

## The remaining Peter Collinson trees at Mill Hill

Mill Hill School occupies a commanding position on the Ridgeway, Mill Hill, ten miles north west of central London, which was once the site of Peter Collinson's house and garden. From the top terrace it was, until quite recently, possible, on rare and exceptionally clear days, to see Windsor Castle, over twenty miles away.



Ridge Way House Peter Collinson's home stood on the site now occupied by Mill Hill School

The Mill Hill of Peter Collinson was very different to that of today but looking out across top terrace on a summer's evening it is not difficult to empathise with his thoughts, as expressed to Cadwalader Colden in a letter dated February 25, 1764.

*"I am Here retired to my Sweet and Calm old Mansion, from its High Elevation, Look 40 or 50 Miles round Mee on the Busie Vain World below – Envyng No Man but am truly thankful for the undeserved Blessings Good Providence hath pleased to confer on Mee." (i)*

The original school chapel was fashioned out of the stables of Collinson's 'Ridge Way House' and in this house the Mill Hill Grammar School first assembled on January 25th, 1808. The non-conformist group who founded the school had been dismayed, when first visiting the site, to contemplate the enormous sums needed to restore it but "They took a walk on the terrace; the beauties of nature cheered their hearts; they thanked God and took courage." (ii)



Mill Hill School, The Ridgeway, Mill Hill, London

The present building was designed by the architect William Tite in the same Greco-Roman style as his more famous creation, the Royal Exchange in the city of London. Built in 1825, it has been extended variously since that date. The surrounding parkland covers an area much greater than Collinson's original garden and over the years it has been carved into attractive terraces to make a number of sports fields, each with its own character. In the process a number of Collinson's tree plantings were lost. Two hundred and fifty years on, it is remarkable that a few still survive. They are illustrated in the photographs which follow.

The portico of Mill Hill School framed by two of Peter Collinson's plantings; to the left (Pin oak, *Quercus palustris*, and Black locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*) and to the right, a cedar, *Cedrus atlantica*, planted by HRH Queen Elizabeth to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the school





**Pin oak**  
*Quercus palustris*

A tree valued for its decorative value rather than its timber which is too knotted. This specimen almost certainly arrived in a shipment of seeds from John Bartram.

It has lost its crown due to necessary surgery but retains the ability to impress with its autumn colours.

**Black locust tree**  
*Robinia pseudoacacia*

This tree has an enormous hollow base from which the upright trunks have sprung, indicating its age. The proximity to the building (like the Pin oak above and the Tulip tree following), suggests that it predates the school building.

A valued timber tree for furniture and boat building, this is also an import from N America





**Tulip tree**  
*Liliodendron*  
*tulipifera*

The tulip tree pictured here was felled by a lightning strike in 1977. Vigorous shoots grew out of the stump a year later, one much stronger and straighter than the rest. This shoot was retained and carefully nurtured by the Author and the result can be seen in the photograph.

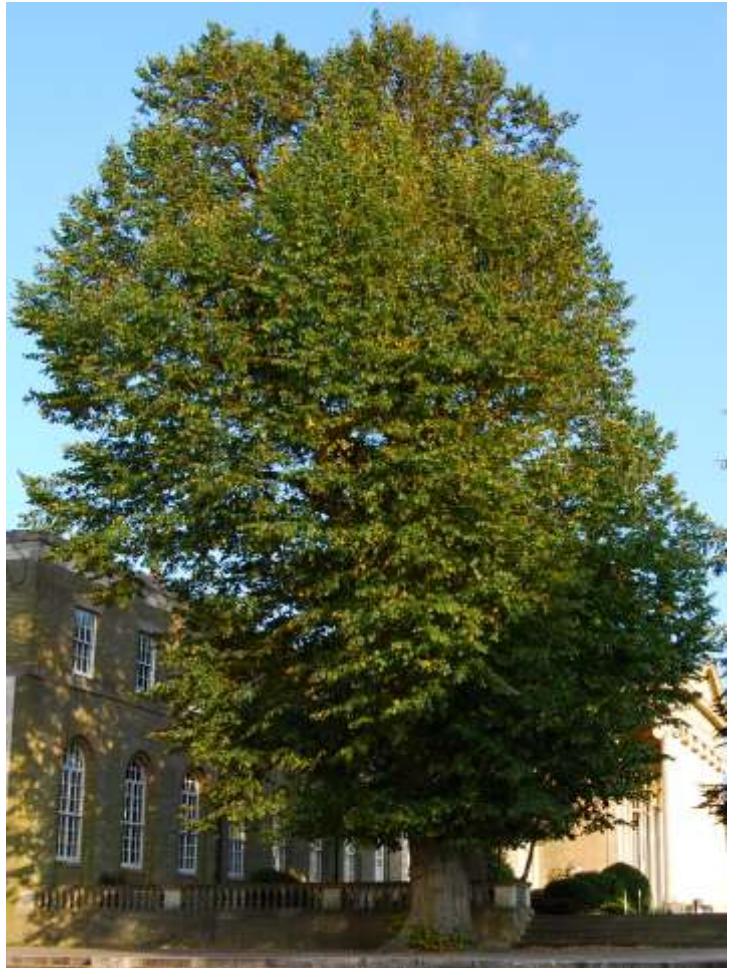
This tulip tree most probably arrived in a box of seeds from Bartram. One of the most beautiful furniture trees of N.E. America, it flowers profusely in mid June.



**Common Lime**  
*Tilia x europaea*

From its position, it is clear that this tree predates the school building and is likely to have been standing in Collinson's garden.

It is a natural hybrid between the small leaved and large leaved limes



**English oak**  
*Quercus robur*

This tree dominates the top terrace of Mill Hill School a hundred yards from the site of Peter Collinson's original house, looking out on what he described as the "busy vain world below"



**Oriental plane**  
*Platanus orientalis*

This tree stands on the edge of the same terrace. It doesn't look its age as its growth has been hampered by prevailing winds from the west. A similar tree stands in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Collinson visited his botanist friend, Bernard de Jussieu there in 1734 and planted a cedar (see photo below) so it is likely that the plane trees are of a common provenance.



This cedar of Lebanon was planted by Peter Collinson in 1734 in The Jardin des Plantes in Paris (see inscription)



**Sweet Chestnut**  
*Castanea sativa*



This tree, planted by Peter Collinson joins the oak and plane on top terrace and evokes even more eloquently the lasting sense of memory and place inherited by Mill Hill School. He would be so pleased to know that it remains here today.

On September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1758 he wrote about a chestnut tree he had seen in his friend Lond Petre's Essex garden, "*...a stately chestnut tree, which is now flourishing, that I measured five feet above the ground, and found it's girth forty-five feet. The tradition in this neighbourhood is, that fifteen deer could shelter under it.*"

Peter Collinson's footprint in Mill Hill is not just to be found in these remaining old specimens touched in their infancy by his own hand. Around the grounds of Mill Hill School and beyond, in the surrounding district, evidence of his legacy can be found. Across the sports field and facing the imposing portico of the main building is a collection of trees a number of which are likely descendants of an original collection. Notable among these are three specimens of swamp cypress, *Taxodium distichum* in various states of health, the largest (see picture) taking advantage of the boggy conditions which it so favours. *Taxodium distichum* is native to the wetlands of Florida but flourishes throughout the Eastern seaboard of the US. Introduced to the UK by John Tradescant in the mid seventeenth century it is likely to have been a resident of Peter Collinson's garden.



**Swamp Cypress**

***Taxodium  
distichum***





These young students of Mill Hill School are unlikely to be aware now that they are running around in what used to be Peter Collinson's garden. Perhaps they will never know but they will, like all the teachers and students who have gone before them, have, to some extent, been infused by that sense of place. Peter Collinson's trees and his legacy are part of their lives.

Trevor Chilton  
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#### Notes

- (i) Darlington W. (1849) *Colden Papers*, vol.6 pp 288, 289 from *Memorials of John Bartram and Humphry Marshall, with notices of their Botanical Contemporaries*.
- (ii) Timpson G.F (1957) *Et Virtutem. Essays on Mill Hill* . Published privately to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school