



Trees in the Royal Victoria Park (RVP) and Bath Botanical Gardens (BBG)

Antonia Johnson

Over the years since we moved to Bath it has been my great pleasure to explore, identify as far as I can, and certainly appreciate the beauty and variety of the treescape planted for us by past Bathonians. Although Bath is judged a Unesco World Heritage site for its historic architecture, it would be a soulless place without its trees, the planes and other species stitched through the public places and the surprises hidden in the corners of parks and cemeteries.

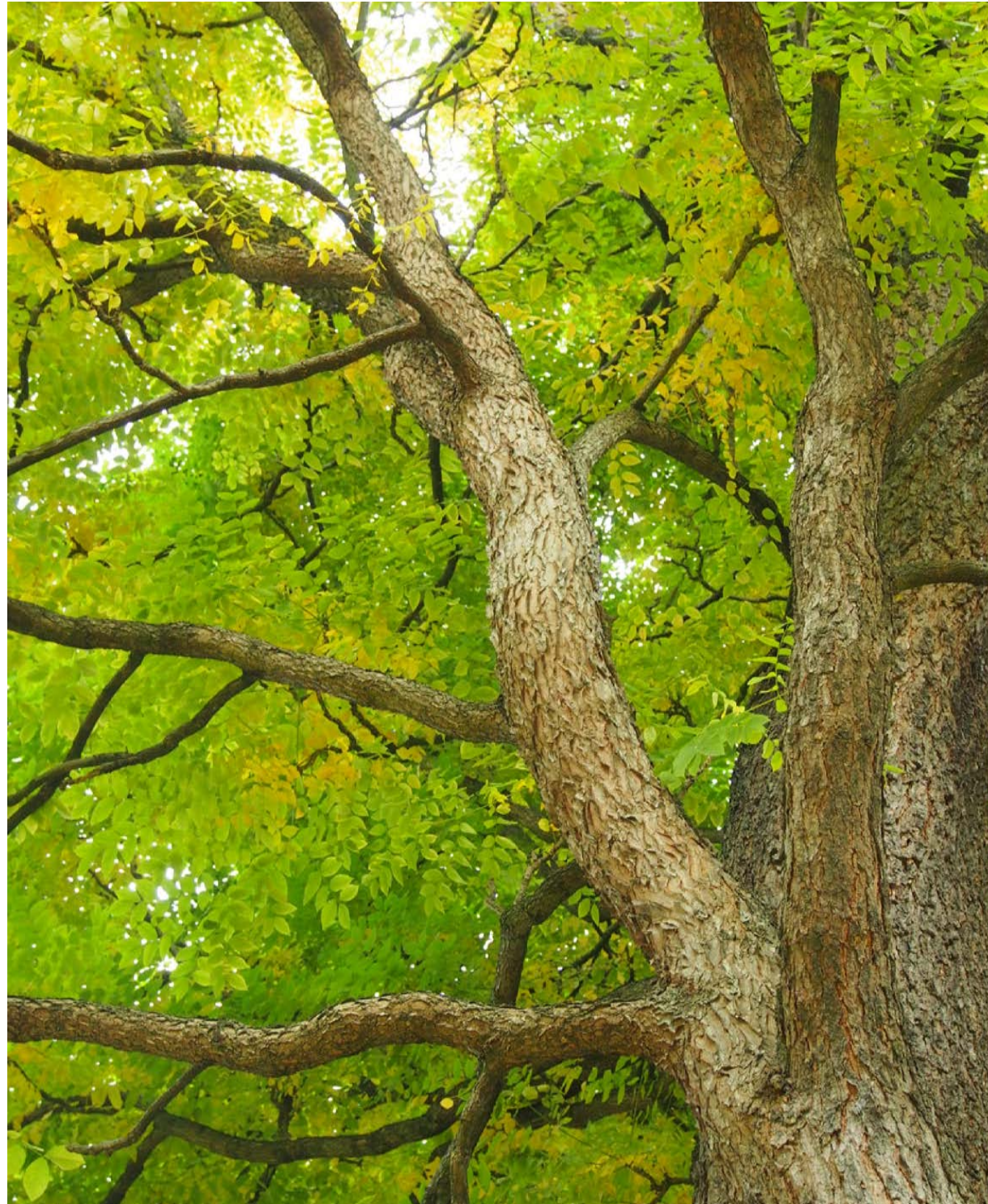
The Royal Victoria Park has the distinction of being amongst the very first parks created by citizens for citizens. Opened in 1829 by the then Princess Victoria, she was so impressed she gave it its 'Royal' epithet. Some 25,000 trees and shrubs were planted in its 23 hectares initially, with the admirable intention of creating an Arboretum for the West of England, and planting has continued, including many rare trees added by Stan Hitt towards the end of last century.

Given it is upwards of 200 years since the Park's creation, we are now blessed with some properly mature specimen trees, as evidenced by the records of TROBI (The Tree Register of the British Isles), which finds 24 champions, and there are many more impressive specimens which just don't quite measure up to the tallest or the broadest in county or country. There are deciduous and coniferous trees, native and non-native, beautiful and curious, and some real rarities.

Given the size of the Park, I find it useful to have a certain tree or group in mind to head towards, although of course you get distracted en route; which tree will vary according to the time of year. For instance, I love the Kentucky coffee tree which looms tall towards the East end of the lawn below the Royal Crescent, but it is good to remember that it comes late into leaf. Properly known as *Gymnocladus dioica*, it can be identified in winter by the very distinctive puckered bark; in full summer the leaves are extraordinary as they can be a metre long, but as they are doubly pinnate, the leaflets having leaflets of their own, the overall appearance is feathery. This specimen is the tallest in Somerset and the broadest in England, but there is another smaller one in the BBG.

To continue on the pinnate theme there are several Golden Rain trees - *Koelreuteria paniculata* - which is lovely in spring with shrimp-pink serrated-leaflet leaves, which then relax into green; in July/August it throws up large panicles of yellow flowers, which set willingly into shiny black seeds encased in papery husks which themselves often colour red if in the sunny spot these prefer. There's one just by the water below the temple in the BBG. Once here you must look at two rare deciduous conifers, not large specimens but beautiful particularly in fresh new leaf.






Gymnocladus dioica

Royal Victoria Park

Photo Antonia Johnson



At the south end of the pond there is a *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* 'Gold Rush' - a golden form of what is known as the dawn redwood, referring I suspect to the origins of the tree in the dawn of time: *Metasequoia* were only known from the fossil record until the 1940s when live trees were found in China, and this was only introduced to England in 1947. The other side of the path there is a variant of the swamp cypress, *Taxodium distichum* var. *imbricatum*, which in spring throws up armies of neat green shoots, which become feathery over time. Out in the RVP near the duckpond you will find the same two genera, without the variations, the taxodium in the curve encircled by a wooden seat (this specimen is somewhat dumpy due to having lost its leader some time in the past) and on the slope above is a beautifully shaped *M. glyptostroboides*. Both produce cones.

To return to the pinnate leaves theme, there is a champion *Gleditsia triacanthos* 'Inermis' at the junction of one of the cross-paths in the middle of the RVP, very noticeable because it has a characterfully swollen lower trunk. In autumn you may find its long brown pods scattered about; in a continental climate I have seen gleditsia very heavily swagged with these. One of the most spectacular pinnate-leaved trees is to the SW of the BBG, and this is worth finding in most seasons: in midsummer it will have developed its long dangling chains of seeds that give a hint to its common name, as each link in the chain is a winged seed, and this is the Caucasian wingnut, *Pterocarya fraxinifolia*. The species name says its leaves are like those of an ash, *Fraxinus*. In autumn the tree colours well; and once the leaves have dropped it is worth taking a close look at the bare shoots - literally bare as this is one of the relatively few trees not to encase next years folded-up leaves in a protective bud case.

Turn your back to the wingnut and you will see a good plain English oak - parks need their native contingent as well as the exotics, for comfort both for human and for insect visitors. Beyond the oak along the path are an assortment of trees, limes and acers and beech and planes, and there's a lovely carpet of crocus under them in spring.

Cross the path and look left and there is another tree with striking infructescences, the Turkish hazel, *Corylus colurna*. It was when I first knew it a very clear candle shape, but having put on another ten years' growth it is looser, and flowers (catkins in February) and fruits all the better. The nuts are in dense clusters with long fringed husks.

Beyond the hazel, just into the gates of the BBG, are two spectacular ginkgos. The ginkgo outdoes metasequoia in the ancient stakes, as ginkgo-ish trees are known in the fossil record over 200 million years ago; no one is sure where they originated, as they have been prized and planted at temples through China and Japan for millennia. *Ginkgo biloba* are dioecious trees, being either male or female, and the 2nd of these is a female, which regularly produces its seeds plentifully. Careful collecting these, prized as they are in Asian cuisine and health regimes, as they are covered in a fleshy husk which smells quite spectacularly awful as it rots, which it has to do to release the nut. Beyond the BBG in the Dell there is another ginkgo which is definitely male as I have photographed its woolly catkins one spring. Another dioecious species is *Broussonetia papyrifera*, the paper mulberry, and we have one to the south of the (did I mention?) possibly grandest tree in the whole park, the enormous cut-leaf beech, *Fagus sylvatica* 'Aspleniifolia'. 'Our' *Broussonetia* is a female, with bobbly fruits in autumn that would turn bright orange if we were transported to the Mediterranean; sadly I have yet to see a male anywhere in Bath...

This is just a typical wander around the Park, looking at a random selection, but no short essay would encompass anything like all the trees worth the detour; you just have to keep going, and wandering, and looking.



Pterocarya fraxinifolia

Photo: Antonia Johnson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antonia Johnson has been studying trees for many years.

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and she recommends:

www.treeregister.org

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