



Viewpoint

Expanding roots



Time: 15 mins

Region: Greater London

Landscape: urban



Location:

St Pancras Old Churchyard, Pancras Road,
London NW1 1UL

Grid reference:

TQ 29826 83443

Directions:

From Pancras Road the tree is behind the church
and next to the wall

Keep an eye out for:

A bench in the churchyard once used by The Beatles

Standing behind St Pancras Old Church, the roots of a large ash tree weave their way among rows of headstones. This extraordinary tangle of life and death is named after the novelist and poet Thomas Hardy.

Hardy's books – including *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* – were based on the Dorset countryside he grew up in. But before his literary career took off, Hardy worked in London and created this unusual landmark.

How does this Victorian tree still reflect 21st century London?



The answer is a few metres away, on the other side of the churchyard's large brick wall. Stop for a few minutes and listen. Among the birdsong and traffic noises you'll hear passing trains. Look carefully and you might see the carriage roofs.

St Pancras Old Church dates back to the 4th century and the graveyard used to be much larger; it was one of the most significant burial grounds in London. But from the 1830s it was cut off from its parish then cut up by three major stations – Euston, Kings Cross and St Pancras.

In these early years of railway expansion, different companies built and ran their own lines in competition with each other. Routes into London were profitable and busy. By the 1860s the railways couldn't carry enough passengers into the capital and a new station was needed.

The Midland Railway Company identified this churchyard as the ideal site. St Pancras was perfectly placed on the edge of central London. The land was also becoming less used; after a larger, New St Pancras Church was built nearby many of the congregation had left. The last burial took place here in 1854.

A decade later, enter Thomas Hardy. When the church grounds were being cleared to make space for the railway line, Hardy was a London architect's assistant. He had the grim task of exhuming hundreds of bodies and removing their graves. During the work Hardy ordered headstones to be placed under this ash tree.

His reasons are unknown but Hardy was a keen naturalist and may have done it to prevent the tree being removed. Or he may have saved the stones to respect the people whose final resting place had been disturbed.

How do you feel about the tree? Does it help the living or mourn the dead? Does it record the enduring power of nature or the relentless march of progress? Is it a memorial, a protest or even an artwork?

Whatever the reason Hardy created it, the ground where 88,000 bodies lay buried now carries over 20 million passengers every year - hurtling across the county at speeds the Victorians could only dream of!

Over 150 years later the Hardy Tree and St Pancras station continue to evolve. While expanding roots bind the stones together, the churchyard wall dates from 2007, when the expanded St Pancras International began Eurostar services to Europe.

Between 1999 and 2009 railway passenger numbers in Britain increased by 50 per cent. Several major projects are underway to meet demand, including Crossrail and High Speed 2. Many have caused controversy over costs, disruptions and demolitions. The Hardy Tree shows us that changes like these aren't new.