

Black poplar *Populus nigra* ssp. *betulifolia* (native, or British, black poplar) was a common tree in the countryside; it is portrayed in the painting 'The Hay Wain' by John Constable. Commonly planted in C19, it likes wet conditions and grows often along streams and rivers.

Mature black poplars are large trees, often leaning and with an ungainly appearance with massively arching, down-curved branches and deeply grooved, heavily burred trunks. They are often difficult to distinguish from **hybrid black poplar** *Populus x canadensis*. C20 plantings of black poplar have been predominantly of the hybrid type – which therefore tend to be younger than the natives (but not necessarily smaller!).

Black poplars (like other poplars) are 'dioecious': they have separate male and female trees. In the Spring, the male trees produce red catkins **A** and the female trees green catkins. In the Summer, female trees produce large quantities of white fluff **B** (poplars are also called 'cottonwoods' in the USA). Female trees were less commonly planted as their prolific seeding was considered to be a nuisance.



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USES OF THE WOOD

As black poplar wood is heat- and fire-resistant, it was used in mill buildings and for flooring near fires. Its shock-absorbent properties were exploited in wagon bottoms and it was used for rifle butts in WW1 & 2. Thin branches from pollarded black poplars were used for hurdles and fruit baskets.

IDENTIFYING POPLAR TREES

There are many varieties of poplar tree in Hackney, most of which can be seen on Hackney Marshes.

BLACK POPLAR TREES IN HACKNEY



Native black poplars (centre) in Wick Wood in Autumn, revealing the shapes of their branches. The leaves to the left are also of native black poplar, planted in 1996.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Buses: All areas are near to bus routes. See: www.tfl.gov.uk/buses; or phone 020 7222 1234

Trains: Some nearby stations are marked ⇌

This leaflet was prepared by Anne Woollett and Mike Trier with assistance from Annie Chipchase, Ian Graham and Russell Miller.

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www.hackneyenvironment.org.uk

All poplars have triangular-shaped leaves arranged alternately on the twigs, and rough, deeply-grooved bark when mature **C**.



Native black poplar has a darker trunk (hence 'black' poplar), and is more gnarled and less upright than the hybrid. Spiral galls – distinctive swellings on the leaf stalks – are thought to be specific to native black poplars and may confirm their native origin.

Other poplars in Hackney are:

Lombardy Poplar *Populus nigra* 'Italica': a tall, thin tree. (Round N changing-rooms, Hackney Marsh.)

White & Grey Poplar *Populus alba* & *P. canescens*: leaves with white or grey underside, distinctive in the breeze. (Marsh side of the path along old River Lea, NE corner of Marshes.)

Aspen *Populus tremula*: long catkins; leaves which tremble in the wind. (Wick Wood & East Marsh.)

Balsam & Western Balsam Poplar *Populus glabra* & *P. trichocarpa*: flowers have an aromatic smell of balsam. (Rows along Homerton Road and on the Marsh side of the path round the Marshes. Planted in 1980s and now very tall.)

THE FUTURE OF NATIVE BLACK POPLARS

According to the Forestry Commission, there are about 7000 native black poplars in the UK, of which 600 are female. In the past it was the practice to plant predominantly male clones, resulting in little natural regeneration. The loss of suitable habitats, such as flooded meadows, threaten existing populations of native black poplars. As a result, they have become rare. The practice of cloning also results in a lack of genetic diversity which leaves the trees susceptible to disease. This is the case in Manchester where hundreds are to be felled, having been infected with what is thought to be poplar scab.

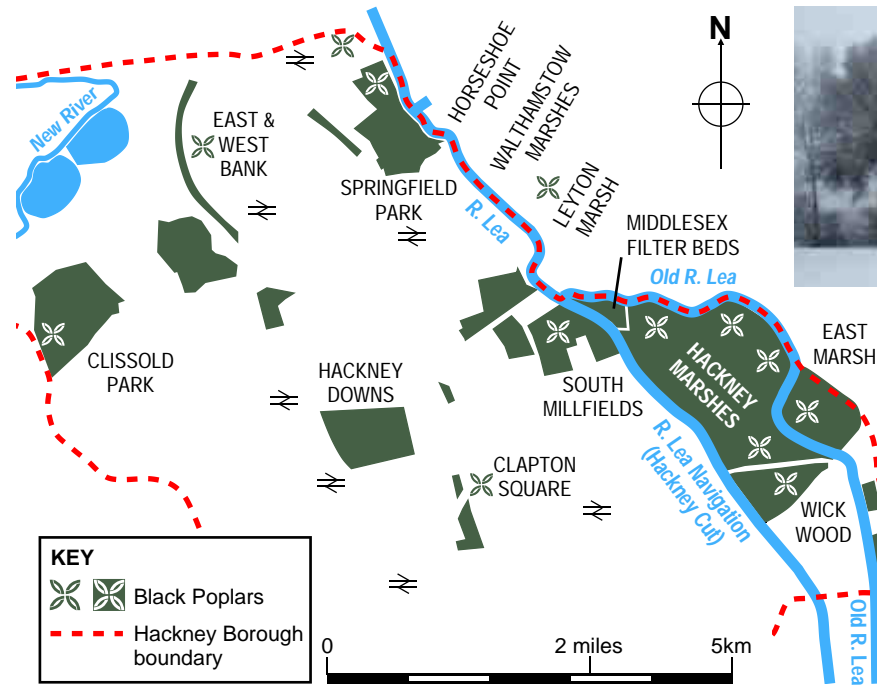
Because of their rarity, GLA Biodiversity Partnership designated them a Flagship London species. (See under 'further information', overleaf.)

LOCATIONS OF MATURE NATIVE BLACK POPLARS

There are over 40 mature native black poplar trees on Hackney Marshes, so probably over 50 in Hackney. The map shows their general locations, and the list (opposite) gives further details.



A native black poplar leaning across the Old River Lea, with another one reflected in the water in the background.



If you know of any native black poplar trees in Hackney to add to this list, please contact Hackney's Tree Officer: lan.Graham@hackney.gov.uk

For further information on black poplars, see:
<http://pages.eidosnet.co.uk/proe/>
http://www.lbp.org.uk/03action_pdfs/ac24_poplar.rtf



- Clissold Park** One next to Green Lanes.
- East & West Bank** Two (and possibly one female) along railway cutting.
- Springfield Park** A row along River Lea next to Spring Hill Sports Ground; and in Craven Park Rd.
- Clapton Square** One at SW corner.
- South Millfields** One, pollarded, under overhead power lines.
- Hackney Marshes** One landmark tree (*above left*), N end of Marshes; row along Old River Lea, interplanted with planes and ash (including Red Ash, in National Register); 12 gateway trees along Homerton Rd (*above right*).
- East Marsh** Three near New Spitalfields Market.
- Wick Wood** Six gateway trees.
- Walthamstow Marshes (LB Waltham Forest)** One at E end of boundary bank with Leyton Marsh.

Most of Hackney's mature native black poplars are on Hackney Marshes and were planted when the Marshes first came into public ownership in 1890s. Some have been lost in recent years, including one at the N end of Hackney Marshes (*foreground in photo above*) – cut down by the Environment Agency in 2006. There is new growth from the base of this tree, and it is hoped that it might regenerate. The original trees probably came from Noble's Nursery in Pond Lane – now Millfields Road.

New plantings
 Because the old trees are scarce, new ones – especially females – are needed to increase genetic diversity and maintain a viable population.

In Wick Wood in 1996, over 40 trees specially grown from cuttings taken in Essex were planted along the main path. The trees are fast-growing; and after ten years many are 10m (30ft) tall. Volunteers in HMUG & Tree Musketeers worked with Parks Tree Gang to 'lift' the crowns of the trees and let in light to the woodland floor (*right*). Cuttings were taken and potted-up in the Tree Nursery on Hackney Marshes. These are now being planted out in Springfield Park and on Hackney Downs. Young native black poplars have also been planted along the Old River Lea, some of which are now quite tall.



Potting up native black poplar cuttings (*below*) at the Tree Nursery on Hackney Marshes. They were taken from mature trees in Wick Wood in 2004 and were ready for planting out 18 months later (*right*).

