Bruce Castle Oak

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Ancient trees are living history and never more so than when enclosed within highly populated urban landscapes such as North London. Tottenham's Bruce Castle Oak sits in Tottenham's oldest park. It owes its name to the 13th century Scot Robert the Bruce who once owned the land. The tree is around 450 years old (based on J E J White 1998 methodology) and was therefore established around 1570, 250 years after Bruce's lands were confiscated following the battle of Bannockburn. Inevitably little is known of its early years, but it may have begun as a boundary tree between two tenanted plots.

The tree is a Sessile Oak (*Quercus petraea*), unusual for native oaks in South East England where Pedunculate Oak is more common (*Q. robur*). It was open grown, as evidenced by its very long, low limbs. Unfortunately, long low branches are mechanically hard to sustain because the tree has to reach ever further for light outside the shade of its higher branches. These long levers exert massive forces as the branch union suspends them against gravity. Consequently, this tree has suffered two huge limb failures.

Although there is little written history pre-2000, being an urban tree is has been captured in photographs for over 100 years. A postcard of 1907 in the Haringey Archives shows a taller

tree with a dying upper crown. By 1953 this had gone and the lower form of the tree we see today was established. Then in about 1987 and again in 2011 huge low limbs fell away.

Photo: Wounds where two huge low branches tore off circa 1987(?) and 2011.

Having lost its central leader, the crown has reiterated and retrenched to form an impressive 33m wide canopy 16m tall all on a hollow bole. A basal cavity was partially filled with concrete in the days when concerned ignorance favoured such interventions. Fortunately, recent concern has been more informed, and veteran tree specialist Luke Steer examined the tree for the Woodland Trust after it was nominated as England's Tree of the Year 2018 (it came second).

Unobtrusive wooden props support the remaining low limbs, but as they are 20 years old, and one sports an Artist's Bracket of its own, replacements might be in order. Urban trees often endure vandalism, and last year this tree's unusual age attracted bizarre rituals involving fires, floral offerings and the removal of huge quantities of priceless wood mould. Haringey council responded quickly with Hares fencing but it's an ugly, short-term safeguard.

Photo: recent branch tearout in the upper crown and a similar much older wound to the right.

Sessile Oak favours the damper climate of the west of the UK and therefore in hot, drought stressed London one might have been expected the tree to suffer during 2022. So far it looks fine, although a high branch tore out in early September exposing brown heart rot. The failure, much smaller than those earlier, was very likely drought related. A heavy mast crop of huge acorns swollen by late rain probably played a part. Such limb failures are often called Summer (or Sudden) Branch Drop, but other than drought, and an absence of wind loading, we cannot really explain, still less predict, SBD.

Photo: *Tillus elongatus* – a predator of decaying wood invertebrates, especially Fan-bearing Wood-borer beetles.

There are a few younger but still impressive oaks nearby which makes the area a refugia for species that have survived the felling of Tottenham's forest. There are perhaps 20 oaks of over 100 years old in this stepping stone between the ancient woodlands of Haringey and Epping Forest. The Bruce Castle Oak hosts Beefsteak and Oak Brackets, which in turn create decaying wood and wood mould for Lesser Stag, Darkling, Longhorn and other beetles.

Hopefully greater fame might bring greater resources and respect for this urban giant. Certainly, some increased root protection would help, especially from the annual funfair which encroaches significantly into the tree's vast root area. Excluding anything heavier than a large human for a 30m radius would be a good start and a 15m mulch area might help in future droughts.

Photo: **Nocturnal Darkling beetles** ***Nalassus laevioctostriatus.***