

Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva and the Preston Park Twins



International artist Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has preserved one of the iconic Preston Park Twins as a new sculptural celebration of these ancient elms. She exhibits her prints, drawings and small gilded objects in four Open Houses this May (see below for details) in support of Preston Park Twins project.

We talked to Elpida:

Can you tell us a bit about the Preston Park Twins and their history?

The Preston Twins were a pair of English elm (*Ulmus minor* 'Atinia') trees that grew in Brighton at the northern end of Preston Park. They were planted around 1613 and were "almost certainly" planted as part of a hedgerow. Believed to be among the oldest and largest English elm trees in the world, they reached heights of more than 100 ft (30 m) and widths of 23 ft (7.0 m). An outbreak of Dutch elm disease in England in the late 1960s caused Brighton to enact several measures to protect its 17,000 elm trees, including setting traps for the beetles that spread disease. They also dug trenches between neighbouring elms to prevent the disease from passing easily from tree to tree via their root systems. Infected branches were pruned and destroyed in efforts to save trees.



In 2017, a storm caused a large limb to break from the eastern twin, which showed that its trunk was entirely hollow. The tree appeared to respond well to pruning to reduce the weight of its limbs. Prior to its damage and branch

loss, it had been the larger of the two trees. This storm-damaged eastern twin became infected by Dutch elm disease, likely in the summer of 2018. It did not show any symptoms of infection until the following summer, by which time the disease had already spread to its roots. A trench was immediately dug between the two twins to sever their connecting roots. In December 2019, the infected tree was cut down. It was hoped that cutting it down would prevent Dutch elm disease from spreading to the other twin. In 2008, a cutting of the eastern twin was planted in Amsterdam. In 2018, the eastern twin was shortlisted in the Tree of the Year competition.



Would you like to tell us about the project you are working on with these trees – and also the significance of the trees to all our lives?

Alister Peters is an immensely experienced Consultant for Connick Tree Care, seconded to the Council to assist in identifying infected trees and arranging for their removal to stop the spread. When the twin was felled, there was little interest in its hollow stem hulk. Keen to give the tree every opportunity for some form of artistic afterlife Alister, with agreement of the Council, in December 2019 arranged for the stem to be transported to Waterhall Sports Ground for temporary storage, prior to being either burnt or repurposed in some way.

In Early 2019 I contacted Brighton City Council looking for dead Elm tree for a commission at University of Nottingham, 'Eurydice Prevails' (<https://elpihv.co.uk/works/eurydice-prevails/>); In January 2021 Alister approached me, he remembered me because I de-bark and char dead trees (an ancient Japanese process called Yakisugi, that preserves the wood) which I then gild, to convert them into sculptures. Many visitors will have admired my gilded tree at Nymans garden, (<https://elpihv.co.uk/archive/rapture/>).

Alister invited me to the site, and we agreed that I 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. I 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 then I had a problem – we had to move the trunk somewhere safe and dry to work on, but we had no finances – everything was difficult. This is where my tree journey really began!



I secured a space at the Secret Garden in Kemp Town, where the tree could be safely worked on for a year. I agreed that I would work during the summer 2021 with special openings of the Secret Garden so that visitors could see me at work. It was also the plan to show the tree as part of the exhibition 'In Nature' that opened in Spring 2022.

I was lucky that Connick Tree Care paid for the tree to be transported from Waterhall to Secret Garden. Local company Yates supported us with scaffolding, and we applied for and were successful with a grant from the National Lottery through Arts Council England. But all this took a long time to fall in place, delaying the progress of the project. I underestimated how bad the tree was; the timber was so badly affected by water it was decomposing – it was almost like paper, sheets were peeling off from the internal cavities. The way the tree was lying down at Waterhall, for two years, it was saturated with water. While I have 25 years' experience in conservations, I realised I had to get specialist advise, it was very daunting – the scale, the damage, the fragility of the tree and the importance of taking on such a big project of significance – I started to worry.



Hugh Harrison, timber conservation specialist, advised on preservation methods and recommended a few products that are sold at Brewers; Brewers Decorator Centres and Repair Care then became the next sponsors and fully supported the project with specialist advice and the best products to use.

In March 2022, a month before the opening of the exhibition at Secret Garden, the tree was still in its early stages of preservation. Anthony Dale Trust told us to fully uncover the tree and take the scaffolding down for the exhibition, but this was not possible – we had to keep the tree under covers for it to stay dry. So we had nowhere to go except back to Preston Park. This was a quite devastating time and risky as the tree was not stable enough to be moved again and the budget that we had just raised for the preservation had to be spent on transport, crane and road closure; in the process we also lost the scaffolding and had to find a new firm to support the project.

Thanks to Alison Bettles, who was working with me on the project we found Amazon Solutions and the new scaffolding was erected at Preston Park at the end of March 2022. We continued with the preservation of the tree and looked for further funding. We also set up a Just Giving page:

<https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/elpida-hadzi-vasileva-brighton-gilded-tree> and I continued to work pro bono as I believed in the project's success and importance for the city.



This preserved Gilded Elm now provides a major new focal point for the many people who visit the park throughout the year, as well as at signature events such as Brighton Festival, the Fireworks display, Pride, Comedy Garden and the Brighton Marathon. The final work keeps the shape, form, and size of the elm with a new gilded interior, creating a jewel for Preston Park, transforming

the tree into a celebration of the Preston Park Twins history and cultural significance. This new work specifically responds to the form, shape and scale of a large hollow elm tree and the traces left by the beetles which carry elm disease are reflected in the specially commissioned protective metalwork.

The trees may be lost, but they need to live in our memory, knowledge, and experience. This project is a final opportunity to hold and celebrate this disappearing past.



What other aims does the project hope to achieve more broadly?

Much of the UK's elm population has been lost, while Brighton and Hove host the largest collection of Elms in England and holds a critically important role in

preserving this native species. Due to the success of the local Elm Disease control programme, the city was granted full National Collection status by [Plant Heritage](#) in 1998. The project also aims to raise more publicity for the disease control campaign on elm disease and other tree threatening diseases. Through the work we have done I hope young generations will learn how important trees are for our survival, we need them they provide clean air for us to breath and we need to look after our environment. The project underlines just how important trees are to communities, both human and wildlife.



You are showing some related work in a series of Open Houses to help support the project. Would you tell us about the work that can be seen and bought?

To support the project, I made a drawing of the eastern twin in its prime, before the disease – when it was proudly standing as the oldest and largest English Elm in the world. It is a pencil drawing made as edition of 20 where each edition is personally signed, and hand gilded with 23.5 ct gold leaf.

In the debarking process I also kept some small bark pieces, which have been carefully cleaned, preserved and treated. One side has been gilded with 23.5 ct gold leaf and using elm square bases made into one off, unique collectable objects.



Where and when can visitors see the work in Preston Park?

The Gilded Elm is now permanently sited on its original location in the northern end of Preston Park in front of the Walled Garden to the left of the main entrance to the park and opposite the Shell petrol station. A What Three Words link points to the exact location: <https://w3w.co/that.brave.daring>

Thanks to:

The project has been funded by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, South Downs National Park Authority, Pride Social Fund, Jeremy Knight & Co and supported by the council. Critical support has also been received by a number of businesses, the most important of which are Brewers Decorators Centres, Repair Care, Connick Tree Care, Amazon Access Solutions, Gold Leaf Supplies, the artists agency and Yates. I would especially like to thank these individuals and other local organisations who have also contributed to the success of the project: Alister Peters, Alison Bettles, James Allen, Marc Thomas, Nigel Riley, Peter Bourne, Sam Harris, DP Squared, Dorothy Stringer School, Balfour Primary School, Urban Tree Festival, Site-Eye Time-Lapse Films, William Ranieri, Vivienne Barton, Rob Bradstock and everyone that donated via Just Giving.

