

## The Manchester Poplar

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It is well known that the great majority of 'Black Poplars' in this country are not referable to *Populus nigra* L., a native of central and southern Europe and probably of parts of England, but to horticultural hybrids between this species and *P. deltoides* Marsh. from eastern North America (= *P. × canadensis* Moench). This hybrid exists as at least a dozen variants, resulting from crosses between different strains or races of the two species and from extensive back-crossing. A good account of these trees is given by Peace (1952). Apparently by far the most common plant in Britain is var. *serotina* (Hartig) Rehd. (often called *P. × serotina* Hartig), which exists only in the male state. Gilbert-Carter (1936) gives a good impression of the differences between this taxon and *P. nigra*.

There is, in horticultural circles, a tree known as 'Manchester Poplar', which according to most authorities is *P. nigra* var. *betulifolia* Pursh. Bugula (1967) concluded that this variety is the only one native in England and western France. He recognised it as *P. nigra* subsp. *betulifolia* (Pursh) W. Wettst.; it differs from the more south-eastern subsp. *nigra* in having pubescent young twigs, petioles and inflorescences. Henry (1914) came to a similar conclusion to Bugula, and gave very useful notes on the identification of planted Black Poplars.

Because of the identity of the English native Black Poplar and the horticultural Manchester Poplar, the natural distribution of the former has probably become clouded by planting. The native area of *P. nigra* in Britain is at any rate uncertain. Warburg (1952) suggests it is from Essex and Lincoln to Gloucester and Shropshire, and Edlin (1956) says 'mainly in eastern England, though it is also common on the Cheshire Plain.' Edlin provides a coloured plate of a good Cheshire specimen. Mr A. Newton, who has just completed a new *Flora of Cheshire* (1971), informs me, on the other hand, that he considers *P. nigra* to be decidedly scarce in the county, and nowhere undoubtedly native.

Hadfield (1957), writing about *P. nigra*, comments that it 'stands smoke well and was popular in the industrial north—hence its name of Manchester Poplar'. McClintock (1966), discussing a rather different topic, states that 'Manchester Poplar is a name for the true Black Poplar *P. nigra*, which is said to withstand the soot and filth of Manchester'.

For the past few years I have attempted to ascertain the correctness or otherwise of some of the above statements. The commonest roadside trees in Manchester are ash, elm, lime, sycamore and plane. Poplars are commoner in parks and similar places, and in a great many cases these are *P. × canadensis*. It was soon found, however, that the Manchester Poplar does still exist in Manchester, and that in some areas of the conurbation it is by far the commonest poplar. It is mainly found in the older (i.e. mostly inner) suburbs, being scarcer in the city centre and in the postwar suburbs. The examples I have observed closest to the centre of Manchester are in Great Ancoats and Adair Streets (Manchester postal districts 4 and 1).

Large numbers are to be found to the south of the city centre (districts 13, 14, 19 and 20, and in various parts of Stockport); and again to the north towards Bolton, Bury and Rochdale (districts 8, 9 and 10, and in parts of Oldham, Middleton, Prestwich, Pendlebury and Kearsley). Particularly good stands have been observed in Cringle Fields Park (district 19), in Hollywood Park (Stockport), in Queens Park and the east side of Heaton Park (district 9), and especially in Broadhurst Park and St Joseph's Cemetery (districts 9 and 10). In districts 9 and 10 (notably Lightbourne Road and Victoria Avenue East) many *roadside* trees are Manchester Poplars. Detailed searches to the east and west have not been made, but specimens have been seen in Ashton-under-Lyne.

Even in areas where these trees are relatively plentiful they are, however, rather locally distributed. Thus in Cringle Fields Park most of the trees are Manchester Poplars, but in Ladybarn Park, about 1 km west, they are scarce, although there are in the latter place plenty of examples of *P. × canadensis* and *P. nigra* var. *italica* Duroi (Lombardy Poplar). There is, however, in the British Museum (BM) a specimen of *P. nigra* var. *betulifolia* collected by R. S. Adamson in 1915 from Mauldeth Road Station (which adjoins Ladybarn Park).

Most of the Manchester Poplars appear to me to be between 30 and 100 years old, though it is difficult to make an accurate assessment and the City Parks Department has no records which would help. Several of the parts of Manchester in which the trees occur are slum-clearance zones (e.g. in district 13 near the University), and it is pleasing to see, in recently cleared areas, specimen trees of Manchester Poplars (amongst other species) preserved for incorporation in the future development of the site. Preservation of existing trees seems almost their only hope of salvation in Manchester, for I am told by the Parks Department that they are extremely rarely planted nowadays, being largely replaced by other variants of the complex, notably '*P. eugenei* Simon-Louis', which can easily withstand the now much cleaner atmosphere. Manchester Poplars are, however, recommended in the C.P.R.E.'s 1970 Cheshire Tree Campaign booklet for planting 'in difficult areas, e.g. wet, badly drained, overgrown or generally neglected'.

Whether the newer hybrids are more or less attractive than *P. nigra* is, of course, a matter of personal taste. Gilbert-Carter found the heavily bossed trunks of the latter 'grotesque', but I much prefer their arching branches and rounded overall outlines (rather similar to an ash) to the exotic shapes of the various cultivars and hybrids. It might also be argued that there are too few native English trees which are widely used for town planting. One advantage of using certain variants of *P. × canadensis* (e.g. var. *serotina* and *P. eugenei*) for horticultural purposes is that they exist only as males, and thus councils are spared the expense of clearing up the often extremely copious deposits of fruiting catkins in early summer. Hayfever is perhaps a less obvious consequence of this policy. One might presume that *P. nigra*, being a natural taxon, exists in roughly equal numbers of each sex. Of about one hundred planted trees examined in April 1970, all were, however, males. It seems clear, therefore, that horticultural material of Manchester Poplars is propagated solely or largely by vegetative means.

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