

HISTORICAL AND NAMED TREES AT BURNHAM BEECHES

HELEN J READ

Over the years many of the characteristic and individual old trees at Burnham Beeches have been given names and this was particularly prevalent in Victorian times. Some trees have been associated with particular people or were planted as part of a ceremonial occasion. This article explains how these trees came to be of such an age and shape, and outlines notable examples both from the past and those that can be seen today.

INTRODUCTION

The reason why Burnham Beeches is so unique among English woodlands is because of the nature of its ancient pollarded trees. The trees, mostly between 450 and 550 years old, are as varied in form and character as people. The special shapes that we see today have been created by management of the trees by pollarding, followed by a period of neglect. Even before Victorian times, the trees had caught the imagination of visitors, and we have paintings and poems to illustrate this. When the Beeches was bought by the Corporation of London in 1880 and became a public open space, visitors could delight in these special trees set in an open aspect so that, for the most part, they were accessible to be explored and wondered at.

The act of pollarding a tree (repeatedly cutting it back to a point above the reach of grazing domestic animals) rejuvenates it. Beech trees have a normal life span of 250 or so years, but pollarded beeches can survive much longer. Pollarding also alters their shape, altering a beech from a tall and graceful tree to a much shorter, squatter and multi-stemmed shape. Where the tree has been cut back repeatedly the result is frequently a knobby and swollen region, from which the branches arise. These protuberances vary from one tree to another, depending on factors such as how and where the tree was cut and its genetic make up. This individuality adds character to the trees, which are easily distinguished from one another. It is not surprising that over the years some of these trees have gained names, which have been marked on maps, discussed in guidebooks and passed from one generation of people to another. The Beeches has also been visited by painters, musicians and poets,

some of whom were or became famous for their work. Trees favoured by these visitors have also gained the respect and admiration of the general public.

TREES ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICULAR PEOPLE

Thomas Gray's Tree

The poet who immortalised Stoke Poges in his 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' stayed regularly with his uncle at Cant's Hill in Burnham (now Burnham Beeches Hotel), and later with his mother when she moved to Stoke Poges in 1742. It is thought that he walked regularly between the two places, and he certainly wrote about the Beeches and the trees. One verse of the 'Elegy' probably describes the stream running through Burnham Beeches:

'There are the foot of yonder nodding Beech,
That wreaths its old fantastic roots on high,
His listless length at noon-tide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by,'

The position of this tree (Plate 1) has been marked in at least three different places on maps of the site, but the most likely is along Hawthorn Lane, close to where the stream crossed the road.

Jenny Lind's Tree

Known as the 'Swedish Nightingale', Jenny Lind was considered the greatest singer of her time, and first performed in London in 1847. She visited Burnham Beeches on many occasions, staying with Mr and Mrs Grote, who lived close to the Beeches

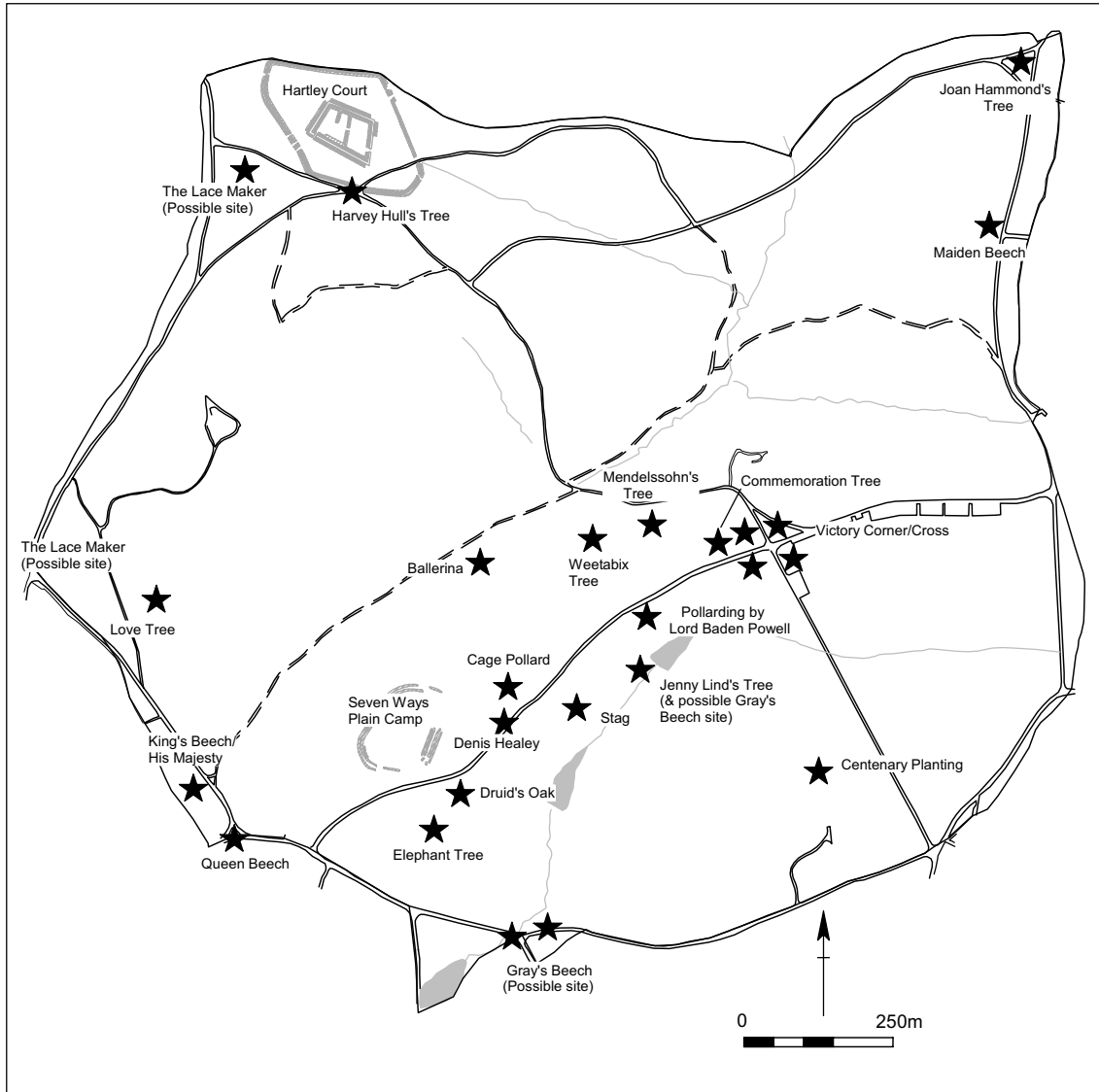


FIGURE 1 Plan showing the locations of the trees, where known

and entertained musical and literary people. A tree near the Upper Pond became Jenny's favourite (Plate 2). It was very large, measuring some 5.8m (19 feet) in diameter, with many exposed and bulbous roots on which it was easy to sit. Townley (1910) says that Mrs Ormiston Chant (a well known late 19th century lady) also sang under this tree during a picnic, when 36 guests lunched on its

extended roots. The stream was supposed to have run close to the tree until the pond was dammed. Unfortunately this tree has long since gone, but a new tree was planted and rededicated to Jenny Lind by the Swedish Ambassador, Leif Leifland, in 1987, whilst accompanied by a soprano. Some maps and guides indicate that this was also the tree described by Thomas Gray.



PLATE 1 Gray's Tree (*undated postcard*)

Felix Mendelssohn

Mr and Mrs Grote also entertained the composer Felix Mendelssohn. His favourite part of the Beeches was a mossy slope between Grenville Walk and Victoria Drive, at that time covered with pollarded trees. Many maps mark this area as Mendelssohn's slope, and it is thought that the music for Puck and Oberon from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' was inspired by this area. After Mendelssohn's untimely death, Mrs Grote erected a headstone in his memory but the headstone was removed, perhaps following a dispute with Lady Grenville, owner of the Beeches at the time (Townley 1909). There is no specific mention in the earlier maps or guides of any particular tree favoured by the composer, but a plaque was later erected on an old pollard tree. The tree blew over and the plaque was moved to one nearby until the storm of 1987, when this tree lost all its branches. In 2005 a new tree was planted by Mr Thomas Matussek, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany, and an explanatory plaque was erected to re-dedicate this area to the memory of Mendelssohn.

NAMED TREES MARKED ON MAPS OR DESCRIBED IN GUIDE BOOKS

Druids Oak

This is almost certainly the oldest tree alive in Burnham Beeches today. Estimates of its age vary between 400 and 1000 years – currently it is believed to be about 800. Photographs taken 100 years ago show that the tree has changed little in this time, other than losing some branches towards the top. There is no recorded mention of the reason for its name: perhaps it just seemed appropriate for a very old tree. Mary Theilgaard Watts describes seeing Druids Oak for the first time in 1971:

'... that particular common could fitly have been dedicated to pilgrims kneeling reverently, chanting, for in its center stood a PRESENCE. An oak it was, so firmly rooted in England, so ponderously unshakable, so full of good years – of good centuries – so smilingly presenting its leaves to yet another season...'

Today the tree has a girth of approximately 9.18m



PLATE 2 Jenny Lind's Tree (*after Townley 1909*)

and is protected by a fence to stop damage to the bark by people climbing in it.

His Majesty

'His Majesty' was described by Townley (1909) as having a girth of 26 feet (7.9m) at the narrowest point. This huge beech tree showed a classic pollard shape, with many large branches (Plate 3). The remains of it can still be found hidden among the undergrowth. The 'Kings Beech' marked on the map in the 1909 Guidebook is in the same location as 'His Majesty', and is presumably the same tree. Another guide book by Forbes (1898) mentions a big tree called the 'Queen Beech', which may or may not be the same as 'His Majesty'.

The Elephant Tree

Roughly 100m south of Druids Oak stood the 'Elephant Tree', supposed to resemble an elephant on its back with its legs and trunk in the air (Plate 4). 'A large sum was spent in trying to save this monster from destruction' (Townley 1909) and the

branches were held together with iron bands, rods and chains. Unfortunately this work was to no avail, the tree is no longer standing and there is no sign of it today. Similar iron bands and rods were used on many other trees in the Beeches at one time, and the remnants of some can still be seen.

The Maiden Beech

In the days when all the beech and oak trees were pollards (and the area of the Beeches was smaller, thus not including any areas of standard trees) this tree, standing roughly half way along Stewart's Drive, was perhaps the sole example of a non-pollarded tree. In one guidebook (Townley 1909) it is described as 'untouched by the axe'. It is marked clearly on several maps and is pictured in one of the early guidebooks.

The Lace Maker

This tree was reputed (Forbes 1898) to be one of an original three trees under which 'the old women used to sit and make lace to sell to passers by'. He



PLATE 3 The Elephant Tree (*undated postcard*)

attributes it to an area on Pumpkin Hill, within an old gravel pit. The guidebook by Le Sueur (1955) calls the tree the 'Buckinghamshire Lace Maker' and places it a little further north, at the junction of Morton's Drive and Park Lane, with a girth of 31 feet (9.4m). This locality is where Heath in 1878 says that the largest tree in Burnham Beeches stood, with a girth of 30 feet (9.1m), but Le Sueur says that this was no longer in existence in by 1955.

Oak Out of Beech

This tree stood on the opposite side of Lord Mayor's Drive to 'Druids Oak', very close to a pit and the earthworks of the Iron Age hill fort. In fact it was two trees: Townley (1909) describes it as 'where an oak is seen springing from the centre of a beech, the two interwoven as one tree'. Similar examples of trees growing within the trunks of pollards can be found today, but photographs show that this was a spectacular example.

Trees on Seven Ways Plain

In Victorian times, the part of the Beeches most visited was probably an area called Seven Ways

Plain. It was a clearing in the woods with many old trees, bisected by Lord Mayor's Drive, just up the hill from its junction with Hawthorn Lane, near Hawthorn Dell. The area was so called because of the number of paths that led from the area, and 'Druids Oak', and 'Oak out of Beech' stood on the 'plain'. The undergrowth was fairly low and the trees were clearly visible. Perhaps because this area was so popular – close to where the omnibus from the station stopped and to a range of tea rooms – many of the trees here have names in captions on photographs and post cards. Thus we find the 'Lion of the Plains', a tree with a large growth on the side of the trunk resembling a lion's head and mane; also 'The Twins', two pollards close together where one branch from the crown of each tree has fused together, and 'The Three Sisters'. Another illustration shows a rather mysterious and ominous looking tree called 'The Monkey Tree' because of a monkey-like face on the trunk. No other reference has been found to this tree, so perhaps it was a figment of someone's imagination!



PLATE 4 His Majesty (after Townley 1909)

TREES PLANTED TO COMMEMORATE EVENTS

Buckingham Commemoration Tree (or Commemoration Tree)

This tree was planted on 3 October 1883 by the Duke of Buckingham when he declared Burnham Beeches open to the public in perpetuity. The company dined afterwards at Eton College, and illustrations from the *London Illustrated News* show that it was a very wet, rainy day. Ironically this tree unfortunately died of drought stress in the dry years of the early 1990s, but the site was re-dedicated in 1991.

Victory Corner or Victory Avenue

Although not immediately obvious, this is another example in the Beeches of trees planted for celebration. Four beech trees were planted, one on each corner, at the junction of Lord Mayor's Drive, Halse Drive and Sir Henry Peek's Drive on 17 October 1919, by the Lord Mayor of London, Lord

Burnham, Lord Desborough and the Chairman of the Opens Spaces Committee. We now refer to this area as Victory Cross, though most visitors do not realise why.

Other Planted Trees

The Lord Mayor continued to plant a tree each year in October or November until 2006: these trees are marked with plaques. A few other trees have been planted ceremonially too. An area with several trees commemorated the centenary of the Corporation's ownership, and one of the past Superintendents (Harvey Hull) planted a tree, as did the soprano singer Joan Hammond (1912-1996) who lived on the edge of the Beeches. Today the Lord Mayor continues to visit each autumn, although young trees are now pollarded by him rather than being planted, and the practice of erecting plaques has been discontinued. In 2008 the Lord Mayor was accompanied by Lord Baden Powell to commemorate 100 years of scouting in Buckinghamshire and who also pollarded a tree.

CURRENT NAMES

Some of the names of the trees described above are still used in the Beeches today. However, despite the individual character many still have, only a very few trees have acquired new names and most of these are fairly unoriginal!

The Cage Pollard

Today this is the best known tree in the Beeches, along with ‘Druid’s Oak’. The ‘Cage Pollard’ had decayed over time in a way that left several struts instead of a solid trunk: it was possible to stand within it, as if in a cage. The tree featured as a backdrop to the 1992 feature film *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves*, and then was designated as one of the ‘Great British Trees’ to commemorate the Queen’s Golden Jubilee (Stokes 2002). Unfortunately part of the trunk disintegrated in March 2010 and the characteristic shape of the trunk has now been lost.

Other Named Trees Today

Trees other than the ‘Cage Pollard’ have provided a focus for scenes in feature films or television dramas. Thus there is the ‘Love Tree’ (from the film *First Knight*, with Richard Gere) and the ‘Weetabix

Trees’ (from a spoof advertisement making fun of the Robin Hood film). We also have the ‘Denis Healey’ tree (it has a ‘face’ on the side of the trunk with large bushy eyebrows) and a beautiful pollard (now sadly dead) between Upper and Middle Pond that was the centre-piece of a scene in the film *A Town Like Alice*, which local children on one school outing christened the ‘Stag Tree’, because it looks as if it has antlers. Perhaps the most individual is the ‘Ballerina’ – christened by a member of staff at the Beeches – which appears to stand on one leg. It is an old pollard that was once much larger, but the natural processes have decayed almost all the trunk and just a tiny remnant remains.

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