



# Silent WITNESS

*It's the Year of the Tree in Richmond Park. And a portrait of the mighty Royal Oak is helping it flourish. Tessa Parry-Wingfield meets the artist*

**S**tanding close to Pen Ponds, the Royal Oak is the extravagant arboreal signature of Richmond Park. At around 750 years old, it is a stoic giant, a silent witness to times past, existing centuries before Charles I enclosed the park in 1637. Yet today it captures well the contemporary zeitgeist, with many people hailing trees as an emblem of – and panacea for – climate change.

And 2020 is to be its year in the sun. November saw the launch of the Year of the Tree, a campaign by conservation charity Friends of Richmond Park to help protect the park's trees and raise awareness of their ecological importance. The patron is Sir David Attenborough, its symbol the majestic Royal Oak.

Cue Mark Frith, the artist and BAFTA-winning documentary film-maker, commissioned by the Friends to produce

a drawing of the Oak to serve as an icon for the Year. This afternoon finds him at a botanical art exhibition in Kew Gardens. As Mark points out, however, he is no botanical artist himself.

"I am a tree portraitist," he explains. "Trees are incredible. So many British oaks have been around for hundreds of years; they have grown into these extraordinary different characters. It's thought that many, if not all of them, will be dead within a century because of climate change. It's awful. To create a record of them is now an urgent task."

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Home to 130,000 trees, 1400 of them considered 'veteran' – displaying ancient characteristics, though of no specific age – Richmond Park is London's largest National Nature Reserve. It's also an "old haunt" of Mark's, a "great spiritual resource" that he would frequently draw upon, often visiting with his family while living across town in North London.

Yet it was the return to his childhood home in Gloucestershire, a decade ago, that reignited his passion for the fine art he had studied with great success at Bristol in the days of his youth.

"In the fields where I played as a boy is an ancient oak tree – one that's about 1,000 years old. When we moved back, I started to draw again. I just picked up a pencil and spent two and a half months creating an enormous drawing of this oak, and from there the whole thing kicked off."





The Royal Oak itself



Sir David Attenborough observing the graphite drawing



Mark Frith with his drawing

Signed, limited-edition fine art giclée prints (90 x 72cm) of the 'Royal Oak', £385 each, are available through the Friends website ([frp.org.uk](http://frp.org.uk)), but only a few are left. Smaller prints are available at the Visitor Information Centre, along with special packs of Walks With Remarkable Trees in Richmond Park. The website also details 2020 events.

Photos: Richard Gray

With personal approval from Prince Charles at Highgrove – “a neighbour, of sorts” who gave him the “courage to go on” – Mark made his first professional foray into giant graphite tree portraiture. The result was *A Legacy of Ancient Oaks*, a 20-strong series of drawings that yielded a book and an exhibition in the Shirley Sherwood Gallery at Kew.

The epic creations took four and a half years to complete. It was a meticulous, Herculean task that saw Mark hunker down in his studio from morning to night. Every day. For him, the devil is in the detail. Only that precision, he insists, can encapsulate the mysterious soul and wise personality of the trees.

“When I came to draw the oak that had been my playmate – that I’d climbed all over during my childhood, inside and out – there were times when it seemed as though my hand was working at a

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disconnect to my conscious brain. As if the tree was drawing itself. Allied to which I could smell the bark – the texture of the bark and the twigs – in a really exciting and peculiar way.”

When Mark received the call from the Friends, it was a mild March – and the Royal Oak was already threatening to bud. He recalls racing to London, camera and sketchbook in hand, just as his subject was coming into leaf. He spent a day with it, working out the right angle and light, and then creating designs to transfer onto the vast canvas later.

“Ancient oaks lend themselves

wonderfully to the pencil,” he enthuses. “During the winter they are pretty much monotone – working with graphite is a very good match. All of my trees are winter portraits, and that’s really important to me because I am after the muscularity of the naked tree.”

Important too because each year more than 5.5 million people visit Richmond Park, and it’s exceptional trees like the Royal Oak that bear the burden. Compaction from visitors, climate change, pollution and an increasing range of diseases are all putting their future in jeopardy.

Ironically, the peril coincides with our truly waking up to the role of these trees in biodiversity. For Mark, it all makes his mission more urgent still, and his next artistic venture is already settled: shining a light on Britain’s threatened ash trees. Before it is finally too late.