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Community effort turns tree tragedy into stunning sculpture

One of the oldest English Elm trees in the world that was destined for the incinerator is being lovingly transformed into an amazing work of art.

The beautiful gilded tree sculpture will be unveiled in Preston Park, Brighton, this spring and reunited with its surviving “twin” elm.

Preston Twins

The pair, known locally as the Preston Twins, stood side-by-side at the city park for over 400 years after being planted in 1613 during the reign of King James 1.

Fast forward to 2019 and one of the huge trees succumbed to Elm Disease – a blight that has decimated the elm population over the past 40 years, including in its strongholds of Brighton & Hove, home to the [National Elm Collection](#) [↗](#), and the neighbouring South Downs.

Thought-provoking

Like many elms, the diseased tree was destined for incineration, but a big community effort has now turned tragedy into thought-provoking art.

Working with a range of organisations, groups and businesses, artist Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva has spent the past two years working on a plan to preserve the tree.

Memorial

Elpida proposed turning the felled tree into a memorial, preserving what remained and adding a gilded interior surface to symbolise how much local people value the tree.

Elpida has donated much of her time pro bono for the creative work because she believes so passionately in the project.

Celebration

Elpida said: “This new preserved Gilded Elm 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 will keep the shape, form and size of the elm with a new interior to create a jewel for Preston Park, transforming the tree into a celebration of the Preston Twins history and honouring their cultural significance.

The tree may be lost, but it needs to live in our memory, knowledge, and experience. This project is a final opportunity to hold and celebrate this disappearing past.”

Conservation work

When Elpida began to work on the project, it became clear the tree required considerable treatments to preserve it.

As well as rigorous conservation treatments, with materials generously provided by Brewers Decorator Centres, the tree required structural interventions to maintain its shape and ensure its safety.

The work, to date, has been funded by Brighton & Hove City Council, Arts Council England, South Downs National Park Authority, and a wide range of local business, individuals and charity supporters including Brewers Decorator Centres, Repair Care, Amazon Access Solutions, Pride Social Impact Fund, and Connick Tree Care.

Returning home

Councillor Elaine Hills, co-chair of Brighton & Hove City Council’s Environment Committee said: “Losing one of our precious Preston Elms was a huge blow for the city and marked the end of an era for Preston Park.

"So, I am thrilled that, through working with our partners at the Arts Council and South Downs National Park Authority, it will return home and live on in such a unique and creative way. I can't wait to welcome its arrival to Preston Park next month."

Beautiful work of art

Claire Kerr, Countryside & Policy Manager for the Eastern Downs of the National Park, added: "This beautiful work of art has turned a negative into a positive and highlights the devastating impacts of pest and diseases like Elm Disease on our landscape and in our local parks.

"This iconic elm has been saved using art as a way to preserve its essence and it underlines just how important trees are to communities, both human and wildlife."

New trees

Later in the year, the South Downs National Park will be donating two disease-resistant elms to Preston Park for future generations to enjoy. This is part of the Trees for the Downs initiative which aims to replace trees lost due to pests and diseases.