UNCOVERING ESSEX'S MULBERRY TREE HERITAGE

Monday 29 June, 2026

Morus Londinium is an award-winning project, managed by The Conservation Foundation to survey, research and promote our legacy of historic Mulberry trees. Initially focused on Greater London, the project is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year by extending its range, thanks to the support of the Essex Heritage Trust.

Long valued for its gnarled appearance and succulent fruit, the black mulberry – our most common mulberry species – was introduced by the Romans nearly 2,000 years ago. No trees from this time will have survived, but, given their early connections with Essex it is possible that the project will uncover trees with Roman links. After all, Camulodunum (today's Colchester) was the first major Roman city.

In the Middle Ages black mulberries were grown in monastery orchards for their nutritional and medicinal value. But it was in the early 17th century that mulberry trees became widely planted – this time not for their fruit, but for their leaves. King James I wanted to start an English silk industry, and the leaves of the mulberry are the only food the silkworm will eat. While tens of thousands of mulberries were planted, the royal project was not a success. Nevertheless, several of those original trees have survived, 450 years later, often hidden from view in stately homes and private gardens where they were planted.

According to the project's director, writer, photographer and cultural historian, Dr Peter Coles, "an old mulberry tree can sometimes be all that remains of a garden or property that has long disappeared under centuries of change and development." One example is the sprawling veteran at St John's Abbey Gate in Colchester, stranded in a car park. "A veteran mulberry tree can raise public awareness of a site's heritage as well as having its own value as a tree", says Peter who has been researching ancient trees and their heritage for over forty years.

Because old mulberry trees are often hidden from public view, Peter will be relying on local people to report mulberry trees they know of in Essex. In this way the project can build on the thirty or so examples already known in the county, but not yet fully researched.

The *Morus Londinium* online map has pinpointed over 1,200 mulberry trees so far in the UK, many for the first time. Peter has visited and photographed many of them and, with this new support from the Essex Heritage Trust, he is excited to have this opportunity to discover new trees and the stories they have to tell.

"For over 10 years our Mulberry project has been called *Morus Londinium*, which puts the focus on London's mulberry heritage" says Peter Coles. "Now, as our range reaches beyond the capital, it may be time to think of a new name."

David Shreeve, a founder director of The Conservation Foundation, is delighted to have another project in Essex. "Our *Elms Across Europe* brought some of the very first Sapporo Autumn Gold disease-resistant elm trees to the project sponsors' headquarters at the Pinnacles in Harlow in 1979 which made headlines back then and led to us launching The Conservation Foundation two years later. Hopefully, we can reinforce the Foundation's historic links with Essex through the county's mulberries."

Sharon Hill, Administrator of the *Essex Heritage Trust* commented "With Essex's strong Roman heritage we were delighted to be able to support the continuation and extension of this excellent project. The presence of these trees seems to bring out some fascinating stories and we very much look forward to seeing what Peter uncovers in Essex."

Summer seemed an appropriate time to launch the Essex research phase of the project. In Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a mulberry tree plays a central role, with dark red stains from the fruit being mistaken for blood and leading to the tragic death of the two lovers in the play-within-a-play that makes up Shakespeare's plot.

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Contact: David Shreeve 07831 387745 (The Conservation Foundation) or Peter Coles 077887 11953 (Morus Londinium project + further information and photographs)

www.conservationfoundation.co.uk/projects/morus-londinium/

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