

A GUIDE TO THE TREES IN LONDON ROAD CEMETERY: PAXTON'S ARBORETUM

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Set to host Marshmallow Laser Feast's **Observations on Being** from 22 June - 15 August, Coventry's **London Road Cemetery** is one of the city's hidden green gems, boasting a stunning arboretum created by Victorian landscape designer Joseph Paxton.

Experienced through seven immersive artworks, *Observations on Being* invites audiences on a journey through the invisible natural world, exploring the idea of breath from a range of scientific and cultural perspectives. Through a mix of audio and visual installations, the piece will draw on the diverse plant life already thriving within the cemetery, offering moments of quiet contemplation amidst the trees, as well as shining a light on the amazing processes that keep them alive.

Ahead of the opening next week, we took a tour of the cemetery in the company of Tree Warden **Derek Robinson** to hear some of the stories behind the arboretum's most impressive trees.

"Paxton was commissioned to do the cemetery in 1845, and a lot of his original designs remain in what you can see here today," says Derek. "It was all built on a disused quarry, and it was designed first and foremost as a cemetery, but also as a gentleman's park and arboretum – a sort of three for one, if you like."

Already approaching the height of his career as a landscape gardener, Paxton was also responsible for designing the famous Chatsworth gardens, as well as one of the earliest and most influential

public parks in Birkenhead. A graveyard might seem like an unlikely place for an outing today, but that's largely because our attitudes to death have changed a lot over the years.

"You've got to understand that the Victorian concept of death was very different to ours," he explains. "People nowadays are often frightened of it, but back then it was normal – there was a lot of it, so you were next to it all the time."



Yew tree (*Taxus baccata*)

Although human life expectancy was shorter in the past, time moves differently for trees, and many of those on the site were planted during Paxton's time. After entering via the Main Gate from Quarryfield Lane and passing by the tower, we soon come across an old Yew tree (*Taxus baccata*), leaning in towards the path from a bank on the right hand side, its gnarled roots raised up above the soil – it's definitely been here a long time.

Behind it, however, the brighter leaves of Common Laurels (*Prunus laurocerasus*) crest the hill – more recent additions to the park which have "added themselves", as Derek puts it. While he's not so keen on these, he is more open to things changing here than some – in over 170 years, it's inevitable, after all.

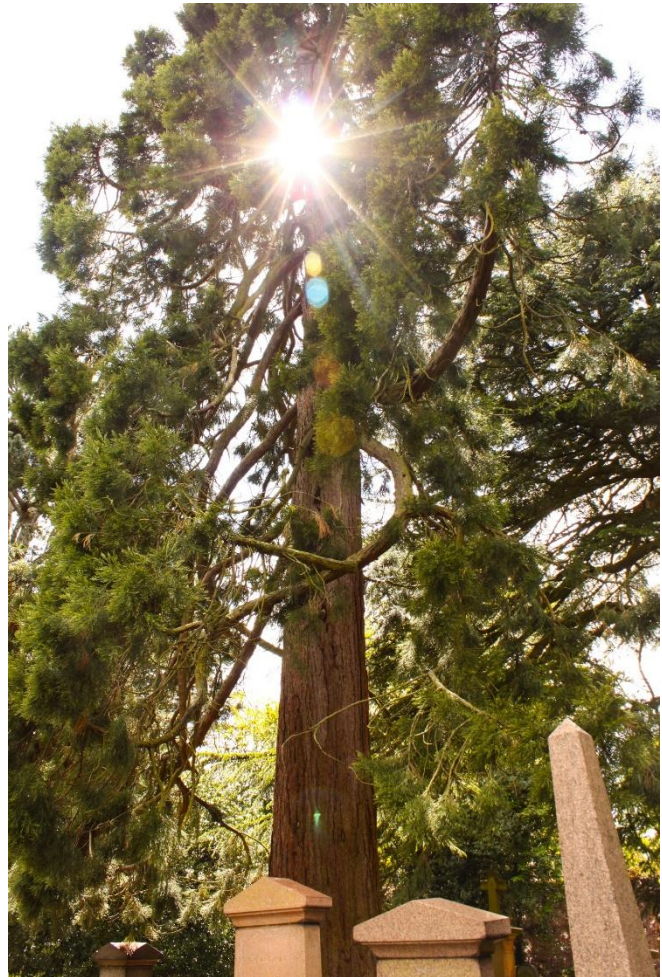
"Sometimes if you think one of the trees is going to fall over

and hurt someone or do damage, it has to come down. Recently we had a Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*) taken down, and it was the only one we had, so there was a bit of resistance to it. But all of the root plates had rotted, and it was starting to rot over – and it was a big one! So of course you can guarantee that the day it fell over by itself, there would have been a car or a person underneath. It's a shame, but everything has its time in the end."

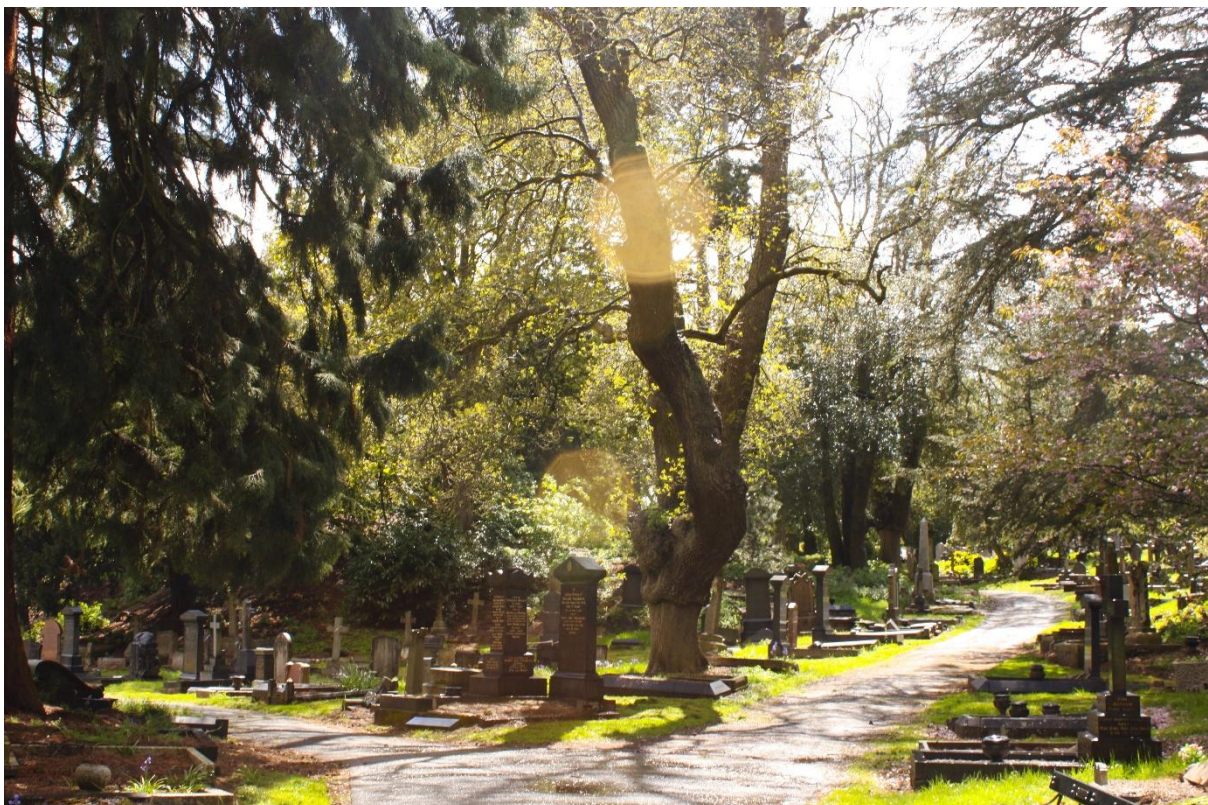
Some of the most impressive trees you'll see throughout the arboretum are the Giant Sequoias (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) which as a species hold the title of the world's tallest tree. Originally from California, those imposing redwoods were introduced to Britain in 1853. It was the year the Duke of Wellington died, giving them their English name Wellingtonia.

The species has a part to play in *Observations on Being*, too – without revealing too much, a Giant Sequoia will be the subject of a spectacular installation titled *Oceans of Air*.

Exotic plants like this were hugely popular in Paxton's time, the growth of the British Empire resulting in exciting new species arriving from around the world. Other examples found in the cemetery include the Coast Redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), a Californian cousin to the Giant Sequoias, and the Himalayan Bhutan Pine, named *Pinus wallachiana* after the Danish botanist Nathaniel Wallich, who introduced the first seeds to England in 1827.



Giant Sequoia (Sequoiadendron giganteum)



Grafted Ash: Common Ash rootstock (Fraxinus excelsior) and Narrow-leaved Ash scion (Fraxinus angustifolia)

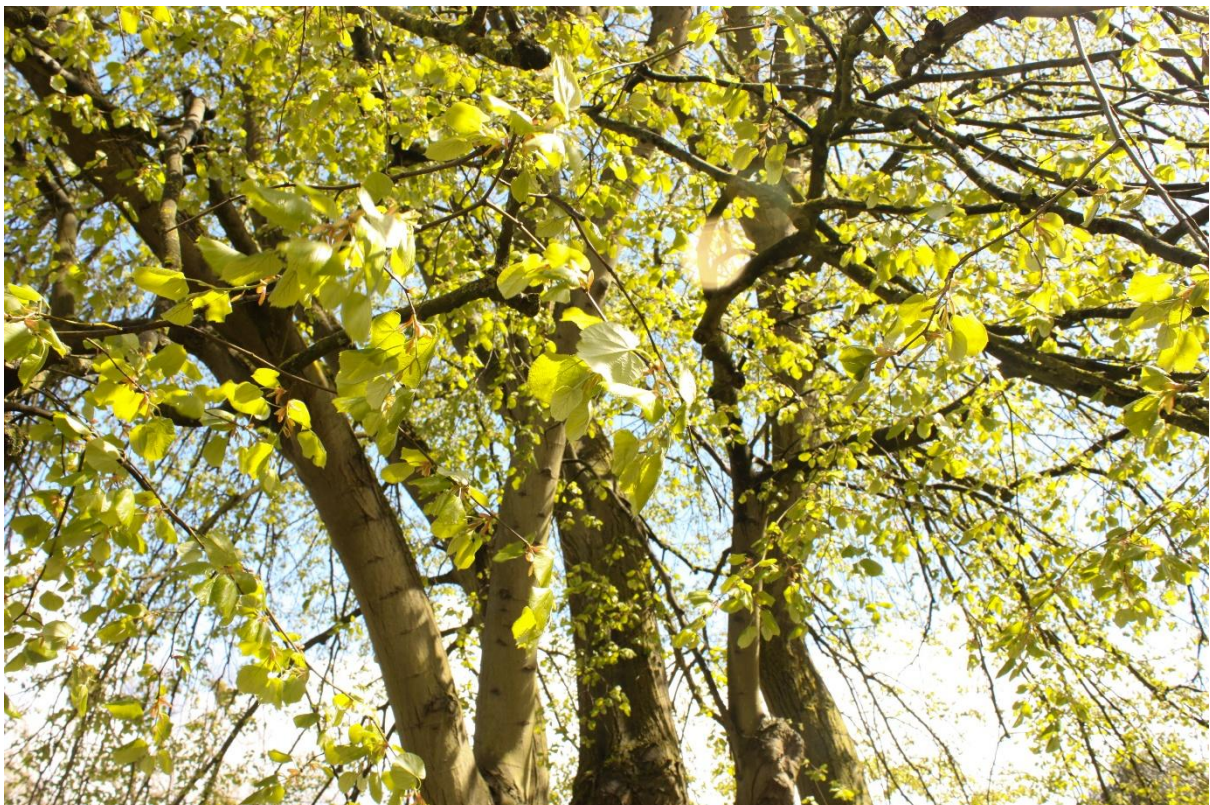


Graft point on the Grafted Ash

Another vestige of Victorian trends that can still be seen throughout the cemetery is grafting – the practice of joining two plants together so that they continue their growth symbiotically. Typically, one plant will be selected for its roots (the stock) and a second chosen for its leaves, flowers or fruits (the scion).

The first example we encounter has a Common Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) as its rootstock and a Narrow-

leaved Ash (*Fraxinus angustifolia*) as its scion, and you can easily see the graft point between the two once you know to look out for it.



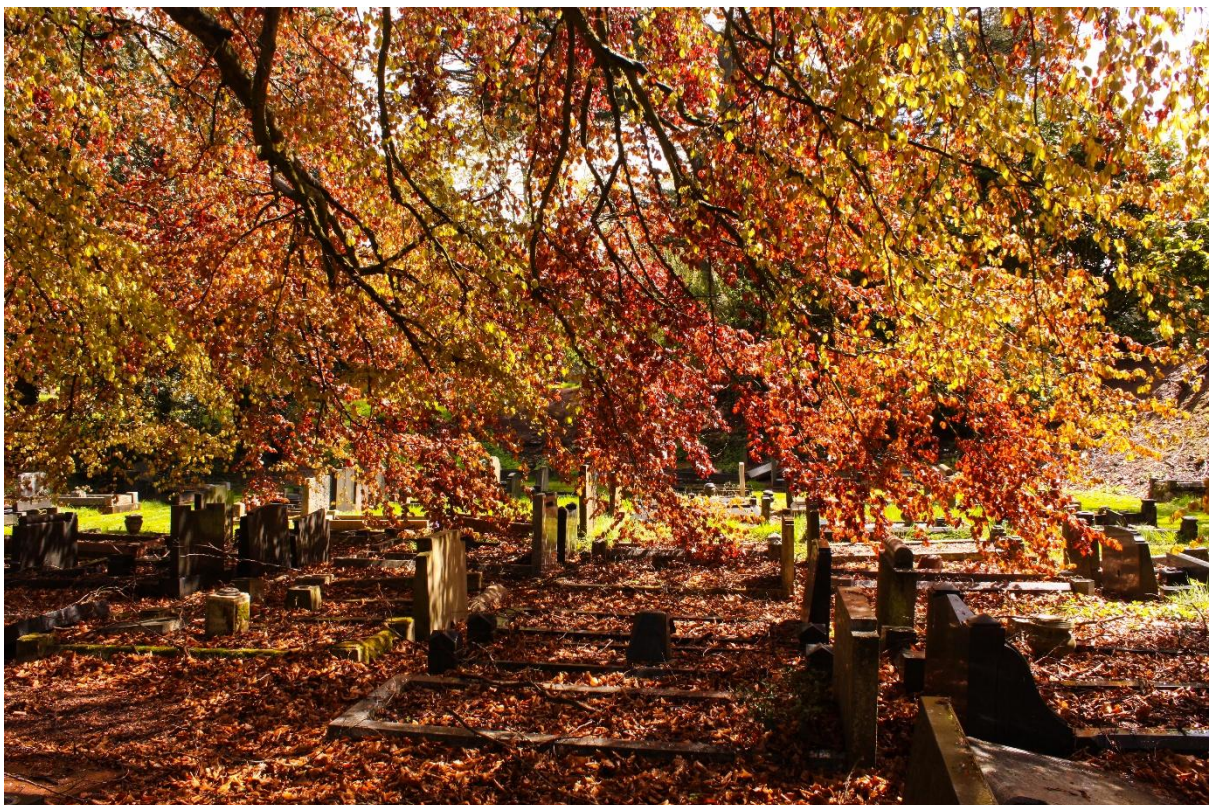
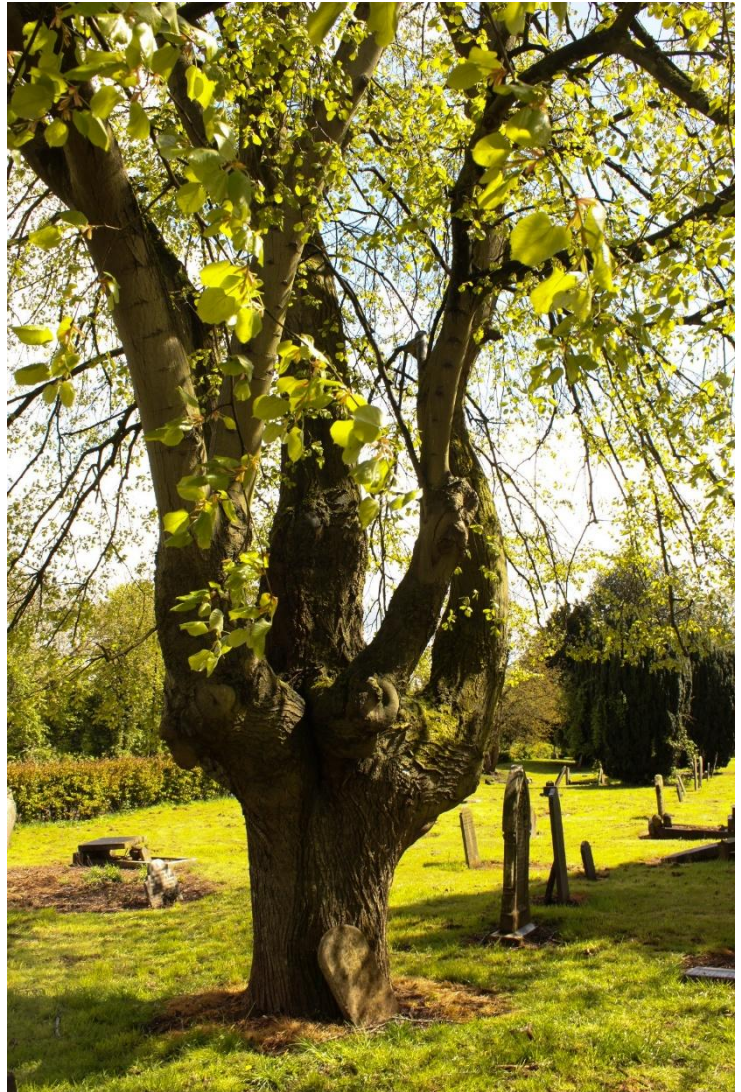
"Eternal flame" - Silver-Leaved Weeping Lime (Tilia tormentosa)

A little further on, there are Candelabra Limes – so known due to the distinctive shape the grafting process gives them. The trees are made up of Large-leaved Limes (*Tilia platyphyllos*) as stock and Silver-leaved Weeping Limes (*Tilia tormentosa*) grafted on top.

“They’re not quite out enough for you to get the full effect at the moment, but you can see how white the leaves are on the back,” says Derek. “When you see them all fluttering in the breeze, with the candelabra shape of the tree, you can see why their Victorian symbolism was ‘Eternal flame’.

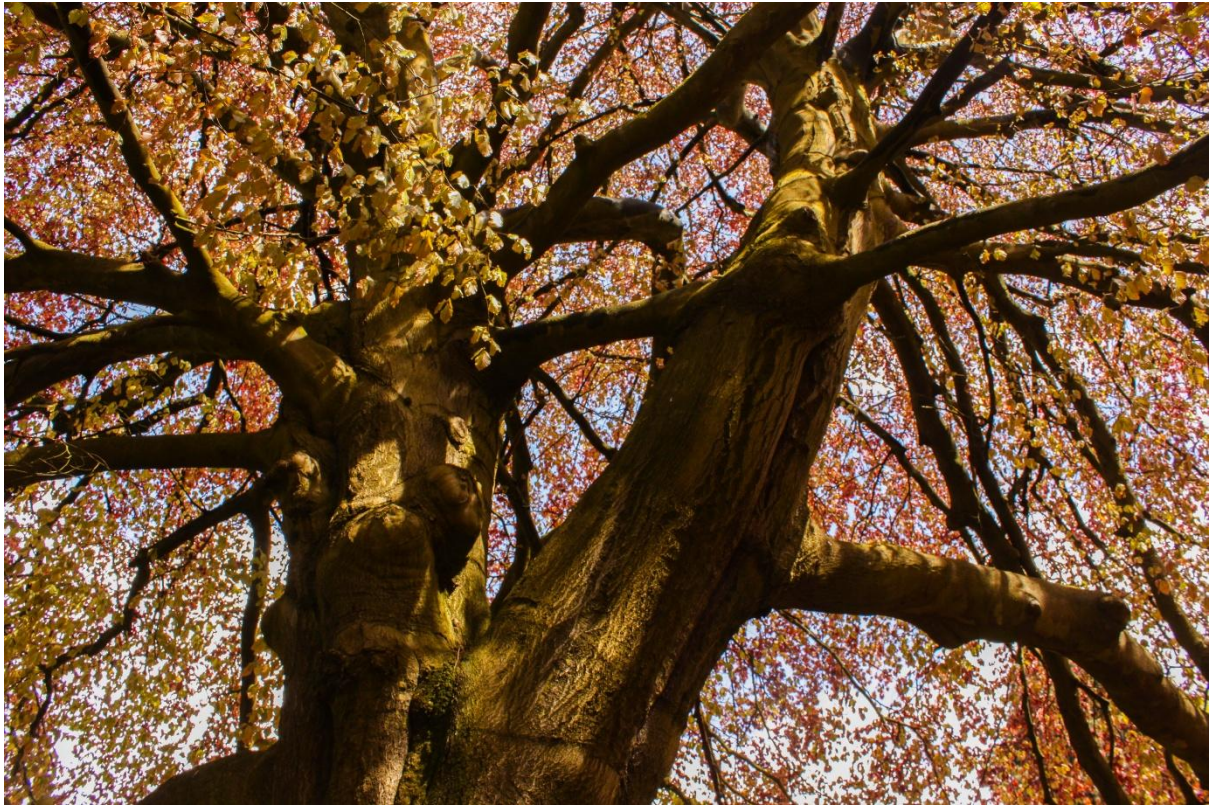
“Victorians had all sorts of complex symbolism for their plants. You can see it especially in the language of flowers – they had something for everything. You could probably have done this whole interview with flowers! But certainly, if you sent someone a bouquet, they would know exactly what all the flowers meant, and it definitely wasn’t all, ‘I love you!’”

Candelabra Lime: Large-leaved Lime rootstock (*Tilia platyphyllos*) and Silver-Leaved Weeping Lime scion (*Tilia tormentosa*)



Copper Beech (*Fagus sylvatica purpurea*)

Grafting isn't only something that's imposed by people, however – Derek also points out how trees “work with themselves” to stabilise themselves as they grow. We pass a magnificent Copper Beech (*Fagus sylvatica purpurea*) which has developed its own “scaffold graft”, where a cut branch has connected itself to another part of the tree, so that it's attached at both ends.



Copper Beech scaffold graft

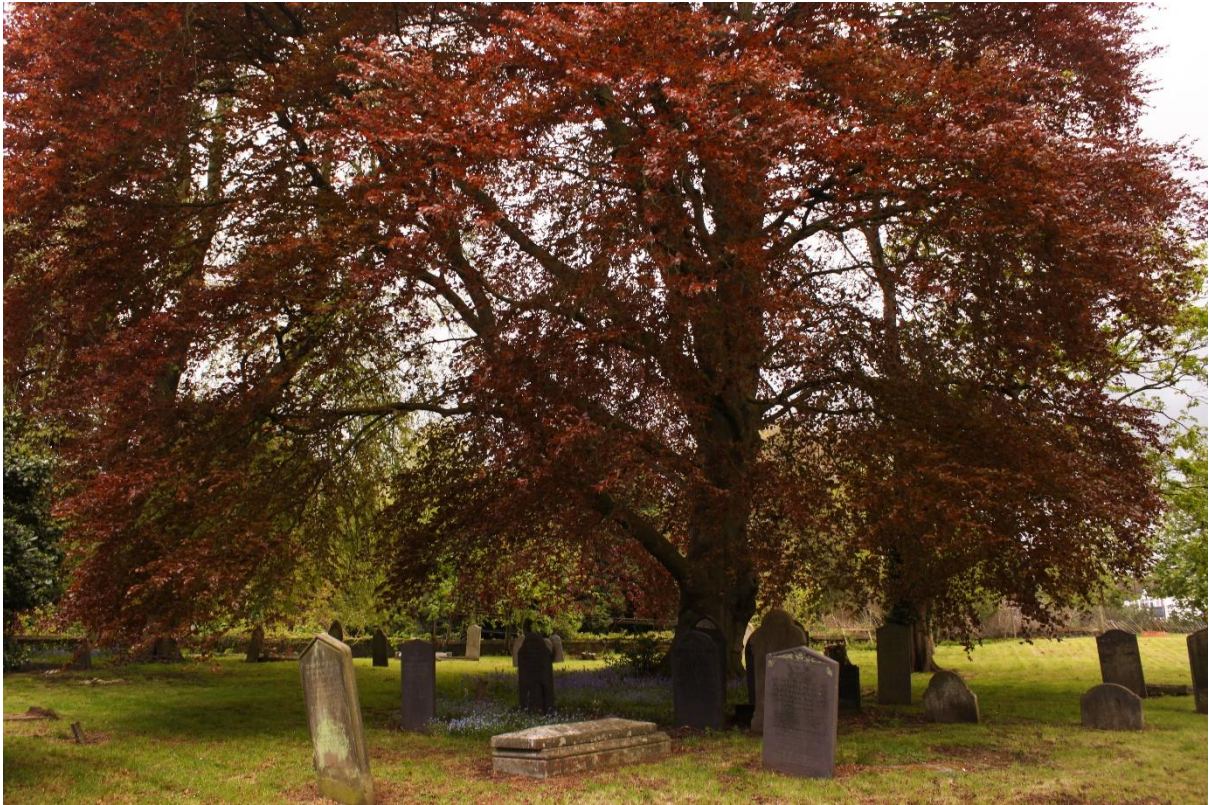


A tree "swallowing" a gravestone

Trees grow in a whole range of remarkable ways here, and it seems little can stop them once they've reached a certain size. At one point we see a tree that has begun “swallowing” a headstone, the trunk beginning to wrap itself around it. Derek talks about the “muscle” trees put on, and how he loves being able to look at a tree and understand immediately why it has grown the way it has.

Nor is grafting the only way that different types of trees can be combined: there are also hybrid species found here like the Lucombe Oak, a natural hybrid between the Turkey Oak (*Quercus cerris*) and the Cork Oak (*Quercus suber*), discovered in 1762 by William Lucombe.

The final story Derek shares is of the beech tree that crossed Coventry on wheels. On 15th October 1850, an already mature Copper Beech was relocated from its original position next to Warwick Road (opposite The Litten Tree pub) to make way for the quadrant to be built there.

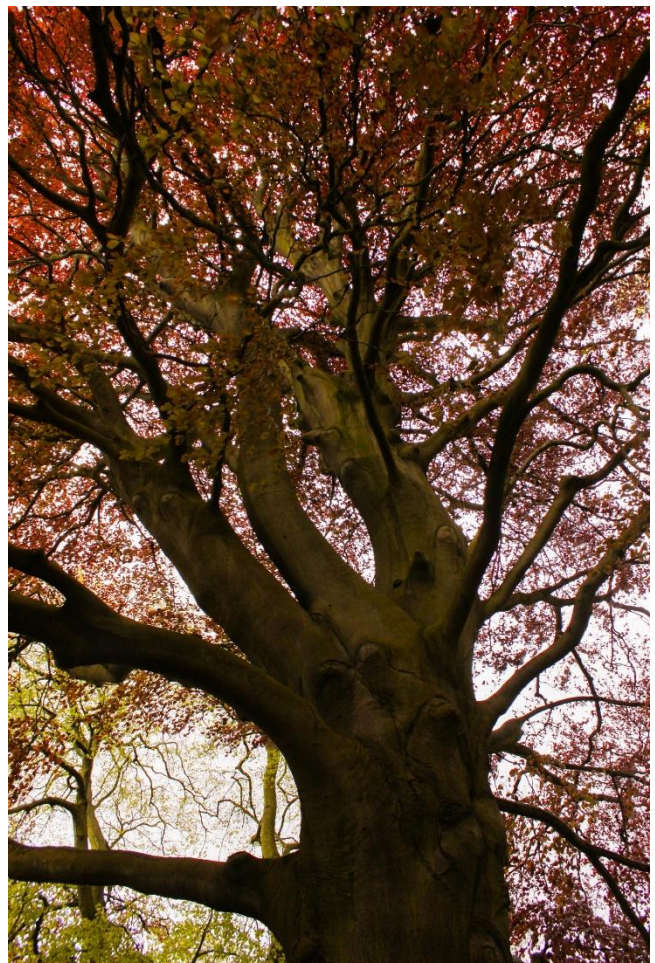


Above and below, the "tree on wheels" - Copper Beech (Fagus sylvatica purpurea)

[A newspaper article from the time](#) reports that the tree, which “could not be far short of a century old” and was “of splendid growth”, took workmen several weeks to excavate. It was transported in “a most perplexing operation”, which saw it carried upright on top of a carriage for several hours, with one carriage breaking down and several branches having to be removed to avoid damage to nearby houses along the way. Happily, the tree survived the hazardous journey and is now flourishing near to the Dissenter’s chapel.

For Derek, who gives up his time to care for the trees on a voluntary basis, nature and trees especially are a real passion.

“All this mindfulness that’s popular now – I’ve been doing it all my life, we just didn’t call it that then,” he laughs. “You can feel how peaceful it is here, can’t you? There’s something about trees that just makes you settle.



“This morning I was sitting in the middle of Piles Coppice, just me, recording the birdsong, and I’m quite happy like that on my own. You don’t need anything else.”

Observations on Being was open in the *London Road Cemetery: Paxton’s Arboretum* from 22 June until 15 August 2021.

Created by [Marshmallow Laser Feast](#), the project was commissioned by Coventry City of Culture Trust and produced in partnership with [York Mediale](#), working closely with the *Friends of London Road Cemetery*. It is presented in partnership with [Historic Coventry Trust](#), [Warwickshire Wildlife Trust](#) and [Coventry City Council](#).

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