

The Great Trees Of London

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Foreword

I cycle past St Pancras churchyard every working day of my life, yet it was only when I spotted a windswept group of prelates and parishioners one day that I paused to go inside. The Bishop of London was presiding over an event outside the small Norman church. It was as I wandered round the back of the building that I came across the Hardy Ash.

In the 1860s, the writer Thomas Hardy had been apprenticed to an architect, Arthur Blomfield, in Covent Garden. The building of the nearby Midland Railway had disrupted many of the graves in the churchyard and Hardy was tasked with making an inventory and reburying them. He stacked the headstones round a convenient ash tree. Then he seems to have moved on before the job was finished.

What remains is the scene he left, save for the extraordinary development of the tree, which has wrapped itself around the headstones as if to prevent anyone ever attempting to move them again. Each is numbered with a Roman numeral, and I like to think Hardy may have carved the numbers himself.

The Hardy Ash represents a wondrously direct and organic connection with history, but it is also the most beautiful artefact. When Trees for Cities asked me to nominate my favourite tree for their Great Trees of London project, I chose it without hesitation. But, in truth, I do all the Great Trees, and so many more besides, a disservice. I love them all. And we need more, more for the greening of London, more to play their vital role in combating climate change. That's why I am passionate about the capital's fantastic arboreal heritage and proud to be a patron of Trees for Cities. We must keep planting!

Jon Snow

Patron, Trees for Cities