Tree Walks

in Alexandra Park, Hastings

FRIENDS OF ALEXANDRA PARK

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Our Jewel in the Crown -

Alexandra Park

For those who live close by, it is easy to forget that Alexandra Park is one of the most important public parks in Britain, both for its history and in particular for the scale of its collection of rare trees.

The lower part of the valley, nearer the town centre, was gardened from the 1830s by a local businessman, Mr Shirley, and known as 'Shirley's Ponds'. This land was obtained by the Hastings Corporation in 1859 and named St Andrews Gardens in 1864. A decade later, the Corporation approached Robert Marnock, a Scotsman who had largely retired as one of the country's most influential landscape architects, to design a much bigger garden, stretching as far as the existing reservoirs at Buckshole and Shornden and proportionate to Hastings' ambitions at the time as a leading seaside resort. The new park was opened in 1882 by Prince Edward and Princess Alexandra. Marnock's design incorporated the winding walks and shrubberies we can see today, and also an arboretum with more than a thousand labelled trees, laid out family by family.

Some trees from this original vision are still going strong, but the Park has been fortunate to enjoy several periods during which its plantings were enriched, resulting in the varied, robust tree collection we enjoy today. In 1935, an ambitious new arboretum with 220 trees was planted in Thorpe's Wood, below Newgate Road in Bohemia; this has been enhanced since 2017. In the 1950s and 1960s, a Mr Cassidy was Parks Superintendent and sourced many unusual plants. After the damage to the Park in the 'Great Storm' of October 1987, Hastings' Tree Officer John Tucker planted an imaginative range of replacements. Since 2015, Hastings Borough Council and the Friends of Alexandra Park have enthusiastically supported the acquisition of many particularly unusual trees which, while not featured individually in these Tree Walks, may provide the Park's future champions.

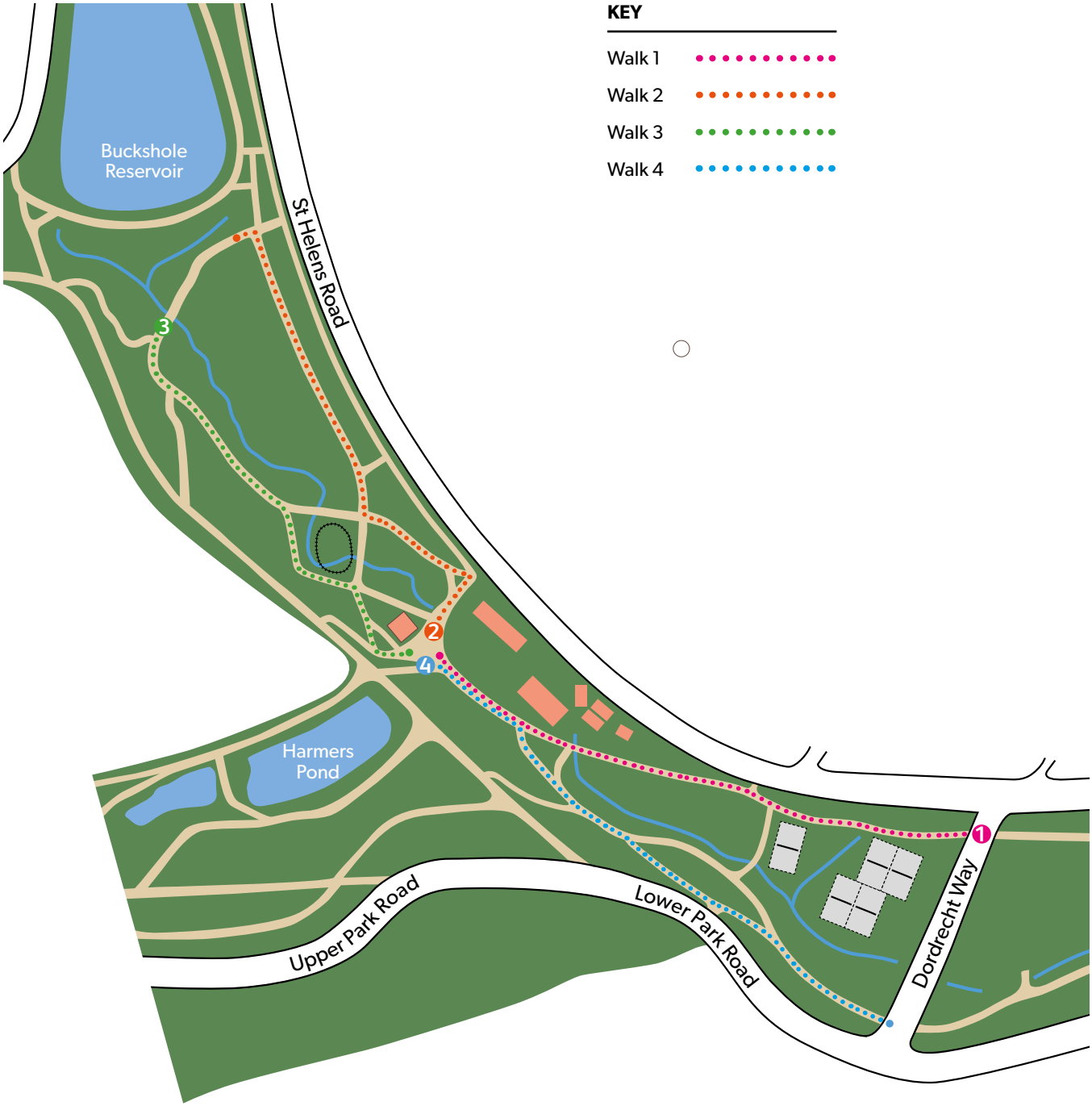
A 'champion tree' is the largest or tallest of its kind; in 2024, Alexandra Park had 77 county champions for East Sussex and nine champions for the whole of Britain and Ireland – more than any other public park in England. Five of these national champions are featured in these Tree Walks; the others, also labelled in 2024, being:

- a narrowly spire-shaped cypress, *Thuja plicata* 'Pyramidalis', which grows halfway along the straight avenue through Shornden Woods, on the north side
- a horse chestnut with white-marked leaves, *Aesculus hippocastanum* 'Variegata', which grows by the iron footbridge west of the Alexandra Park Cafe as a relic of Marnock's chestnut collection here, and which now has green leaves in the crown and white leaves clustering on the trunk
- a weeping variant of American lime, T*ilia americana* 'Pendula', by the upper path south of the Arts in the Park building – a relic of Marnock's lime collection
- another lime nearby, part of the same collection, with yellow rather than reddish twigs, *Tilia platyphyllos* 'Aurea', which is tucked behind the railings of the playground.

It would have been easy to plant the Park with a few dozen common and easy-to-source trees, like so many other public spaces across Britain. The benefits of planting 400 different kinds include the opportunity to conserve species which are threatened in their native habits, and the creation of a landscape which will be proof, in parts at least, against climate change and new pests and diseases. A diversely planted garden will also be more beautiful, year-round, as strange flowers and foliage catch the eye, and will entice the people who use it to really look at trees, and to value them more.

These Tree Walks cover only one part of Alexandra Park, which happens to be easily accessible and where the rare trees can be admired in close order; for the adventurous, there is plenty more to discover and enjoy in the rest of the garden. The Walks begin at the north-west gate (St Helens Road side) from Dordrecht Way and cover 1.7km of gently undulating surfaced paths, ending at the south-west gate (Park Road side) to Dordrecht Way. All the trees featured in it have been labelled, but over the years these inevitably fall off, get vandalised, or are obscured by ivy. (Remember, too, that some of the trees on these Walks may also be lost as the years pass.) For those preferring a shorter trail, the Walks can be divided into four sections, each ending or beginning at the Pump House Cafe, where toilet facilities are available. Bus service 29 runs half-hourly (hourly on Sundays) from Hastings rail station and from Tenterden to bus-stops on St Helens Road adjoining Dordrecht Way and the start of these Walks.

Tree Walks Map



Tree Walk 1

From Dordrecht Way at its junction with St Helens Road, take the path leading west (with St Helens Road on your right). The first labelled tree, in the shrub border on your right, is a **Single-leaved Ash,** *Fraxinus excelsior* Diversifolia Group. It was planted in 1981 and has so far withstood Chalara Ash Dieback which has killed many wild ash trees in Britain. This is a 'sport' of native ash and instead of nine to 13 leaflets has just one, so in summer it can confuse even people who really know their trees. But it is also a beautiful tree, with branches like a silver chandelier in winter.

Immediately before the stream bridge, you can detour left into the little lawn between the hard court and the stream. The first tree you will see is a **Lace-bark Pine,** *Pinus bungeana*, planted by John Tucker in the late 1990s. As it gets older, this Chinese conifer's bark flakes in white and grey, sometimes with green or bluish tints, but we will have to wait a few decades longer for this develop. It is one of rather few pine species to carry its needles in bunches of three, rather than two or five.

Towards the back of this lawn is a group of white-barked gum-trees. The biggest central tree, which is also the oldest (planted 1974) is a rare kind, the **Jounama Snow Gum,** *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *debeuzevillei*, from the Jounama Peaks in Australia's New South Wales. The white bark prevents the cambium from overheating in strong sun, and its fallen flakes naturally fuel forest fires which kill rival trees but give room for the next generation of eucalyptus seedlings to germinate.

Returning to the surfaced path, continue past the tennis courts and the Rose Garden. In the shrub border on your right grows one of the best example in Britain of a **Golden Irish Yew,** *Taxus baccata* 'Standishii'. This has neat turrets of eye-catching bronzy-yellow foliage, and you will also see the crimson berries or 'arils' which are only carried by female specimens.

In the same shrubbery, the next large shrub is a **Variegated Cornelian Cherry,** *Cornus mas* 'Variegata'. This Mediterranean relative of the native Dogwood was once grown for its edible red 'cherries', but 'Variegata' was selected for its leaves' showy, white margins. Because the white bits of the leaves have no chlorophyll, these branches grow slower than the green reversions, which have to be pruned out. In late winter, the little yellow flowers are also a delight. Tear a leaf carefully in half and threads of elastic in the veins will hold the lower half suspended.

The big tree after this is a **Maidenhair Tree,** *Ginkgo biloba*. From its great size, this must have been one of the first trees to be planted in this part of the park; in its native China, it can live for a thousand years. The Ginkgo is the most 'primitive' tree we can grow, although it has all the features we associate with more recently evolved species; it was widespread in the Jurassic, but is now almost extinct in the wild. As with yews, each Ginkgo is either male or female; this one is female and produces yellow 'plums' in autumn. When fresh these can be eaten, but they smell of dog excrement as they rot. For this reason, most planted Ginkgos are male.

In this same shrubbery, immediately opposite the west hedge of the Peace Garden, are a close-set slender pair of **Eucryphias,** *Eucryphia* x *nymansensis* 'Nymansay'. This form arose at Nymans garden near Crawley around 1915 as a hybrid between two species from the Andes mountains of southern Chile. The evergreen leaves have three leaflets, somewhat like a giant clover, and the poppy-like white flowers cover the crown in August. The mountains where its parents grow wild are extremely wet, so this tree flowers best during dull, damp summers.

Just over the paling fence of 'Burnside' behind this shrubbery is a **Campbell's Magnolia,** *Magnolia campbellii* Alba Group. It is rare to see one of these giant-leaved tree magnolias from the Himalayas in a public park, let alone a small private garden, because they can take 30 years to start flowering, but 'Burnside' used to be the home of Parks Superintendent Mr Cassidy in the mid 20th century. Mr Cassidy knew that the wait was going to be worth it: the flowers open in March and resemble a great flock of white doves settled in the crown, provided wind or frost don't spoil them. Later in the year, look out too for the seed-heads which are like knobbly, crimson gherkins.

At the iron bridge, on the left, is a group of **Chusan Palms,** *Trachycarpus fortunei*. This fan-leaved palm from the forests of southern China is the toughest sort we can grow and was planted here to create a sub-tropical

ambience when winters were much colder than now. The fibres insulating the trunk are the remains of old leaf-stalks, and were woven in China into raincoats. Nowadays, gardeners have the choice of many somewhat tenderer palm species; in this same bed you will see *Chamaerops humilis* from the Mediterranean, also with fan-leaves but with shark-tooth spines along the leaf-stalk, and *Jubaea chilensis* from the southern Andes, with feather-like leaves ultimately eight metres long. This palm grows very slowly and it will be several decades before we can admire its smooth, grey cathedral column of a bole.

Continue over the iron bridge and keep right. On the right, the tallest tree in this border is a **Cider Gum,** *Eucalyptus gunnii*. This Tasmanian tree is very hardy and grows fast: planted as recently as 1988, ours is already 27m tall. The aromatic oils in the greyish foliage smell a little like cider.

Opposite this, at the foot of the wooded bank, is one of three tall old specimens of **Western Red Cedar,** *Thuja plicata*. One of the giant conifers of the American north-west, it can live for a thousand years; like all the disparate trees that lumber-merchants called 'cedar' it produces an excellent, durable and aromatic timber. In hot weather, the tree cools itself by evaporating pineapple-scented volatile oils from its glossy sprays of foliage, but it dislikes drought and is very unlikely to reach its full lifespan in Hastings: you may see that this one has a dead top, after retrenching to conserve resources in recent summers.

The path now takes you to the Pump House Cafe, where toilet facilities are available.

Tree Walk 2

Facing the Pump House, turn sharp right. At the entrance to the depot and Greenhouse stands an old **Tulip Tree,** *Liriodendron tulipifera*. This is one of numerous trees from the eastern United States which thrive in Britain; in autumn the leaves turn an exotically brilliant yellow. Their unique shape slightly resembles a tulip's outline, but the tree gains its name from its flowers which are even more tulip-like, but greeny-yellow and quite hard to spot among the foliage in June.

Follow the path towards St Helens Road and bear left. On the right, the first tree next to St Helens Road is a **Silver Lime,** *Tilia tomentosa*. This was planted in 1990 as a replacement for a belt of Austrian Pines established by Marnock to shelter the new park from adjacent open farmland, and which all blew down in the violent storms of October 1987 and January 1990. Silver Lime comes from southern Europe and in hot dry weather its leaf-stalks twist so that the underside of the leaf turns outwards; this face is coated in silvery light-trapping hairs which limit water loss and creates a delightful two-coloured crown.

A little further on, also to the right of the path, is a young **Tree of Heaven,** *Ailanthus altissima*. It is Chinese, but is named after an Indonesia ally, 'the tree that reaches heaven'. Each leaflet of its long leaves has a tooth at the base which contains a nectary, which feeds ants and encourages them to patrol the canopy and deter parasitic insects. In most of Europe, the sale of Tree of Heaven is banned because it can naturalise aggressively by suckering, but this tree is harmless for now because Hastings' summers are too cool for it to run wild, and any suckers in the grass get mown.

By the start of the next path on the left and opposite the miniature railway station stands a **Crimean Lime,** *Tilia x euchlora*. As with the Silver Lime, the leaves are heart-shaped (and characteristically lop-sided at the base, like a human heart), but in this tree they are glossy green. In autumn, they turn butter-yellow one by one. Despite its name, this a garden tree, which has never been re-found in the Crimea or anywhere else. It always grows a tangle of branches above the straight trunk, with drooping smaller branches – making an excellent tree to shelter under in the rain.

Follow the uphill path, with St Helens Road to your right. On your left, the tall pine with the long straight bole and the rugged purplish bark is a **Monterey Pine,** *Pinus radiata*. This is probably a survivor of the original plantings in this part of the park, c.1880; this lawn was designed by Marnock as a pinetum or conifer collection. It comes from California and hangs onto its fist-sized cones until the heat of a forest fire opens them - or not, in this case. The horizontal scars up the trunk mark the point where the tree stopped growth for the winter when it was young, so you can see how fast it grew. The slender needles come in bunches of three.

Next to this on the lawn is a younger pine, **Weymouth Pine,** *Pinus strobus*. It was planted in 1988 and represents a different section of the genus, with needles in fives and hanging banana-shaped cones. It is a denizen of the mountain forests of the eastern United States and, when it was first found by Europeans, produced the best and longest ship masts they knew; its growth in Britain is slower.

A third pine on the lawn left of the path is a **Himalayan Pine,** *Pinus wallichiana*. An Old World ally of the Weymouth Pine, this has longer, drooping needles and rather bigger cones. This specimen was planted around the middle of the 20th century.

On the right here (just past the short straight path to St Helens Road) is a **Bristlecone Pine,** *Pinus aristata*, which grows in harsh, dry, alpine conditions in California. A close ally, *P. longaeva*, can live for more than 5000 years and is widely considered to be the world's longest-living plant; ours is a mere stripling, established in 1993. The cones have little bristles between each scale, and the needles (in fives) are spotted with white resin, making this undeniably scruffy little tree look as if it has a bad case of dandruff.

Further along on the right, where the path comes close to St Helens Road, is a flame-shaped deciduous tree, the **Golden Dawyck Beech,** *Fagus sylvatica* 'Dawyck Gold'. It was planted in 1990 and is an ornamental form of the native beech created by breeding two 'sports': one, arising at Dawyck in Scotland in Victorian times, with erect branches, the other with lemon-yellow young leaves that mature to fresh green.

Next to this, with a contrastingly spreading habit, is a **Japanese flowering cherry,** *Prunus* 'Shirofugen'. This is one of many kinds which were bred in old Japan and were often associated with a single temple garden, and which were popularised in Europe by a quite local gardener from Benenden, Collingwood 'Cherry Ingram' (1880-1981). 'Shirofugen' is one of the last of the group to blossom, around the start of May, and its white many-petalled flowers hang on long stalks from red buds among the purplish unfolding leaves, then fade to soft pink. A second season of glory comes in November as the leaves go amber and scarlet.

Opposite is a **Sessile Oak,** *Quercus petraea*. This oak carries 'sessile' acorns which sit on the twigs, without the long 'peduncles' or stalks which are feature of the common Pedunculate or English Oak (*Q. robur*). It can be found locally growing wild in woods on lighter soils and is every bit as handsome and long-living as the Pedunculate Oak, but is planted much less. This one is, however, a planted specimen dating from the mid 20th century.

On the open lawn to the left after this are three **Stone Pines,** *Pinus pinea*. With its umbrella-shaped canopy, this pine is a familiar landscape feature around the Mediterranean and produces the edible pine nut. Its needles come in pairs. Like many trees, it grows faster in youth than many people expect: these ones date from 1988.

To the right of the path, the majority of the pines are **Austrian Pines,** *Pinus nigra* subsp. *nigra*. This was the species chosen by Marnock for the Park's original boundary shelterbelt and whose loss in 1987 the current generation replaces.

On the left here is the closest to the surfaced paths of several examples in the pinetum of **Atlas Cedar,** *Cedrus atlantica*. This is the only exclusively African tree we shall meet on this walk; it grows wild in the high Atlas Mountains and can be distinguished from its Lebanese ally (*C. libani*) by its generally less wide-spreading and tabular branches in maturity. This specimen dates from the mid 20th century.

Next on the left is another cedar, the **Deodar,** *Cedrus deodara*. Growing near the Atlas Cedar and of about the same age, it can be distinguished by its fresher green foliage and way the shoot-tips droop. On these young shoots the needles are carried singly but on older wood the true cedars carry them in 'rosettes' of up to 60. Theirs is the only genus of conifer to survive only in the west Eurasian biome, and the Deodar is the easternmost representative, originating in the western Himalaya.

The final conifer on the lawn to the left is a **Golden Monterey Cypress,** *Cupressus macrocarpa* 'Donard Gold'. Like the Monterey Pine which we saw at the start of the pinetum, this is endemic to coastal California, and its ability to survive salt-laden winds has made it a favourite in towns like Hastings. Planted away from the sea, as here, it grows very fast: this is a survivor of the campaign 'Plant a Tree in '73' and is a candidate national champion tree. The wild species has dark green foliage; this yellowish seedling was selected at the Donard nursery in Northern Ireland.

Rather than continuing uphill to Buckshole Reservoir, take the path to the left. On your right here is a group of various cultivars of **Yew,** *Taxus baccata*, which were planted by Marnock around 1880 as one of his signature shrubbery clumps (they have now grown bigger than he would have envisaged). Two of these cultivars can be named; both are UK champion trees. By the path, 'Adpressa' has needles only half the usual length, giving the foliage a fluffier aspect. Behind, at the top, 'Neidpathensis' is a scion of an old yew that still grows at Neidpath Castle in Scotland and has branches that make erect turrets. It is less striking in this respect than the Irish Yew ('Fastigiata'), and only a few surviving plantings are known.

Continue down the path, cross the stream on the iron footbridge, and turn left.

Tree Walk 3

This next Walk begins under some of the oldest trees in the Park: Pedunculate Oaks (*Quercus robur*) which survive from the ancient woodland that stool here when the area was imparked in 1876. The largest of these, now dead and very hollow, has been converted into an environmental sculpture by chainsaw artist Joc Hare.

On the left opposite the Chalybeate Well, the slender conifer near the stream is a **Japanese Red Cedar,** *Cryptomeria japonica*. It was planted in the mid 20th century and its spongy reddish bark reveals its allegiance to the giant redwoods of California. But this example has found the soil at this spot too waterlogged to become a real giant.

Next to this is a **Swamp Cypress,** *Taxodium distichum*. It is the same age as the Cryptomeria but better adapted to the wet here, coming as it does from the Florida Everglades and similar habits in the south-eastern United States. It is one of few deciduous conifers that we can grow, and its tiny needles turn red-brown and drop near the end of the year.

Continue along the main lower path with the stream to your left. On the bank to the stream is a **London Plane,** *Platanus* x *hispanica* 'Pyramidalis'. This must have been one of the first trees planted in this part of the park, but is still a comparative youngster: both the London Plane's parents, from the Aegean and from the eastern United States, are perhaps the largest and longest-lived trees in their local area. The selection 'Pyramidalis' lacks the prettily-coloured flaking bark of most London Planes, and the finger-like lobes to its leaves are shallower. The nurseryman who first sold must have hoped that it would at least maintain a neat, pyramidal shape; he would have been disappointed.

Next on the left is one of the London Plane's wild hybrids, the **Oriental Plane,** *Platanus orientalis*. This is sometimes a tree you can smell before seeing: the air under it is sweetly aromatic on hot days. Its leaves are fresher green than the London Plane's, and their snowflake shapes slice up the sun-shafts that penetrate the canopy. In winter too it is a beautiful tree, with its twisting limbs clad in fine flakes of beige and cream.

Just after this on the left is a young **Willow Oak,** *Quercus phellos*. You are now entering the part of the Park that Marnock envisaged as an oak collection or 'quercetum', and this tree was raised by John Tucker from a much older Willow Oak which blew down in the 1987 'hurricane'. Oaks are a large and diverse group whose leaves come in all shapes but which all carry acorns. The Willow Oak, from the eastern United States, has slender unlobed leaves a bit like a willow's, and its tiny acorns take two years to ripen.

On the right side of the path, under the steep bank to the old filter beds, grows a **Black Oak,** *Quercus velutina*. It is about the same age as the Willow Oak, having been planted in 1990 by John Tucker to replace oaks lost in the Great Storm, and it comes from the same part of the world, but its leaves are very different. The elaborate lobes are fringed with series of tiny whiskers; they open covered in yellowish wool and mature as stiff as parchment. As this tree ages, its bark will become rougher and blacker than most of its fellow 'red oaks'.

On the left, just by the path-fork to the miniature railway, are two **Dawn Redwoods,** *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*. An oriental equivalent of the American Swamp Cypress, the Dawn Redwood was only discovered by science in the 1940s, first as fossils and then as a tiny and Critically Endangered population of surviving trees in central China. It was quickly introduced to Britain and found to flourish here; specimens like these now safeguard much of the species' natural biodiversity. Like the Swamp Cypress, the Dawn Redwood has a wonderful fox-red bark, and autumn colour to match. These two were planted in 1970; you may see a kink in the convoluted bole of the one of the left, which is where it was nearly snapped off by vandals but successfully splinted together again by the author's parents.

Take the right fork of the path. Just up the bank to the right, the big oak which holds onto some of its green leaves until spring is a form of **Lucombe Oak,** *Quercus* x *hispanica* 'Lucombeana'. It is a survivor from the first late Victorian plantings in the quercetum and belongs to a group of hybrid oaks which were first noted by a Devon nurseryman, William Lucombe, who grew both the parents – the deciduous Turkey Oak and the evergreen Cork Oak. Lucombe eventually felled his first tree to make boards from his own coffin; but he lived to 103, by which time the boards had rotten and another of his Lucombe Oaks had to be felled instead.

On the very steep bank behind the Lucombe Oak, three younger additions to the quercetum are best admired from the distance of the path. The **Blue-jack Oak** (*Quercus incana*) and the **Black-jack Oak** (*Q. marilandica*) were planted by John Tucker around 1990, the former as one of the first introductions of this species from the Deep South of the United States. It has narrowly egg-shaped leaves; the Black-jack Oak, from similar habitats, has roughly triangular leaves a bit like a dinosaur's footprint. The **Hastings Oak,** *Q x hastingsii*, was purchased by the Friends of Alexandra Park in 2015 and is in fact named after Hastings in Texas, where this natural hybrid was first discovered. Despite its southerly origins, it is so far growing sedately but happily in a spot secure from vandalism.

A little further along, but also up the steep bank to the right, is a **Water Oak,** *Quercus nigra*. Another eastern American species, planted in 1990, this is largely evergreen with us and has leaves with a just a few, very variable lobes.

The next oak along the bank is a **Californian Live Oak,** *Quercus agrifolia*. 'Live', in this case, means evergreen, and its little oval leaves hang on until the new ones emerge each summer. It was planted in 1991.

On the left here and immediately behind the miniature railway line, are two hazel bushes, of which the first is a **Cut-leaved Hazel,** *Corylus avellana* 'Urticifolia'. A rarely-planted sport of our native hazel, its leaves are cut into sharp segments. At nine metres, this is the tallest measured example and is the Park's smallest champion tree - or champion bush. It seems reasonable to assume that the hazel next to it was also planted long ago as a special sort, but it has reverted to type.

The oak up the bank opposite is another evergreen, **Turner's Oak,** *Quercus x turneri*. Although scarcely taller than the Californian Live Oak this is much older and dates back to the quercetum's origins in the late 19th century. Like the Lucombe Oak it is named after an 18th century nurseryman, Spencer Turner of Essex, who raised it as a hybrid of the evergreen Holm Oak and the native Pedunculate Oak.

At the top of the bank, but big enough to be admired from the bottom path, is an **Algerian Oak,** *Quercus canariensis*. This is perhaps the most magnificent of the original oaks in the quercetum, and stands out in views across Hastings around Christmas time when most of its leaves turn yellow and drop. It is native to Iberia and Algeria, but not the Canaries.

Halfway up the bank, right of the cross-paths, are two **Turkey Oaks,** *Quercus cerris*. A southern and eastern European oak, this species thrives in Britain and is becoming well naturalised. Whenever you seen the acorns of wild Pedunculate Oaks turned into convoluted Knopper galls, you know that a Turkey Oak grows at hand, since the minute wasp that turns the acorns into galls to protect its eggs has a complex life history and alternate generations feed only on the foliage of Turkey Oaks.

At the top of the bank, behind the Turkey Oaks, is a **Downy Oak,** *Quercus pubescens*. This cannot be seen very well from the bottom path (if you detour up the sloping path further along on the right you will be able to get close to it) but it is of interest as the rarest survivor from the original quercetum; its leaves are similar in shape to our native oaks' but hairier, and it grows wild only 100km away in northern France. The ivy growing up this very special tree is occasionally removed, although in general ivy is valuable plant for native animals and should be left to flourish.

At the cross-paths, take the right fork. The oak on the bank on the right which is nearest to the path is a **Hungarian Oak,** *Quercus frainetto*. A species from southern and eastern Europe, this has the most magnificently and elaborately lobed leaves. It can also make a singularly majestic tree, but this one, planted in 1989, has been slightly spoiled by the Grey Squirrels who love to chew through the younger bark.

The next oak at the foot of the bank on the right is a **Pin Oak,** *Quercus palustris*. This is another of the 'red oaks' from the eastern United States with whiskers tipping its leaves' lobes and, in the wild at least, rich crimson autumn colour. One of several around the Park, this was planted in 1989.

Next, on the bank to the right, is a small group of varied cypresses. Near the top is a **Japanese Arbor-vitae,** *Thuja standishii*. It is a much scarcer ally of the familiar *T. plicata* from western North America and has a prettily sea-green foliage and a bark that flakes in harder but more colourful strips. It, too, is highly aromatic, suggesting wine-gums. Its lower branch arch like the tusks of a mammoth. It belongs to a group of 'cypresses' called

'arbor-vitae' or 'trees of life' because early European sailors reaching North America found that chewing the foliage of the allied Eastern White Cedar, rich in Vitamin C, was a cure for scurvy.

In the middle of the bank of cypresses is a **Sawara Cypress**, *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Plumosa'. An old garden selection of another Japanese species, this has 'semi-juvenile' foliage: its tiny scale-like leaves have spreading points, rather than closely clasping the twig. A Peter Pan of a tree, 'Plumosa' consequently never flowers or bears cones. It used, for whatever reason, to be particularly popular in graveyards.

Just above the path, the larger cypress is another **Western Red Cedar,** *Thuja plicata*. Rather than growing with a strong single bole, like the three below the Pumphouse Cafe, this one forks, which may be evidence that it was clipped in youth to keep it dwarf, and which reminds us how protean in habit most tree species can be, and how much their forms can sometimes tell us about their individual life-stories.

The final cypress on the right of the path is a hybrid of **Eastern White and Western Red Cedars,** *Thuja occidentalis* x *plicata*. It is a champion tree by default, since it is the only example of this accidental garden cross to have been identified in Britain with much confidence.

The final cypress on the left of the path is a **Lawson Cypress,** *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*. Although this is quite a scarce and threatened tree in its native habitat (the mountains of Oregon) it has been very widely planted in Britain since its introduction in the 1850s and has produced ornamental 'sports' in greater variety than any other conifer. Its sprays of foliage are matt, drooping, and smell of parsley.

The path now takes you back to the Pump House Cafe, where there are toilet facilities.

Tree Walk 4

With the Pump House Cafe behind you, go straight ahead along the broad path which you followed in the opposite direction at the end of Walk 1. At the grass triangle, take the right hand fork. On the left, just after the triangle, is a forest of stems which are all part of one **Green Thread Cypress,** *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera'. This is another sport, raised in old Japan, of the Sawara Cypress whose clone 'Plumosa' we saw above the Pump House Cafe. This time, the foliage is adult but grows long, unbranched strings which hang and give the crown the texture of a green haystack. (Parts of this old specimen have reverted to type.) Here is good example of natural layering: where its branches have been allowed to touch the ground, they have rooted; eventually, the shaded branch between the trunk and the new roots dies and rots away, and the rooted section looks like a new tree. This example now has four of five iterations all round, and could theoretically continue to spread like this for ever.

At the foot of the bank to the right, just after the junction of the sloping path from Harmer's Layby, is a **Sugar Maple,** *Acer saccharum*. You may recognise the leaf-shape from the Canadian flag; in south-eastern Canada, the scarlet fall colours are spectacular, but in our gloomier climate they are more muted and this tree is very seldom planted. It is one of two here under the tall Turkey Oaks; the other maples on this bank (with yellow autumn colour) are Norway Maples, an Old World look-alike.

Further along on the left, on the grassy slope to the stream, is one of the handsomest examples in the Park of **Copper Beech,** *Fagus sylvatica* f. *purpurea*. In purple trees, the leaf's chlorophyll (which absorbs all except green light) is masked by a group of pigments called anthocyanins, which absorb all except red light. Beech likes to grow among other trees, where its foliage is protected from dehydrating winds and its roots never overheat in direct sunlight, so this steep north-facing slope was a good spot in which to plant one.

The next tree grows at the top of the steep path which starts 30m before the Copper Beech, but can be seen in winter from the shallow gradient of the bottom path. This is one of the biggest wild oaks in Park and is an example of the natural hybrid between **Pedunculate and Sessile Oaks,** *Quercus* x *rosacea*. This one has

extraordinarily big leaves, suggesting the 'hybrid vigour' of a first-generation accidental cross. Like most hybrids, it may be infertile and seldom bears any acorns.

Go straight on until the steep upper and the lower paths rejoin. Up the bank to Park Road on the right here is the first of several big, bushy **Holm Oaks** *(Quercus ilex)*. It probably forms part of the original 1870s landscaping of the park and is a Mediterranean species which is now happy enough in the local microclimate to naturalise. It holds its leaves through winter and replaces them each June.

Down the bank to the left, about 50m before Dordrecht Way, is a **Dove Tree**, *Davidia involucrata.* This central Chinese tree was planted among the older flowering cherries in 1993; its leaves resemble a lime's (but are symmetrical) whilst its floral spectacle, in May, is unique: each flower carries a milk-white bract the size of a perching dove (or, as some will have it, a pocket handkerchief). This is a tree which expects to get plenty of rain throughout the growing season, and its leaves droop dejectedly during droughts; sheltered by other trees and not far from the stream, this youngster is well-placed.

The big spreading tree nearer Dordrecht Way, with branches sweeping the ground, is a **Fern-leaved Beech,** *Fagus sylvatica* 'Aspleniifolia'. A sport of the native beech, its leaves are deeply and jaggedly lobed - more like an oak's than a fern's. This creates a uniquely soft texture to the foliage, which turns golden-brown in autumn.

Just left of the path as it reaches Dordrecht Way is a **White Haw,** *Crataegus punctata*. It is the only survivor from a collection of hawthorn species planted here by Marnock, but this feature been renewed with varied plantings since 2016. The largest example in Britain, the White Haw is completely hollow and braced together, and its label can get hidden behind ivy. This little-known species from eastern North America is an engaging tree: its vernacular name celebrates the silvery colour of the winter twigs, which tend to arrange themselves in tiers, almost like a miniature Cedar of Lebanon. It blossoms profusely in June, and in summer the leaves are nothing like our native hawthorns', being oval with neatly parallel veins. The fruit ('haws') are bigger, and orange with white flecks, but birds soon eat them.

You are now back to Dordrecht Way. To find the start point and the bus stop, turn left.

Further Reading

The Collins Tree Guide,
Owen Johnson & David More; 2004, HarperCollins.
Including nearly all the trees you will see in the Park.

Hastings' Historic Alexandra Park,
Steven Whitford and Anne Scott; 2014, Pom Press.

Robert Marnock's retirement project: Alexandra Park, Hastings (1876-1882), 'superior to any park in any other seaside resort'. Jan Woudstra, *Garden History*, 51 (1), 2023, pp. 17-38.

Trees and Shrubs Online
(https://www.treesandshrubsonline.org).
The best web-based guide to every tree cultivated in Britain.

The Tree Register
(https://www.treeregister.org).
Full details of 130 of Alexandra Park's best trees, plus 90,000 others from across Britain and Ireland; continually updated.

The first Tree Walks in Alexandra Park were conceived, prepared and sponsored early in the century by the Friends of Alexandra Park, with advice from Dr Owen Johnson. The Friends have also sponsored the labelling of the trees on the Walks, and replacement and additional labels since then. In 2024 the Walks were revised and extended, with new text by Dr Owen Johnson. They are sponsored by the Alexandra Park Greenhouse Group and by the Friends of Alexandra Park.

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