

# Square peg

As the frustration of propping up a household Christmas tree in a tub fades from memory for another year, **Michael Miles** explain why putting up a tree 15 times the size is a lot easier

**T**raditionally put up from the first Thursday of December until Twelfth Night in January, the Christmas tree which stands in Trafalgar Square with Nelson's Column and the Lions is a familiar image to many living outside

the capital, as well as those visiting it. Decorated with more than 600 white low-voltage lights, strung up and down in a Norwegian style, it is the focal point for carol singing and other festive events in the area.

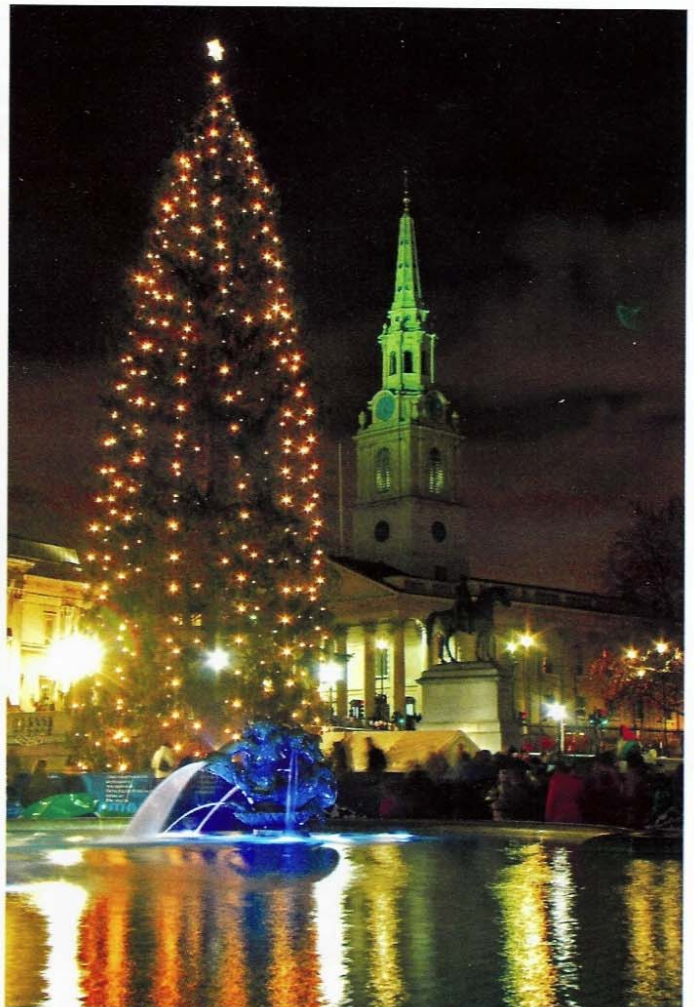
A carefully-selected Norwegian

spruce tree has stood on this site every year since 1947, when the original Christmas tree was shipped over from Oslo as a 'thank you' for Britain's wartime support.

Yet, while 2009's specimen was an impressive 28 metres high and 2.5

tonnes, it took the team of contractors just over half-an-hour to erect it with plant and vehicles, because this well-practised operation can call on hidden support.

Before the official event to switch on the lights on 3 December 2009,



work began on-site at 5am on 30 November, with the delivery of the 80-year-old spruce on an extended trailer to accommodate its length. Already in position, specialist Beck & Pollitzer then used a 40-tonne city crane, with 32-metre boom and 30-metre hook height, to raise the tree from its cradle, and allow the ground crew to guide it into the support mechanisms of 'the pit'.

This pit is camouflaged within the square's Yorkstone paving with a bespoke tree pit cover and support assembly. Designed and manufactured by Jones of Oswestry, it has now clocked up 20 years of service in its supporting role.

This Suprabloc access system has four recessed covers which, when lifted clear together with their support beams, reveal a 1.8-metre deep tree pit. Inside this, eight heavy-duty hinged clamps are arranged around an inner collar, bolted to the chamber wall, which secure the tree in an up-

right position, bracing it against high winds. Before installation, the tree base is also fitted with a steel capping piece, which locates into a metal collar at the bottom of the pit, in order to provide further anchorage.

'The tree pit system is a fine piece of engineering which has sustained itself nobly over the 20 years it has been installed,' says Richard Genn, infrastructure facilities officer at the Greater London Authority and responsible for looking after the fabric of Trafalgar Square.

Before the work began on-site, the GLA's built asset consultant, EC Harris, brought in a number of specialists to carry out the tree installation and associated preparations.

The GLA's maintenance contractor MITIE project-managed operations, while Sykes and Son under-

took the tree installation, decoration and electrical work. Martin Stiff, senior contracts manager for Sykes, has supervised installation of the Trafalgar Square tree for the last 12 years.

He says: 'We check the clamps regularly to ensure there is no movement, given the tree is only 1.8 metres in the ground and subject to strong winds. The pit installation was serviced in 2008, by stripping all the parts down and re-greasing them.'

In 1988, it was structural rigidity which was a key concern for the original consulting engineer, Hurst, Peirce & Malcolm, when it specified the cover system as part of the square's refurbishment. So, extra thick steelplate was used in the Suprabloc cover and frame to provide this rigidity, avoiding buckling, even

under the heavy service loads of the event vehicles which access the site. Even after months lying unopened, the covers lift instantly for the installation, and then, a few weeks later, vanish unseen, back into the paving.

The covers also came with Jones' extra heavy-duty post-galvanised zinc coating, now known as Duragalv. Applied after fabrication to ensure total coverage of the steel, it has provided protection against environmental weathering, including the de-icing fluids borne in surface water. Still in prime condition, it is set to exceed the 20 to 25 years' design life expected of landscaping metalwork.

So, while this season's tree is turned into chippings for compost, signs are that the tree pit will be playing its supporting role in the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree tradition for many years to come.

• **Michael Miles** is director of Jones of Oswestry, part of Technogroup

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