

News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

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Annual Lecture - Remarkable Trees of Ladbroke - Thomas Pakenham

Thomas Pakenham, a founder member and former Chairman of the Ladbroke Association, who also serves as President of the Irish Tree

Society and is famous for the book and television programmes entitled *Meetings with Remarkable Trees*, has just finished the manuscript of

a book on great trees of the world. But on 22 April he turned his thoughts and camera on more local specimens for the Ladbroke Association's annual lecture in St Peter's Church. He was in very fine form and managed to keep his packed congregation glued to their pews for over an hour.

Happily there are many fine trees in the Ladbroke area, thanks to the 'Ladbroke experiment' in which garden squares were built behind the houses, with the only access through back gardens. This was largely the creation of the architects and designers Thomas Allason and Thomas Allom – responsible respectively for the areas west and east of Ladbroke Grove.

The great variety of trees in front gardens was illustrated with spectacular colour slides, many of them taken the morning of the lecture, which gave rise to the lecturer being dubbed 'last minute dot com' by his family. Examples included a magnificent monkey puzzle thriving in Lansdowne Road, although in its native habitat, the Chilean Andes, it is now classified as an endangered species. The Chusan palm from North Vietnam, the only palm that can tolerate frost, has adapted well to life in W11 (fig. 2). Magnolias look their most resplendent in late April, and the slides did them full justice. Many are *soulangiana* hybrids, a cross of two Chinese species achieved by Capitaine Soulange-Bodin, a French officer



1. A magnificent plane tree in Ladbroke Square that has never been subjected to pruning



2. *Trachycarpus Chusan*, the only palm that can tolerate freezing temperatures, under snow in Elgin Crescent

defeated at Waterloo by Wellington – who remarked philosophically ‘if we can’t make war we can make plants’. Also worthy of praise were a cherry tree in full blossom in the snow (*Prunus subhirtella autumnalis*) and a gleditsia in Stanley Crescent. A Judas tree (*Cercis Siliquastrum*) flourishing under a plane tree in Ladbroke Square and a crab apple in Clarendon Road both in full flower were also commended. The giant wisteria which smothers the façade of 29½ Lansdowne Road was given special mention, for the purpose of the lecture being classified as a tree under the definition of ‘a plant capable of sustaining itself on a trunk three metres high’.

Another giant is the plane on the corner of Lansdowne Road and Ladbroke Road (fig. 3). Plant combinations were also recommended, illustrated by a rose scrambling through a tree of heaven in Elgin Crescent.

It was in order to save street trees that the Ladbroke Association was founded in 1969. Thirty-two years ago the avenue of planes along the southern end of Ladbroke Grove was under sentence of felling from the Council. Today another fate

threatens them: vicious pruning, which leaves their branches like mutilated limbs and regrowth resembling lavatory brushes. This dire practice, undertaken under the auspices of the Council, has been promoted by insurance companies who claim, often erroneously, that the root system of large trees is causing subsidence in houses. Trees that had been subjected to such ‘surgery’ produce even more foliage, while the wounds inflicted make them vulnerable to rot and disease.

The few planes that survive unpruned are almost all in the private communal gardens of Ladbroke. According to Henrietta Phipps, ‘one of the most beautiful trees in London, if not the world’ is a plane in Ladbroke Square; its long smooth trunk, free of protuberances, has never known the surgeon’s scalpel (fig. 1). Other fine examples include one in Stanley Crescent leaning out into the street, that on St John’s Gardens in the Clarendon/Lansdowne garden and the magnificent sweep of planes on the western perimeter path of Ladbroke Square.

Street trees, planted for the benefit of all by the Council, should be chosen with care. Gradually the classic landscape trees of the original planting, including planes, ashes, elms (of



3. The largest tree in any front garden: the plane on the corner of Lansdowne Road and Ladbroke Road

which very few are left) and robinias, named after Jean Robin, gardener to Louis XIII, are being replaced by other species. Ideally, to complement the architectural unity of the Ladbroke Estate, the same species should be planted on either side of a street, but this is not always Council policy, and the streetscape suffers from haphazard plantings. There have, however, been some interesting single plantings, including a liquidambar (American sweet gum) in Portobello Road, and an Asiatic white-barked birch with exquisite catkins.

Certain trees were particularly commended. There is a rare example of the Montpelier maple (*Acer monspessulanum*) in Clarendon Road, and a Turkish hazel (*corylus colurna*) with its upright habit in Lansdowne Road. Also recommended was the Raywood ash (*Fraxinus oxycarpa* Raywood) which has wonderful autumn colour. Unsuitable street trees include the Chinese elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*), red horse chestnuts and the *Zelkova serrata*, which, while delightful, is a bad shape for a street tree and needs heavy pruning. Ginkgos, which date from before the time of the dinosaurs and before the Alps were formed, are ideal city trees, very resistant to disease and fungus.

Pruning was another topic on which the lecturer waxed passionately. If a tree has its lower branches removed while still young it forms a far better shape, a lesson that it would be good for the Council to learn. The common lime, a hybrid between two native trees, in spite of the beauty of its green unfolding leaf, was often pruned so badly that it grew into horrible shapes. It also has the unfortunate habit of dropping a black sticky substance, greenfly shit, onto pavements and cars below.

Council planting policy might be affected by global warming, and our lecturer particularly commended the

the Chusan palms and cordylines from New Zealand planted in the triangular bed on Kensington Park Road. As the temperature rises, tropical plants might become a standard feature in Ladbroke.

Finally Thomas Pakenham turned to the trees in communal gardens. Some of the hawthorns, elders and yews may predate the building of the estate and be survivors of the of early 19th-century hedgerows. Some champion trees deserved special mention: the large wych elm in the Lansdowne/Elgin Garden is one of the very few to have survived the scourge of Dutch elm disease. This garden is fortunate in its fruit trees: including damsons, a medlar, hazels, chestnuts and walnut; its mulberry was the gift of the Ladbroke Association to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977.

The narrow leaved ash in Stanley Crescent is one of the largest in Great Britain; other fine specimen are in the Montpelier garden.

Ladbroke Square boasts some unusual hybrids of Turkey and cork oak, and an Atlantic cedar, one of the few conifers in the Estate. A tulip tree had replaced a black poplar; and a spectacularly aged oak has been propped up for posterity.

Looking to the future, he urged garden committees to be bold in their planting and, among the laburnums, mulberries and weeping willows, add some more exotic trees: for instance the giant sequoia (*sequoiadendron giganteum*) or the African baobab. Charming, erudite, provocative, at all times entertaining, Thomas Pakenham fired his audience with enthusiasm and, even if there is no space for a baobab in the front garden, we can look forward to admiring such miracles of nature in his new book, *Remarkable Trees of the World*, to be published in August.



4. Ladbroke Terrace after very brutal and visually unacceptable tree surgery where it may take some years for the trees to recover their former grandeur.

TREES IN LADBROKE TERRACE

Cllr David Champion

Was I alone in complaining bitterly to the Council about the way that the previously lovely rows of tree in Ladbroke Terrace, between Ladbroke Road and Ladbroke Square, had been brutally savaged (fig. 4) by the contractors undertaking what should have been purely annual routine pruning - in effect they removed virtually every twig and leaf from most of the fine trees with the result that it may now be years before they are restored to their original grandeur.

This is not the first time that I have had to make a vociferous complaint about excessive butchery.

One reason for the excessive stripping is to comply with the requirements of insurance companies representing the owners of adjacent properties who will demand complete tree removal if they can prove any damage to house foundations following a landmark case more recently in Westminster that was fought right up to the Lords. To combat this sort of threat the Council needs to be equally well represented in order to resist removal where the need cannot adequately be proved.

Another possible reason put forward for such excessive pruning is to increase the time interval between successive maintenance work being needed and therefore lessen the cost over a period of years. If this was to be the excuse then it totally ignores the fact that trees are one of the Borough's most cherished possessions and ought not to be dealt with in this way - the rule ought to be 'little and often' even though this may well be more expensive in the long term. What price amenity?

CONVERSION OF WESTBOURNE GROVE CHAPEL

Rachel Kelly

Is this the wrath of God? In March, the twenty metre-high north wall of the Westbourne Grove Baptist Chapel crashed to the ground while workmen were converting the building into luxury flats. Chunks of masonry rained down around astonished shoppers sipping their lattes in the cafés of Westbourne Grove, and scaffolding poles smashed into the wall of a neighbouring flat, leaving a hole measuring four by five metres.

The irony was not lost on locals. Clearly, they muttered, this is some kind of divine retribution for turn-



5. Westbourne Grove Baptist Chapel was designed by C. G. Searle in the Early English gothic style and opened in 1853. Originally its two octagonal towers on the west façade were topped with small spires but they were destroyed in World War II

ing what was once a church open to the poor and needy into fourteen flats valued between £500,000 and £1.3 million. St Francis would surely be spinning in his grave.

Originally, the developer, Manhattan Loft Corporation (MLC), was planning to demolish the building. But local residents and the Pembridge Association were so energetic in their objections that Westminster Council was forced to reconsider its initial recommendations and the exterior walls of the Chapel were saved. In addition to eleven flats, there will be two retail units, as well as a meeting hall for the church community. The main external change will be penthouse flats with the large windows at the top of the building, creating the effect of a glass roof.

Since the collapse of the wall the developers have promised to rebuild the collapsed wall exactly as it was originally. Despite such trials, we should welcome the trend to turn redundant buildings into new living spaces. Whereas once factories, offices, schools and churches would have been demolished, now we are saving part of our architectural her-

itage for new use. Eleven apartments and two retail units will be created. Schemes such as the Westbourne Grove Chapel provide space and light and individual design rather than identical rabbit hutches, says Harry Handlesman from the MLC. Potential buyers can choose six architects to work with, including Seth Stein. It may have lost its north wall, but at least Westbourne Grove Chapel still has its façade.

GOLDEN JUBILEE TREES

The Ladbroke Association is proposing to offer £100 to each garden square for the purchase of a tree or bench to commemorate Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee Year. 25 years ago the Association made similar grants in the Silver Jubilee Year.

NOTTING HILL LIBRARY Closure Still Threatened

Flora Fraser

No 1 Pembridge Square, an imposing house on the corner of Pembridge Villas, excited attention when it was built in the 1860s. To-

day its exterior no longer dazzles. The upper floors have long been converted for social housing. A large sign at ground floor level proclaiming the presence of Notting Hill's local library - since 1953 - is almost lost to view behind overgrown trees in the front garden.

Looking closer, the building has all the hallmarks of a purposeful local amenity. Mothers are pulling push-chairs and children up the steep steps. Older library-goers are gingerly descending. Inside the airy ground floor rooms there's a queue for the two librarians. The pair of computers are in use. So are the newspapers over in the small reference section. Friday morning story-time in the children's library is over-subscribed.

Notting Hill Library is the very model of a modern local library. The librarians - Andrew Harvey and Emma Marsh - are helpful, knowledgeable and kind. They know a great many of the borrowers by name. Is there more to ask?

Unfortunately the Pembridge Library, is still under threat of possible closure next April. Last year, the Council, faced with a depleted government grant made the decision to cut £150,000 a year off its libraries' budget. Notting Hill Library costs exactly that sum to run per annum so, faced with declining book issues there, they determined to shut it. The strength of local protest, together with the strong support of the Ward Councillors, won a two year reprieve. To dampen joy unconfined, the opening hours were cut to 28 hours a week.

The original protestors, now the Friends of Notting Hill Library, have sponsored a children's short story award and successful 'Evenings with...' to raise the library's profile. News that the council is installing a wheelchair lift up those steep steps and an automatic door at the top might make victory next



6. The Notting Hill Library in Pembridge Square still threatened with possible closure.

April appear certain. But the ways of councils - and the budgetary pressures on them - are mysterious. 'Increased library usage' may be the key to keeping Pembridge Library open. Borrow some books - contact Andrew Harvey for opening hours on 0207 229 8574 - and help to send loans skywards! Libraries matter.

ANNUAL GARDEN WALK

Henrietta Phipps led an enthusiastic group of Members around three Ladbroke gardens on 22 May.

She started in the southern Clarendon/Lansdowne garden, one of the earliest to be laid out, which still preserves its central bed, perimeter path and the north-south path that bisected the grass (the east-west path has gone). This garden is remarkable for its magnificent plane trees, now some 150 years old and, unlike so many of the planes that once shaded the roads, still with their full canopies of leaves.

The layout of the second garden, the immaculately maintained northern Clarendon/Lansdowne, has been radically altered. A central shrubbery has been replaced by a collection of birch trees, which creates an open, park-like space but provides less opportunity for children to play hide and seek.

The group ended their walk at the Blenheim/Elgin garden. This is a long narrow strip of land divided into many contrasting 'spaces' with plenty of seats for the sedentary as well as play spaces and bike routes for children. Children's camps are encouraged provided plants and trees are not harmed. Trees are clearly labelled with their species and variety; a detail that other gardens might follow. Martin and Jane Evans generously provided refreshments and for once this summer the sun shone.

PALMED OFF, OR PALM COURT

Gloria Mundi

There are nearly 4,000 members of the *Palmae* family, including such exotics as the Bottle Palm, the Christmas Palm, the Fishtail Palm and the fabulous Royal Palm; all are indelibly associated with temperate climes - indeed, as one authoritative book on the subject says, 'no other plant is so redolent of the tropics'.

Note that last word, 'tropics'; is there any mention of the palm being redolent of island beds in London's balmy West Eleven? Is *palmae ladbrokeia* mentioned in any catalogue, or the resort of Notting-on-Sea extolled in any guide book? Yet, all across our balmy, *tropicus in urbe* district, the island beds on

larger roads are inexplicably sprouting several different species of stunted spiky plants that might be related to the noble palm family, but which honestly look more like lavatory brushes, long past their sell-by dates - a quick head count found, within two square miles, six raised beds hosting, between them, fourteen of these tortured tree things, many of them at least two metres high.

What is going on here? In days gone by, these same island beds were models of municipal planting, filled as they were with seasonal bedding plants, carefully chosen for their colour and harmonious form; they were a pleasure to look at, and marked the seasons with charm. But now frankly - we've been palmed off.

The spiky ones began to appear in a slow and stealthy manner. At first it was just a single specimen - a palm pilot one might say, landing like a triumphant exclamation mark in the centre of a bed. Then, almost under cover of darkness, like Canada geese, another one would alight, and make the bed its own, and before we knew it, there might be three or even four lowering monsters, bestriding the cowering wallflowers or pansies beneath them. The cuckoos of the bedding world, these foreign incomers throw out all around them - several beds now sport nothing else other than bare earth.

It is whispered that some expert arborialists even quite approve of these mutants, citing arguments about changing climates and water shortages - but frankly that just doesn't wash - these things are brash, they are much too tall, and what's worst of all, they are just very ugly, like a row of old black umbrellas with broken spokes.

Take the argument to its logical conclusion: are the planes, birches, and gingkos on our pavements to be replaced with breadfruit, rubber and banyan trees? And will the seasonal

