

Bringing back the poplars

An iconic tree from our landscape has all but disappeared from the riverside. Bridget Flanagan from the Great Ouse Valley Trust describes efforts to reinstate it.

The number of Black Poplar trees in Huntingdonshire received a significant boost this month. Local landowner and farmer Alf Peacock invited the Great Ouse Valley Trust to plant twelve young trees along the riverbank in West Meadow opposite Brampton Mill. The Black Poplar, *Populus nigra*, sometimes called the Water Poplar, is one of Britain's rarest native trees. These trees like boggy places, ditches and wet meadows and as many of these habitats have been drained and lost to modern agricultural practices, their numbers have declined. In 2006 a national survey counted around only 7,000 Black Poplars, and in Huntingdonshire just 40 mature trees are recorded.

Black Poplars are magnificent trees in maturity, reaching a height of about 30 metres (100 feet) with thick fissured trunks covered in big lumpy burrs. At this time of year their outer branches take on an amber glow in the spring sunshine and this will be followed by wonderful crimson catkins on the male trees. They have glossy green triangular-shaped leaves, and these are tremulous like all poplars. Two hundred years ago the Black Poplar was a common feature of lowland meadows. The trees can be seen in Constable's paintings of the Stour Valley and Flatford Mill – a landscape with many similarities to that of ours in the Ouse Valley. Constable's hay wain was very probably made from Black Poplar wood - a lightweight, springy timber well suited for planking, floorboards and cart-wheels. (The hay wain is standing in the river to swell the wood of its wheels to keep the iron rims tight.)



The Hay Wain by John Constable (National Gallery)



The Trust work party planting a Black Poplar whip

Black Poplars almost never reproduce naturally, and this is another reason for their decline. Male and female trees must be in close proximity for seeds to be produced. The seeds are viable for little more than two weeks and must fall on bare wet ground to germinate. And as female trees are especially rare and account for fewer than 10% of the national total it is obvious that Black Poplars now rely on man for their survival.

Last year a splendid old Black Poplar on Clark's Island in Godmanchester was toppled by high winds. It is sad to see the end of a great tree. Its broken skeleton lay on the meadow to become a fun climbing feature for children, until it was all cleared away. However, the good news is that many more Black Poplars are returning to the Great Ouse valley. In the last few years there have been successful plantings at the Pightle Millennium Green in Eaton Socon,

Hinchingbrooke Country Park and Hemingford Grey. The Community Nursery in Godmanchester has grown young 'whips' that have been planted on Judith's Field, the Recreation Ground and the old Osier Beds in Godmanchester. The new Nursery Manager, Oscar Jeakins, is very keen to keep up the supply of genuine local Black Poplars - male and female – so that the Great Ouse Valley Trust can keep planting these imposing trees and restore our landscape for future generations.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire.

For more information about the Trust please visit

www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk

