

The London Planes of Hoxton Square

A brief history by Twinkle Troughton

I lived in Hackney, just a stone's throw from Hoxton Square, throughout much of my twenties and thirties. I was an artist painting in my bedroom, a space where I ate, slept, worked and partied. It was the early 2000s and gentrification was creeping into the area, but hadn't yet taken hold. It was a place which provided late night revelry in the nearby pubs, galleries, empty warehouses, gig venues, kebab shops, clubs, and whatever else was open 'til late. The square was where I met friends with cans of beer or 'three for a fiver' bottles of wine. It was also a photoshoot location for a Fairies Band EP cover - a raucous, DIY-driven band which I, and three other potty-mouthed wild women fronted, who wore fairy wings, ripped fishnet tights and stilettos.

It was an era of hedonism and chaos, but filled with energy, creativity and ambition. And while we made the most of Hoxton Square in our own way, and did our bit to contribute to the culture, it was also a time where I rarely, if ever, considered the history of what had been before, and especially that of the trees that grow there.

Now I live in Margate, a place with one of the lowest tree counts in the country. So, as someone who desires to be around trees even more than I do the sea, to come back to London, a city officially classed as a forest due to its high tree count, has been an elixir for me. And to visit Hoxton Square especially to learn about it anew has been nostalgic, fascinating and invigorating.

What follows is just some of what I have learnt.

Hoxton Square's history is colourful. Originating in 1709 and completed by the 1720's, it is one of London's oldest garden squares. Built to resemble the exclusive Bloomsbury Square, the garden was incorporated to make it an appealing place to live.

The square has repeatedly experienced periods of decline and of reinvention, and according to a report by Hackney Council, in the 1700s it became a place for religious dissent, with more than 25 dissenting ministers living here. In 1777 it was described as being in 'great disorder' resulting in local proprietors installing seats, lighting and railings, as well as planting trees in the garden in an attempt to revive the area.

And it's these trees which still grow in the square today. They are the London plane. A hybrid tree of the American sycamore and the Oriental plane, the species is thought to have been discovered after an accidental cross-pollination in the Vauxhall nursery of famous botanist and tree-hunter John Tradescant the Younger, who, along with his famous tree-hunter father John Tradescant, travelled to three continents in their lifetime seeking out exotic trees to bring back to the UK.

Tree-hunting was a vocation driven by different ambitions. A wealth of exotic botany enriched the empire, and for tree-hunters, whilst not necessarily having colonial intentions themselves, their work was made possible by following the path of imperial pursuits.

For many plant and tree-hunters, the motivation was also scientific exploration, and to acquire a knowledge of how trees and plants could be used as medicine. However, much of the knowledge of botany's healing power

was already known by natives of these colonised lands. Knowledge and plants were taken, but no credit or remuneration was given back.

It's August 2025, and I step back inside Hoxton Square with the sole intention of revisiting the trees. I am immediately struck by how tall they are. Towering above, the trunks lead to a maze of twirling limbs overhead. As I try to photograph them, I notice how far back I need to stand to be able to take in a whole tree, and as I walk amongst them, my immediate view is, more often than not, just of the trunk itself. Gnarly and twisted with hues of pink, amber, green and white, with a contrast of smooth surfaces peeking through the peeling and cracking of crevices and scales, some trunks are slender, whilst some are rotund with bulging curves. They are strange, beguiling, beautiful and unsettling. I reach out and place my fingers on the bark of a tree before me and consider not only my own passing decades that are connected to it, but of the passing centuries it has stood firm in the ground of this ever-changing cityscape.

Even though the London planes in Hoxton Square are hundreds of years old, it's impossible to define them as ancient, because an ancient tree is classed as such by the age a species would usually die at, and to date a London plane has not died from old age.

It is a tree particularly resilient to pollution, and as a result has become the most populous tree in London. It has been exported globally, and now grows in cities throughout the world. It provides a high density of shade, and while this means the grass beneath it can often struggle to thrive (see the mottled grass in Hoxton Square), shade from trees is known to be vital for keeping the earth's temperature down, something the London plane excels at.

Described in the New Yorker by Alison Kinney (April 2017) as a 'tough immigrant tree that represents us all' she goes on to say how the London plane 'would become New York's most common street tree. Here, like other hardworking immigrants, they performed tireless, invisible labor for the city, sequestering carbon, countering the heat-island effect, and reducing the pollution of storm-water runoff.'

This connecting trees to migration is what drives my work. It's what fascinates and moves me. This tree, and the thousands of other 'non-native' species which grow here in the UK represent the deep-rooted diversity of our nation. In the stories they tell of empire and colonialism, their own roots are dark, but above ground they form a landscape which reflects us all, connecting each of us to its history.

Like us, trees carry wounds. Occlusions are considered as wounds that don't heal, but become part of the tree's journey. But still new wood grows - the tree is certain in its purpose as it continues to reach for the sky, continuing to heal us, both through helping us to understand our collective history, but also by the vital work it does to keep our planet healthy.

Trees are light from darkness. They can become a way not just to relive the past, but to reimagine our future.

When we know how and why a tree exists in our landscape, I ask if their histories can help us to better understand ourselves and the natural world, and dare I dream, help us reach a kinder, more tolerant existence?