

## La Trobe's legacy takes root: A descendant of Charles La Trobe's elm makes its own mark on Melbourne

By Megan Backhouse

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A street, a university and a State Library reading room are named after him, a whole valley in south eastern Victoria too, also a river and, elsewhere in the state, a mountain. Almost everywhere you turn you come across a reminder of Victoria's first lieutenant-governor. Charles La Trobe is remembered in statues, plaques and commemorative stones. His house has been resurrected, his furniture saved, his garden reimagined.

No surprises, then, that an English elm that this London-born officer of state planted in Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens in 1851, which died 42 years ago, now has a life of its own.



The original English elm planted in the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne in 1851 by Charles La Trobe, seen here in 1951  
*State Botanical Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria*

La Trobe planted the *Ulmus procera* to commemorate the separation of Victoria from New South Wales. Victoria's move to self-government drew a rapturous response and this European tree struck a celebratory chord.

Melbourne's age of elm planting was just getting under way. The Royal Botanic Gardens' first curator, John Arthur, had already planted four English elms near the gardens' lake and within decades there would be elms lining all Melbourne's main boulevards.

Within a century some of these trees were failing too. The elm planted by La Trobe survived – not far from Arthur's elms (just one of which remains) – until 1977 when the then-rotting tree was removed. But its planting provenance meant that wasn't the end of matters.

A propagator at the gardens, Cliff Grosvenor, collected some of the tree's roots – ones as thick as his fingers – cut them into segments, planted them in the gardens' nursery to grow new elms with the same genetic makeup as that planted by La Trobe.

Grosvenor then retired but his cuttings still took and, in 1979, La Trobe's great-nephew visited Melbourne from his home in Germany and – with much fanfare and one of the garden's memorial spades – planted one of the new seedlings on the site of the original tree.

You could say La Trobe's *Ulmus procera* lived on. But within 30 years it was dying and by the end of May 2012 it was gone. Step in Jenny Happell, a volunteer at the gardens since 1983 and an avid collector of all sorts of memorabilia associated with the gardens. She has a library of old guidebooks, hundreds of postcards, historic newspaper cuttings and old photographs, including several of the original elm planted by La Trobe. They show a tall and majestic tree with a generous canopy.

Happell says she was "quite distressed" to see this link to La Trobe – who had also established the entire gardens in 1846 – had been severed. So she didn't let matters lie. She regularly perused the spot from where the second elm had been removed and kept her eyes peeled for any suckers from remaining roots. When new shoots duly unfurled, Happell pounced. She dug them up and planted them in pots and cared for them in her home garden. She began agitating for the gardens to plant a third round of this *Ulmus procera* and also contacted Sandra Pullman, who was then the volunteer head gardener at La Trobe's Cottage, to see if she wanted one of the seedlings too.

But more than 160 years after the first planting, ideas had changed and before the tree was planted in a public space again, it was decided to have it bud grafted – at a nursery in Silvan – onto the rootstock of *Ulmus glabra* (Wych elm), because that stops the tree's suckering habit. The RBG last year planted one of the resulting grafts in a new spot uphill from La Trobe's original planting (Sandi and I went to watch) and Pullman and Happell hope for another to be planted in Kings Domain near La Trobe's Cottage.

But it is a whole different ball game planting a tree in a public space today than it was in La Trobe's time. Nothing is left to chance and no detail of any specimen being considered for planting – not its growth habit, life expectancy nor the places in which the same species has been planted in the past – is left unexamined.

Negotiations are currently under way as to precisely where this second English elm should go. Happell says that if there is one thing the process has taught her it is that "persistence pays off". "There have been a lot of obstacles but this is the same tree that La Trobe planted when Melbourne was only 16 years old. It is incredibly important."

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