

THE GREAT
ORIENTAL
PLANE TREE

AT EMMANUEL COLLEGE

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To the Master and Fellows and Staff
of Emmanuel College Cambridge

Life Fellow, Emmanuel College



cover and above: The Oriental Plane tree at Emmanuel College

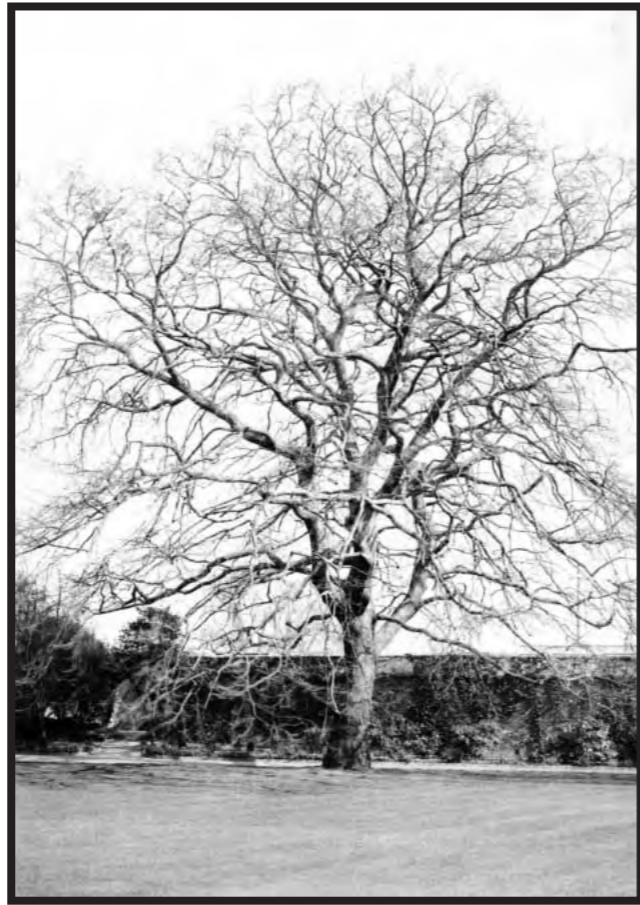
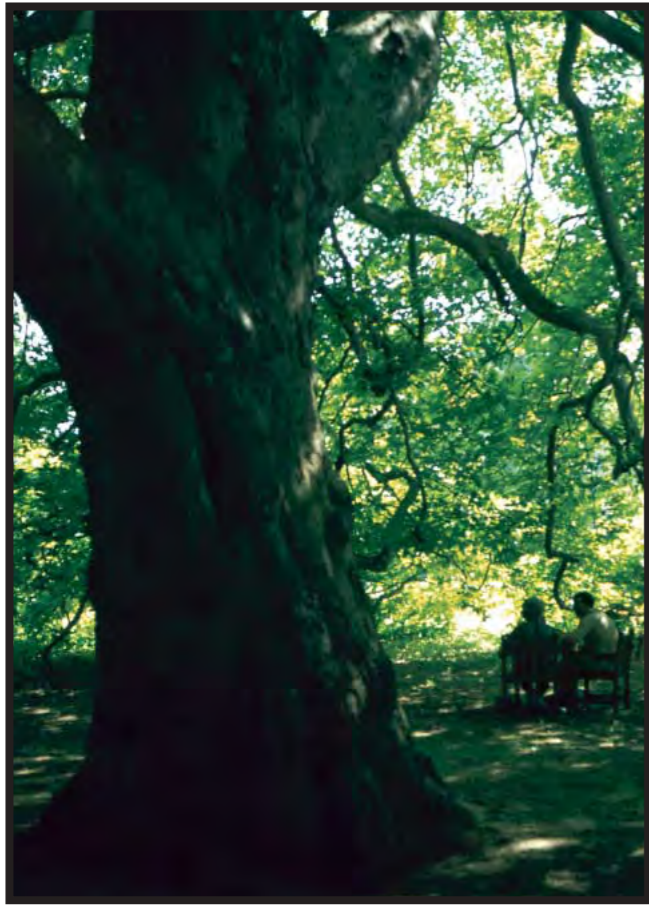
bottom left: The Tree of Hippocrates on the island of Kos

bottom right: The tree at Addenbrooke's Hospital, planted from seed from the tree at Kos

Hippocrates is probably not the author of the medical writings said to be his, and if he did teach under the shade of an Oriental Plane on the Greek island of Kos, the one now carefully preserved there would need to be about 2,450 years old. It is certainly venerable – almost nothing but a circle of bark with a few leaves and twigs sprouting out of it. Anyway, somebody had the excellent idea in 1984 of planting a seedling from it outside the Medical Research Laboratory at New Addenbrooke's. It's at least a reminder of the Hippocratic Oath medical students used to take for the last two hundred years, promising to look after their

patients, as perhaps some still do promise. The leaves differ very slightly from the Oriental Plane at Emmanuel.

According to Herodotus, King Xerxes, on the way to invade Greece, so admired one of these planes that he had it decorated all over with golden ornaments, and appointed a guardian for it (or the gold?) 'in perpetuity'. Handel wrote an opera *Serse* in which the same King shows his admiration for the tree in an aria, 'Ombra mai fu', now a regular CD favourite. There was never a tree, he sings, that gave such admirable shade. The tune



The Tree about a hundred years ago

is even more popular, being known as Handel's Largo. Some crusading knights who went to the Bosphorus with Godfrey de Bouillon (or Boulogne) found one big enough to camp under. No-one today knows where that was, or is.

The Emmanuel tree in the Fellows' Garden shades only the odd Fellow who likes to teach under it, and used to do so for church fêtes, where the foliage kept the rain off cakes and sandwiches for long enough to cover them over. Shakespeare in the open air couldn't have a better background. Star of Bethlehem flowers carpet the whole covered area in Spring.

How old it is nobody knows. A measurement of the girth in 1986 suggested it was planted in 1836, allowing an average growth for trees generally of one inch a year, but this is a rough and ready measure. More acceptable to many admirers, but unprovable, is the idea that it was planted in 1802, the same year as the Oriental Plane at Jesus College, which was celebrated in 2002, when the Jesus College choir sang the *Serse* aria, an address to the tree was made by the Orator of the University, and a huge party followed. The date is known for a fact: seeds were brought that year from the battlefield of Thermopylae, where Xerxes defeated the Spartans under Leonidas, in their

heroic three-day stand. The Fellow of Jesus who brought back the seeds, Edward Daniel Clarke, could well have had that connection in mind. He was himself an explorer, and the first Professor of Mineralogy. He knew Sir William Gell, who had graduated from Jesus in 1798 and returned there as a Fellow in 1804, after a brief spell at Emmanuel as a Fellow. A great favourite with the royals and nobility of his day, Gell had been to Greece, and published an *Itinerary of Greece* in 1810. His *Topography of Troy* (1804) often mentions the trees he had seen there. So there's the evidence. It's true the Jesus tree does not have the weeping habit of Emmanuel's, which is uncommon. (Some at Blickling Hall, Norfolk, also have it. They are said to have been planted in Elizabethan times.) But in a photo taken between 1894 and 1919, now in the Archives, the tree had not yet reached down to the ground.

Seedlings from the Emmanuel tree were raised at Tewkesbury a few years ago. So there may be more soon, but not, unfortunately, at the College. The tree planted near the Hostel has dark green leaves, and rather smooth-edged lobes, and is a *Platanus orientalis* 'Digitata'.

The three Oriental Planes at Kings' College Fellows' Garden and the one at the Botanic Garden are like the Jesus one in their habit. The gigantic so-called Oriental Plane in the Bishops' Garden at Ely is in fact a London Plane, like the one on the other side of the Paddock, though there are some smaller Oriental Planes there against the wall near the Cathedral. The London planes differ in their leaves but are otherwise quite similar. Around Lake Dal in Kashmir are many Oriental Planes planted by the Emperor Akbar the Great.

Comparing the Emmanuel tree with others listed by W J Bean – to whose four volumes I owe quite a lot –

gives it good standing. The girth in 2006 was 190 inches (478cms), giving a planting date of 1816, reassuringly near to the date of the Jesus one, but again this is not very reliable. The much older one at Kew was 16 feet in 1967, while one at Woodstock Park, Kent, (1968) was 25 1/2 feet (at the base). The Jesus tree, though certainly younger than the Kew specimen, was 17 feet in 1972. Bean also records specimens in England reaching 80 to 100 feet in height against the Emmanuel height of 21.5m (70.8 feet) in 1986.

Some branches at Emmanuel look neurotic, plunging downwards but then thinking twice about it, reversing and plunging again. Two have wrapped themselves round each other in a tangle. Others lift themselves with ease over the wall by the taxi-rank, as though judging the distance by radar. Some reach the ground and put down roots, and should become one day a circle of new trees like the ones at Blickling Hall. The crown is already of a lighter colour than the leaves of these new shoots.





The Oriental Plane Tree at Kew Gardens

A poem by the Spanish poet Luis Cernuda, who lived at the College during the Second World War, is entitled 'El arbol'. The first verse reads:

Al lado de las aguas està, como leyenda

En su jardín murado e silencioso,

El arbol bello dos veces centenario

Las poderosas ramas extendidas,

Cerco de tanta hierba, entrelazando hojas,

Dosel donde una sombra edenice subsiste.

(By the side of the waters stands like a legend in its walled and silent garden the beautiful tree, surrounded by grass, interweaving its leaves, a canopy where a shadow of Eden still exists)

The whole may be read in Cernuda's *La Realidad y el Desio*, third edition 1958, pp. 248–50, a copy of which is in the College Library; a translation appears below.

Another claim to fame: the Emmanuel tree is given pride of place in Thomas Pakenham's book of photographs, *Meetings with Remarkable Trees*, sixty in all from Britain and Ireland.



*left:
The intertwining branches*

*below:
Dr Anthony Bowen, the Orator of the University, addressing the Oriental Plane at Jesus College during the celebration of the bicentenary of the planting of the tree.*





*In the midst there was the tree of life and the leaves of the tree were
for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22.2*



*Ombra mai fu di vegetabile soave ed
amabile, soave più.* Handel. *Serse*

*Ne'er was dappled shade granted more
lavishly, more lovingly.* Handel. *Serse*



*Hope deferred maketh the heart sick:
But when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life. Proverbs 13.12*

THE TREE

Alongside the water it stands, like a legend
In its walled, silent garden
This beautiful tree, two centuries old.
Its powerful branches stretched out
Surrounded by so much grass, leaves interwoven
Into a canopy, concealing a dark Eden.

Born under this Nordic sky
Whose light is so short, so uncertain, despite its brevity
The delight of summer barely moves or exalts it
As it does to its brother, the southern plane
Where the sound of crickets makes it so agreeable,
So divinely useless, to kill time.

After the horrors of winter, when only a flame
Reassures the hope of future revival,
At the foot of the tree sprout tears of snow
Coronets of saffron, hyacinth and asphodel.
With a vernal thrust from the earth
The tree faithfully crowns itself with a new
found youth.

These then, are the days, some of them clear-skied,
Some cloudy, the warmest this climate ever gets,
A northern dream that the sun has difficulty
in breaking.
And towards the pond flock fair serenading youngsters.
Trembling, like so many frail bodies, the water remains:
The air lingers on, vibrating like so many ringing voices.

Amongst this youth, the promise of life,
Although soon to wither in sad use,
Rare is the man who feels, alone one day
In a moment of passion, his hand on the trunk,
The secret urgency of the sap rising
As though it was the beat of his own destiny.

In youth the world is wide,
As vast as desire itself.
Loneliness falls lightly, this departure enjoyable.
Watching, without nostalgia, objects and creatures;
Friends for a moment, the memory free
Of memories, one day to become a heavy load.

Behind come the others, repeating
Without any internal urgency, the gestures they have
learned,
Made legitimate by a sterile result
Like a flock mating, producing children
Passive in the face of pain like frightened animals
Alive in the limbo of death.

But there's a pause mid-way,
The look that yearns, forward looking,
Is nostalgia now, turned towards the past,
A new tiredness is now alert to the echoes
Of voices which have gone, suspended in the air;
The same old questions, answered by no-one.

And the deluded lad is now old, he himself does not
know how,
Between dreams time was so mis-spent.
Now his own reflected face seems strange to him,
Missing his conscience
From which the fervour has fled, broken by disgust,
Like some alien bird in another's nest.

Meanwhile, in its garden, the beautiful tree exists
Free of the mortal deceit that time develops.
And as the light fades from its top in the evening,

When the shadows slowly overcome the breeze
It only appears sad to those who look upon it sadly,
This creature of a magic world where man is
a stranger.

*Luis Cernuda (1902–63), translated by Tony Axon.
Cernuda was Lector at Emmanuel from 1943 to 1945.*



Star of Bethlehem flowers

