

# Peckham Rye Park

# Tree Trail



Smooth Arizona Cypress (No.13)

Bark Detail – Natural Colours

**Christopher Howard**

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# Peckham Rye Park

## Tree Trail



Welcome to Peckham Rye Park and to a trail that leads you past some of our more interesting and notable trees. Trees, those large woody plants that we sometimes take for granted. We benefit from their welcome shade on a hot summer's day, or stroll through the landscape happily accepting the beauty and diversity they bring to our surroundings. That is, until we notice an unusual leaf, strange fruits, or surprising flowers that we'd not noticed before, and then we think: What is that tree? Perhaps this little guide will help. If this is your first visit to the park you will find helpful maps at the Main Gates and at the gate by the car park and café on the north side of the park. There are WCs located behind the Park Manager's office, shown on the map. You will find the comfortable and inviting café just beyond the small parking area, facing onto the common.

**A tree index, glossary and map can be found at the back of this guide**  
**Dates of introduction of trees in the text refer to Britain**

Our trail begins at the park's main entrance facing 'The Oval' lawn, with its flower bed. It was not far from here, in May 1894, that local dignitaries along with an amazingly large crowd of over 90,000 citizens, processed through the borough for the grand opening of the park; by all accounts it was a magnificent occasion.

Peckham Rye Park is a gem. It remains an enduring part of our local heritage; one that is as proudly valued today, as it was in Victorian times.



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With the main entrance gates behind you and facing the oval bed, the tree on your right is a magnificent example of what is most commonly known as (1) a **Copper Beech**, also called Purple Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* Purpurea Group). The tree, when in leaf, has an interesting variation in its colouring. The leaves are quite purple at the branch ends. Then as you move under the tree, you will notice the leaves become quite green but with purple veins; this is because of changes in the colouring pigments (anthocyanins) in the leaves, as the season moves on. These trees can sometimes become a little dull as they age but this one is quite a radiant example. A fine tree.

Taking the path to the left, the next tree to note, on your left and overhanging the path is (2) a **Caucasian Wingnut** (*Pterocarya fraxinifolia*), originally from the Caucasus to N Iran and introduced in 1782. This has big compound lush green leaves that can be 60cm long, with up to 25 leaflets; the leaflets are more oblong than rounded or oval. The tree often has many suckers around the base; but the glory is in the catkins. Tiny red and green flowers appear on shorter catkins in the spring and there is a later development of 'necklaces' up to 50cm long with many green fruits, each with two semi-circular wings. A tree that seems to drip - with interest.

A few metres further on, again on your left, is (3) a **Strawberry Tree** (*Arbutus unedo*). Despite its fruity name the tree has an attractive but unappetising crop of fruits. The previous year's orange fruits ripen to an appealing red and are evident in the early autumn, at the same time as the flowers which are clusters of small white 'bells'. These may seem familiar - the tree is in the same family as the heathers. Its Latin name is telling: *unedo* comes from *unum edo* meaning 'I eat one' or eat only one; don't bother to find out why!

Continuing along the path you come to a small bridge and here on your right you will notice (4) an **Erman's Birch** (*Betula ermanii*). A graceful tree with attractive pale bark. This is not as bright as some of the other birches but makes a good contrast here with its neighbours, particularly in the winter. Its leaves turn a handsome yellow in the autumn.

After the Birch on your right you will see the interesting gates to the community wildlife garden. The gates here merit a closer look to fully appreciate their depictions of flora and fauna. To their left is (5) a **Judas Tree** (*Cercis siliquastrum*), originally from the Eastern Mediterranean and introduced here in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A tree with some unusual characteristics. It has beautiful spring flowering of deep-pink pea-like flowers directly on the branches and even the trunk, followed by the heart-shaped leaves. The tree produces interesting brown pods which often stay on the tree until winter.

Continuing past the Judas Tree you will see a low gate leading to a sloping path into the Japanese Garden. Before going through this gate you will note a small grove of Maple trees on the right-hand side of the path. These are (6) **Cappadocian Maple** (*Acer cappadocicum*), originally from the Caucasus, W China and the Himalaya, introduced into Britain in 1838. You will notice that each of the untoothed lobes of the leaves has a 'whisker' tip to it.

Go back to the Japanese Garden gate, opposite the metal bench. Enter the garden and to the left of the path, you will see the fine conical shape of (7) a **Turkish Hazel** (*Corylus colurna*), native to SE Europe and introduced into Britain in 1582. Note the large leaves, and the fruits when they come. The nuts are slightly larger than those of the Common Hazel, in distinctive frilly and bristly husks, and are much favoured by the squirrels, who take most of them. The tree is also valued for its slightly pink-brown timber, which is used in furniture making. If you look closely at the bark its hue gives a clue to the colour of the timber.

Move into the trees beyond the Hazel at this point, and you cannot fail to notice (8) a **Corkscrew Willow** (*Salix babylonica* var. *pekinensis* 'Tortuosa'), introduced from N China/Japan in 1925. With its madly curling branches and rather buckled leaves, this tree looks as though it's had a nasty shock, but it's quite well, and rather happy in its damp spot here. Wayward flower arrangers seem to like using the tree's twigs, perhaps because they bring a little riotous disorder to otherwise neat arrangements.

Moving back to the path you will see two interesting trees on the right-hand side, behind the small lawn. The first is (9) a **Smooth Japanese Maple** (*Acer palmatum*), introduced in 1820. A delicate tree, whose moss-green leaves turn a vibrant red in the autumn; always a good seasonal performer.

Behind this and to the left, at the back of the border stands (10) a **Campbell's Magnolia** (*Magnolia campbellii*), introduced from the Himalayas in about 1865. This tree, with its large oval leaves is another stunning performer but this time in the spring. Its mass of very large pink flowers can appear as early as February and continue into March. This one is quite sheltered here and if early winds or frost are not too harsh this tree can be the park's biggest show-off. It's definitely one not to miss when in flower.

Following the path you will cross a bridge over an ornamental pond, detour left here with the Japanese Shelter ahead of you. With your back to the shelter you will see (11) a **Monterey Pine** (*Pinus radiata*) introduced from California in 1833. Looking up you may see some of the cones, which grow in small clusters and are individually up to 15cm long; these can stay on the branch for many years. A robust tree, often found in coastal areas, where it tolerates salt spray very well. Note the bark's rough and rugged fissures.

Moving back along the path, towards but before the bridge, on your right you will see the striking outline of (12) a **Dawn Redwood** (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*). An endangered tree in the wild, originally from SW China and introduced in 1947 (Cambridge University Botanic Garden). It is estimated that our tree here could have been planted at about the time of the Queen's coronation. A deciduous conifer notable for its straight trunk and dense spire; it's one of the easiest trees for young children to draw, a big cone on a stick! The foliage on this tree in the spring is a beautiful fresh green and as soft as feathers. This turns a gingery fox-like red in the autumn; always well-dressed when in leaf. Look back at this tree when you get to No.15, to appreciate its form.

Something else here that fascinates children in the summer (not trees) are the giant rhubarb-like plants (*Gunnera manicata*), that grow well in the boggy conditions alongside.

Retrace your steps, moving past the bridge and just before the gate ahead of you and on your right, is (13) a **Smooth Arizona Cypress** (*Cupressus arizonica* var. *glabra*), originally from the USA and introduced in 1907. Quite dense and upwardly sweeping in appearance. Notice the bark, which is particularly attractive with its blue-grey and purple colouring. Small round cones are also evident. (There is a photograph of the bark on the front of this guide).

Turn left through the gates and you will see a lawn on your left; a few steps into this you will come to (14) an **Indian Bean Tree** (*Catalpa bignonioides*), originally from the southern USA and introduced in 1726. This tree seems to play dead for many months and comes into leaf in late June. But what big leaves. They can be up to 30cm across and are followed in July with flower spikes that have been compared to the Foxglove Tree (46), which also has a similar, but larger leaf. However, these flowers are white with very attractive yellow and purple splashes. The fruit are extraordinarily long and thin (up to 40cm) bean pods; these often dangle from the branches through the winter.

Move ahead to the tree with the seat around it. This is a (15) **Blue Atlas Cedar** (*Cedrus atlantica* Glauca Group), attractive for its form and colour. Originally from the Atlas Mountains in North Africa this variety has vigorous growth and it makes a showy ornament to the lawn. Its needles are more silver-grey than blue and you will notice that they are set in little 'bunches' or rosettes.

Now cross towards the bowling green fence to another conifer. This is a (16) **Japanese Red Cedar** (*Cryptomeria japonica*), introduced in 1842. Despite the name this is not a cedar! Its needles are very different to the last tree, a true cedar. This tree is much less common and our specimen usually has a good display of interesting small shaggy cones at the tips of its shoots. The orange-brown stringy bark is another distinctive feature of this handsome tree.

Moving back towards the path at the top of the lawn there are two more trees to note. The first of these, just to the right, is (17) a **Sweet Gum** (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), originally from the USA, it was introduced in 1681. The leaves of this tree fool many into thinking it is a maple, but they are set alternate rather than opposite each other, like maple leaves are. This tree excels in the autumn with its 'hot flush', showing a superb crimson glow given the right conditions.

Beyond the Sweet Gum and near to the path is a maple that appears like something else! This is (18) the **Ash-leaved Maple** or Box Elder (*Acer negundo*), originally from central and N America, introduced about 1688. Its pretty little plumes of flowers appear in March and the unusual leaves follow. They are pinnate, but the leaflets are recognisable as Maple; just, – what do you think? Some have the smallest suggestions of lobes. The winged fruits when they appear confirm the tree as a Maple, but it is a tree that can, and does confuse.

Returning to the main path, continue left, noting a lofty (19) **Cider Gum** (*Eucalyptus gunnii*) with its distinctive bark. The tree originally comes from Australasia, introduced in 1846, it is evergreen and very fast growing. It produces a sap which when fermented can resemble, and some say can taste, like cider – hence the name. We know from our research that Somerset’s apples do a better job.

Following the path you will note the fence of the Sexby Garden on your right. This is adorned with a mature Wisteria which is a real show-off in May/June with its multitude of racemes of fragrant blue flowers.

Enter the Sexby Garden and turn left to (20) the **Maidenhair Tree** (*Ginkgo biloba*), introduced from China in 1758. A fascinating and ancient tree. Fossil records show that the *Ginkgo* existed over 200 million years ago. It has a singular and unmistakable leaf, fan-shaped and split down the middle. It is the only remaining species of the *Ginkgoaceae* family. Without doubt, it is a great survivor. The tree is now popular for street planting in London and these are almost all male trees. Our individual here is a relatively rare female tree and produces ovules that have the most unpleasant and pungent smell. Tread carefully around here in the autumn.



The ‘Sexby’ is a beautiful and peaceful garden to linger awhile; with its bold yew hedges, fragrant roses and colourful planting, it delights all of the senses.



Turn right out of the gate you entered by with the bowling green on your left. There are three large trees to note as you move towards the lake. The first on your left is (21) a mighty **English Oak** (*Quercus robur*), perhaps the best known of the British native trees. Everyone’s friend, it supplies us with excellent timber and provides a free lunch for more leaf-eating insects than any other tree in Britain. Perhaps that’s because a large mature oak like this one has about a quarter of a million leaves!

Moving over the crossroads, the next tree on the left, after another oak, is (22) a **Sycamore** (*Acer pseudoplatanus*). Look for the hanging tails of yellow-green flowers in the spring and the winged fruits in the autumn.

Further on the left, the next tree is (23) a large **Common Ash** (*Fraxinus excelsior*). This is the last of our native trees into leaf; these are pinnate, with opposite pairs of leaflets. It is also one of the first to drop its leaves. The timber is very durable and used for tools, such as fork handles; and still used for traditional wooden hockey sticks. It’s also much valued as fuel, as the wood burns very well, even when green. It has single-winged fruits known as ‘keys’ and they are often seen hanging in large bunches late into the autumn. You should be able to

clearly see the soot-black buds on the branches nearest the ground – a distinctive sign of this common woodland and hedgerow tree.

The last large tree on your right before the lake area is (24) a **London Plane** (*Platanus x hispanica*). A tough tree. Planted a lot in our parks, and as a street tree in London, where it can tolerate high pollution levels. Its leaves are Maple-like but it has some distinctive characteristics in bark and fruits. Among the other large trees on this path it stands out for its scaly bark, showing greys, cream and brown, sometimes called blotchy or like camouflage. The fruits become very noticeable in the winter after the leaves fall. These are 3 centimetre balls of hairy seeds, which then break up and disperse in the spring.

Continue on to the lake and here you will notice (25) a **Golden Weeping Willow** (*Salix x sepulcralis* 'Chryscoma'); best viewed at a distance, it's an easy tree to identify. This tree looks good on a sunny winter's day showing off its yellow-gold twigs.

Take the path to the left, passing some (26) **Common Yew** (*Taxus baccata*). Yew trees are very long-lived, up to an incredible 2,000 years. Some of the oldest are found in churchyards, sometimes older than the church itself and it is thought that the tree had pre-Christian religious significance. The seeds, which are largely enclosed by red fleshy coats called arils, are poisonous, as is the foliage, however, the clippings do have medicinal uses.

Moving on to the pink granite replica water fountain, turn right and immediately you will notice on your left a young (27) **Japanese Hornbeam** or Kuma-shide (*Carpinus japonica*), introduced from Japan in 1895. This is a particularly attractive tree sometimes confused with the European Hop Hornbeam but the seed bracts are subtly different and generally a little longer, which makes them more distinctive. These fruits tend to remain on the tree after the leaves fall looking rather like small lanterns. Beautifully Japanese.

Following the path, the next tree to note on your left, opposite the lifebelt, is (28) a **Trident Maple** (*Acer buergerianum*), originally from eastern China and Korea it was introduced here in about 1890. A fine young tree where the leaves live up to their name (think Neptune) with three forward pointing lobes (or prongs!). The fruits, in common with other maples, come in pairs, each with a wing.

Continue around the lake passing another Weeping Willow and you will come to, on your right, just behind the lake's fence and opposite the path to the sports field, a group of (29) the **Common Alder** (*Alnus glutinosa*), our only native alder. An interesting wetland species, ours are very much at home in this setting by the lake. The timber is waterproof and has been used for centuries where its characteristics are needed, notably in the foundations of buildings in Venice. It's also used for making clogs. Growing near water, these trees usually

keep their leaves until quite late. You can always find a few of the distinctive small ‘cones’, either green, or brown if last year’s.

When you reach the first Weeping Willow (25) take the heavily shaded path to your left. This leads out to a fine avenue of young trees on your right, which runs behind the Sexby Garden where you were earlier. Walk down the avenue and you will notice a very large tree over on your right. This is (30) a **Holm Oak** (*Quercus ilex*) an evergreen oak. Allowed the space and light it has developed a fine shape. The leaves have very slight spines around the edge but lack the deeper lobes found on some other oaks, which makes this magnificent old tree so different from the other oaks you will see in the park.

You now should be into the avenue, with the fenced Arboretum and picnic area on your left. The handsome trees lining the avenue are all (31) **Elms** (*Ulmus* ‘New Horizon’). These were planted in 2004 and are a disease resistant cultivar that is now also being used by the Royal Parks, Hyde Park in particular. Those in our Peckham Rye avenue are particularly fine specimens. Go through the gate half-way along the avenue on your left, and then turn left.

Once in the arboretum, and with the fence on your left, move ahead to the second large tree on your right. This is (32) a large **Red Oak** (*Quercus rubra*), introduced from North America in 1724. This is a little neater in appearance than the English Oak (21). This variety has large leaves looking more cut and pointy than the other oaks on the tree trail. These can go a deep red after a good and long summer and a couple of cold nights. Otherwise, they tend to go a glossy brown before they fall.

Now move towards the far side (South) fence. You will pass on your right (33) a large **Horse Chestnut** (*Aesculus hippocastanum*). This tree has been recently lopped; the development of new growth is awaited.

Continue forward towards the fence and turn right, keeping the fence close on your left. The next large tree is rather unusual (it also has a label). It is (34) a **Cut-leaved Lime** (*Tilia platyphyllos* ‘laciniata’). The leaves of this tree are its most unusual aspect; they are very variable, almost eccentric, giving the tree a charmingly rebellious characteristic when its more regular flowers and fruits appear.

Carry on along the fence line to the 3<sup>rd</sup> large tree, another oak. This is (35) a **Turkey Oak** (*Quercus cerris*), originally from southern Europe and Turkey, and introduced in 1735; it is a fast growing tree. You will recognise the leaf as ‘Oak-like’ (lobed) but varied in shape and size, but not quite as much as the previous tree. The acorn cups are fascinating and quite distinctive; they are sometimes described as mossy because they are very heavily whiskered.



Follow the fence line round towards the corner of the arboretum to the last tree in the corner, a fastigiata (all branches growing upwards) example of (36) the **Hornbeam** (*Carpinus betulus*). Its leaves are beech-like but have distinctive toothed edges and the fruits are borne on 3-lobed bracts. Hornbeam is a very hard wood, long used for butchers' blocks and the cogs in mill wheels. Its fastigiata form makes this a rather neat and attractive tree.

You now head for the opposite fence again, going at an angle through the middle of the picnic tables to (37) an **American Lime** (*Tilia americana*), close by some felled timber. This tree was originally from North America and introduced in 1752. The Americans call it the Basswood. It produces relatively soft, light wood that is popular for hand carving. The North Americans treat it as an important timber tree and its nectar-rich flowers are very popular with bees. Its large leaves are better behaved than the Cut-leaved Lime (34) that you saw earlier.

Leave the arboretum by the gate at the nearest corner, passing another fine example of the Turkish Hazel (7). Turn left along the path for a few paces and you will see off to the right is an interesting large tree that is fairly uncommon. This is (38) a **Single-leaved Ash** (*Fraxinus excelsior* 'Diversifolia'). You saw the Common Ash (23) with its large compound leaves. This tree usually has single leaves, but sometimes 3 leaflets, with quite irregular and jagged teeth and demonstrates how diverse trees can be. This sometimes makes them a challenge to identify. You will now have the satisfaction of pointing this one out as an ash, while others with you, puzzle at the leaves.

Retrace your steps back along the path and as you approach the crossroads you will see on your left (39) a **Whitebeam** (*Sorbus aria*). This tree looks beautiful in the breeze. The leaves are a light dullish-green with a thick white covering of hair underneath in the early summer. The effect is steely-grey rather than silvery, but it does make you smile with its light and dark wave! There are rather dull red berries that follow the small flower heads, which the Blackbirds adore.

Turn left at the crossroads and continue along this path until the first turning right which is a path through the Woodland. Directly opposite the turning note the tree on the left of the main path, usually surrounded by many suckers. This is (40) an **Eastern Balsam Poplar** (*Populus balsamifera*), introduced from North America in 1689. You should be able to smell the sweet scent near the tree, which the buds give off in the spring. The individual leaves have relatively long petioles (leaf stalks) and this allows them to tremble and rustle in the wind. So you can see, smell and hear this tree; all rather touching.

Take the woodland path to a triangular piece of grass where there is (41) a **Honey Locust** (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), originally from the USA. There is beauty in its compound leaves with lots of small delicate leaflets and strange fruits in very large flat dark-brown pods. Their sweet pulp (sought after by squirrels), once used for brewing in America, gave the tree its name.

Next on your right, after the Honey Locust is (42) a **Bird Cherry** (*Prunus padus*). A common tree but not often found in gardens. It is most notable in the late spring for its numerous stiff spikes of white flowers. The cherries later in the year are small, black and rather bitter.

Continuing a few metres forward you come to a fork in the path, located here is (43) a **Swamp Cypress** (*Taxodium distichum*), originally from the southern USA and introduced about 1640 by the botanist and gardener John Tradescant the Younger. This deciduous conifer, despite its name, grows quite happily away from water. Its soft fresh green leaves appear in the spring and these turn to a lovely yellow-bronze in the autumn, which brightens this corner considerably.

Take the left fork and as the path emerges onto the area of open grassland the tree on your right is (44) a **Black Mulberry** (*Morus nigra*), originally from western Asia and introduced in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The large leathery leaves are quite rough to touch and shaped like a heart. The ripe fruit look a little like raspberries. You are advised not to pick them if you want to avoid the long-lasting stains they make! But they do make delicious jam.

On the left is (45) a **Silver Maple** (*Acer saccharinum*), introduced in 1725 from North America. Its five-lobed leaves are a light silver-grey on the underside, hence the name. Like the Whitebeam (39), the contrasting colour looks good in a breeze. This tall maple sits in an open sunny position and usually produces some good autumn tints. Young children often collect the brightly coloured fallen leaves to make pressed leaf tableaux. An innocent pleasure that has delighted their adoring grandparents for generations.

Facing the open meadow take the path to your right. This will take you back to The Oval, where you started. When you get there bear left and ahead of you on the left is a good sized (46) **Foxglove Tree** (*Paulownia tomentosa*) with its smooth grey bark. Originally from N China and introduced in 1838. Best in warm weather when it will give an impressive show of tall heads of violet-blue flowers in May, before the huge heart shaped leaves appear. It goes on to produce interesting beaked seed capsules. It grows freely in the south of France; this one seems very happy in Peckham Rye Park!

Looking back across The Oval you will notice another Caucasian Wingnut (2) on the right, and on the left (47) a **Deodar** (*Cedrus deodara*), originally from western Himalaya, introduced in 1831. It has longer (needle-like) leaves than other cedars. This one is a bit crowded but you can appreciate its form best from this position.



**Do follow this trail again in another season. It is a very pleasant walk and you will be the spectator of another free performance of Nature's Wonderful Tree Show!**

*Thank you for taking our trail, we hope you enjoyed it - The Friends of Peckham Rye Park*

## INDEX

### Trees by English name

<u>Tree Name</u>	<u>Tree No.</u>	<u>Tree Name</u>	<u>Tree No.</u>
Alder, Common	29	Magnolia, Campbell's	10
Ash, Common	23	Maidenhair Tree	20
Ash, Single-leaved	38	Maple, Ash-leaved	18
Beech, Copper	1	Maple, Cappadocian	6
Birch, Erman's	4	Maple, Silver	45
Cedar, Blue Atlas	15	Maple, Smooth Japanese	9
Cedar, Japanese Red	16	Maple, Trident	28
Cherry, Bird	42	Mulberry, Black	44
Chestnut, Horse	33	Oak, English	21
Cypress, Smooth Arizona	13	Oak, Holm	30
Cypress, Swamp	43	Oak, Red	32
Deodar	47	Oak, Turkey	35
Elm	31	Pine, Monterey	11
Foxglove Tree	46	Plane, London	24
Gum, Cider	19	Poplar, Eastern Balsam	40
Gum, Sweet	17	Redwood, Dawn	12
Hazel, Turkish	7	Strawberry Tree	3
Hornbeam	36	Sycamore	22
Hornbeam, Japanese	27	Whitebeam	39
Indian Bean Tree	14	Willow, Corkscrew	8
Judas Tree	5	Willow, Golden Weeping	25
Lime, American	37	Wingnut, Caucasian	2
Lime, Cut-leaved	34	Yew, Common	26
Locust, Honey	41		

## GLOSSARY

**Bract** Modified leaf behind a flower or fruit.

**Catkin** A tail-like cluster of male or female flowers.

**Compound** A single leaf divided into leaflets.

**Cultivar** A cultivated variety produced from a natural species, maintained in cultivation by propagation.

**Hybrid** The offspring of the result of a cross between different species, sub-species or varieties often growing in close vicinity.

**Leaflet** One part of a compound leaf.

**Lobes** Rounded indentations and projections on a leaf edge

**Pinnate** Having leaflets in pairs on either side of the rachis (central stalk).

**Raceme** An elongated flowering part of the plant with stalked flowers

