

# Capital Trees

There are many culturally significant heritage trees to be found in Scotland's capital city, Edinburgh. Wishing to protect and promote these trees, in 2003 Edinburgh City Council, after much consultation with interested groups, experts and the general public, compiled a list of some 52 trees which were deemed to be of historical significance and importance. These trees, or in some cases groups of trees, were to become ones whose special uniqueness was to be recognised and preserved. The council also set up the Edinburgh Tree Warden Network, linked into the national UK network, with the aim of getting the capital's residents actively involved in tree and woodland issues. There are now over forty tree wardens and an excellent website [www.treewarden.org.uk/edinburgh](http://www.treewarden.org.uk/edinburgh) that helps to promote both the scheme but more importantly the trees themselves.

You can normally be guaranteed to find heritage trees associated with churchyards throughout the country and Edinburgh is no different, having several examples. However, two are particularly interesting and worthy of mention – one a sycamore and the other a yew. As well as being trees with a story to tell, they both also strangely enough have ghostly connections as well!

The Corstorphine sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus* 'Corstorphinense') is itself a descendant from the perhaps more famous Corstorphine sycamore which was blown down during the Boxing Day gales of 1998. The original tree does still remain in the garden of a local bed and breakfast establishment nearby, while its younger offspring grows in the churchyard of Corstorphine Kirk.

This type of sycamore was named after the area of its origination to mark it out as different from others, because the current specimen and its more venerable 'mother' tree and others of the same species have distinctive yellow foliage that flushes a good number of weeks earlier than is normal. The current holder of the name was propagated like many others throughout the city from a cutting taken from the original tree.

This tree is thought to have been planted in the 17th century and was a major landmark. It's reputed to have been nearly 17 metres high, with almost a 4 metre girth; it was perhaps these stunning dimensions that enabled it to continue to grow even after it had been reduced to just a stump after the aforementioned stormy

and seasonal gales.

The locals, determined to keep the memory of this magnificent tree alive, ensured that many different implements, ranging from a stunning violin to simple fruit bowls, were made from the wood that could be salvaged. Also legend suggests that the ghost of Christine Nimmo, the murdered lover of the local landowner, haunts the ground around the legendary tree stump.

Only a short distance from this tree there is another at nearby Colinton, where the ghost of a long-haired man is said to occupy a yew tree in the grounds of the manse of the church. This yew (*Taxus baccata*) is a mature tree, thought to be up to 400 years old, with a trunk that is a metre in diameter. It continues to grow healthily despite having a new church building as its neighbour!

There is a swing hanging from one of the branches of this famous tree which is in keeping with its history. It is said that there was a swing there back in the days when author Robert Louis Stevenson stayed at the manse with his grandfather, who was minister of Colinton Church.

Indeed Stevenson refers to the tree in his work 'Children's Garden of Verse'; it seems it helped inspire him to continue to develop his writing which, of course, led to some of his more famous works including 'Treasure Island' and 'Kidnapped'.

'Kidnapped' was in fact partly penned by Stevenson when he stayed at the Hawes Inn, at South Queensferry. He perhaps sat under the spreading boughs of this yew tree which is still in existence there today

and was certainly growing at the inn back in his days he spent there. Not quite as old as the one at Colinton, at a mere 200 years, it is a fair size and said to be one of the largest in the capital. It certainly has an impressive girth, at 1.7 metres. Today the tree is carefully nurtured and maintained to ensure that it continues to survive long into the future.

These wonderful examples of heritage trees in Edinburgh don't just exist in public places though. There are two amazing trees that, while being remnants of great estate woods of the past, find themselves today right in the middle of housing estates!

There is a sycamore in Cramond which dominates the landscape of the village and, located on the main road, is hard to miss. It may have been planted as part of the original woodlands of Cramond House; it is certainly thought to be as old as the house in whose garden it grows making it at least 230 years old. It has several major limbs which grow from its solid trunk and its root system has been protected against damage by the cottage's boundary wall with an ingenious building design. The wall has been bridged over the roots and this has allowed it to continue to spread unhindered, which has undoubtedly contributed to this sycamore being a truly stunning example of *Acer pseudoplatanus*.

In neighbouring Barnton, there is an oak (*Quercus petraea*) that is known locally as the Barnton Gate oak. With its very large open crown and towering branches it looks somewhat out of place in a suburban street. The other trees that grow in neighbouring gardens are dwarfed by this magnificent tree. One look at the massive trunk suggests that it is at least 250 years old and once again, like its counterpart in Cramond, it is thought to have been part of an original estate planting.

Lauriston Castle, with a mixture of conifers and broadleaves, still remains as a fascinating example of the large Edinburgh house and gardens that it was in the mid 1920s, when its owners bequeathed it to the city. The Reids, who last owned the castle and house, loved exotic trees and plants and this is reflected in some of the species that can still be found growing there today. While the beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica*) that dominate the parkland



This silver birch (*Betula pendula tristis*) is a definite survivor, as most of this tree species in the wild die after 80 or so years – this veteran is said to have been planted in the 19th century!



Cars rush by the unnoticed Comely Bank London planes (*Platanus x hispanica*) which are now just an accepted part of the street landscape of this part of Edinburgh.

may be run-of-the-mill, the five Monkey Puzzles (*Araucaria araucana*) and the two Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) in the formal garden are certainly not!

There are archive pictures of one of the Monkey Puzzle trees pictured at Lauriston Castle in 1887, which suggests that these five Monkey Puzzles are probably some of the earliest planted in the UK. The Japanese cedars probably arrived at Lauriston because the Reids had a love of Japanese plants and constructed their very own oriental garden on the banks of the River Forth. The two trees are excellent examples of the species, which can grow up to 70 metres in height.

Giant Redwood (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) are amongst several exotic conifers that can be found in the grounds of the ruined Cammo Estate, which is now a council-run woodland and offers a number of walks through old broadleaves and conifer parkland.

As well as the Giant Redwood, there are Monkey Puzzle, Umbrella pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*), Deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) and Arolla pine (*Pinus cembra*) which quietly grow together almost unnoticed to the countless dog walkers and visitors to this park. These trees also vie for attention with Western Red cedar (*Thuja pilcata*), Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menzies*) and an old grove of five yew trees. Not to be outdone, however, the broadleaves have many fine mature species throughout the parkland, including a stunning ash.

This ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) is believed to be the biggest and oldest of its kind growing within the boundaries of the capital. It is almost hidden amongst other less worthy trees, at the side of the main pathway which leads up from the Ranger Centre at Cammo. Its branches radiate out from a gnarled and wizened solid trunk which has an impressive girth of 1.6 metres, giving this tree a majestic air of superiority.

Superior and certainly veteran trees also populate the Redford Woods, close-by to the military barracks of the same name. There is yet another Giant Redwood which is worthy of mention, for this Redwood has royal connections! Planted nearly 100 years ago, by the Prince of Siam on completion of his military training, it is a regal tree in every respect.

The city has in excess of one and a quarter million trees contained within its boundaries and many of the roads and streets of Scotland's capital are tree lined. While many of these trees are not extraordinary, the Plane trees that grace the north of the roadside in Comely Bank certainly are.

The sixteen London Planes (*Platanus x hispanica*) form a prominent part of the streetscape of this part of the city. Visitors to Stockbridge cannot fail to notice, and be impressed by, these large mature trees that form a barrier between the Comely Bank Road and the cricket and rugby fields to their rear. They were certainly planted in a time well before the benefits of using such



Monkey Puzzles (*Araucaria araucana*) and Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) make an interesting contrast to the other trees and plants at Lauriston Castle.

a tree species to offset carbon emissions had been thought of.

The London Plane, as a large growing deciduous tree, is very popular as a street species in towns and cities, primarily because it is capable of dealing with the exhaust and atmospheric pollution associated with large conurbations. Its root system is normally compact and despite growing to a reasonable size of over 30 metres, it is pretty wind resistant making it an ideal tree to plant in built-up areas.

Almost in the same vicinity of these heritage trees is the city's Royal Botanic Gardens. Here there are a multitude of trees of every size and description, with many that would merit a mention, but none more so than a contorted Silver birch (*Betula pendula tristis*). This tree is a true aged wonder with its flaky silvery white bark which supports its crown of arching branches.

Located next to the Caledonian Hall, in the eastern part of the gardens, it is a mature example and seems to have outlived the normal lifespan of the Silver birch of around eighty years. This tree is thought to have been planted in the 19th century and is known to be one of the oldest and largest examples of this wonderful tree variety in the capital.

Our final 'Capital tree' is another distinctive tree species – the Sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*). Located in the grounds of the Gallery of Modern Art, most experts agree that it is as old as the gallery buildings themselves – around 150 years of age. It is a large tree with a typical large single trunk and a spirally growth and leaf crown extend from this on its many branches. In the summer season this particular tree is an amazing sight to see, even among the other mature trees that grow in the grounds of the gallery.

The trees discussed here are but a small proportion of the heritage trees of the capital. Each have their own stories and uniqueness and have undoubtedly been around for many years, gracing the city with their distinctive shapes, sizes and appearances. It is fitting that today steps have been taken to ensure that they are preserved for generations to come, so that they too can experience these exceptional trees.

James Hendrie



The Monkey Puzzles (*Araucaria araucana*) have been growing at Lauriston Castle since the mid 1850s.



This silver birch (*Betula pendula tristis*) has really amazing twisted branches.



A unique design of boundary wall protects this venerable old tree's roots from being harmed and allows it to grow unhindered.