

Street tree planting in 19th and early 20th century Dublin

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Introduction

Street trees have been part of the urban fabric of cities for centuries, from the streets of ancient Athens, the boulevards of Paris in the seventeenth century to the Thames Embankment in 1870s London. Mark Johnston, in his recent book *Street Trees*, has recorded the development of street tree planting in urban and suburban Victorian and Edwardian Britain (Johnson 2017). However, what of Ireland - Dublin in particular? The Dublin City Tree Strategy 2016 – 2020, published by Dublin City Council (2016), states that “In the historical development of the city, tree planting has been carried out to great effect and to the continued appreciation of its citizens and visitors. A review of older city maps and records indicates the use of tree planting in parks, streets and private lands”. However, little information from these maps and records has been published. Drawing on minutes of the Municipal Council of the City of Dublin and Pembroke Urban District Council, Irish newspaper reports, English horticultural journals and archival records, this paper examines street tree planting in late 19th and early 20th century Dublin city and suburbs.



Figure 1: A view along the London plane-lined North Circular Road towards the Phoenix Park c. 1915. Photograph courtesy of the Historical Picture Archive.

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Street Tree planting in Dublin city and north suburbs

A brief news item in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* of January 1874, noted that "the Corporation of the City of Dublin had undertaken to plant Sackville Street [O'Connell Street]." Alderman James W. Mackey, a former Lord Mayor and nurseryman in Westmoreland Street, "had done much to promote the planting of Sackville Street". Plane trees (*Platanus occidentalis* L.) were the species chosen and the work was entrusted by the Corporation to Mr. Thomas Moore, editor of the *Irish Gardeners' Record*, and sometime gardener. The purpose of the tree planting was the "ornamentation of that fine thoroughfare".¹ A writer in *The Garden* commented that "the addition of trees will render it one of the handsomest thoroughfares".² These short reports encapsulate the three main factors influencing the successful cultivation of street trees - advocacy, species selection and skilled staff.

Two years later a visitor to Dublin wrote "Sackville-street is very noble, and soon will be, when its plane trees grow a little, quite a boulevard".³ However the trees were not a success and Sackville Street presented "the most unhappy example of municipal arboriculture in Europe."⁴ Mr [Ninian] Niven of the Garden Farm (Drumcondra, Dublin) offered to supply trees for the street provided that they were planted in October - the costs of transport, fresh soil and labour were to be borne by the Corporation.⁵

At a meeting of the Municipal Council of the City of Dublin, held on February 12th 1883, the removal of trees in Sackville Street was discussed again.⁶ Some twenty months later on 6th October 1884 the Council recommended that the trees be replanted.⁷ After some years, work was to be undertaken by the Office of Public Works and a detailed minute⁸ recorded how and where the trees were to be planted as follows:

Sir Richard Sankey, chairman of the Board of Works to supply and plant trees in Sackville Street in October which is their last month, as follows:-

At the Rotunda end to plant four Wytch [*sic*] Elms, i.e. one in the line of each of the side flagways as in Paris, and again one on each side out in the street, say twenty or twenty-five feet from each flagway:-

¹ Anon. 1874. A short time since. *The Gardeners' Chronicle* n.s. 1: 154.

² Anon. 1873. Notes of the week. *The Garden* IV: p 434.

³ "A Traveller". 1876. From a letter to the Editor of *Freeman's Journal* 31: 3rd March 1876.

⁴ Anon. 1878. Re-planting Sackville Street, Dublin. *The Garden* XIII: 23rd February 1878, p 172.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Item 66 in minutes of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin, 1883, p 59.

⁷ Item 372 in minutes of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin, 1884, p 300.

⁸ Meeting of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin held on 1st October 1894.

At the south end of the street to plant four Western Plane trees:-

In the three years' time trees (if ever) have fully established themselves and a selection can be made as to which tree to use to create an avenue the entire length.

They further stipulated that precautions be taken to “secure trees against the deleterious effects of gas and sewer water, more than likely to have caused failure of trees earlier and noted that “Mr Dick, the Park Bailiff, who is proposed should carry out the work is a thoroughly experienced forester”.⁹ Planting was not limited to Sackville Street. In December 1894, the Council recommended that the Paving Committee procure and plant suitable trees at each side of Lord Edward Street.¹⁰

While the City of Dublin planted trees in their administrative area (Figure 2), individuals also provided street trees for their locality. A donation of trees from Archbishop William Walsh, Archbishop of Dublin, received notice in the press. In 1890 a meeting of Drumcondra Town Commissioners was told that Archbishop Walsh would have “the slope opposite his new home planted with trees.” The meeting thanked the Archbishop for his “kindness and generosity in giving a sufficient supply



Figure 2: A view of Upper Sackville (O'Connell) Street in the early 1900s showing the recently established plane trees. The image comes from a black and white photograph hand-tinted for use as a postcard and is courtesy of the Historical Picture Archive.

⁹ Item 410 in minutes of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin 1894, pp 378-379.

¹⁰ Item 527 in minutes of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin, 1894, p 504.

of healthy trees to plant both sides of Drumcondra Road” (Sheehy 2000). A generous supply of trees was purchased - an invoice from William Sheppard, a Landscape Gardener in Churchtown (Dundrum, Dublin), to Archbishop Walsh, dated 3rd April 1890 lists 100 *Platanus occidentalis* costing £30.¹¹ By this time Dublin Corporation had also planted thoroughfares nearby.

In 1902 the Drumcondra Labour Electoral Association wrote to the Municipal Council of the City of Dublin about the “necessity of protecting the trees and slopes on the Drumcondra Road.”¹² The tender of Messrs. Brooks Thomas and Co. Ltd., for the sum of £37 7s 0d for the supply and erection of 83 red deal tree guards for the trees on Drumcondra slopes (being 9s per guard) was accepted by the Council.¹³

At a meeting of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin held in 11th December 1905, a letter submitted by Miss Harrison, 33 Harcourt Street, offering to the Corporation on behalf of a friend, 2,000 young trees to be planted along the streets and quays of the City “between the four bridges” was forwarded to the Paving Committee for their attention.¹⁴ The Paving Committee replied:

We had under consideration a letter forwarded by a Miss Harrison, offering on behalf of a person (who preferred to remain anonymous) a gift to the city of 2,000 trees. We obtained a report from the Engineer estimating the cost of planting at £5 10s. or £6 a tree. We are at present in correspondence with a Mr. Lane, who evinced a deep interest in the matter, and will report further in due course.¹⁵ The Paving Committee considered the offer further.

In connection with the planting of the trees offered by Mr. Lane (vide Report No, 260, 1906) and for which purpose an item of £200 is included in the current estimates, the Deputy Borough Surveyor reported that this sum would only permit the planting of 40 trees being planted this year, the cost, estimated by Mr. Dick (Phoenix Park, late Gardener) under whose supervision the trees will be planted, being £5 per tree. We gave instructions for the 40 trees to be planted in Hollybrook Road. Seventy-four

¹¹ Invoice dated 3rd April 1890. Dublin Diocesan Archives, Walsh Papers.

¹² Item 247 in minutes of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin 1902, p 165.

¹³ Report of the Paving Committee Breviate for the Quarter ended 31st December 1907. Reports and Printed Documents of the Corporation of Dublin 1908 Vol. 1. Dublin: Cahill and Co., p 161.

¹⁴ Item 638 in minutes of Municipal Council of the City of Dublin 1905, p 616.

¹⁵ Report of the Paving Committee Breviate for the Quarter ended 30th September 1906. In *Reports and Printed Documents of the Corporation of Dublin* 1906, Vol. 111 Dublin: Cahill and Co. 1908, p 316.

being were estimated for the road, but by planting them twice the distance apart, allowed for by Mr. Dick, the number available would permit of the whole road being planted.¹⁶ [See Figure 3.]

The Miss Harrison mentioned was Sarah Cecilia Harrison (1863-1941). A portrait painter, social reformer, she was a member of Dublin Corporation from 1912-1915.¹⁷ She was a friend of Hugh Lane (1875-1915) the art collector and dealer. Having organised an exhibition of Irish art in London in 1904, Lane began to plan the establishment of the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art which eventually opened in 17 Harcourt Street in 1908.¹⁸ In offering to line the river Liffey with 2,000 trees, Lane may have already been considering a riverside location for this art gallery. In 1912 Sir Edwin Lutyen's design for a gallery at Wellington Bridge (Halfpenny Bridge) was rejected by Dublin Corporation.

As well as sanctioning tree planting funded by Lane, tree planting occurred on existing streets and on newly laid out roads. In 1907 the Council "ordered the planting of trees on O'Connell Street, Fairview Strand and Annesley Bridge Road in place of ones which had decayed." Permission was granted to Mrs. A. Butterly to plant trees on

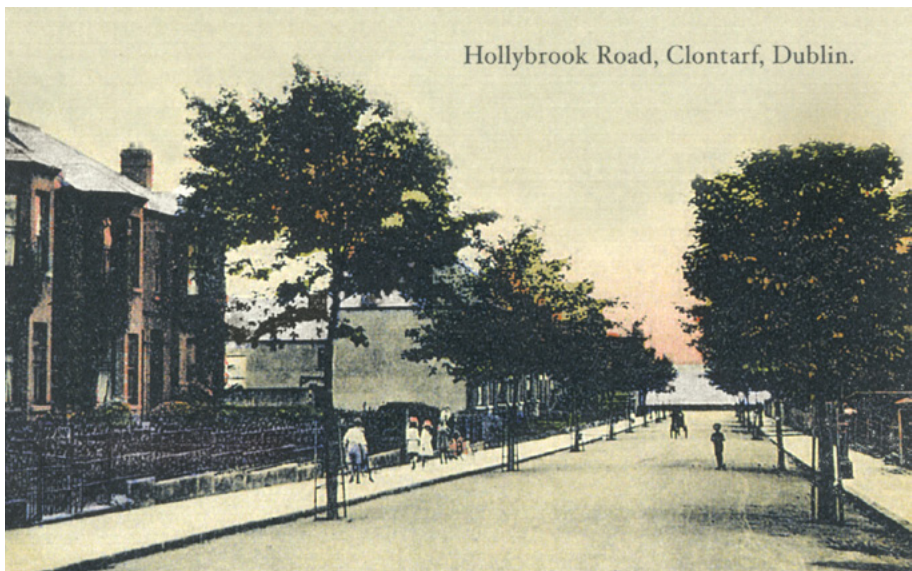


Figure 3: A photograph of Hollybrook Road shows a tree-lined street where the trees were planted at the edge of the road rather than on the edge of the footpath. Photograph courtesy of the Historical Picture Archive.

¹⁶ Report of the Paving Committee Breviate for the Quarter ended 31st March 1907. In *Reports and Printed Documents of the Corporation of Dublin 1907* Vol. 1. Dublin: Cahill and Co. 1908, p 869.

¹⁷ *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Available at dib.cambridge.org [Accessed November 2019].

¹⁸ *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Available at dib.cambridge.org [Accessed November 2019].

“the continuation of Home Farm Road [Drumcondra] and two new roads off same”.¹⁹

In 1909 Dublin Corporation planted London Plane (*Platanus* × *hispanica*) of “substantial proportions” in “fresh soil” which “stand the smoke well by reason of the glabrous foliage”. The trees were supplied by a local firm Watson and Sons, Clontarf Nurseries, Dublin. The locations selected were Foster Place, College Green and Upper Sackville Street. Though a brief report, it included interesting facts about tree planting practice at the time.²⁰

In 1911, the *Irish Times* reported that tree planting took place on Lindsay Road, Glasnevin. The trees, again supplied by Watson’s, were “Fine straight-stemmed specimens, with well-shaped heads, and should quickly prove effective”.²¹ In 1913 it reported that “the North side has taken the lead in tree planting” and the trees planted by Archbishop Walsh’s residence were “presenting an agreeable picture to the advantage of the whole district” and also stated that “Citizens will be glad to learn that Dublin Corporation are taking steps to further improve in the matter of tree planting the appearance of the city and suburban thoroughfares under their control”. The report continued that “people have the idea that trees do not thrive in cities but once properly planted and cared for in the first few years they become vigorous in growth.” The Corporation decided to plant trees on the South Circular Road in November 1913 and the contract to plant London plane trees was to be given to Messrs. Sheppard and Son (Dublin). The Council also decided to plant trees on Ross Road, Bride Street and Nicholas Street where artisans’ dwellings had been built. The newspaper commented that “the effect of such planting would naturally be to enhance the amenities and cheerfulness of the environment of the rehoused working classes”.²²

Unfortunately, by February 1914, the Secretary of the Paving Committee, City Hall, wrote to the Editor of the *Irish Times* regretting “malicious destruction to the trees on Ross Road, Bride Road and Eden Quay”. The Paving Committee had been “endeavouring... to meet a public demand in the matter of improving the appearance of our streets by a gradual process of tree planting” and a reward for information was offered.²³ A later report stated that 120 trees were planted in four or five localities in the city. Five trees at Bride and Ross Roads near St. Patrick’s Cathedral were ruined and two at Eden Quay damaged.²⁴ Photographs of recently-planted trees illustrate the practice of the time of planting tall specimen trees each with three stakes and supports at the top and bottom of the stem. A second photograph shows how the stake was used

¹⁹ Report of the Paving Committee Breviate for the Quarter ended 31st March 1907. *Reports and Printed Documents of the Corporation of Dublin* 1907 Vol. 1. Dublin: Cahill and Co. 1908, p 869.

²⁰ Anon. 1909. Planting trees in leading Dublin streets, *The Irish Times*, 25th Mar 1909, p 5.

²¹ Anon. 1911. Tree planting in Dublin streets, *The Irish Times*, 28th December 1911, p 7.

²² Anon. 1913. Tree planting in Dublin, *The Irish Times*, 15th October 1913, p 6.

²³ Tobin. P. 1914. Letter to Editor re. damage to trees. *The Irish Times*, 27th February 1914, p 8.

²⁴ Anon. 1914. Injuring city trees. *Irish Independent*, 28th February 1914, p 6.

as a fulcrum and the tree was broken off at stake height.²⁵

In March 1916 more London plane trees had been ordered from a Dublin nursery - street tree planting by Dublin Corporation was continuing quietly.²⁶ By 1919 a gardening columnist noted the advances made in street tree planting, particularly on the north side of the city where “youthful specimens of the London plane were now showing the beauty of shapeliness and luxuriant leafage” - a positive comment about the development of a tree-lined streetscape.²⁷

Street tree planting in the south suburbs

While reports of street tree planting in the city centre and north suburbs provide information about tree planting and establishment, those from the south suburbs detail tree maintenance and costs of tree planting.

James M’Nab, Curator of the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, wrote in 1874 “All through the southern suburbs of Dublin, newly arranged for streets, trees have been extensively planted along the edges of footpaths”. However, he noted that while the trees were in a “free growing healthy condition”, because of a “lack of branch and stem pruning, they had assumed a wide-spread appearance” (M’Nab 1874). M’Nab was likely referring to Ballsbridge and environs, a suburb then under construction on lands of the Pembroke estate.

In 1903, Fane Vernon D.L. Agent of the Pembroke estate wrote to Pembroke Urban District Council stating that “Lord Pembroke was prepared to contribute two shillings per tree per annum in aid of costs and expenses of and incidental to, the maintenance and renewal of the road trees in the part of the Pembroke Urban District which is upon his Estate, such contribution to continue for five years and enclosed £75 being for first year’s contribution for 750 trees.”²⁸ At a meeting on 11th Sept 1903, the proposal that the Council take over the maintenance of the trees was adopted.²⁹ An examination of Ballsbridge and environs on 19th century maps shows the extent of street tree planting and housing. On Clyde Road, though few houses are shown on the map, both sides of the street were tree lined.³⁰

A brief newspaper report in 1903 stated that the Roads Committee of Pembroke Urban District Council had placed orders for the purchase of plane and lime (*Tilia* spp.) trees to replace missing trees.³¹ While Pembroke Urban District Council minutes

²⁵ Anon. 1914. Malicious injury to trees. *The Irish Times*, 11th April 1914, p 13.

²⁶ Anon. 1916. Gardening notes. *The Weekly Irish Times*, 4th March 1916, p 7.

²⁷ Anon. 1919. The garden. *The Irish Times*, 16th August 1919, p 7.

²⁸ Pembroke Urban District. Minutes of Council meeting, 13th July 1903, p 17.

²⁹ Ibid. Council meeting, 11th September 1903, p 35.

³⁰ Ordnance Survey Ireland. *19th Century Historical Maps* held by Ordnance Survey Ireland. © Public domain. Digital content: © Ordnance Survey Ireland, published by UCD Library, University College Dublin. Available at <http://digital.ucd.ie/view/ucdlib:40377> [Accessed November 2019].

³¹ Anon. 1903. Pembroke Urban Council. *The Irish Times*, 14th December 1903, p 6.

(1907-1909) record the costs of road tree planting £334 5 shillings and 3 pence in total - no details of species purchased or location of planting was given.³²

Street tree planting by builders

Builders and landowners were also responsible for street tree planting. On land owned by the Earl of Howth, St. Lawrence Road, Clontarf, was developed from 1870 and was completed by 1898. In a history of Clontarf an extract from the 1907 Ordnance Survey map and an early 20th century photograph show a tree-lined road (Lennon 2014). Patrick Plunkett built houses in Rathmines and Ballsbridge, and by 1870 although only seventeen houses had been built, he had already planted trees on Palmerston Road in anticipation of the development (Figure 4) (Plunkett Dillon 2006).

Street tree planting in Dublin

Various sources, Council minutes, newspaper reports, maps and historical photographs provide information about tree planting in Dublin. Table 1 gives the location of planting and associated dates, where known, from written reports, maps and historical photographs.

In undertaking tree planting the City of Dublin drew on the expertise of contemporary experts like Mr Thomas Moore, Mr Ninian Niven and Mr. Wm. Dick, Bailiff of the Phoenix Park. In both the City of Dublin and Pembroke Urban District Council, the Pavement Committee and the Roads Committee, respectively, were responsible for tree



Figure 4: *The mature Tilia planted along Palmerston Road likely date to the 1882 planting.*

³² Pembroke Urban District Council, Council Minute Book No 10. Dublin City Archives.

Table 1: Street trees in 19th and early 20th century Dublin and suburbs. The final column lists whether the trees dating from the original plantings are likely still present.

Location	Written report date	Map date	Historical photograph	Original trees present (2019)
Wellington Road		1865		
Clyde Road		1865	Several 1905	×
Raglan Road		1865		×
Pembroke Road		×	×	×
Northumberland Road		1888	×	×
Merrion Road			×	×
Morehampton Road			×	×
Park Avenue		1865	×	×
Sydney Parade Avenue		1865		×
St. Lawrence Road, Clontarf		1907	×	×
Hollybrook Road, Clontarf	1907		×	×
Hollybank Road, Drumcondra			×	×
Drumcondra	1890		×	×
Islandbridge			×	
North Circular Road near Phoenix Park			×	×
South Circular Road	1913			
Eden Quay	1913			
Nicholas Street	1913			
Ross Road	1913			
Bride Street	1913			
Lindsay Road, Glasnevin	1911			
Foster Place, College Green	1909			×
Fairview Strand	1907			
Annesley Bridge Road	1907			
Home Farm Road, Drumcondra	1907			×
Upper Sackville Street (O'Connell Street)	1874, 1876, 1894, 1907, 1909		×	
Lord Edward Street	1894		×	

planting. In doing so they sought to respond to the public's demand for trees. Individuals such as the Archbishop of Dublin and Mr Hugh Lane also financially supported tree planting. While builders and landowners planted or paid for tree maintenance, a financial return on houses may also have been a motive for their support.

The tree species selection was limited to Wych elm (*Ulmus glabra* Huds.), plane (*Platanus occidentalis* L.) and later London plane (*Platanus* × *hispanica*) and lime. Ningal et al. (2010) prepared an inventory of trees within the canals and found while

hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus* L.) was the most numerous tree species, plane and lime were also numerous and of an older age profile. While plane, lime and horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum* L.) were commonly used in Britain, the last-listed was not mentioned as a street tree in Dublin. The names of two tree suppliers were found. Wm. Watson and Sons ran a nursery at Strandville Avenue, Clontarf and were, as their catalogue described, “nurserymen and plant merchants”. They supplied ornamental shrubs, roses, trees, and herbaceous plants to garden owners. Their catalogue for 1915 – 1916 stated that they “undertake contracts for the planting of private and public roads etc.”³³ William Sheppard was a well-known landscape gardener who described himself as “Successor to the late Mr. Niven”. He laid out private gardens and grounds, e.g. Glencormac, Co. Wicklow (1874); Archbishops House, Drumcondra, (1890); public parks at St Stephen’s Green for Lord Ardilaun (1880), Harold’s Cross Park (1893) and Palmerston Park (1892) for Rathmines and Rathgar Improvement Commissioners and street tree planting for the City of Dublin.

Though tree losses occurred, particularly on Sackville Street, attributed to incorrect time of planting, poor quality stock, or poor ground conditions, many trees grew to great stature. Success occurred as can be seen today on the tree-lined roads of Drumcondra Road, St. Alphonsus Road and Hollybank Road and in the suburbs of Ballsbridge, Rathgar (Figure 5) and Sandymount.



Figure 5: Mature *Platanus x hispanica* (London plane) planted along Orwell Park in Rathgar.

³³ Unpublished catalogue of Wm. Watson and Sons Ltd., Clontarf Nurseries, Dublin. List no. 84, Autumn 1915 – 1916.

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