Remarkable Trees of Camberwell
Church Tree Walk

During the course of this 40-45 minute walk you will be guided through five parks and gardens close to St Giles Church in the centre of Camberwell. Representatives of local friends groups looking after these open spaces have chosen eight trees that are remarkable because of their size, local history, unusual appearance, or just because they are wonderful examples of their species. Have a great time, and don’t forget to share your photos, observations and comments on the Camberwell Society’s Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/camberwellsociety/ or via email at: webmaster@camberwellsociety.org.uk

We hope you will enjoy this walk, the first of a series of tree walks across Camberwell created by the Camberwell Society and actively supported by the SE5 Forum. But please participate in a responsible way while the Covid-19 restrictions are in place:

• Are you local to Camberwell? This walk is ideal as your chosen outdoor exercise for the day, and will give you a fresh perspective on our neighbourhood.
• Are you planning to walk with other people? Remember for now this walk should only be undertaken either alone or with your immediate household. We hope you will bring friends and wider family on this walk after the restrictions are lifted.
• Keep yourself, your household and other people safe. Remember your ‘social distancing’: stay 2 metres (6 ft) away from other people at all times.

For the most up to date advice please see https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus
1. Camberwell Green’s “Landmark” London Plane Tree

This walk starts at the large London Plane (*Platanus X hispanica*) tree in the centre of Camberwell Green, an ancient area of communal land dating back to the thirteenth century or even earlier. The tree itself is probably between 100 and 200 years old, and has recently been provided with lighting.

The London Plane, London’s most famous tree species, has peeling bark that is a useful way of ridding the tree of dust and soot deposits. This is the main reason it has been able to thrive in polluted cities. London Planes are easy to spot not only by their distinctive bark but also by their spherical, furry looking fruit. These stay on the tree and are visible throughout winter.

After admiring the impressive scale of this Camberwell landmark, head for the pedestrianised exit to the North East of Camberwell Green passing the new Camberwell Library, and the old Law Courts on your right. This path joins Elmington Road to the right.

Continue to the right, travelling east along Elmington Road, ignore the first two left-hand turnings, but take the third left into Horsnell Close. In less than a minute you will reach a low wooded fence on the right adjoining a small wooded area. Proceed through the gap on the right into Benhill Road Nature Garden.

2. Benhill Road Nature Garden’s “Poetic” Apple Tree

This is a community garden providing local people an oasis of natural beauty and calm officially opened in May 1982 by Harriet Harman, who remains to this day our local MP.

As you enter the garden, follow the path on the right through the small wood. Before the path starts to bend left, you will see on your right an Apple Tree (*Malus domestica*). Here is a photo of it in case it is hard to spot.

Otherwise unremarkable seeming, this tree was featured in a poem written recently by local resident John Turpin, one of the volunteers who leads on looking after the garden.
Ballad of Elmington Green

What did you see in the Nature Garden Billy?
I saw a big spider with a bulging belly.
They eat their husbands – I saw it on the ‘tele.

Two young men in a cloud of ‘weed’:
they were sweet and sat for a chat.
That’s what I see’d.

Stir the compost heap Stacy,
and what do you see?
Little frogs trying to escape from me!
Life springing from decay, says daddy.

Watch the buddleia Beverley.
The last Painted Lady of summer may flutter by.
Actually it’s a dragonfly bound for yonder pond-d.

Leave the little apples, Laura,
they fall too soon.
Yes, pity me, sighs the old tree,
which has seen other falls.
Like the pre-fabs on Houseman Way
where a happy householder planted me,
his apple tree, in 1953.

Then during five decades of dust and decay,
nature survives,
A garden slowly comes alive
for all to wonder at –
including the fox and the black and white cat.

Bob Bell the builder would like a say
about his new homes on Houseman Way.
He’s pleased with what’s been said and seen.
The view’s for sale –
called Elmington Green.

Next, continue following the path as it bends to the left, entering an area of open space within the nature garden. On your left you will notice a large stone sculpture affixed to the wall of a sports hall entitled “The Pied Piper of Hamlin”.

This work by Austrian émigré Willi Soukop dates from 1959 and depicts the fable of the German rat catcher who, unappreciated by his community, used music from his magic pipe to lure the town’s children away. The piper in this sculpture is leading the children towards Brunswick Park Primary School!
Now head out of the garden, exiting at the opposite side to which you entered, onto Benhill Road. Turn right on Benhill Road, noticing the avenue of London Plane trees lining the roadway as you walk towards St Giles Church, with its spire in the distance. After some minutes, at the junction of Brunswick Park, on the left, find the small path that brings you into Brunswick Park. Follow this path, bearing right towards the tennis courts.

3. Brunswick Park’s “Tall” Lime Tree

Standing back before you reach the tennis courts, observe the two tall Lime Trees (*Tilia X europaea*) on the corner of the courts nearest to you. The taller of the two is without doubt the tallest tree in the ward and possibly the tallest tree in all of Camberwell.

It is always difficult to know the age of a tree without cutting it down and examining rings visible in its trunk. This one could be up to 100 years old. It is unlikely, however, to have been planted as early as 1847, the year when Brunswick Park was created during the reign of Queen Victoria.

As you can see, this tree is used by crows who have built several nests in its upper branches high up and away from potential predators. The common lime is a hybrid species native to the UK, a mix of the large leaved lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*) and the small leaved lime (*Tilia cordata*). This species shows hybrid vigour, growing faster than either parent. Unfortunately, aphids swarm over the foliage in the summer and the tree rains down sticky honeydew.

4. Brunswick Park’s “Medusa” Horse Chestnut Tree

Before you move on from this vantage point, notice a mid-size Horse Chestnut tree (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) to your right with twisty branches flowing in all directions. In summer, step right under the canopy. Locals refer to this tree as the “Medusa Tree”, since it resembles the monster described in Ancient Greek Mythology who had poisonous snakes instead of hair. Compare the branches around you with Medusa’s hair shown in this picture painted by Caravaggio (1571-1610)
5. Brunswick Park’s “Boris the Squirrel” Ash Tree

Further along the path on the left-hand side is a semi mature ash tree (Fraxinus excelsior), another species native to the British Isles. It is recognisable by the deep fissures in its pale grey bark. Go through the gate in the black metal fencing for a closer look.

This was once the home of Boris, the albino (white) squirrel. Only one in a million squirrels is ever born white. Our Boris tragically lost his life in November 2012 attacked by a dog while he was defending his mate Bianca. A plaque commemorating this local hero is fastened to the tree.
An old rhyme about the burning properties of different woods praises ash, as it does not need drying before being placed on the fire: ‘Ash wet, or ash dry, A king may warm his slippers by.’

Now, leave Brunswick Park passing the tennis courts on your right. You will exit onto St Giles Road facing a striking red and white building with a clock tower showing roman numerals. This was once a hospital. Turn right and as you walk down St Giles Road, look right to see an avenue of heavily cut back – or pollarded in tree surgeon speak – London Plane trees that look like ghostly skeletons.

Carry on along St Giles Road until you reach the busy main road, Peckham Road. Turn left, and cross over. After a short while, look for the entrance to Lucas Gardens across the main road: you can’t miss the sign written in wrought iron with a coat of arms above it. Walk up the thin strip of land at the entrance to the park.

6. Lucas Gardens’ “Mother” Beech Tree

Right behind a small circular stone feature with a low black, yellow and red iron fence around it you will see a gnarled Copper Beech tree (Fagus sylvatica ‘Purpurea’).

This tree was described as the “Mother Tree” in a beautiful and thought provoking 2018 short film by artist Rory Pilgrim, part of his The Resounding Bell series sponsored by the South London Gallery, a well-regarded art institution based in Camberwell. Here is an excerpt from that video showing this tree dappled in sunlight: https://vimeo.com/295372699
Copper beech trees display a remarkable range of colour in their leaves over the course of a year, from carmine pink in the spring, to wine red in early summer, to dark purple in high summer to bright gold in autumn.

Evolution of a copper beech tree’s leaf colour through the course of the growing season is captured in this sequence painted by Camberwell artist David J. More.

It has been said that copper beech trees were offered free to clergymen to celebrate the winning of the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Consequently, they were frequently planted in rectory gardens. But it is improbable that any survive today.

7. Lucas Gardens’ “Regal” Tulip Tree

As you progress a little further into Lucas Gardens, you will see a large Tulip tree (Liriodendron tulipifera) reigning over the lawn on your left.

This fast-growing specimen, a species originally imported into British parks and gardens from North America, lost part of its crown in the Great Storm of 1987. Yet is has gone on to flourish. The flowers do look a little like tulips. The tree species is very ancient, occurring in the fossil record from the late Cretaceous and early Tertiary – so maybe the dinosaurs liked them as well.

Carry on along the path heading up the slight hill, taking the second exit out of the gardens on the right-hand side. Then, cross into Maude Road directly ahead of you and continue down it until you reach the second road, Wilson Road. Turn right and travel down Wilson Road. You will see St Giles Church looming up on the left-hand side.
On the right is a red brick building that used to be Wilson's Grammar School. Originally founded in 1615, it was one of the country's oldest state schools. The building is now used by the world-renowned Camberwell College of Arts. As you approach the main road, look on the left side of the road for an entrance flanked by two brick pillars. Follow the path straight into the churchyard of St Giles.

8. St Giles Churchyard’s “Crazy” Oriental Plane Tree

Look out for the remarkably contorted Oriental Plane tree (Platanus orientalis), a little further along on your right, with a low trunk that splits into two hulking limbs. The age of this very distinctive tree, which represents a species related to the London Plane originally found in the Balkans and eastwards into Asia, is a mystery. Southwark Council has no records and old photographs that are helpful: even the aerial photographs taken in the 1920s and an image captured in 1939 were inconclusive. However, a mature specimen like this is likely to be more than 100 years old.

The zigzag of its branches provides some instaworthy framing for the views of this much loved local landmark. The magnificent spire was designed by the famous Victorian architect Sir George Gilbert-Scott after the previous church burned down. The rebuilt church was consecrated in 1844. The painting of St Giles Churchyard is by also by David J. More.

Finish the walk by carrying on through the churchyard along a small passageway straight ahead, past an avenue of pollarded lime trees on your right. On the street at the end of the passage, you find yourself in Camberwell Grove. Looking to the left up the hill you will be able to see fine examples of architecture from the Georgian era of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries – reminding us of those earlier residents of Camberwell who came, built, and planted some of the remarkable trees that we have seen today.

If you have enjoyed the walk and would like to nominate other remarkable trees in Camberwell for future walks in the series, please contact webmaster@camberwellsociety.org.uk