

A Californian Giant at St Mary's, Hardmead

Clare Kirk

In 2021, a tree survey was carried out at St Mary's, Hardmead, Buckinghamshire, in preparation for drainage work. The survey revealed the diversity of tree species in the churchyard. In the small moated lot, about fifty trees (thirteen species), were measured and their health examined. One tree literally stood out from the rest: a twenty-six-metre-tall Wellingtonia or giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), which dominates the skyline above this Grade I listed medieval church. As well as its height, you can spot this distinctive coniferous tree by its rusty-red, spongy deeply-grooved bark, on a trunk (one metre in diameter at its base) that tapers up to sloping branches of dark green scale leaves, and sometimes small hard cones.

When I first heard that one of our churches had a sequoia, I was instantly intrigued. Having spent much of my life in the San Francisco Bay Area, these awe-inspiring trees are close to my heart. On the Northern Californian coast, I enjoyed many hikes and camping trips among the coastal redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*). But to see giant sequoias, known fondly, by many, simply as 'big trees', you need to head inland to the Sierra Nevada mountain range – the only place in the world where this species grows naturally. In Yosemite National Park, 1660–2000 metres above sea level, three groves of giant sequoias, some of the tallest, largest, and oldest trees in the world, are among the many iconic sights that draw millions of visitors every year.

So how did a massive Californian mountain-dwelling tree come to be growing in a rural Buckinghamshire churchyard? It turns out that Hardmead's Wellingtonia is one of the oldest in the UK, perhaps grown from one of the first seeds to be shipped to this country. And it was planted by one of the most renowned figures in Victorian Britain.

Gold Rush, Monkey Puzzles and the Next Big Thing

When California became the thirty-first state in 1850, it was in the grip of the Gold Rush. It is estimated that between 1848 and 1855, 300,000 people surged into the region hoping to make their fortune, whether by prospecting, or setting up businesses to feed, clothe, house and entertain this huge influx. However, a few people had their eyes and ears open to other natural treasures – exciting plant species from the New World.

One of those was Cornishman William Lobb (1809–1864). A gardener and amateur botanist, he had been employed by James Veitch, the owner of an Exeter plant nursery, to gather exotic plants in South America. In November

Opposite: The giant sequoia at Hardmead



1840, Lobb set sail for Rio de Janeiro taking with him seeds of a Cornish rhododendron hybrid as a gift for the Emperor of Brazil. Lobb explored the region, collecting orchids, begonias, passion flowers, and many more plants, which were shipped back to Exeter. However, it was a tree that would make Lobb famous.

The monkey-puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*), had been first brought to the UK in 1795 but had never been grown commercially. Under instructions to obtain seeds, Lobb crossed the Andes through deep snow, and travelled south by steamship to the high-altitude Chilean forests where the prickly monkey-puzzle could be found. Lobb collected 3000 seeds, which were soon on sale at Veitch Nurseries. He continued on to Peru before finally returning to England in 1844, sick and exhausted from his endeavours.

In 1849, after another South America trip had been undertaken, Lobb was dispatched to North America to collect conifers and shrubs. Over several years he collected numerous species, including sacks full of seeds from coastal redwoods. In 1853, Lobb was in San Francisco preparing a shipment of specimens when he received an invitation from the California Academy of Sciences to attend one of their meetings. William Lobb was about to discover the ‘next (really) big thing’!

The California Academy of Sciences had been founded that spring by American physician and botanist Albert Kellogg (1813–1887; no relation to the cereal makers). Kellogg had himself come to California in the Gold Rush, working for a mining company before setting up a pharmacy business in San Francisco. But trees were his true passion, and in 1852 he was the first to conduct a detailed study of the giant sequoia. He had heard about these gargantuan trees from a hunter by the name of Augustus T Dowd, employed by the Union Water Company.

At the Academy meeting, Lobb was introduced to Dowd, and heard his tall tale: Two years earlier, Dowd had been hunting and trapping in Calaveras County in the foothills of the Sierras and had injured a large grizzly bear which he pursued into an area of the forest that was new to him. Suddenly, he found himself in a grove of the biggest trees he had ever seen. He abandoned his hunt and rushed back to camp to tell people about this incredible sight. At first nobody would believe him. But very quickly, Dowd’s big trees, including one dubbed the ‘Discovery Tree’, drew crowds. Sadly, the 1300-year-old Discovery Tree was felled just a year later. Its enormous stump was used as a dance floor.

Lobb, recognising a commercial opportunity, raced to the Calaveras Grove and collected as many seeds, cones, and shoots as he could carry, even transporting two tiny trees, and left California with them immediately, hand-delivering them to his delighted employer. Veitch immediately sent specimens to John Lindley (1799–1865), Professor of Botany at the University of London and the founder and editor of *The Gardeners’ Chronicle*, and invited him to name the tree.



THE STUMP AND TRUNK OF THE MAMMOTH TREE OF CALAVERAS.
Showing a Gaiety Party of Thirty-two Persons Dancing on the Stump at one time.



20. Driving through the famous Wawona, Mariposa Grove of Big Trees, Cal., U. S. A. accompanied by A. G. Woods.

- 1 A dance party on the stump of the Discovery Tree
- 2 Driving a wagon through the Wawona tree

Wellington v. Washington

On Christmas Eve, Lindley announced in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* that Mr Veitch had sent him

'branches and cones of a most remarkable coniferous tree ... seeds and a living specimen of which had just been brought him by his excellent collector Mr. WM. LOBB... Of that tree Mr Lobb has furnished the following account:

"This magnificent evergreen tree, from its extraordinary height and large dimensions, may be termed the monarch of the Californian forest."

But what is its name to be?

We think that no one will differ from us in feeling that the most appropriate name to be proposed for the most gigantic tree which has been revealed to us by modern discovery is that of the greatest of modern heroes. WELLINGTON stands as high above his contemporaries as the Californian tree above all the surrounding foresters. Let it then bear hence forward the name of WELLINGTONIA GIGANTEA.'

The 1st Duke of Wellington, hero of the Battle of Waterloo, had died the previous year, and giving his name to the discovery was seen as a fitting tribute to his monumental reputation. However, the tree was American, not British, and the Americans, understandably, had their own opinions on what this tree should be called. Dr Kellogg had wanted to call the great tree 'Washingtonia' in honour of America's first president and founding father, George Washington. Many Americans were furious that the British had presumed to name it first.

Of course, the tree already had names in local indigenous languages. The native people in Yosemite Valley called it 'wawona' – the sound of an owl whose spirit guarded the forest.

Lindley's name was soon found to be invalid, since another plant had already taken the name 'Wellingtonia'. It wasn't until 1939 that it received its scientific name *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, placing it in a genus with two extinct species. Nevertheless, 'Wellingtonia' was embraced in the UK, and has persisted as a common name here ever since.

The Wellingtonia Craze

By summer 1854, Veitch was selling seedlings of the tree for two guineas a piece (about £170 today). Although the trees for sale were tiny, gardeners were inspired by amazing descriptions comparing their height to famous landmarks such as the dome of St Paul's Cathedral. Photographs, illustrations, and even cross sections of trunks shipped from California all helped to convey the epic proportions and great age that it could one day reach.

Opposite: Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Hardmead



Very quickly, Victorian Britain fell in love with the exotic species, and the Wellingtonia became a status symbol for the wealthy. Giant sequoias were planted in estates and parks – alone, in groups, or forming avenues. Today, they can be found at hundreds of locations across the UK. Tragically, Lobb didn't reap the rewards, dying in obscurity from syphilis in San Francisco in 1864.

Restoration at Hardmead

While the Wellingtonia was becoming a must-have tree for fashionable Victorians, the church at Hardmead, largely dating from the 13th and 15th centuries, was undergoing a 'complete restoration'. The architect was David Brandon (1813–1897); Brandon was a Scottish architect who worked on a number of country houses and churches, including another of our churches – St Michael and All Angels' in Castlemartin, Pembrokeshire in the late 1850s.

The chancel of Hardmead church was restored in 1860, followed by the rest of the church in 1861.

The restoration was largely financed by the local landowners – brothers William George Shedden, Roscow Cole Shedden, and the Rev. Edward Cole Shedden (Rector of Clapton, Northants), along with contributions raised from parish rates.

The Sheddens had purchased the estate at Hardmead from the Catesby family in the early 1800s. Shedden family memorials in the church include that of William (d. 1820) and his son Robert, who died in 1849 on his schooner yacht the Nancy Dawson. Having previously circumnavigated the globe, Shedden volunteered to help search for the lost Franklin Expedition in the Canadian Arctic, but perished at sea, his 'noble remains ... interred near the wild waves of the Pacific Ocean'.

The Shedden family still live in Hardmead and are the caretakers of this beautiful church.

Reopening of the Church

On Tuesday 26 November, 1861, special services were held at St Mary's by the Bishop of Oxford to reopen the restored church for divine service.

The day started out wet and stormy, but the service was well attended by a large number of local clergy and gentry, several yeomen from adjoining parishes, and the labourers of Hardmead, who had been given the day off work as a holiday. The church was soon packed to the rafters, and the churchwarden worked hard to find seating for everyone, adding chairs and benches wherever there was space.

Morning prayer was said by the rector of St Mary's, the Rev. B. D. Goodrich, and a 'most heart-stirring' sermon was given by the bishop.

I continue the story from the Bucks Herald:

'After the service the Bishop planted a tree, "Wellingtonia Gigantia," in the south-west part of the churchyard, commemorative of the event.

The whole company then proceeded to luncheon in the new school and school-house, built and conveyed to the parish by the Rev. E. C. Shedden, which was tastefully decorated for the occasion. After the visitors had finished, the labourers of Hardmead, with their wives and families, were admitted to a substantial repast of beef, mutton, and plum-pudding, provided for them by the Rev. E. C. Shedden.'

The special events culminated with Evening Prayer. 'Thus ended a most joyous day, and a day to be long remembered in the little parish of Hardmead – a parish that had for years been looked upon as the darkest and most desolate spot in the neighbourhood. But is now, thank God, in a social, moral, and religious aspect, at least upon a footing with any of the surrounding parishes.'

The Bishop of Oxford

We now know when and why our tree was planted, but who exactly was the Bishop of Oxford who had ceremoniously placed it into the hallowed ground? That was Samuel Wilberforce (1805–1873).

Samuel was a son of William Wilberforce – the Yorkshire MP, evangelical Christian, and leading campaigner in the British movement to abolish the slave trade. William Wilberforce died just three days after the passing of the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1833 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.



Caricature of Samuel Wilberforce, *Vanity Fair*, 24 July 1869

Samuel was educated at Oriel College, Oxford, where he was involved in the university's debating society. Perhaps that's where he first earned the nickname 'Soapy Sam' – a reference to the slippery nature of his debating skills. He graduated with a first-class degree in Mathematics and a second-class degree in Classics. After a 'Grand Tour' of the continent he married and began his ecclesiastical career.

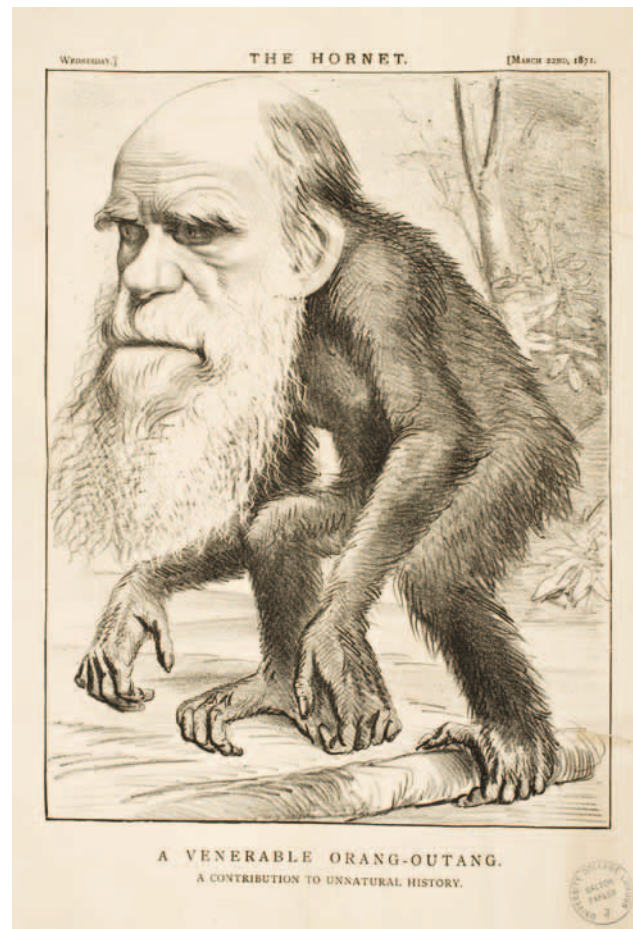
Wilberforce rose rapidly to prominence in the Church of England, famed as an engaging and amusing preacher and public speaker on causes such as the international abolition of slavery.

In 1845, he was appointed Bishop and Primate of Oxford and Dean of Westminster, and also became a Fellow of the Royal Society. Like many clergymen of his day, he saw no conflict between religious faith and belief in science.

The Great Debate

Bishop Wilberforce is today most famous, or rather infamous, for a debate in which he participated at Oxford University's Museum of Natural History on 3 June 1860. The museum was not yet complete when the British Association for the Advancement of Science held its thirtieth meeting in the new building. Throughout the day, scientific papers were presented by a range of scientists, including botanist and explorer Joseph Dalton Hooker.

HARDMEAD.
RESTORATION OF THE PARISH CHURCH.
 On Tuesday, the 26th ult., the old Parish Church of St. Mary, at Hardmead, was re-opened for Divine Service by the Lord Bishop of Oxford, after a complete restoration from designs by D. Brandon, Esq., architect. Notwithstanding a stormy wet morning, a large company of clergy and gentry of the neighbourhood attended, and several yeomen from adjoining parishes, also the labourers of Hardmead, who all had a holiday. The congregation being all seated by the churchwarden, so as to completely fill every part of the church and every space where a chair or bench could be placed, at 11 a.m. the Bishop, attended by two rural-deans and upwards of twenty clergy in surplices, proceeded from the rectory and walked up the nave to the chancel.
 Morning Prayer was read by the Rector, the Rev. D. G. Goodrich, and the 1st and 2nd Lessons by the Rev. J. H. Talbot, Rector of Newton Blossomville, and the Rev. E. C. Shelden, Rector of Clapton, Northamptonshire. The Canticles were chanted. The Bishop preached from St. Matthew, c. 14, v. 16, "They need not depart, give ye them to eat." His sermon was a most heart-stirring appeal to a more real and true faith in God's ways and God's ordinances, laying aside man's prejudices and man's opinions, and was listened to, as his Lordship's sermons are always sure to be, with the deepest attention. Holy Communion was administered by the Bishop, assisted by the two Rural-Deans—the Rev. H. Hull, Perpetual Curate of Lathbury, and the Rev. G. W. Pears, Rector of Walton—and the Rector. Fifty-eight communicants attended. The offertory amounted to £22 1s. 5d.
 After the service the Bishop planted a tree, "Wellingtonia Gigantia," in the south-west part of the churchyard, commemorative of the event.
 The whole company then proceeded to luncheon in the new school and school-house, built and conveyed to the parish by the Rev. E. C. Shelden, which was tastefully decorated for the occasion. After the visitors had finished, the labourers of Hardmead, with their wives and families, were admitted to a substantial repast of beef, mutton, and plum-pudding, provided for them by the Rev. E. C. Shelden.
 Evening Prayer was said at 6.30 p.m., with a sermon by the Rev. E. C. Shelden from Galatians c. 6, v. 7, "Whoever sows what shall he also reap," in behalf of a fund to cover the expenses of day and evening schools. The collection amounted to 45.
 This ended a most joyous day, and a day to be long remembered in the little parish of Hardmead—a parish that had for years been looked upon as the darkest and most desolate spot in the neighbourhood. But is now, thank God, in a social, moral, and religious aspect, at least upon a footing with any of the surrounding parishes. It was formerly the residence of the Catesbys, who owned the manor of Hardmead, and lived in a large house near the church, long since pulled down.
 The restoration of the church was at the cost of the owners of land in Hardmead—W. G. Shelden, Esq., R. C. Shelden, Esq., and the Rev. E. C. Shelden, assisted by the occupiers, who raised £250 upon security of Church-rates. The chancel had been restored in the previous year, 1860.



After one paper, which addressed Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, an animated debate ensued between several of the country's leading scientists and philosophers. Darwin's revolutionary *On the Origin of the Species* had only been published the previous year. In front of a noisy crowd of five hundred, Oxford's bishop engaged in a battle of wits with biologist Thomas Huxley (1825–1895) – 'Darwin's bulldog', volleying sharply opposing ideas about Darwin's theory. During this heated exchange, Wilberforce supposedly asked Huxley whether it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey. Huxley responded that he would rather be related to an ape, than to a man who used his natural gifts of reason and eloquence to introduce ridicule into a serious scientific discussion. Although Wilberforce's joke was probably misquoted, it later became the stuff of legend; as a result, Wilberforce is often unfairly regarded as anti-science, unenlightened – a man on the wrong side of history; in short a fool.

Wilberforce and the Wellingtonia

Just seventeen months after the 'Wilberforce-Huxley' debate, Bishop Wilberforce planted the giant sequoia at Hardmead. He recorded the event in his own Diocese book:



Oxford University Museum of Natural History, 1860, with newly planted trees.
 (© Oxford University Museum of Natural History)

'Bucks Herald, 7 December 1861'. (Newspaper image © The British Library Board. All rights reserved.
 With thanks to The British Newspaper Archive)
 Darwin – *A Venerable Orang-Outang* (via UCL Special Collections)

'Hardmead, Nov 26 1861. Preached & celebrated at the Reopening of the church, & planted Wellingtonia – Rev E Shedden attending for self & two brothers who now the Squires & have helped greatly in the good work. Also school built & Parsonage finished. Mr Tarry the Churchwarden (Clerk Wait & other Ch Warden Linger!!) capital man. All seeming on the rise here D.G.'

Why did Wilberforce plant a Wellingtonia? We don't know whether he chose the plant for the occasion himself. However, he couldn't have been unaware of this popular tree. Indeed, a Wellingtonia was planted at the front entrance of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History at about the time the debate took place (and it is still there today). Planting a Wellingtonia was a conspicuous show of modernity, scientific knowledge, and wealth (or generosity). Its high value made it an appropriate choice for a special occasion. However, as OUNHM's Education Officer Chris Jarvis pointed out to me, Wilberforce may also have seen the giant sequoia as the 'ultimate perfect archetype of trees' and 'felt that it echoed the majestic vision and power of the great Creator.'

The Only Way Is Up

The giant sequoia at Hardmead will turn 162 years old this November, but it is still really just an infant. The oldest living giant sequoia, the 'Grizzly Giant' in Yosemite's Mariposa Grove, is estimated to be 3000 years old, and the oldest known to have lived was 3,266 years old.

Just as the ancient church at Hardmead has borne witness to countless past generations, the giant sequoia in its churchyard will continue its life journey for countless more generations beyond our own short lives.

Our tree also has a lot more growing to do. The tallest known giant sequoia stands at ninety-five metres. But the mightiest and most awesome of them all is the General Sherman tree in Sequoia National Park. At nearly eighty-four metres tall and with a circumference of more than thirty-one metres, its overall volume makes it the largest individual living organism on earth.

I leave you with the words of the great Scottish-American ecologist John Muir, whose efforts to protect California's giant sequoias led to the creation of the United States' first national park at Yosemite in 1890:

'Do behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia! Behold! Behold! seems all I can say. Some time ago I left all for Sequoia and have been and am at his feet, fasting and praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods, in the world? Where are such columns of sunshine, tangible, accessible, terrestrialized?'

Opposite: Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Hardmead

