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Eyesore tree is transformed into eye-catching landmark

By John Lawrence

Over five days in January, a neglected tree in the garden of East Finchley Methodist Church was transformed into a stunning sculpture that will stand as a prominent landmark for years to come.



Unmissable: Simon O'Rourke's carving stands out against the sky. Photo Mike Coles

Professional tree carver Simon O'Rourke used a chain saw and smaller power tools to create what is believed to be the first public sculpture of Susanna Wesley, known as the Mother of Methodism, as part of the church's 200th anniversary

celebrations.

Standing at over 20 feet tall, the western red cedar was previously a bare eyesore overlooking the High Road. In an amazingly short time, Simon's skills turned it into a beautiful and imposing art work showing

Susanna with her welcoming arms stretched wide and surrounded by woodland creatures.

The sculpture project was funded by church members and the Heathfield Trust, a Barnet-based Methodist charity, as part of a major renovation of the corner garden for community use.

Branches become arms

Simon, who is based in North Wales, told *The Archer* that the tree had been a pleasure to work on and its natural shape had lent itself perfectly to the subject.

"We think this cedar tree, which is actually a type of cypress, is about 70 years old but its trunk is actually strong and healthy," he said. "It's a very soft wood to work with, so that meant I could get plenty of detail into Susanna's face and hat, and into the woodland animals down below."

"The two outstretched branches of the tree determined the whole shape of the carving. I could tell straightaway that they would become Susanna's arms and somehow the result is a perfect match for her personality."

Simon is used to working in peaceful forest or park settings



Woodland life: An owl nestles in the trunk



Transformed: How the tree used to look

so the bustling High Road was a new experience for him. "Being urban and with so many people around all the time, this could be my most viewed piece," he said. "I had lots of attention and people asking questions while I was working and everyone was so positive about it."

Linking church and community

During the carving, Simon found a length of telephone cable embedded into the wood from the time the tree had been used as a makeshift telegraph pole, but that was the only minor difficulty.

The cross symbol carved into the central section of the trunk is the same as that seen in the stained glass windows of the church behind. With care and a regular coat of decking oil, Simon expects the tree sculpture to look good for upwards of 25 years.

Senior church steward Jane Ray said: "We are excited to see Simon bring his vision to life. We

hope it brings the church outside and encourages the community to come inside."



Inspirational: Susanna Wesley

Susanna Wesley, the mother of Methodism


Susanna Wesley was born in Bishopsgate, London, in 1669 and was the mother of John and Charles Wesley, who both became founders of the new Church of England movement known as Methodism.

Susanna had 19 children in total, nine of whom died as infants, and she took responsibility for their education, teaching her sons and daughters Latin, Greek and other classical studies.

On Sundays, she would assemble the family in their kitchen for a devout service that included psalm singing and a sermon. Neighbours asked if they could join and at one time more than 200 people worshipped with Susanna and her children. She explained her devotion this way: "I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me under trust by the great Lord."


Her husband Samuel was a clergyman and poet but conducted himself poorly in financial matters, meaning Susanna was almost constantly battling with hardship and poverty.





She died in 1742 and is buried in Bunhill Fields, near Old Street. A number of her own writings and meditations on faith and spiritual life survive.


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