Trinity’s Trees

This year Trinity lost three iconic trees – the two venerable Oregon maples that had stood in Library Square for almost 180 years, and a third smaller, probably younger Oregon maple in New Square.

The Oregon maples in Library Square, possibly the oldest trees on campus, were amongst the largest known specimens in Ireland and the UK, and in Europe. It is reputed that they arose from the first consignment of seed brought back to Ireland by David Douglas in 1827.

The first to go, the Oregon maple on the GMB side of Library Square, collapsed unexpectedly and dramatically in the early hours of Saturday 2nd June. This produced an outpouring on social media, including a tweet from the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, TD, who, like generations of Trinity graduates mourned the tree he had loved.
These mainly deciduous trees range from all over the world and include 12 species of maple, seven species of oak, magnolia, rowan, ash, mulberry, arbutus, alder, birch, wild cherry, holly and hawthorn.
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Trinity’s trees are regularly surveyed by leading tree experts, Bartlett Consultants, to assess their condition using a variety of techniques, including state-of-the-art tomography (similar to an ultrasound scan providing coloured images of sections through the trunk or branches of a tree). The April 2018 survey indicated concerns about the condition of all three Oregon maples, particularly the one in New Square, but it was not believed they were in immediate danger of collapse and it was hoped that the life of the Library Square maples might be prolonged through remedial works.

It is not known, and probably never will be, why the maple in Library Square collapsed at the time it did. The very hot weather may have played a part, causing exceptional physiological and physical stress to a tree that was not in tip-top condition.

Following the dramatic collapse of this tree, the decision was taken to proceed with felling the smaller Oregon maple in New Square. The April survey had revealed a large amount of dead or damaged wood on its trunk as well as two different wood-decaying fungi (Ganoderma applanatum / australic and Bjerkandera adjusta) infecting the trunk and roots. The tree was already known to be in poor condition and in anticipation of its likely felling, the Grounds and Gardens Advisory Committee had planted replacement trees close by a number of years ago - an Irish Sessile Oak (Quercus petraea) from Killarney and a Beech (Fagus sylvatica). These will soon occlude the gap, rapidly remaking the landscape of that part of the university.

It was initially hoped to save the remaining maple in Library Square through remedial works - lightening the canopy, and treating the roots and some of the limbs with a mixture of fungicide and nutrient solution. However, as work began removing a major limb (and another smaller limb to balance the weight of the crown), it became evident that the tree was more infected with wood decay fungus (Polyporus squamosus) than foreseen and its structure was so highly compromised that any further work would likely lead to immediate collapse. This necessitated the felling of the tree.

The Provost and the Grounds and Gardens Advisory Committee have agreed not to rush into immediate replanting. Instead this unique opportunity will be used to comprehensively consult and plan for the future of Library Square. Since the university requires an integrated plan covering the next 150 years, this process will take at least a year.

In the short term, the remaining stumps have been cleaned and sanded so that the tree-rings can be counted and viewed. A number of slices or sections of the stumps have been taken away for further investigation: eventually the stumps will be ground out.

The many other trees – 466 in total - on Trinity’s campus are enjoyed by staff, students and visitors alike. These mainly deciduous trees range from all over the world and include 12 species of maple, seven species of oak, magnolia, rowan, ash, mulberry, arbutus, alder, birch, wild cherry, holly and hawthorn. The wych elm which was the last survivor from the epidemic of Dutch elm disease that killed 60 elms in Trinity in the 1970s was removed in July as the main stem has split in high winds and it became unsafe.

Interestingly, one of the birch trees in Parliament Square on the lawns just inside Front Gate is considerably larger than the other, despite both being of the same genetic strain and planted at the same time, more than six decades ago. Trinity was built on the site of All Hallows Priory and the archaeological remains lie beneath Front Square. It is likely that the smaller tree is located just above some of the masonry remains and this has restricted its growth.

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Not all trees on campus are outside: an indoor arboretum in the Hamilton Building is home to tropical plants, including a banana tree which is 30 feet tall...
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