

Morus nigra research

Peter Coles

The mulberry at Lesnes Abbey in the London Borough of Bexley

Morus Londinium, unravelling the tale of London's mulberry tree heritage.

Supported in 2021-22 by a Vicky Schilling Bursary, Peter Coles has re-visited one of his favourite trees to research further into its history.

The veteran Lesnes Abbey mulberry has to be one of the Capital's most photogenic trees, standing on a mound, flanked by the ruins of a 12th century monastery and nestled beneath ancient woodland. But the old farmhouse it probably belonged to has disappeared without trace.



The Lesnes Abbey mulberry (Photo © Peter Coles)

The Lesnes Abbey mulberry has inherited an enviable pedigree, simply by its location. Standing in the shadows of what remains of the dormitory and refectory walls of a ruined 12th century Augustinian abbey, one would be forgiven for thinking this impressive old black mulberry has the credentials of a really ancient tree.



Looking north-west, with remains of the dormitory walls (Photo © Peter Coles)

Indeed, black mulberries were often grown in monastery and medieval gardens for their nutritious and famously fragile fruit, having been introduced to England by the Romans in the first century AD. All parts of the black mulberry have medicinal uses, which medieval monks knew all too well. So, Lesnes Abbey may well have had a mulberry in its infirmary garden, but, if so, it wasn't the present tree, as we will reveal.

The Abbey

Lesnes Abbey was founded in 1178 by Richard de Lucie, who was Chief Justiciar (a bit like Prime Minister) to Henry II. De Lucie apparently felt bad for not doing more to prevent the murder of Thomas Beckett at the altar of Canterbury Cathedral. Indeed, Lesnes Abbey is on one leg of the Pilgrim's Way from Southwark Cathedral to St Thomas's shrine in Canterbury and the abbey church was dedicated to St Mary and St Thomas the Martyr.

An imposing structure, Lesnes (or Lessness) Abbey was, nevertheless, one of the 'smaller' monasteries that Cardinal Wolsey suppressed in 1524-5, to fund a new college – Cardinal College (now Christ Church) – in Oxford. This was a decade before his nemesis, Henry VIII, dissolved the monasteries (1536-4) to mark his rift with the Catholic church and the Pope – and fill his coffers with plunder.

Typically, suppressed monastery buildings were first weakened so that they would collapse and anything valuable, including stones from the walls, salvaged for construction projects, such as roads and mansions. Over the following centuries, the remaining parts of walls, doorways, pillars and pulpits gradually got buried and overgrown, with just a few ruins poking up like bits of shipwreck, until the site was eventually excavated in 1909-13.

No evidence for silk

Rather than link the mulberry to the medieval Abbey, an information display by the tree – installed some years after I first visited it in 2013 – claims that it dates back to the early 17th century, as part of James I's (failed) attempt to foster English sericulture – rearing silkworms on mulberry leaves to produce silk thread. The presumption of a heritage link to James I's silk venture is understandable. After all, the Stuart king did import thousands of mulberry saplings in the decade after he took the throne in 1603, some of which survive today.

However, this is unlikely to be the reason that this tree was planted, not least because there is no evidence of any silkworm houses nearby or any history of sericulture here. Also, a 400-year-old mulberry would likely be completely hollow and, possibly, lying horizontally, sending up branches vertically as future stems (as this one probably will in decades to come).

The Abbey farm

After searching the Bexley and Kent archives, it seems more likely that the mulberry was linked to one of two generations of farmhouse that once stood on the site and was grown for its fruit and shade, rather than its leaves.



Dominating the Lesnes site for centuries was an impressive 16th century brick and timber mansion, converted from one of the original monastery buildings – the Abbott's Lodging – in the angle formed by the dormitory (*dorter*), its latrines (*reredorter*), and the refectory (*frater*) at the north-west of the site. This would once have accommodated the Abbott, as well as frequent visitors and pilgrims. Immediately after the Dissolution, Ralph Sadler (Henry VIII's Chief Minister) lived here with his family for a while, until he sold the property.

Changing hands several times until it was bequeathed to Christ's Hospital in 1633, the Abbot's lodging was converted into a farmhouse, with some of the abbey's original walls requisitioned for outbuildings and to enclose an orchard. In 1845, a new farmhouse replaced the Tudor one until it, too, was demolished in 1933.

Georeferenced old maps enable us to locate the tree as standing close to the position of the western wall of these farmhouses, which shared the same basic footprint. This is corroborated by photos of the Victorian farmhouse and a 1757 drawing of the earlier house by Samuel Grim, now in the British Library. Both show a tree that could be the mulberry we see today – but what does the tree itself have to say?

18th century or Victorian?

The formulae for calculating the age of a veteran tree are quite complex, as trees grow quickly when young and more slowly with age, depending on soil and sunlight. Black mulberries are particularly difficult to age, not least because they typically have many burrs, which make it hard to get a true measurement of girth. However, after studying scores of old mulberries with approximately known planting dates, I've found that an increase in girth of about 1 cm per year, *averaged over several decades*, gives a reasonable 'ball-park' estimate. Signs of hollowing and dropped branches are other clues to a veteran tree – both of which the leaning Lesnes mulberry shows.



North wall of the 'frater' (refectory) showing the rebuilt farmhouse. The mulberry is beyond the wall to the left of the house. [British Library]

With a girth of just over two metres (225 cm), this rule of thumb would suggest that the tree was planted around 220-250 years ago, with, perhaps, the earliest date somewhere around 1770. Back then, the abbey had not yet been excavated and the visible remains were just a few remnants of walls, doorways and columns poking up in a field. This date would fit well with the Samuel Grim drawing of 1757, although a younger, faster-growing tree linked to the second farmhouse of 1845 can't be ruled out.

Interestingly, an 1855 guide to Erith mentions the so-called 'Abbot's Thorn' on the Abbey site: a tree 'of great

age' measuring 6'6" (198 cm) around the trunk, with two stems and having a crown circumference of 60 feet (18.2 metres). It's not easy to confuse a thorn with a mulberry, but who knows?



A post-war postcard showing the Y-shaped mulberry, already starting to lean



The mulberry in 2021 (photo © Peter Coles)



The mulberry in 2021 (photo © Peter Coles)

For more information visit: **Morus Londinium**
www.moruslondinium.org

Morus Londinium is hosted by the Conservation Foundation and maintained by the voluntary contributions of Peter Coles

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