

HICKLING CHURCHYARD

THE NATIVE BLACK POPLAR TREE

At the far end of the Churchyard, directly in front of the path stands a tree, which is about 30 metres tall. Few people give this tree a second glance and would perhaps not know how important this tree is. It has stood looking towards the Church for over 200yrs. In the early 1900's two trees stood in the churchyard but one has since died.

This tree is the NATIVE BLACK POPLAR TREE [populous nigra aap. Beulifolia], a tree which is now Britain's most endangered timber tree. It is rarer than the Giant Panda!

The leaves are not as soft as other poplars but are clearly defined by their strong heart shape. They are large round trees with a straight trunk and a smoky grey bark. In their lifetime they grow about 35 metres tall with a 20 metre branch span and live for about 250yrs.

BLACK POPLARS were once a familiar part of the British landscape. It was a component of floodplain woodland. It was found in valleys, besides farm ponds and near to rivers. The landscape artist, John Constable captured this magnificent tree in his famous 1821 painting, 'The Hay Wain'

This tree, along with oak provided much of the timber used in Britain up until the end of the 17th century. The timber is quite fire resistant and so was used for floor boards and roofing. The wood is shock absorbent and so this timber was the choice for rifle butts, wagon bottoms and horse stabling partitions. The main trunk is straight so was used for thatching spurs and sheep pens. The forked trunks formed the structural support of cruck framed buildings. The wood is lightweight and light in colour so was used for clogs, furniture and fruit boxes. The ship builders took a large number of trees and their wood was used for the Armada.

In 1973 it was thought that there were less than 6000 mature native Black Poplar trees left in the whole of the British Isles. In 1990, the County of Cheshire recorded that they had identified just 370 mature trees.

This tree has not reproduced naturally for many centuries and has been in decline over the last 300 years.

Pollination requires the presence of both male and female trees. It is estimated that there are only 400 mature, female trees left. The one standing in Hickling Churchyard is male. This tree does not produce suckers.

Native Black Poplars can hybridise with other types of poplars so most seed produced trees seen around are not the true Black Poplar. Such hybrids can be seen along the Grantham Canal

In the 18th century faster growing American and European poplars were introduced and the popularity of the Black Poplar declined. As a result the trees which remain today are old and reaching the end of their lives. The one in Hickling Churchyard is over 200 yrs old.

The Church Wardens recently had the Hickling tree pruned at a cost of over £500 when to remove this tree and take away the wood would have been about £350. It is thanks to those who knew the rarity of this tree and had the foresight to keep it, that it still stands in Hickling Churchyard today.

The Kew botanist, Edgar Milne Redhead did a survey of the number and distribution of Native Black Poplars from 1973 to 1985. He concluded they were endangered and he started a programme of propagating them from cuttings.

Roger Jefcoate, known as the Phantom Tree Planter is committed in his campaign in saving this tree from extinction. He spends his time combing Britain looking for places to plant Native Black Poplar saplings. He planted one in the middle of a roundabout in Milton Keynes.

In 2009, the Crown Estate became involved in trying to save this tree from extinction. In 2010 they replanted 200 slips from the Dunster Estate in Somerset [which is one of the few bastions of this native tree]

In Suffolk 90 mature trees were identified and a project has been launched to take cuttings and when established to replant in suitable landscapes in the County where they can grow and mature.

‘Unless something is done to try and increase the numbers we will end up losing the Native Black Poplar’ ...Prince Charles

In 2017 HICKLING W.I. is 70yrs old. To celebrate this event the members wanted to put something in the village but not the usual ‘bench’. It was decided that they would like to plant a native Black Poplar Tree as the rare one in Hickling Churchyard is reaching the end of its life. To date no suitable position has been found to plant this tree but the W.I. hope they will get approval for this project somewhere where the tree will be visible to all.

So next time you are in Hickling walk along the Church path and at the end pause and admire this rare tree which has stood here unnoticed for so long

**Carol Beadle
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