Each Winter, leaf fall allows evergreen conifers to stand out more clearly in our landscape even when mixed in with native 'broadleaves'. Our churchyard, surrounding gardens, the roadside by the old school, Udlington and the site of Merton Nurseries by the Four Crosses all contain a rich variety of specimens of all sizes. Further afield, Onslow Hall has a good collection while, beyond the Parish, Nesscliffe Hall has one of the finest collections in the County, well worth a visit.

To some people, such 'exotic' trees are viewed as 'alien' intrusions into our 'native' landscape, but to others they provide additional interest with their fascinating botanical and historical story.

In evolutionary terms they can boast a very long ancestry, stretching back to the Carboniferous Period 300 million years ago, when swamps preserved so much plant remains to form coal. At this time primitive conifers were also colonising the drier sites, where they were less well preserved (except when a volcano buried some of them under its ash near Dudley).

They were clearly well adapted to cope with the stresses of changing climates which caused the extinctions of many of those swamp plants, and could colonise a wider range of sites. This encouraged the development of different 'families' as they spread around the continents, which just at this time were joined together. Having survived those 'extinction' events at the end of the Permian and Triassic Periods, 200 million years ago, they prospered in the kinder conditions of the following Jurassic and Cretaceous Periods, better known for the evolution of dinosaurs. Some of these had to become 'walking compost heaps' with long necks in order to browse on such rough foliage, while the trees themselves developed sharper scales like the Monkey Puzzle and needed to grow even taller to get out of the way. Natural selection and adaptation at work!

During these periods the continents were moving apart again, thus isolating some distinct populations. Also flowering plants were evolving, challenging the dominance of conifers in the tropics especially, leaving them to the harsher conditions of high altitudes and latitudes (it was curious plant distributions arising from all this which first gave clues to 'Continental Drift').

Nevertheless, some species, including Redwoods, could still hold their own in the new 'mixed' forests and contribute their remains to some European Lignite (brown coal) deposits. However, the more recent Ice Ages made them extinct in such areas, leaving surviving populations only in S E Asia and N America. Now 'artificially' reintroduced, they can once again thrive here during our current 'interglacial'. From now on they have become part of our landscape history.

During the eighteenth century the English gentry were creating 'ideal' landscapes around their country mansions, using experts such as Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and Humphrey Repton – their 'English Style' gardening also fitted in with the improvements of whole estates for both food and timber production, not to mention fox hunting.

While all this was going on, British merchants were opening up trade contacts around the world and competing with European neighbours for the establishment of colonies. The government even promoted voyages of exploration which included botanists who drew attention to the rich plant life which they observed. The voyage of the Beagle with Charles Darwin was a continuation of this policy.

Landowners and nurserymen also helped sponsor plant hunters in the wilds of North America and the Himalayas and were eager to plant new discoveries on their estates, both for appearance and

potential for timber production. Meanwhile, as more of North America was being opened up, the colonists were only interested in chopping down the virgin forests!

From the 1850s onwards, landowners were especially eager to plant giant sequoias from California since their reputation for massive growth so impressed them. Its popular name became Wellingtonia, after the 'Iron Duke', but he had nothing to do with them. Even some smaller Victorian villas and our churchyard had one or two which could cause problems later on restricted sites.

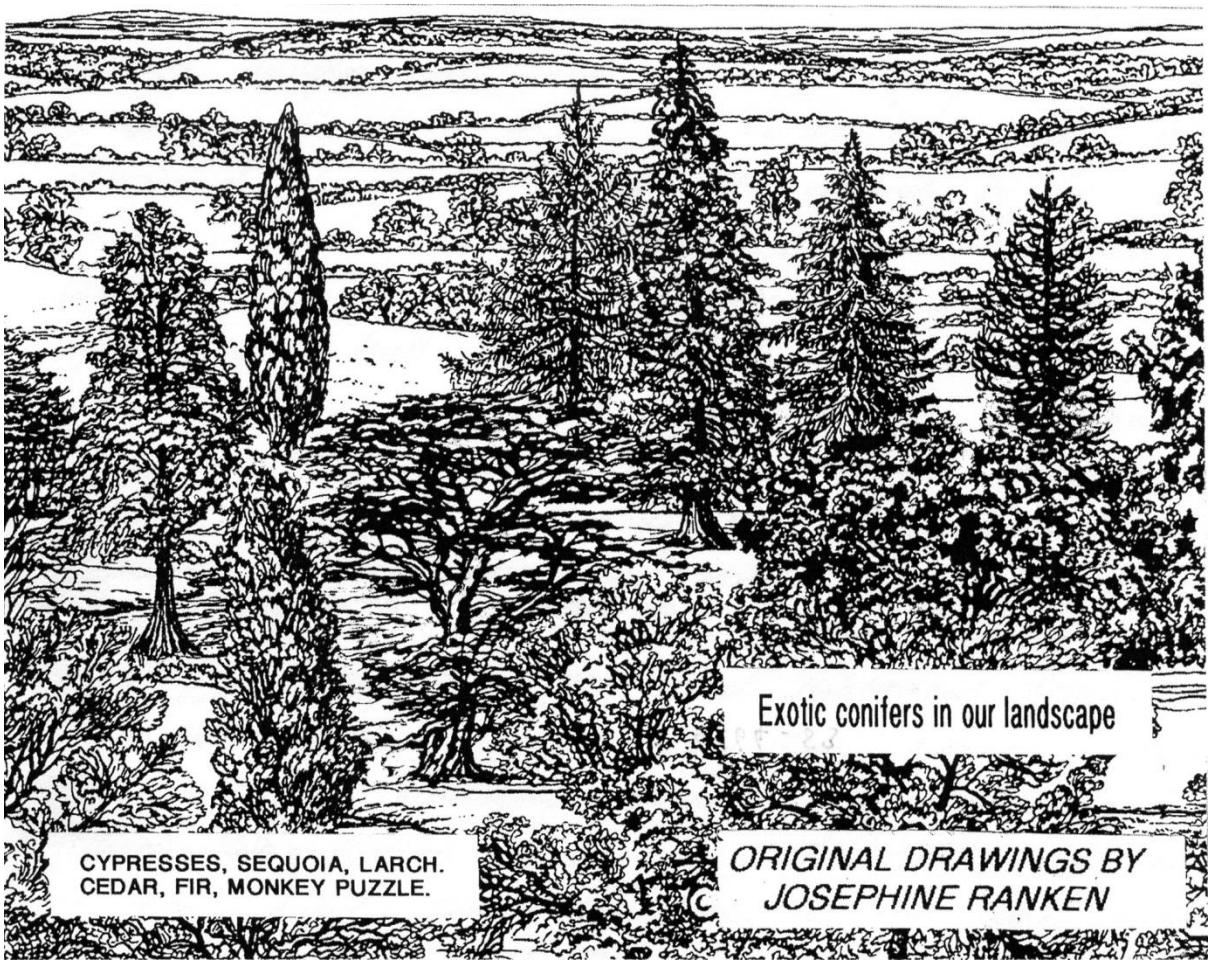
Less well known to the general public is the 'Coast Redwood', since it is best suited to sheltered sites and prefers to be in pure stands. Today, small groves of them thrive at Leighton, Nesscliffe and Hawkestone within larger woodlands but are less suited to sites within Bicton.

When the British Navy explored the NW coast of America they recognised the potential of the Douglas Fir for ships' masts. Now planted here, several British estates vie with each other to boast the tallest tree in the Kingdom, but the navy no longer needs them!

Nearer home, as Victoria and Albert discovered the delights of the Scottish Highlands, English gentry discovered the usefulness of Scots Pine, especially in exposed sites. Today, Udlington Manor by the Four Crosses is surrounded by them. Prince Albert also introduced us to the Norway Spruce and European Fir as a Christmas tree, such trees now contribute to our commercial forests in the hills. While all these varied forms of conifer illustrate well the forces of 'natural selection' acting through long geological time, in more recent decades, nurserymen and plant breeders have been using 'unnatural selection' in producing 'cultivars' more suited to small suburban gardens.

Dwarf and prostrate forms, more golden or darker shades now decorate gardens around the Oval, and also the site of Merton Nurseries, which once sold many of them. Gardens are also screened by that 'accidental' hybrid, the Leyland Cypress, instead of traditional privet.

This is but a brief summary of the conifer story drawing attention to their significance in our landscape, leaving scope for more detailed history and botany some other time. In the meantime, do take the trouble to look closely at them and perhaps think of hungry dinosaurs and brave plant hunters.


Exotic conifers in our landscape
CYPRESSES, SEQUOIA, LARCH.
CEDAR, FIR, MONKEY PUZZLE.
ORIGINAL DRAWINGS BY
JOSEPHINE RANKEN