

ST LEONARD'S CHURCHYARD TREE TRAIL

(August 2026)



This beautiful churchyard is a place for peaceful remembrance and it's also a haven for wildlife, rich in trees, wildflowers and the many different creatures they support. There are more than 25 different tree species growing here, including native and non-native species.

We invite you to discover some of these trees; the trail begins just outside the churchyard to the right of the Lychgate. Do enjoy the trees as you explore; look at their flowers, leaves and fruit and feel their bark, and look out for the wildlife they harbour.

Tree Quiz – Can you find which trees the leaves on the quiz sheet belong to? Each tree has a letter next to it on a wooden post – match the letters to the leaves!

A. Corsican Pines

The trail begins just outside the churchyard in the layby to the right of the lychgate where two tall evergreen trees overlook the churchyard wall. These are Corsican pines, with longer needles than the native Scots pine.

There are three native conifer species in the UK (Scots Pine, Yew and Juniper), but many faster-growing conifers, including the Corsican pine, have been introduced for commercial forestry and as ornamental trees.

Pinecones reflect a change in the weather. In damp conditions the scales absorb moisture and swell, closing the cone to protect the seeds from rain. In dry conditions the scales shrink and curl outwards, forcing the cone to open wide so the seeds can disperse.

B. Paper bark Maple

Go through the lychgate and turn immediately right onto the grass path which starts behind the noticeboard; this tree is on your left.

Paper bark maple is a slow growing tree originally from the mountains of central China. It is the only maple species with beautiful peeling chestnut-brown papery bark. In autumn look out for its bright red and orange leaves.

C. Ash

Continue to walk in the same direction then bear slightly right across the open area to join a path that runs alongside some metal railings. The ash tree is on the corner, next to where the railings end.

Ash is one of our most widespread trees, common in woodlands and hedgerows. Sadly, the virulent fungal infection ash dieback (Chalara) is killing about 80% of ash trees across the UK, having a devastating impact on local landscapes and biodiversity.

Norse mythology held up ash as the “Tree of Life” and the first man on earth was said to have come from an ash tree. Ash is easily identified in winter with smooth greyish twigs and black velvety buds in pairs. It produces abundant winged seeds called keys.

D. Rowan (also called Mountain Ash)

Follow the path straight ahead between gravestones. The Rowan is the first tree on the left.

Rowan grows in the wild mostly in the north of the UK but is widely planted elsewhere. It has a long folklore history of providing protection from witchcraft; in Scotland there is still a taboo on cutting a rowan tree down, especially near houses. Look for its brilliant red berries at the end of summer, they can be used to make a bitter jelly to accompany meat.

E. Holly

Continue on this path and you will soon see a holly tree on the right

Often found in churchyards, holly's red berries and sharp leaves symbolise Christ's blood and the crown of thorns. Flourishing when most other plants seem dead or dormant, it symbolises the continuity of life through the winter months. It is a traditional boundary tree, its prickles making it a good stockproof barrier – but above 12ft the leaves become less prickly as they are harder for grazing animals to reach.

F. Cherry

Keep going along the path, the cherry tree is directly behind a stone cross.

Cherry trees have distinctive reddish-brown bark with horizontal lines. This is a cultivated cherry, but wild cherry trees are common on the Chilterns' chalky soils, covered in drifts of white blossom in the late spring and producing small bitter cherries in the autumn. Cherry has valuable reddish-brown timber which can be polished to look like mahogany.

G. Oak

Continue walking to the end of the path where you will find an oak tree.

This tree was planted in 1995 by General Sir John Mogg, commemorating 50 years of peace in Europe. Oak trees support more life than any of our other native trees, providing vital spaces for more than 2300 wildlife species to feed, shelter and breed.

Oak produces incredibly strong timber and has provided a building material for centuries, including for cathedrals and ships.

H. London Plane (non-native)

Turn round and head back on the path past the stone cross, until you come to some railings. This large stately tree is beside the railings on the left.

The London Plane is a hybrid tree widely planted since the 18th century. A tough and resilient tree, it rarely sheds branches and can grow in very compacted or paved over soil so it can thrive beside busy city streets. Despite being a hybrid, it produces fertile seeds; look for the spherical fruit clusters hanging from the twigs from late spring onwards before they break open over the winter to release the seeds.

I. Copper Beech

Follow the small path on the right, leading between a row of gravestones and several mature trees on the left. The second big tree on the left is an impressive beech tree.

Also known as purple beech, this cultivated form of our native beech tree has coppery leaves and smooth grey bark. Beech leaves are sensitive to light, twisting on their stalks to face the sun. The three-sided nuts are edible.

The Chilterns are well known for their beech woodlands, many of which were planted for the furniture industry. The dense, hard wood is strong and has a uniform grain, ideal for making a wide range of furniture.

J. Crab Apple

Continue walking then turn left just before a remnant of metal fence and follow a little path between the trees. The crab apple is on the left amidst the undergrowth

This veteran crab-apple tree partially collapsed due to a very heavy crop of fruit. After seeking advice, local volunteers cut it back to a previous pollarding point. Pollarding is a traditional pruning method, involving cutting upper branches back to a main trunk. It stimulates strong regrowth and is most often used on willow trees.

This tree is re-sprouting strongly, so we hope its long-term future is secured. Look for white blossom in spring and small apples in autumn. Wild crab apple trees were the ancestors of commercial apples, but many so-called crab apple trees have grown from self-seeded domestic apples.

Some of the original stump has died, but retaining some dead wood in wooded areas provides a very valuable habitat, supporting many invertebrates.

K. Sycamore

Continue on the same path past two holly trees, then look for the sycamore tree on your left.

Sycamore trees were probably introduced to the UK sometime in the 15th century, this adaptable and successful species produces thousands of winged "helicopter" seeds allowing it to spread widely. The prolific flowers attract many bees in the spring. The wood is clean and pale, an excellent choice for bread boards, wooden spoons and kitchen tables.

L. Elder

Follow the path to the end until you see a large stone tomb near the east end of the church. Turn right here and go towards the tomb, which has an elder tree growing around it.

Elder is a small tree which likes rich soils and is often found in graveyards. This untidy, short-lived shrub was once considered the most magically powerful plant; among the elder myths is one that claims it was the wood of the cross. It is popular

with foragers; the sweet, scented flowers make a delicious cordial in early summer and in autumn the heads of small purple berries can be used in hedgerow jam.

M. Common Lime

At this point turn round, head back to the Lychgate and walk beyond it to an open area surrounded by large lime trees. Go to the first tree on the left.

Sometimes called linden trees, these stately trees produce fragrant blossom in the summer, a magnet for bees. The young leaves can be eaten with salads. The leaves attract aphids which then produce vast amounts of sticky honey dew. This fast-growing tree produces side shoots around the base of the trunk.

N. Persian Ironwood Tree (non-native)

Cross the open space and look for the memorial stone to Kim Ellis beneath a small spreading tree which was planted in her memory.

This small, drought tolerant multi-stemmed deciduous tree is native to northern Iran. It is sometimes planted as a garden tree for its attractive flaking bark when mature, its showy red flowers in spring, and multicoloured leaves in autumn.

O. Yew

Look for the large ancient tree next to the church tower; you have come to the end of the trail.

This remarkable tree is said to be over 1000 years old; it must have lots of stories to tell! Ancient yews are common in churchyards; it has been suggested that they were originally grown there to provide wood for long bows and to keep their poisonous foliage out of the reach of browsing cattle. Nearly every part of the Yew is poisonous, and it produces a substance named taxol which can be used to treat various cancers. Yew thrives on the chalky soils of the Chilterns; there is a dense dark yew wood on Watlington Hill.

Now you have completed the trail, you may like to take a moment to sit on the bench beside the yew tree and contemplate the peaceful atmosphere of this tree-filled churchyard.

