

# Sycamore Gap: some reflections

by Cressida Ryan

## Introduction

The CUCD Bulletin carries articles on a range of subjects which matter to the Classics community; when the sycamore tree at Sycamore Gap was felled in late November 2023, there was a national outpouring of grief and outrage which blended a range of cultural sensitivities with popular culture (Robin Hood) and archaeological awareness. The tree wasn't Roman, but it stood prominently in a Roman landscape, where Classicists and locals alike had gravitated towards it as an icon for the area. As editors, therefore, we felt that it was appropriate to write about the tree. Part "tree obituary", part reflection, part digest of the international press, this short article collates press coverage about the tree, offers some perspectives on why its felling has mattered in its own right, been dismissed, and fed into a national discourse about British culture and its relationship with the natural world.



The iconic front view of the tree. Photograph courtesy of Anna Judson.



## What happened

The incident remains part of a criminal case, and so this short article does not speculate on perpetrators and intent, but does lay out some of the facts about what happened, and responses to / reflection on the tree and its destruction.

On the night of 27<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup> September 2023, the sycamore tree at Sycamore Gap on Hadrian's wall was cut down at its base. The tree stands on National Trust land, and they were quick to make a statement about it.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/news/our-statement-on-the-felling-of-the-sycamore-gap-tree>

It is unclear who cut it down and why, but the act was deliberate, carried out with some expert knowledge, and with appropriate machinery. The fallen tree was left in situ. It attracted coverage from local, national, and international press. The following is not a fully comprehensive list of reports, but gives an indication of the range of reporting which took place.

### Local:

The story: <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/sycamore-gap-tree-northumberland-live-27801497>

Where the tree has featured on screen: <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/sycamore-gap-movies-tv-music-27803799>

### National:

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/28/famous-sycamore-gap-tree-at-hadrians-wall-found-apparently-cut-down>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/oct/05/felling-of-sycamore-gap-tree-damaged-hadrians-wall-inspection-reveals>
3. ITV's range of coverage: <https://www.itv.com/news/topic/sycamore-gap>
4. The removal of the tree: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/end-era-sycamore-gap-tree-31171347>
5. The BBC are running a "story so far" page, last updated 13<sup>th</sup> December 2023: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-66994729> This collates a range of reports on the incident, and responses to it.
6. Informal channels such as Reddit have collated material: [https://www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinfuriating/comments/16ujt0d/a\\_16\\_year\\_old\\_cut\\_down\\_the\\_iconic\\_tree\\_at/?rdt=35227](https://www.reddit.com/r/mildlyinfuriating/comments/16ujt0d/a_16_year_old_cut_down_the_iconic_tree_at/?rdt=35227)
7. The Times has run pieces on the tree's removal (Thursday October 12<sup>th</sup> 2023: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/workers-lift-felled-sycamore-gap-tree->



[from-hadrians-wall-9wfsf8szh](#)), on hope for its future (Wednesday December 6<sup>th</sup> 2023: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hope-for-sycamore-gap-tree-as-seeds-and-cuttings-show-signs-of-life-w67h7nzm3>) on what might be done with its wood (Sunday October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2023: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hope-for-sycamore-gap-tree-as-seeds-and-cuttings-show-signs-of-life-w67h7nzm3>). The immediate piece after the tree's felling, "How can we ensure the Sycamore Gap tree did not fall in vain" (2<sup>nd</sup> October 2023), shows how quick people are to try to pull out positives from disasters, to extrapolate to the bigger picture: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/how-we-can-ensure-the-sycamore-gap-tree-did-not-fall-in-vain-6w9w8j5xk> Unfortunately these articles are behind a paywall, but the range of titles is indicative of the kind of coverage given by national press.

### International:

This single British tree was reported on across the world.

1. <https://news.sky.com/story/sycamore-gap-iconic-tree-at-hadrians-wall-deliberately-felled-12971594>
2. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/englands-beloved-sycamore-gap-tree-chopped-down-180982987/>
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/28/world/europe/sycamore-gap-tree-uk.html>
4. <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/11/1205066133/sycamore-gap-tree-trunk-removed>
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/01/world/europe/sycamore-gap-tree-arrests-uk.html?>

### How people responded

The public response has been significant. Individual academics, local residents, artists, writers, and celebrities have all given reactions. The following are a representative sample:

1. Si King, "Hairy Biker": <https://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/23821580.hairy-bikers-fury-sycamore-gap-northumberland-felling/>
2. "Tree lovers": <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-67787521>
3. Lucy Pittaway, artist: <https://www.lucypittaway.co.uk/blog/sycamore-gap>
4. Rebecca Vincent, artist: <https://www.rebecca-vincent.co.uk/single-post/sycamore-gap-art>
5. Emily Ward, artist: <https://www.emilywardart.com/sycamore-gap-painting>

6. Simon Armitage, Poet Laureate: <https://www.itv.com/news/tyne-tees/2023-11-10/sycamore-gap-poet-laureate-pens-tribute-to-beloved-tree>
7. A drone artist recreated the tree as a “Tree of Light”:  
<https://metro.co.uk/video/drone-artist-recreates-felled-sycamore-gap-tree-light-3094715/>
8. A tree surgeon has walked (“conquered”) the Wall in just under 24 hours on New Year’s Day, raising money to support work around it:  
<https://www.timesandstar.co.uk/news/24031194.tree-surgeon-conquers-hadrians-wall-memory-sycamore-gap/>



The view along the Wall over Sycamore Gap. Photograph courtesy of Anna Judson.

The response to the tree’s destruction has been significant, at both an individual and a collective level.

For many people, however, the tree has meant so much that they have kept their responses private and unexpressed. Who has had a voice over this incident has also formed part of the story, as those making the most noise have in some cases been those with causes to further, rather than those for whom the tree was special. While there are longer-term concerns about the economic impact of the tree’s destruction, in the short-term, people have flocked to the site. Indeed, people have been asked to stop visiting the site (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-66971729>), given the impact of tourism on efforts to protect and preserve the area.

## Where we’re at, February 2024

The story has not been clear. Initially, a teenager was arrested, with various stories



circulating about why a teenager might have been both sufficiently motivated and skilled to carry out such an act.

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/uk-news/teenager-arrested-after-felling-sycamore-27806213>

In later October, further arrests had been made:

<https://metro.co.uk/2023/11/01/two-more-men-arrested-over-felling-of-world-famous-sycamore-gap-tree-19755159/>

By mid-November, there were updates about ongoing investigations and bail:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/sycamore-gap-tree-police-latest-b2448396.html>

The public were informed about developments, and, given the ongoing nature of the case, asked not to speculate. This balance between keeping people apprised whilst acknowledging the need for impartiality in a criminal case and trying to avoid inappropriate persecution of those potentially linked to the case also speaks to an ongoing tension between the British media and legal system. This tension is often seen in high-profile cases of crimes against people, but in this instance, the focus point has been a tree.

There have been further updates as recently as December 2023.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/man-in-his-60s-arrested-over-sycamore-gap-tree-to-face-no-further-action/ar-AA1lrL16>

## Afterlife

Ecologically, there is significant concern about the impact that the tree's felling will have on the area. I say felling, but it is more accurately coppicing. Sycamores are known for their ability to regrow, and people have been at pains to point out that the tree is not (yet) dead, but dormant. The theme of renewal and ecological hope is particularly pertinent in an environment where national morale is low, and the climate and landscape are under threat.

Regrowing the tree, however, is not assured, and would take decades, indeed centuries. In order to achieve this, further acts of vandalism would need to be prevented, and steps have been taken to stop livestock from inadvertently damaging the stump; we're choosing to intervene and protect nature from nature after the intervention of man.

For some sources on the tree's future, see:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sycamore-tree-felled-experts-b2422871.html>





Forestry news: <https://www.forestryjournal.co.uk/news/23973690.sycamore-gap-hopes-tree-will-live-cuttings-show-viability/>  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd1p82zdzzpo> - the BBC have run several pieces, with this the most recent at the time of writing, suggesting an afterlife through seedlings.

See also:

<https://www.npr.org/2023/12/06/1217541486/sycamore-gap-tree-seedlings-regrow>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2023/dec/06/cuttings-from-felled-sycamore-gap-tree-showing-signs-of-growth-says-national-trust?ref=upstract.com>

It is also not just about the tree. The tree acted as an ecosystem in its own right. Removing the tree destroyed that ecosystem, which has a significant impact on biodiversity in the area. Furthermore, tree roots lead to a soil nutrient balance which both nourishes the tree in particular, and leads to a specific environment for the surrounding area. If steps are not taken to protect the soil composition in the absence of the tree, it will change rapidly, affecting both the surrounding landscape and the potential for a new tree surviving and thriving.

A new sycamore could be cultivated and transplanted, but given the sensitivity of the soil, this would need to be extremely carefully managed, and would take very large sums of money.

Humans can act to preserve the ecosystem, given that humans have created the problem. Yet the need to act in the face of a major change – albeit manmade rather than natural – leads to a preservation of the past at odds with the inevitable cycle of change in the natural world. It speaks to our need to ossify the past, making a relatively modern tree a fixed part of an historic landscape, where change cannot be tolerated. There is no simple “what next?” for the site.

Economically, the local community fear that the loss of the iconic tree will lead to a drop in tourism, and therefore a negative economic impact on the area in an already marked cost of living crisis. This is clearly demonstrated by the Sycamore Gap beer at the wonderful [Twice Brewed Inn](#) (drunk by many a school teacher on a Classics trip); the inn have asked for cross-sections of the tree to remember it by, in the hope that they can continue to attract visitors as the inn closest to the site.

Twice Brewed’s request for physical remnants of the tree leads us to consider the extensive suggestions about what to do with the wood left from the tree. This has been removed, taken to a place of safekeeping. A memorial at the site has been

suggested, along with a whole range of possible useful and / or beautiful objects, from pencils upwards.



The tree from a distance. Photograph courtesy of Anna Judson.

## More than a tree

The tree and its coppicing have started a number of conversations about topics including trees, the British relationship with our landscape, tourism, economics, collective identity. Some of these are picked up in general discussion pieces such as these two:

<https://theconversation.com/sycamore-gap-what-the-long-life-of-a-single-tree-can-tell-us-about-centuries-of-change-214750>

<https://the-past.com/feature/the-tale-of-a-tree-an-archaeological-history-of-sycamore-gap/>

George Connor explores a number of the threads involved in his thoughtful reflection: <https://www.workingclassicists.com/post/if-a-tree-falls-in-the-north>. The destruction of the tree has been used as a way to reflect negatively on particular people and groups of people; it has channelled unwarranted levels of vitriol and outrage, which are unhelpful, when what we need is community investment and support. The story of this tree has become overwritten by a whole range of deeper narratives.

As Classicists, we're used to understanding the power of the olive in the Athenian imagination, or the laurel at Delphi, or [Demeter's](#) tree that Erysichthon so foolishly chopped down. The oak occupies a similar position in the United Kingdom, as I



argued in a [2011 interview](#), or, in a more scholarly fashion, in 2022 ([Colonus in England's Green and Pleasant Lands](#)). To return to Robin Hood, the [Major Oak](#) in Sherwood Forest is an excellent example of this phenomenon, linking a semi-mythological figure with a tangible, visible piece of nature. This physical link with the past may be another reason why Sycamore Gap is such an important part of the Hadrian's Wall landscape. It makes history real to us.

The very tangible nature of the tree, even if it is merely hundreds of years old rather than thousands of years like the Wall, has given people something concrete to latch on to. The destruction of the sycamore captured the public imagination to such an extent that it has become a hook for protecting other national trees at risk:

<https://www.cardiffcivicsociety.org/blog/from-sycamore-gap-to-wrexham-britain-is-vocal-in-its-love-for-trees-the-guardian-leader>

Petitions have flown around, from Change.org regarding the [Darwin oak](#) (October 2023), in particular, to calls for the government to [protect trees in general](#) (November 2023).

There are indeed “bigger things” to worry about at both a national and an international level. This, however, is, for many reasons, yet another factor in why the tree's shocking coppicing has taken such root in the public imagination. It reflects a tradition of sublime landscapes mattering, of the relationship between landscape and the Humanities which goes beyond pure pragmatism. It channels anger and grief into something very focussed, giving the amorphous overwhelm of contemporary financial, ecological, and political crises a focus point for expression. While there are layers of moral complexity in the case, it has not been hard to unite over the idea that the act of cutting down the tree was itself not a good thing to do. This focus for moral outrage, taken to greater extremes than others, makes the outrage to some extent performative, and risks scapegoating the perpetrators, as noted by George Connor (see above).

I may not be a Romanist, but, as my work on Britain already mentioned suggests, the relationship between our Roman past and the British landscape is something which matters to me. I first visited Sycamore Gap in 1998, a teenager on work experience with the Actors of Dionysus, sent out on a Durham summer school day trip to Housesteads. It was my first major visit to a Roman site and made the ancient world real to me. This will be true for many others. I replicated the experience in 2011, taking a group of students from the Oxford Latin Teaching Project on a weekend trip there to support their group cohesion as well as their Classical education. I reviewed a pilot radio comedy which is now a play, [“It's Grim up North”](#), and bonded over the wall as a source of poetic inspiration with Classics teacher Helen Lawrenson, whose book [Upon a good high hill](#) exudes excitement and love for the area. I later





walked the whole wall carrying my baby daughter on my back. Yet I'm a Greek tragedy and education expert. Thousands of us will have similar stories. Herein lies another reason why the vandalism of the sycamore tree had such an impact. As a discipline, it unites school children with professors, Hellenists and Romanists. From the GCSE syllabus to academic monographs, Hadrian's Wall is ubiquitous in Classics, and Sycamore Gap has been a central point for those visiting the core destinations of Housesteads, Vindolanda, Corbridge, and Carrawburgh.

## TO FINISH

This piece was intended to round up the main coverage, and strands of coverage about the destruction of the tree at Sycamore Gap. The tree isn't Classical, but it has intertwined itself with an area of the Wall which is so well-known to many who might otherwise not know much about the Wall, that its image has become emblematic of this part of Roman Britain. Its destruction was sudden and recent, unlike much of the decay which has faced other parts of the Wall, and therefore stands out. Events have brought together the voices of varied communities, from those resident in Northumberland, to the international media. It demonstrates some of the ways in which both Classics and the material culture associated with the Classical world matter to people outside of our more rarefied academic community. Understanding the importance of the tree, its destruction, and the responses to / reporting of its felling is its own form of Classical reception and service to the discipline.