees; he came out of retirement to devote five years to creating the landscape of winding paths, lakes and shrubberies which survives today<sup>1</sup>. Marnock envisaged Alexandra Park as a botanical collection, with more than a thousand plant labels and with collections of *Acer*, *Aesculus*, *Crataegus*, *Fagus*, *Quercus* and *Tilia* laid out genus by genus.

It would have been easy for the town to rest with that, but a living tree collection depends on continual planting so that up-and-coming rarities are ready to take the place of older plantings as they begin to fail. Alexandra Park

<sup>1</sup> The publication of Robert Marnock's Retirement Project: Alexandra Park, Hastings, 1876–82, 'Superior to any Park in any other Seaside Resort' by Dr Jan Woudstra, (*Garden History*, 51:1, pp. 17–38) closely coincided with this Study Day.

has been fortunate in a series of head gardeners and tree officers who have gone far beyond their job descriptions: in the mid-20th century, Hastings' Parks Superintendent was a Mr Cassidy, who was clearly a remarkable plantsman, while over the last eight years the Friends of Alexandra Park have persuaded Hastings Borough Council to give myself, in a volunteer role, a free remit in sourcing and planting rare trees which I hope will provide the champions of the future.

All of this could be demonstrated by the trees immediately surrounding our venue at the Old Bowls Pavilion. We stood under a veteran Austrian pine (*Pinus nigra* subsp. *nigra*) which was a survivor from hundreds planted by Marnock in the 1870s to provide a sturdy framework for the park. Above this, in the old *Tilia* collection, the weeping American lime (*T. americana* 'Pendula') is reaching the end of its days but is one of ten or so national Champion Trees in the park – the largest or tallest of their kind recorded in Britain or Ireland. Trees from Mr Cassidy's era here include a magnificent weeping beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula') and one of Britain's biggest Chinese sweetgums (*Liquidambar formosana*). A *Robinia pseudoacacia*, now maintained as a stool, is one of the earliest plantings from St Andrew's Gardens, while a well-grown beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) is probably the tree planted by Princess Alexandra during the new park's opening ceremony in June 1882. Next to this, *Tilia americana* 'Fastigiata', a very worthwhile but scarce cultivar obtained as a standard from Barcham Trees in 2018, provided an example of our commitment to maintaining the tree collection through the 21st century.

This last specimen also introduced us to some of the difficulties in planting an arboretum in the public domain. The range of trees which are commercially available at standard size is necessarily limited; independent nurseries such as Crûg Farm and Pan Global Plants specialise in smaller rarities which are sold almost exclusively to private clients. Traditionally, small plantings are seen as too vulnerable to vandalism for public places, and Hastings certainly suffers more than most towns from the social problems which underlie such patterns of behaviour. My experience, over the last eight years, is that standards are also vulnerable – little saplings may not even be noticed by potential vandals, or may seem to offer too little of a challenge – while small plantings are certainly easier to establish. But the general policy has been to locate the smaller and rarer plantings in out-of-the-way corners and in the less frequented outlying parts of the park. I grow these on in my garden until they are deemed big enough to fend for themselves.

Because of the limited range of trees available as standards, and the lack of familiarity of many Tree Officers with the vast potential range of rare species that might be planted at smaller sizes, tree populations in public places often lack variety. Monocultures are always vulnerable to pests and diseases, and to changes in climate; an opportunity is also missed to create beautiful and diverse landscapes, and to engage local people in their environment



Owen Johnson and a veteran *Pinus nigra* subsp. *nigra* planted in the 1870s.

by presenting leaves, flowers, barks and tree crowns in captivating variety. My own fascination with trees is certainly thanks in part to the varied trees in Alexandra Park, which I was lucky enough to grow up next door to. Provocatively, I even suggested that it is a shame that, whereas it seemed natural to the Victorian rich to devote part of their fortunes to endowing public parks and public tree collections, nowadays tree lovers prefer to plant in their own gardens, where the specimens are often crowded, are appreciated by just a few friends, and may have no long-term future. At least our public open spaces offer room for trees, and an assured future of management.

It is easy to fear that planting real rarities is merely a niche interest. To show that a rich variety of tree forms can in fact engage a wide spectrum of society, Caroline Hughes, a volunteer tutor for Hastings' charity 'Arts on Prescription', spoke to us next about the work of its Art in the Park project, which over





Left: *Quercus petraea*, 1911 Coronation memorial planting; right: *Robinia pseudoacacia* stool

the last two years had developed the Pavilion into a hub where local people with a range of mental health issues or from disadvantaged backgrounds can express themselves through art: many artworks inspired by individual trees in the park were displayed on the walls. The charity's work was of particular interest to several in the group who represented Friends groups from other public parks. We were also of course most grateful to Caroline and her fellow volunteers for providing us with shelter and hospitality, particularly as it now started to rain.

Obligingly, the rain stopped just in time for the next part of the day, during which Chris Wilkin, Hastings' Tree Officer of many years' experience, teamed up with me to show more of the park's trees. We looked first at street plantings of *Liquidambar styraciflua* along the busy adjacent St Helens Road, and Chris offered many insights into the practical issues involved in establishing trees in this harshest of environments.

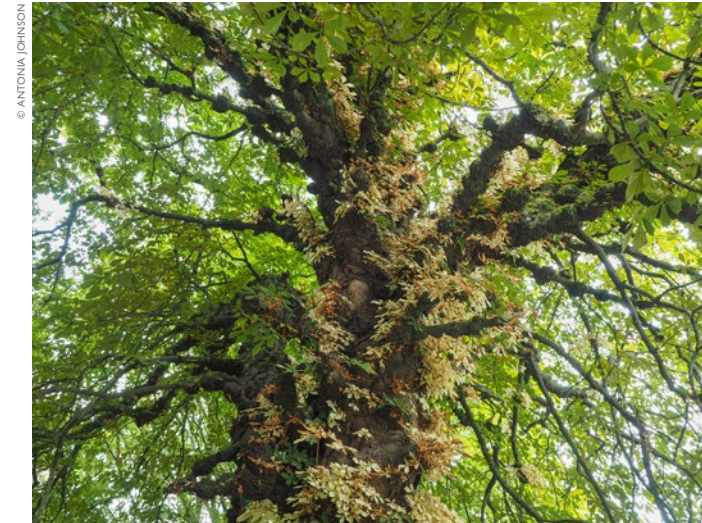
One of the important roles of urban trees, of course, is to baffle traffic noise and to soak up exhaust fumes – a feature of which our party grew pleasantly aware as we returned to the park itself and looked at some successful (and less successful) recent plantings. These included a *Prunus* 'Taoyame', perhaps my favourite Japanese cherry, which had been uprooted by vandals and thrown into the adjacent stream, where it had floated off and been discovered a fortnight later by the park's Urban Ranger; it was replanted and has thrived ever since. Older champions which we visited included a horse chestnut presumably planted in the 1880s or 90s as *Aesculus hippocastanum* 'Variegatum',

and whose leaves were now entirely green in the upper crown and entirely white in sprouts off the lower trunk and branches.

Then it was back to the pavilion for a delicious buffet lunch cooked and prepared by volunteers from Art in the Park, during which the rain came down again. But by two the sun was shining and we took a longer leisurely stroll around some of the upper parts of Alexandra Park where many of the best trees are concentrated. The Victorian hawthorn (*Crataegus*) collection still has one of its original representatives – a magnificent, hollow specimen of white haw (*C. punctata*) from the eastern United States, which is another UK champion. Hawthorns are one genus which is currently cultivated in less variety, in public places, than seems to have been the case a century before, and I have devoted some energy to sourcing a good range of species to rejuvenate this part of the park's collection. Significantly, this is the only genus where I have had 100% success in establishing the new trees, so far.

The oak collection (*Quercus*) is perhaps Alexandra Park's most extensive grouping. We admired fine surviving examples, from the Victorian era, of *Q. pubescens*, *Q. canariensis*, *Q. × crenata* and *Q. × turneri*, and also the replacements sourced in the late 1980s by former Hastings Tree Officer John Tucker, which include one of the first plantings in the UK of bluejack oak (*Q. incana*) from the south-eastern United States. From this same biome, Hastings oak (*Q. × hastingsii*) was of course a must for the Friends of the Park to add to the quercetum, and is performing unexpectedly well.

Some much older wild *Quercus robur* provide shade and shelter in this part of the park. The biggest, a very hollow and once tall tree near the Chalybeate Well, provided an opportunity for us to look at veteran tree management.



*Aesculus hippocastanum* 'Variegatum' with green upper crown leaves and white leaves on the lower trunk and branches, giving a curious bicolour effect.





Above left: *Quercus phellos*

Above right: *Crataegus punctata*

Right: Tree Officer Chris Wilkin with carved hollow *Quercus robur*

Below: *Corylus avellana* 'Urticifolia', champion example of cut-leaved hazel



Chris told us how he had gradually reduced this tree's crown and, rather than felling the tall dead stump that now remains, had commissioned a local environmental sculptor to carve homes for birds and insect life out of it.

There are plenty more interesting trees around Alexandra Park which we didn't get time to see this year. In fact, the trees in general in town parks and cemeteries across Britain provide a wonderful and still under-appreciated resource for the tree enthusiast to explore. It is hoped to run a similar event in Hastings again during summer 2024.