

Inspiring Oak Trees

A talk by Megan Dobbyn, Visitor Assistant at Leeds Art Gallery

Oak trees, gods of the forest, ancient spaces for worship, meeting places and creative inspiration. My talk today focuses on local oak trees linked to our collection at Leeds Art Gallery.

Cowthorpe oak

One of the first paintings I'm going to talk about is the Cowthorpe Oak, it's in our permanent collection, currently displayed in the Ziff gallery. The painting depicts a famous local tree with a fascinating history. The Cowthorpe Oak was painted by John Rhodes, John was the son of local well-known Leeds artist Joseph Rhodes. John was born in Leeds in 1809 and died in 1842 at his cottage in Harehills Lane near Leeds at the young age of 33.

Painted in 1840, this painting shows a large oak tree against a delicate rosy sky, this is The Cowthorpe Oak in North Yorkshire. This oak tree was famous for its age and size and has been sketched by the artist JMW Turner, as well as mentioned in one of Shakespeare's plays 'As You Like It' as 'An oak whose boughs were mossed with age, and high top bald with dry antiquity'

It was said to cover 2000 m² of land, over half an acre! It is thought to date as far back as Roman Britain. Hundreds of visitors would come to see the tree and picnic by it. At one point no tour of the north was considered complete without a stop at the mighty oak tree. By 1822 much of the tree was beginning to die and many branches were supported by wooden props that you can see in Rhodes painting. Sadly the tree's life came to an end in 1950.

The legacy of the tree still continues in paintings, drawings and even more importantly through its acorns. The Runciman Oak grew from an acorn taken from the Cowthorpe Oak by Captain James Runciman and planted in the 1870s in New Zealand. The Runciman Oak too has many acorn descendants planted nearby.

Headingley Shire oak

John Rhodes must have been fond of oak trees as he also drew the sketch of the Headingley Shire Oak, another very famous local oak tree. Headingley originated from a 9th century Danish settlement which formed part of the administrative division of 'Skyrack Wapentake'. A wapentake is another word for the Danish local assembly and Skyrack came from the name of the tree at the time which one scīr āc. The wapentake assembly

used to meet regularly under the Shire Oak to make important decisions such as settling legal disputes, and deciding military tactics.

Some local stories date the tree to as far back as the ancient British Druids. Oak trees were seen as the 'father of the forest' to the Druids and represented as the green man. Oak trees were worshiped and revered in Druidic culture.

Sadly this oak too has fallen, it was felled by winds in 1941 and its remains were removed - although its memory lives on in other ways. A plaque now stands at the site of the oak tree and part of the wooden remains were sculpted into a statue of 'Madonna and Child' by local sculptor Robert Thompson. This sculpture is on display in St Michael and All Angels' Church, Headingley. The tree also lives on in the names of two Headingley pubs, the Skyrack and the Original Oak.

Joseph Beuys Oak Tree

Another amazing oak tree in connection to Leeds Art Gallery is the oak that stands just outside of the Henry Moore Institute in Victoria Square. This tree was planted in 1998 and was part of an activist art piece by the artist Joseph Beuys. Beuys was an environmental activist, educator and artist who saw creativity as a central aspect of our humanity.

In 1982 Beuys launched a project to plant 7000 oak trees throughout Kassel in Germany, the project took 5 years to complete and spread across the world, The Dia Art Foundation maintain 37 trees paired with stones in New York City. Each tree is paired with a basalt stone and you can see ours standing with the tree in Victoria Square. In 2000 the Joseph Beuys Sculpture Park and Joseph Beuys Tree Partnership was developed, going on to plant 350 more trees throughout Baltimore.

Beuys describes the project saying *"I think the tree is an element of regeneration which in itself is a concept of time. The oak is especially so because it is a slowly growing tree with a kind of really solid wood. It has always been a form of sculpture, a symbol for this planet ever since the Druids, who are called after the oak. Druid means oak. They used their oaks to define their holy places. I can see such a use for the future The tree planting enterprise provides a very simple but radical possibility for this when we start with the seven thousand oaks."*

The goal of the planting project was to "extend the traditional role of the art gallery so the gallery extends out into the city". The oak tree and plaque in Victoria Square is an example of one of the many public artworks the city of Leeds offers for visitors and residents to enjoy. The oak tree is an artwork in a state of constant change and beauty. The Autumn leaves put on an exhibition every year to passers-by as the tree grows and changes. This beautiful tree will hopefully live to see many generations pass before it.