

# Preston Park twin elm tree – felled after 400 years due to elm disease – to be given new life

A famous elm tree which had stood in Preston Park for more than 400 years before it had to be felled will be turned into a piece of art.

By Nicola Caines

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Sculptor, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva with the stem of the Elm tree. Photo by Nicola Coleby

The trustees of the Secret Garden Kemp Town announced the news that the tree, which had to be felled after contaminating elm disease, would be worked on by a sculptor at the garden and become part of a major exhibition before it is returned to Preston Park.

The trustees explained: "The Brighton 'Preston Twins', considered to be two of the largest and oldest elms in the world, were planted around

1613, during James I's reign, when Shakespeare's plays were first being performed.

"Until 2019, the last of their kind, they stood majestically together, having avoided contamination by elm disease through the stringent control measures adopted by Brighton & Hove City Council. The city is host to the National Elm Collection, thanks to the Council's arboreal expertise.



The Preston Twins had stood together in Preston Park for 400 years

"A storm in 2017 exposed a hollow trunk in one of the 'twins', and thereafter the disease spread within. In 2019, the council had no option but to fell this magnificent specimen. Brighton & Hove City Council were determined not to lose this national treasure."

Alister Peters, a consultant for Connick Tree Care, had been seconded to the council to assist in identifying infected trees, and arranging for their removal to stop the spread.

The garden trustees explained that when the twin was felled, Alister was keen to give the hollow stem hulk every opportunity for some form of artistic after life. With agreement of the council, he arranged for the stem to be transported to Waterhall Sports Ground for temporary storage, prior to being either burnt or repurposed in some way.

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He then approached the acclaimed sculptor, Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, who de-barks and chars dead elm trees (an ancient Japanese process called Yakisugi, that preserves the wood) which she then gilds, to convert them into sculptures of breath-taking beauty. Many visitors will have admired her gilded elm at Nymans garden.

The trustees said that Alister invited Elpida to the site, and they agreed she might be able to give the tree new 'life', so that it could eventually be reunited with its remaining twin in Preston Park, as a major artwork.

Elpida was willing to take the risk of removing the bark (necessary to prevent the spread of elm bark beetles) without financial support from an outside agency.

But she needed more space to complete the work. Elpida approached Gavin Henderson, chairman of the Secret Garden Kemp Town, for which she is already creating a new piece for a major exhibition in Spring 2022.

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Gavin was delighted for Elpida to work on the elm at the secure garden. The sculpture will be completed in time for next year's exhibition. Once the show has ended, it is intended that the piece will go directly to Preston Park.

Gavin Henderson,  
chairman of The Antony  
Dale Trust Secret Garden,  
said: "Sad as it is that the  
Brighton's magnificent  
Great Elm has succumbed  
to the Elm disease, it is  
fitting that

this oldest and largest  
elm in Europe should be saved as an everlasting piece of sculpture...to  
be worked on by the distinguished Sussex sculptor Elpida Hadzi-  
Vasileva in Kemp Town's Secret Garden behind Sussex Square.

"We have established this historic garden as a centre for sculpture and  
the Great Elm will become part of a major exhibition of the Brighton  
Festival in 2022. We are so pleased and excited that Elpida may be  
visited to see the work in progress – do check up on the website for  
opening times.

"Secret or not this wonderful tree was growing in Preston Park for over  
400 years, long before Brighton and Hove's notable Regency  
architecture was even dreamt of!"

During summer 2021,  
there will be special  
openings of the Secret  
Garden so that visitors  
can see Elpida at work.

This garden is the only  
one of its type in the city,  
and the only place where  
major outdoor works of  
sculpture can be shown in a secure setting. Visitors of all ages are  
welcome. Entry is free and the garden is fully accessible for  
wheelchairs. For further information, visit:  
[www.secretgardenkemptown.co.uk](http://www.secretgardenkemptown.co.uk) The Preston twin elm tree will be  
transported from the Waterhall Sports Ground on May 10. With grateful  
thanks to Mike Connick at Connick Tree Care, for funding the  
transportation.