

Thames Towpath (Barnes West, 2021)

Essential tree safety works information.

The Towpath.

The Thames Towpath that runs along the southern bank from Beverly Brook near Putney to Teddington Lock, stretches for over 10 miles (17+ km) and is managed by the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. In contrast to the northern bank, it has a predominantly wilder, more natural character with some linear, wooded areas.

It is well used by walkers, runners and cyclists for exercise, as well as a transport route and is bordered by many homes, businesses, schools and sports activity clubs, such as rowing who benefit from good access to the river.

Towpath management.

Along with The Port of London Authority, The Tree Team at Richmond Council have the responsibility for managing many of the trees along this stretch of the towpath. As Arboriculturists we are acutely aware of the importance of trees, not only for the environment and as a home to various fauna and fungi, but also to the landscape and residents.

Our first thoughts are always the environmental and ecological value and benefits of trees, as managing, encouraging and enabling a close relationship between trees and people is a fundamental principle of Arboriculture, because of their shared proximity in urban environments.

Consequently, it is often that case that trees in our care, grow in areas of high public access, therefore, it is vital that this access is maintained safely. This one of the main reasons we are undertaking these essential works along the Towpath, in order to maintain the balance of safe, public accessibility along this wilder, bankside of the Thames.

We are cognisant of residents' concerns when there is a requirement to prune, manage or even remove trees alongside many of the councils well-used roads, footways and paths. The Council takes these concerns very seriously and the decision to undertake major pruning works to any tree is never one that is taken lightly or without a great deal of consideration. We would not undertake such works without good reason.

Towpath Tree Survey.

The Council has dedicated significant resources to the assessment of trees along the towpath, which has included involvement by four separate Arboricultural professionals using the latest decay detection technology. We deemed this investment necessary to ensure we can understand the condition of trees, the risk posed by those of impaired condition and the work that is essential to mitigate the risk to those that live, work alongside and use the Towpath.

There are many circumstances where a tree may still be in leaf or appear to have nothing wrong with it, but it has structural defects, decay or disease which makes it unsafe but is not obvious.



Once such defects have been identified, it is important these works are undertaken promptly, without putting both members of the public and the climbing tree surgeon at unnecessary risk.

Towpath trees and their management.

Unfortunately, many of the Poplar and Willow trees identified in this survey have deteriorated to the point where they pose a very real danger to the public using the Towpath and require a variety of remedial works to ensure that they can either be retained safely or coppiced near ground level to allow them to regrow again from their existing rootstock.

Along with certain other species, Poplars and Willows have been managed in this way for thousands of years (Especially along river banks) and there are examples of trees in the UK where their life expectancy has been extended 4 and 5-fold when maintained like this. We do appreciate that the area around where these trees grow may look sparse in the immediate short-term. However, these [Coppiced](#) and [Pollarded](#) trees will quickly regrow again and flourish.

There are also a significant number of small Elm trees along the Towpath which have died from "Dutch Elm Disease". These will also be coppiced and allowed to regrow from the rootstock which remains unaffected by the disease.

It is important to note that several of the larger Poplar trees have been lost along the towpath over the last few years. Aside, from the obvious safety concerns, the loss of these trees has significant environmental and landscape implications. To do nothing would mean we will lose these trees altogether by allowing them fail. This would not only be negligent from a safety perspective, it would not be sustainable from an ecological one.

Conversely, the recommended Pollarding and Coppicing works will have the effect of extending these trees Safe Life Expectancy (SLE) by reducing their wind profile and weight at height. This minimises the mechanical forces exerted on parts of these trees that and have already been weakened by decay and subject to failure. In addition, many of these trees have already been pollarded in the past, however, the regrowth is inherently weak and liable to shedding. Therefore, creating lower reduction points that do not overhanging the footpath is a way to safely manage the risk this regrowth can present to Towpath users.

There are also trees being worked that are leaning heavily. Where leaning is obviously progressive, this indicates movement and an unacceptable risk of collapse. It would be negligent of the Council to note such defects and fail to act in the knowledge that the risk of failure is unacceptably high.

Tree planting, natural regeneration and habitat.

We do of course understand that the work will impact upon the Towpath environment and will be working towards re-planting where appropriate (this will include a priority of introducing rare clones on Black Poplar to accord with the ambitions of the Species Action Plan - Included within the wider [Biodiversity Action Plan](#)).



However, it is expected that the coppiced trees will regrow from the retained stumps and rootstocks and so planting in these areas is unnecessary. Furthermore, tree-pits would be difficult to dig in areas with an extensive network of existing roots and the new plantings would struggle to compete against re-growth from these coppiced trees. Therefore, allowing for natural regeneration is a far better option in these circumstances.

Richmond Council's policy is to not manage trees within important habitats, such as the wooded tow path during bird nesting season, except for overriding health and safety issues. Our Tree Surgeons are trained to identify active nests and roosts and will work to avoid any direct contact with birds or bats. Provided a tree surgeon has checked there are no active nests, roots or breeding birds within the tree, their actions are lawful.

We do hope that this helps allays concerns regarding the management of our trees. If you require any further information or wish to provide feedback please contact; Treesteam@richmondandwandsworth.gov.uk or telephone 0208 891 1411.

Your sincerely.

The Richmond Tree Team

