

The Fairlop Oak

A History of Hainault Forest's Most Famous Tree

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Preamble

I have been interested in Hainault Forest in London for a long time. Over time, I've carried out botanical surveys across all of its remaining fragments of woodland and most of the surrounding open spaces, getting to know the ground through repeated visits across the changing seasons. It is a landscape that continues to draw me back, and it remains one of my favourite places to spend time. At the heart of Hainault Forest, historically, stood The Fairlop Oak, a Pedunculate Oak (*Quercus robur*) – a tree of extraordinary age and size that once defined this corner of Essex as surely as any building or boundary.

What follows has grown out of that familiarity. It brings together personal observation and anecdote, primary reference sources, survey work and wider research, all shaped by time spent walking, recording and reflecting. I hope you enjoy it.

Location

The Fairlop Oak once stood in Hainault Forest on Fairlop Plain, about three miles from Ilford in the modern London Borough of Redbridge. Historically part of Essex, the tree occupied a vast clearing just east of Barkingside, near today's Forest Road. Writing in the late 19th century, Edward Walford (1883) placed it about a mile east of the Maypole Inn on land that was then part of Crown Farm.

The spot that the oak once occupied can be found in the modern landscape by examining two lines of evidence that point more or less to the same position, and these are discussed in the section 'Where exactly did the tree stand?', below.



Position of the Fairlop Oak and later commemorative plantings

Size and Physical Description

As one of England's most celebrated landmarks, the Fairlop Oak was renowned above all for its extraordinary scale. Writing in *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (1791), William Gilpin described a rough, deeply fluted trunk measuring about 36 feet (11 metres) in girth at three feet from the ground.

Its crown was equally remarkable. Originally, seventeen massive branches rose from the main stem—most exceeding 12 feet (3.66 metres) in circumference—although by the early 19th century only eleven were said to remain (Walford, 1883). Gilpin (1791) observed that these “vast arms” ascended more like those of a Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) than spread horizontally, overspreading a circumference of nearly 300 feet (91.44 metres). At its fullest extent, the canopy was also said to cast shade over nearly an entire acre (Ilford Historical Society, no date).

Not all accounts agreed on the dimensions. In his discussion of the origins of Fairlop Fair, Ing (1796) gave a much larger figure for the tree's girth, although he did not explain how it had been measured. He wrote: “The trunk or main stem of this King of the Forest measures in girth 66 feet [20 metres] or 22 feet [6.7 metres] in diameter, from which 17 large branches issue, each of the dimensions of a tree of moderate growth, and most of them measuring not less than 12 feet in girth.” D. H. Redman's 1811 print repeats this claim, noting that “This venerable Oak of Hainault Forest in Essex is [in an] almost leafless state... Before it was injured by fire it was 66 feet in girth...” Ing (1796) further recorded that the trunk contained a hollow recess large enough to shelter six or seven cattle from the summer heat.

Despite its fame, Walford (1883) noted the “singular omission” of the Fairlop Oak from the Board of Agriculture's official list of notable county trees. Some of the more dramatic descriptions also need to be read with caution. The claim that the tree shaded “nearly an entire acre” is best treated as a historical impression rather than a precise measurement: at Fairlop's latitude the sun stands high (about 60°) at midsummer, so a single midday shadow would probably have covered substantially less than an acre. The statement is therefore more plausibly understood either as a general expression of the tree's immense scale or as referring to the total area traversed by its moving shadow over the course of a day.

Age

Estimates of the tree's age varied enormously. William Gilpin, writing in *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, reported that local tradition traced the tree ‘half-way up the Christian era,’ implying an origin around 900 AD and an age of some 800 to 900 years at the time of his writing. A print drawn by Humphrey Repton and engraved by J. Peltro, published with a caption in Granger and Caulfield's *The New Wonderful Museum and Extraordinary Magazine* (6 vols., London: R.S. Kirby / A. Hogg & Co., 1802–08, Vol. 6) described the tree as ‘supposed to be above 1,800 years old.’ A more cautious estimate appears in *The European Magazine and London Review* (Vol. 48, July–December 1805), which reported on the fire that damaged the tree that June, describing it as ‘supposed to be five hundred years old.’ Whatever the precise figure, there is no doubt that the tree was of very great antiquity and had been a landmark in Hainault Forest for many centuries before it came to wider fame.



The Fairlop Oak, c.1800 (artist unknown), as reproduced in Edward Walford's (1883) *Greater London A Narrative of its History, its People and its Places* – Volume 1

The Origin of the Name

The origin of the name “Fairlop” is disputed, and at least four theories have been advanced.

1. The lopping rights explanation. Historically, the name is often linked to the practice of “lopping”—the legal right of local commoners to cut branches for firewood. In Hainault Forest, this was a strictly regulated common right, permitted only between Martinmas (11th of November) and Candlemas (2nd of February). Those caught lopping outside this window or for purposes other than personal fuel faced immediate arrest.

While many believe the tree was named because it was “lopped fairly”—meaning honestly and within the law—most historians view this as a charming folk etymology. This explanation aligns with the medieval use of “fair” to mean legitimate, yet early records suggest the name likely emerged alongside the “Fairlop Fair,” a massive annual event founded in the

1720s. Regardless of the name's origin, the oak stood as a powerful symbol of these ancient forest laws and the community's hard-won rights to the land.

2. The Daniel Day coffin story. A popular tradition holds that the name arose from the burial of Daniel Day in 1767 in a coffin made from a bough that had fallen naturally from the tree — a “fair lop” because the tree itself was unharmed. However, this is certainly a folk etymology: the name “Fair Lop Tree” is recorded as early as 1738, a full 29 years before Day’s death (Reaney, 1969).

3. The Queen Anne theory. A song associated with Fairlop Fair claims that Queen Anne, on a visit to Hainault Forest around 1704, was so struck by the oak that she declared the place should be called Fairlop. This is almost certainly a romanticisation with no documentary foundation.

4. The hanging boughs theory. The Hainault Forest website suggests the name may derive from “fair” meaning beautiful or splendid, and “lop” in the sense of hanging or drooping branches — the tree with the great fair, lopping boughs. This is linguistically plausible but historically the least well supported.

On balance, the lopping rights explanation carries the most historical weight, grounded as it is in the well-documented legal framework of forest common rights. The area takes its name from the tree, and the tree from the practice.

The Landscape Setting: Woodland, Lopping and the Open Plain

The landscape surrounding the Fairlop Oak was not a static, natural feature but a product of centuries of human intervention. While later illustrations depict the oak standing alone in a vast, grassy clearing, historical maps reveal a dramatic transformation. The 1777 Chapman and André map shows the area as dense woodland, with the oak marked by a large tree symbol west of New Chapel Lodge. However, by the 1805 Ordnance Survey, the woods had vanished, replaced by the open "plain" described in classic accounts.

This shift suggests that intensive lopping and grazing by local commoners progressively cleared the land between the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Managed as "wood pasture," the forest relied on pollarding and lopping to let sunlight reach the forest floor, allowing grass to flourish alongside the trees. These managed openings—known as "plains" or "lawns"—were also protected by forest law to ensure the free movement of deer for hunting.

The progressive clearance of the woodland around the Fairlop Oak directly supports the "lopping rights" theory of its name. A solitary oak standing in a vast clearing, shaped by heavy branch growth, is the logical result of centuries of managed lopping. By harvesting the surrounding understorey for fuel, local commoners effectively sculpted the landscape. The reduction of the oak’s own main branches—from seventeen to eleven between the 18th and 19th centuries—further suggests repeated, systematic lopping over many decades.

The Hainault Forest Act (1851) legislated a change in the status of the forest to that of common land (‘disafforestation’) and allowed clearance across much of the forest and its plains. Where open ground survived, scrub and secondary woodland advanced once grazing stopped.

The Woodland Trust now manages the remaining Hainault Forest woodland and is restoring the older structure — reopening wood pasture and grassland, clearing scrub, and reintroducing grazing. The Fairlop Plain of the early 1800s was no accident of nature, but a landscape sustained by common rights and everyday practice.

Artistic Record

The Fairlop Oak’s fame made it a popular subject for 18th and 19th-century artists, leaving behind a rich visual record in public collections. These works act as more than just art; they provide crucial evidence of the tree's physical changes and the evolving forest landscape.

Key Artistic Records

- Samuel Hieronymus Grimm (1774): His oval watercolour, *Fairlop Oak and Fairlop Fair*, is perhaps the most significant record. Held by the V&A Museum, its 1774 date aligns with early surveys to confirm the tree was still surrounded by dense woodland at that time.
- Mr Webster of Chigwell Row (1800): This local perspective, captured in a pastel drawing when the artist was 80, has been preserved in St Pancras New Church since shortly after its consecration in 1822.
- S. Rawle (1802): An engraving that further popularised the image of the tree as a national landmark during the Napoleonic era.
- D H Redman (1811) Fairlop Oak. Early example of lithographic printing now in the Cleveland Museum of Art. Includes the caption: "This venerable Oak of Hainault Forest in Essex is [in an] almost leafless state... Before it was injured by fire it was 66 feet in Girth and is supposed to be nearly as old as the Christian era."

- Henry Milbourne (1816): Painted just years before the tree's final decline, this oil painting in the London Museum captures the trunk's staggering scale in relation to human figures.
- Thomas Rowlandson (1816): Known for his lively social scenes, his watercolour now sits in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The tree is represented as a leafless silhouette standing at the centre of a distant field



Fairlop Oak, D H Redman (1811). Cleveland Museum of Art.

The Hainault.net website contains other artistic interpretations of the oak, including:

- alternative views of the tree and its setting
- images related to Fairlop Fair
- later commemorations and local historical material

The Fairlop Fair

For much of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Fairlop Oak was the focal point of the annual Fairlop Fair, one of the best-known popular gatherings associated with the Essex edge of London. The event is generally traced to the 1720s and to Daniel Day (1683–1767), a Wapping block-maker remembered locally as “Good Day.” According to later summaries, it began as a yearly entertainment for tenants, workers and acquaintances beneath the tree, with food served under its branches. Over time, what had started as a relatively modest occasion broadened into a much larger fair, drawing stalls, performances and a wide range of amusements to the open ground around the oak. Walter A. Lock, writing retrospectively in the *Ilford Guardian* in 1915, recalled the immense scale of the gathering and noted that the fair of 1840 was said to have attracted at least 200,000 people in a single day (Ilford Historical Society, no date). What had once been a festive annual dinner had become, in the eyes of many officials and reformers, a disorderly mass gathering. Its later history reflects changing attitudes to public recreation as much as anything that happened at Fairlop itself: magistrates, clergy and civic



Fairlop Fair

authorities increasingly treated the event as a problem to be controlled. The final blow fell when, following the enactment of the Hainault Forest Act in 1851, around 100,000 trees were removed in a matter of weeks, with steam-driven machinery ripping trees out of the ground to convert forest to farmland (Hainault Forest, no date; Kane, 2015a). Within three or four years of this the government had enclosed the original site of the fair and shut out the public (Thorne, 1876). However, some aspects of the fair proved remarkably durable: as late as 1876, James Thorne wrote in *Environs of London* that “even now, on the first Friday in July, the block-makers of Wapping visit Barking Side and after skirting the scenes of their old revels, dine at the Maypole, or one of the neighbouring inns.” The last echoes of the fair did not finally disappear until around 1900.

The Tree's Decline and Fall

But long before the demise of the fair, the Fairlop Oak itself had fallen. Over many decades during its life, large crowds had repeatedly gathered around its base, compacting the ground, and visitors were reported to have lit fires inside or against the hollow trunk. In response, in the 1790s the Hainault Foresters—an archery society formed from local gentry—put up a protective fence and treated the injured wood with a restorative mixture associated with the methods of George III's gardener. A notice appealed to visitors not to injure the tree further, stating that a plaster had recently been applied to its wounds (Walford, 1883).

These measures were not enough to save it. In June 1805, a fire caused by people encamped near the trunk burned for almost two days and destroyed several major limbs (Walford, 1883; Kane, 2015b). Although the oak survived for some years afterwards, descriptions from the following decade suggest that it was by then in severe decline; by 1811 it was already

being depicted as nearly leafless. Its final collapse came in February 1820, when a gale brought down the weakened remains (Walford, 1883; Kane, 2015b). A later chronicle referred to the fallen tree as a melancholy reminder of the power of time over even the most ancient living things.

Accounts written after the fall complained that the timber was squandered on trifling souvenirs, but some of it was turned to more substantial purposes. Wood from the tree was used in church furnishings at St Pancras New Church in Euston Road and at St Mary the Virgin, Wanstead. Other objects made from it included tea caddies, a pedestal table and smaller artefacts, several of which are now associated with local museum collections.

Seen in retrospect, the loss of the Fairlop Oak became symbolic of the wider fate of Hainault Forest. Once the tree had gone, the place lost not only its most famous landmark but also part of the public attention that had long attached to it, at a moment when the pressures of enclosure and agricultural "improvement" were reshaping the district.

Where exactly did the tree stand?

The location of the Fairlop Oak can be ascertained from evidence in the following sources:

The 1805 Ordnance Survey Map

The one-inch Ordnance Survey 'Old Series' began publication in 1805 with four sheets covering Essex, issued on 18th April 1805 (Ordnance Survey, 1805; National Library of Scotland, no date). On this one-inch-to-the-mile map—where individual trees are seldom recorded—the Fairlop Oak is shown explicitly, marked by a prominent tree symbol as well as a small square enclosure labelled "Fairlop Oak". The enclosure is shown on the western edge of the Hainault Forest area, close to Barkingside, and the symbol accords with the tall paling fence erected around the tree by the Hainault Foresters in the 1790s (Walford, 1883). Comparison with the Chapman and André map (surveyed 1774, published 1777) is instructive: there, the oak—again emphasised by an oversized tree symbol—sits within dense woodland, whereas by 1805 the surrounding landscape is depicted as substantially more open (Chapman and André, 1777; Ordnance Survey, 1805).

By overlaying the 1805 survey onto modern mapping in the National Library of Scotland's (NLS) georeferenced map viewer, it is possible to propose a National Grid reference for the oak's enclosure: TQ 45811 90987.

The 1805 Old Series map represents a notable technical accomplishment, but its positional accuracy is limited. Locations derived from the 1805 map are unlikely to be accurate to better than c. 100–150 metres, and in unfavourable circumstances errors of up to c. 300 metres are plausible. The grid reference TQ 45811 90987 obtained by overlay should therefore be treated as a reasoned estimate rather than a precise measurement. The 1909 replacement oak identified during the April 2026 field visit lies at TQ 45792 91004—i.e., 19 metres west and 17 metres north of the overlay point—making the two positions about 25.5 metres apart in straight-line distance. That level of agreement falls comfortably within the expected margin of error and, because the 1909 tree is a physical marker placed on the ground by people with direct local knowledge, it should be regarded as the most reliable available indicator of the original Fairlop Oak's position.

The OS Six-Inch Map and the 1909 Planting

A further valuable map source is the Ordnance Survey six-inch to the mile County Series sheet for Essex, revised 1896–1913 and updated 1919, held by the National Library of Scotland (NLS image ID 104194236). At a scale approximately six times larger than the 1805 Old Series, it provides a much more detailed picture of the Fairlop Plain area in the years immediately surrounding the 1909 replanting.

Field Investigation and the 1909 Replacement Oaks

In April 2026 a site visit was made to the Fairlop area to test the grid reference derived from the 1805 OS map against physical evidence on the ground. A mature oak tree of an age consistent with the 1909 planting was found — apparently the only survivor of the three commemorative oaks planted in that year — on the north side of Forest Road, at the southern edge of the recreation grounds, immediately north of what is now Fairlop Waters Country Park. It has a trunk diameter at chest height of approximately 0.75 metres (2 feet 6 inches), giving a circumference of around 2.4 metres (7 feet 10 inches). Using the standard growth rate of approximately one inch (2.5 cm) of diameter per year for open-grown pedunculate oak, this is consistent with a tree planted around 1909 — the date confirmed by the newspaper accounts of the royal opening ceremony. The tree is in good health although the crown has been lifted on the side adjacent to Forest Road. A comparison of a modern satellite image (ESRI) with a 1945–65 OS overlay, both centred on TQ 45792 91004, clearly shows the oak on the north side of Forest Road at the boundary of the recreation grounds, north of the country park.

A GPS reading taken at the oak confirmed a grid reference of TQ 45792 91004. This can be compared with the grid reference of TQ 45811 90987 derived from the 1805 overlay: the two positions are only 25.5 metres (~ 28 yards) apart, a near-perfect and surprisingly close agreement that sits well within the likely margin of error for an isolated feature sketched in open countryside by the 1805 survey method. Taken together—map evidence, newspaper testimony, growth rate and

field measurement—this convergence supports TQ 45792 91004 as the most reliable available estimate for the position of the original Fairlop Oak.



Left image - This is a surviving tree that was planted (by the Prince of Wales) as a replacement for the fallen oak c.1909 north of Forest Road.



Right image - The Festival of Britain Oak at Fullwell Cross planted in 1951.

The broader story of the Fairlop Oak is, in microcosm, the story of Hainault Forest itself: a landscape shaped for centuries by royal forest law, common rights, and patterns of human use and neglect—celebrated for its beauty, then largely destroyed by the enclosure of 1851. The outrage that followed is credited with helping to spark the modern conservation movement, strengthening the arguments that saved Hainault's sister forest, Epping Forest, and the enduring principle of public access to open land. It is fitting that Edward North Buxton (1840–1924) — the Essex conservationist whose tireless campaigning was instrumental in saving Epping Forest from a similar fate to Hainault's — should appear in the press accounts of the 1909 opening as the man thanked by the Prince for “providing” the new playing field, and as the host whose Knighton garden supplied the seedling maple planted by the Princess. The thread of public-spirited conservation that began with the loss of Hainault Forest in 1851 thus runs directly through to the commemorative planting of three oaks in 1909, of which one appears to survive beside Forest Road today.

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