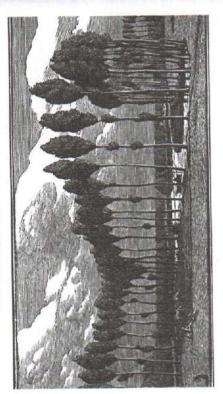
The Long, Long

Gife of Trees

Fiona Stafford



GWEN RAVERAT, POPLARS IN FRANCE

even. And yet there is also something soothing about that sense of under control. Nowadays, tired drivers, hurrying for a ferry, can find the quick inexorable succession of tall trees hypnotic - stroboscopic, under the edict of Napoleon to provide shade for troops marching a suitably triumphal avenue for the emperor - even, orderly and well-regulated sequencing, the changeless pattern beside the road, in heavy uniforms under the hot, bright sun. They certainly formed striping light skies for mile after mile after mile.

tion. These trees seemed specially designed to match the ladies' tall decided to start planting poplars of their own. The 4th Earl of estate. The poplar's natural vigour meant that new avenues of mansions, with their grand neoclassical façades in perfect proporostrich-feather hats, and formed a soothing green Acropolis for appealing to eighteenth-century British landowners on the Grand Tour, who admired them in their native habitat, sweeping grandly across the Lombardy plain and along the banks of the River Po. So admirable were these elegant Italian trees that the grand tourists Rochford returned from Rome in 1754 with the first Lombardy sapling strapped to his carriage, ready for establishing at his Essex column-like trees shot up in no time to complement the Palladian Perhaps this ordered symmetry was what made these trees so

POPLAR

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gentlemen to contemplate the size of their estates. If the tree's tive name was not quite so elegant, for it was widely known as the Italian heritage appealed to fashion-conscious Britons, its alterna-Po poplar'.

storming of the Bastille in 1789, popular prints began to circulate Liberty Tree as a symbol of the new Republic. Suddenly, setting a Rousseau was buried on the Île des Peupliers in the garden at Ermenonville, and so his tomb, encircled by tall, slim, matching poplars, became an icon of liberty, equality and fraternity. After the ical metaphors, other species could be co-opted to the cause. Since and equality of mankind fed the ideals of the revolutionaries, it was showing the triumphant revolutionaries planting a tall, pole-like, affairs drew on images of trees, and while those alarmed by the radical writers such as Thomas Paine called on his fellow men to join him in raising the Tree of Liberty. The original American the Lombardy poplar was strongly associated with the philosopher lean Jacques Rousseau, whose theories about the natural freedom Rather more worrying to many of the great landowners was the poplar's role as the people's tree. Apparently springing from the same etymological roots as the populace, the Populus took on a strongly democratic character during the French Revolution and, as Contemporary political debate over the 'natural' order of human deracination of the French ancien régime turned to the British oak as a symbol of slow growth, gradual change and steady continuity, Liberty Tree was an old elm in Boston, but once trees became politan obvious choice for symbolic planting. After his death in 1778, such, began to seem decidedly threatening to the nobility. poplar meant planting a Liberty Tree.

Although the poplar seems one of the easiest trees to pick out in a landscape, it is worth remembering that the slim cigar silhouette belongs only to the Lombardy variety and is a relative newcomer to Britain. Before its arrival, and indeed for many decades afterwards, the majority of British people thought of poplars as large, deciduous trees, crowned with vast, delicate canopies of fluttering silver-green.



THE LIBERTY TREE

These were the natives that grew freely beside the local rivers, glowing like great lacy lanterns against the sinking sun – just as they do today, though they are generally recognised less readily than their Italian relatives. The poplar family is, in fact, bewilderingly extensive and the different varieties are not always easy to identify. The white poplar, *Populus alba*, also known as the abele, is probably

the easiest to spot, because of its pale grey, diamond-studded trunk and the strange, white down of the leaves, which makes their underside feel like suede. In mixed woodland, the white poplar will flash, as if moon-blanched, at the height of a summer day. These were the trees that classical authors imagined growing on the banks of the Styx: a gently shimmering entrance to the Underworld. They can now be found giving quite ordinary roads in Britain an air of mysterious grandeur.

white relation, but larger and more abundant. This variety is a the meaning of a tree can change utterly in a single night: from out in state for people to pay their last respects. It is strange how outstretched on the riverbank, was like seeing a great leader laid thus seemed an excellent choice for representing Ireland in the was, for many years, the centrepiece of the old castle grounds and Castle in County Offaly, the biggest grey poplar in these islands attain a height of over forty metres, if left to its own devices. At Birr both. The grey poplar will live for over two hundred years and can hybrid of the white poplar and the aspen (Populus tremula), so their defeat, pathos and vulnerability - little more, indeed, than a pile of being a figure of tremendous strength and stability to one of heroic however, a massive storm blew it down. The sight of the old poplar, European Tree of the Year contest, 2014. On 13 February 2014, leaves, smooth green and silver-haired, bear a family resemblance to firewood. The grey poplar, Populus canescens, is similar in shape to its

Black poplars, too, were once common in Britain and across central and southern Europe, flourishing in flood plains and in the boggy, low-lying areas beside slow-moving rivers. The rapid post-war expansion of urban areas and reclamation of older, water-logged sites meant that much of their natural habitat disappeared, because the seeds germinate in bare, open ground, lying in the moist mud from June to October. Since the species is dioecious, pollination requires the presence of both male and female trees. Once they had begun to decline, the chances of natural recovery were therefore

low. Oddly enough, the ebullient, easy-growing Lombardy is a kind of black poplar, too, but much more resilient to a changing, modern environment. The great black poplar, with its arching lower branches, is now Britain's most endangered timber tree — so rare that when developers in Newcastle were planning to clear the ground at St Willibrord and All Saints in the city centre, plans were halted once the old trees in the churchyard were identified as an endangered species by the National Recorder of Poplars. The great trees now lend a somewhat melancholy air as they tower over the graves on the hill above the wharf, beside the grand, disused, baroque church. One of the fifty Great British Trees of the Golden Jubilee was the black poplar at World's End Wood in Essex, chosen partly because of its rarity. And what more suitable tree for the World's End? Neither apoplectic nor apocalyptic, the black poplar seems a tree in atrophy.

The leaves of the native black poplar are not as soft as some varieties, but are clearly defined by their strong heart shape. This may have been what Tennyson had in mind when he depicted the abandoned bride, Mariana, marooned in a moated grange amidst the dark fen, with only a solitary poplar, 'all silver-green with gnarled bark', to mark the level waste for miles around. Poplars lose their smooth skin as they age, their trunks becoming pockmarked and deeply wrinkled, but, most poignant of all, the inevitable, seasonal fall of the native poplar resembles a cascade of faded hearts.

Although the black poplar population of Europe is threatened with irreversible decline and ultimate extinction, there are still signs of hope. In 2010, the Crown Estate launched a project to reverse the drastic decline of the black poplar in Britain by replanting slips from the Dunster estate in Somerset, one of the few remaining bastions of this native tree. This rare species also has its independent champions. Roger Jefcoate, 'the phantom tree-planter', is committed to a one-man campaign of repopulation – and spends his time combing the countryside for places to plant black poplar saplings.

He even succeeded in getting one to grow in the middle of a roundabout in Milton Keynes. His inspiration came from an earlier poplar specialist, the pioneering conservationist Edgar Milne-Redhead, who first drew attention to the plight of the native black poplar after conducting an extensive survey of their distribution from 1973 to 1988. As a botanist at Kew, Milne-Redhead's research led him to start propagating poplar trees from cuttings and popular support from essays and broadcasts. Tree survival tends to depend ultimately on a collective effort, though it takes the special insight of individuals to recognise what is happening, especially when the trees in question are so familiar as to be virtually invisible to those beneath.

deteated pagan deities as having faded eyes, a palsied tongue and a conjuring up an image of the ancient, overthrown forces of earth in morning, when other trees are still as sleep, their heavy late-summer whose leaves are in constant motion. Even on an early September most striking physical characteristic. This is the trembling poplar, stand freezing winter blasts, the aspen has never had a particularly north of England. Despite its hardy character and ability to withenough to unsettle any sense of peace. suggests the aftermath of trauma, a quiet tremulousness, just strong beard shaking 'with such aspen-malady'. The motion of the aspen his unfinished epic 'Hyperion', he described the leader of the be shaking, finding a breeze that is not there. When John Keats was robust reputation. Its botanical name, Populus tremula, reflects its hemisphere and, in Britain, remain common in Scotland and the secure, as these trees can be found across much of the northern leaves all wrapped in soft mist, the aspen's long, slender stems will The future of Britain's other native poplar, the aspen, is more

In some areas of Britain, the wood for Christ's cross was thought to have come from the trembling aspen poplar, and the trees have been shaking with guilt ever since. In his collection of oral poetry from the Scottish Highlands and Islands, the nineteenth-century folklorist Alexander Carmichael included an incantation

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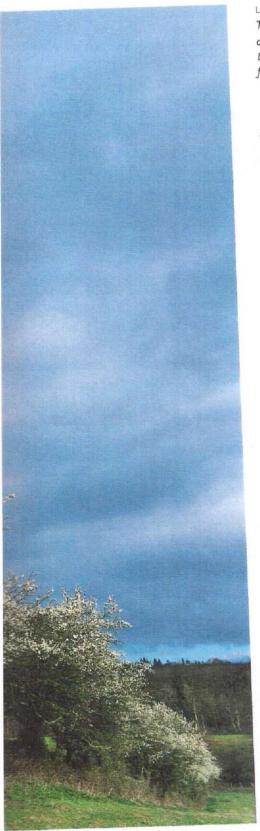


BIBIG ACCOMPANIES THE BBC TV SERIES Introduction by TONY KIRKHAM & JON HAMMERTON



THE TRES that made BRITAIN

Archie Miles



LEFT Damson trees in hedgerows occur as very localized features.

These trees on the Herefordshire and Worcestershire border were once grown for the dye derived from the fruit and used by the Lancashire cotton industry. Now they are an early source of nectar for bees and provide delicious harvests for jam and wine-makers.

to explain why it might have been introduced, as the flowers smell disgusting and the fruits are virtually inedible. The species now enjoys special protection under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

A hedgerow tree that has attracted a good deal of interest in recent years is the native black poplar (Populus nigra subsp. betulifolia). This had been quietly growing in Britain, barely heeded by anyone until 1973, when Edgar Milne-Redhead decided to undertake a national survey after he retired as deputy keeper of the herbarium at Kew. Within a couple of years he had located about 1000 trees, which is a very small number indeed for such an important native broadleaf. The dendrologist John White spoke about the tree in a programme on Radio 4 in 1994 and then Peter Roe of the Daily Telegraph wrote an article about it and announced the launch of a nationwide black-poplar hunt. There are currently about 7000 specimens recorded, although there appears to be none in Scotland. There are two main reasons why this tree is so rare: the floodplains that they favour have declined because of agricultural drainage schemes and the timber appears to have little commercial value. This means that the species has been left to regenerate naturally and there has been very little planned planting for almost 200 years. Black poplars tend to be found near rivers and streams and they do well in hedges that have ditches. The black poplar's profile is very distinctive, with its leaning bole and graceful, arcing boughs, and one of the best areas to pick it out in the landscape is in the Vale of Aylesbury.

Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) has always been an excellent choice for the hedgerow. It is tolerant of a wide variety of soils and conditions and it forms a dense, stockproof barrier. It regenerates well after browsing by animals and has been used in the past in some areas as winter fodder. Holly features regularly in hedges around the Pennines, extending into Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire, Staffordshire, Cheshire and Herefordshire. Large trees