

# the sycamore gap tree — one tragedy among thousands

**Heather Rumble, Dean Bell, Adam Cormack, Kenton Rogers and Danni Sinnett** consider the need for greater protection for our urban trees and our old trees of special meaning and value

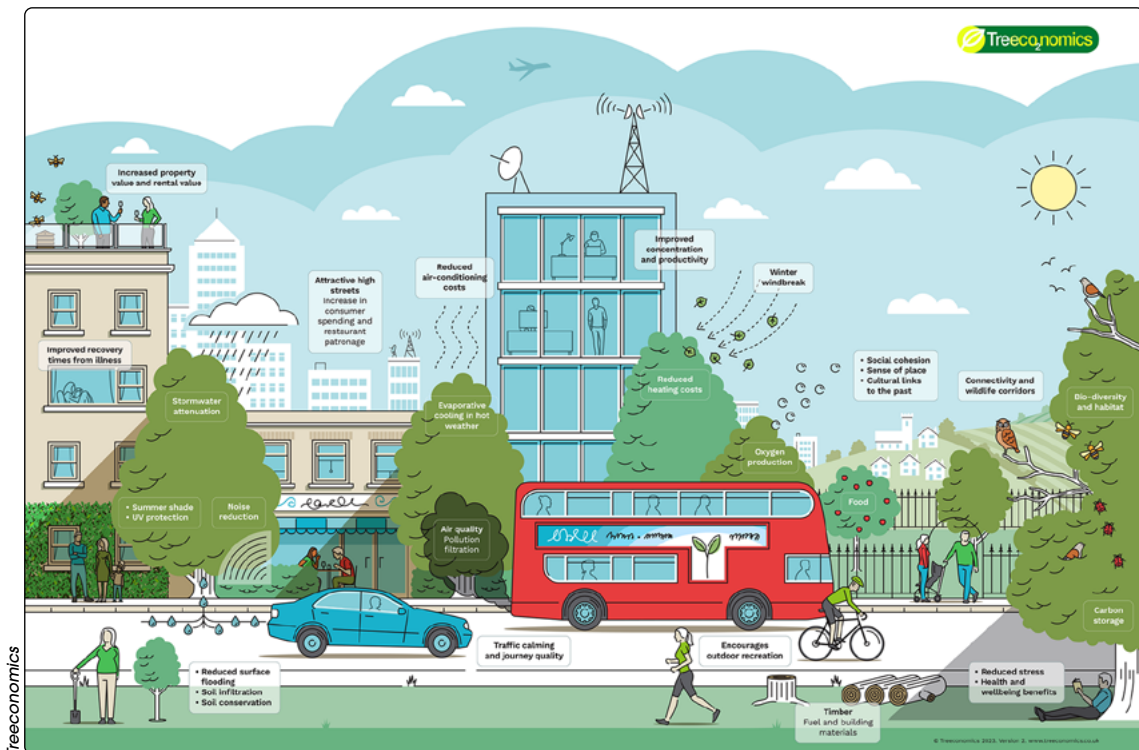


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**The Sycamore Gap tree near Hexham in Northumberland, before it was felled**

Soon after daybreak on 28 September 2023 a collective gasp rang out across the British Isles. Under the cover of darkness, a devastating crime had been committed: a single tree, living in a small gap in Hadrian's Wall, had been felled in the night. The outpouring of emotion that followed was palpable. Media crews rushed to the remote spot in Northumberland National Park. The telephones of tree experts and notable enthusiasts rang all day as journalist sought quotes. People trawled through photo albums and Facebook looking for a last picture taken of the spot—'We were there just months ago'; 'We could have been some of the last people to see it'; 'We decided to get married there'; 'We were there in 1967 with our grandparents; the World was so different then'.

The felling of the Sycamore Gap tree<sup>1</sup> was a terrible event. It was also a moment for reflection. We know that trees are good for us: they cool our cities in summer,<sup>2</sup> they purify our air,<sup>3</sup> they absorb carbon, and they support a myriad of species that we rely on for survival (native oaks alone support more than 2,300 other species<sup>4</sup>). We also know that they benefit our mental and physical health—for example, time spent in natural surroundings reduces inflammation,<sup>5</sup> reduces cortisol levels<sup>6</sup> and makes the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD<sup>7</sup> and dementia<sup>8</sup> more manageable. Trees are a vital components of the natural world, their leaves and branches making up the all-important 'natural fractals' (irregular shapes that we find in nature) that benefit our brains.<sup>9</sup>



## The benefits of trees

But the furore around the Sycamore Gap felling has demonstrated that our need for trees might run deeper than we think. They form part of our cultural landscape. They are a backdrop to our important life events. They form the character of places that have meaning to us. They connect us to our past and help us to celebrate the future. They help us to identify the changing of the seasons. They are a landmark, helping us to punctuate time and space to create meaningful events and places.

For those of us surveying trees in cities, hovering around a tree with a clipboard inevitably sparks attention from someone in the neighbourhood. Before a tape measure has even been drawn, there is often a shout from a nearby window: ‘You’re not going to chop that tree down, are you?’—depressing that an official with a clipboard appears to signify the destruction of a tree, but enlivening to witness people’s passion for, and defence of, trees.

It is no wonder that a clipboard is a worrying sight for nemophilists (tree lovers!). Recent events in Plymouth,<sup>10</sup> Sheffield<sup>11</sup> and Tooting (the ‘chainsaw massacre’)<sup>12</sup> have highlighted that, as important as trees are in our landscape, the funding and protection that they need to be able to persist, especially in urban areas, often are not there. While heritage buildings, battlefields and ancient monuments can be, and often are, protected by law, we have no specific mechanism for protecting our oldest and most special heritage trees—and we should not forget that it is these older, larger-canopy trees that

often provide the greatest benefits. Nor can we protect trees that have special, cultural meaning to us or define the neighbourhoods in which we live.

In Poland, around 30,000 trees are legally protected as natural monuments,<sup>13</sup> in recognition of their cultural value and driving their active conservation. In Italy, a similar law protects 22,000 monumental trees.<sup>14</sup> No such protection exists in the UK, even though the Woodland Trust’s Ancient Tree Inventory<sup>15</sup> now lists 180,000 trees, including 20,000 verified ancient trees, that would benefit from legal protection.

Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) can be granted by local authorities, resulting in fines or even prison sentences for people damaging or cutting down trees. But TPOs cover a tiny proportion of trees in most places; many of us have witnessed community groups planting trees on their land (as is their right), only for a neighbour to cut them down in the night or poison them with weed killer. Although such vandalism is illegal, in reality little recourse is available to these groups. TPOs are also difficult to action, with objectors able to overturn them within the first six months of the granting of the initial temporary order and the grant of planning permission for development trumping a tree’s protected status.<sup>16</sup>

Major infrastructure projects could do better too: thousands of trees have been felled to make way for HS2, many of which have not been accounted for within the project’s ‘no net loss’ methodology.<sup>17</sup> This means a reduction in the amount of compensatory habitat creation that is required of the project.

While there are ambitious tree-planting targets in many UK cities and ambitious rewilding projects outside of cities, there is clearly a widespread attitude that one tree is replaceable by another, regardless of its age or what it means to people.

The veteran Cubbington Pear<sup>18</sup> is a case in point: felled, with the stump moved 100 metres under the HS2 project to re-sprout as a new sapling, its character now completely different and its services to biodiversity diminished. The question—aside from ‘who are we to end the life of a 200-year-old tree?’—is: will the new pear reach the grand old age of 250 years without proper protection? And there was no guarantee that the moving process itself would be a success: many trees fail to establish once planted or moved,<sup>19</sup> in some cases owing to natural processes but in many others the result of neglect or improper planting. A focus on planting numbers as opposed to a commitment to tree establishment frequently results in planting efforts going to waste, with trees dying by the roadside as a result of a lack of appropriate aftercare.

Furthermore, it is usually the case that responsibility for planting and preserving trees is assumed to rest with local authorities—but they have little control over trees in the private realm, which is where the majority of urban trees are found. Many of these trees are being lost to development or the changing preferences of households. Development has hitherto overwhelmingly failed to consider trees, and will have to be more mindful in light of the new Biodiversity Net Gain requirement.<sup>20</sup> However, the view that ‘one tree is as good as another’ still largely prevails: sometimes a mature tree is felled only for a new tree to be replanted mere metres away from the site of the lost tree.

Within domestic settings, the conversation seems almost taboo. A person’s home is their castle, regardless of the fact that private gardens collectively form a large proportion of a city’s footprint and have impacts on the wider landscape. Even in London, private gardens make up a quarter of the city’s land mass.<sup>21</sup> According to the *Trees in Towns II* report,<sup>22</sup> ‘Two thirds of all trees and shrubs were on private property (mainly in gardens) or on less accessible public land (e.g. schools, churchyards, allotments, etc.)’. Although these trees are often smaller, they are usually more diverse and in better condition than those on public land.<sup>23</sup> They have a significant impact on city-wide ecosystem service provision, urban biodiversity and the wellbeing of our neighbours. But never make the mistake of falling in love with a neighbour’s tree...

So what is being done to reverse the plight of the urban tree? The Woodland Trust is campaigning hard to ensure proper protection for trees, seeking support from the public as well as from politicians. More than 70,000 people have signed its Living Legends petition,<sup>24</sup> which calls for legally protected status for our oldest heritage trees.



**Cherry Tree Walk—but not a tree in sight**

In terms of the broader urban forest, 41% of local authorities now have publicly accessible tree strategies<sup>25</sup> that form the basis for long-term, sustainable urban forest management, helping curb unnecessary tree removal and prioritising planting in areas of need. Torfaen County Borough Council’s ‘Branching Out’ project,<sup>26</sup> part of its tree strategy, is a great example, adding public engagement by asking residents to identify areas in which they would like to see more trees planted, creating social buy-in on public (and private) land.

New tools are also strengthening such strategies and ensuring that trees are established in areas of most need. We know that lower socio-economic status areas are also the areas in which trees are most lacking<sup>27</sup> and their habitats the least protected.<sup>28</sup> In December 2023 a partnership of the Woodland Trust, the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare and American Forests launched the Tree Equity Score UK,<sup>29</sup> which combines tree canopy, socio-economic, air and heat pollution data to help identify priority urban areas for increasing urban tree canopy cover for those who most need it. The Tree Equity Score should also help when it comes to starting conversations about community level tree canopy conservation, also engaging those with trees on private property in the conversation.

There are so many dimensions to an urban tree’s life that we, as planners, can have an impact upon. With luck and the right conditions, the Sycamore Gap tree will live on in a new form on Hadrian’s Wall. But a walk down your local Elm Street,

Almond Close or Oakland Drive will soon tell you that our urban trees rarely have that opportunity.

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## Notes

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