The Cage Pollard at Burnham Beeches, Buckinghamshire

The Cage Pollard is one of the 400-500-year-old beech trees that can be found in Burnham Beeches, an ancient wooded common owned and managed by the City of London. Cut in the past for wood fuel for local use, the trees were abandoned approximately 200 years ago, resulting in very heavy branches on fragile stems. Many of the estimated 3,000 original trees have been lost as they have fallen over or fallen apart so now only some 420 remain.

The Beeches has a long history of public access and in Victorian times there were many named trees featured on postcards and in guidebooks. These included the Twins, the Lion of the Plains, His Majesty and the Elephant Tree. Due to the long association with famous artistic and musical people there was also Thomas Gray’s Tree, Mendelssohn’s Tree and the Jenny Lind Tree. Sadly all of these have now disappeared.

In the late 1980s restoration started on the ancient beech trees and the first stage involved clearing encroaching holly and birch. In the process some amazingly shaped trees were discovered, including one with a trunk that resembled a cage, with a series of struts around a hollow centre. Shortly after the clearance, filming began on Robin Hood Prince of Thieves. An area was sought to film a burial scene with Kevin Costner and Morgan Freeman and the recent clearance around the Cage Pollard was ideal, with the tree forming a fitting backdrop.

In subsequent years the film-star-tree has been a popular place for visitors to have their photographs taken and in 2002 it was named by the Tree Council as one of the 50 Great British Trees for the Queen’s Golden Jubilee. Too much love had consequences for the tree and a fence was erected around it to reduce compaction and disintegration. Despite several stages of restoration cutting, the tree has become increasingly unbalanced and some of the cage-like struts have fallen apart. Wooden props were erected to stop it falling over in 2005 and these were replaced in 2015 by bespoke metal ones. The live parts of the tree are still growing well and put on good extension growth annually, so it is hoped it will survive for many more years.

The Ancient Tree Forum champions the biological, cultural and heritage value of Britain’s ancient and veteran trees and provides advice on their value and management at www.ancienttreeforum.co.uk.