



barrell
TREE CONSULTANCY

Arboriculture Time to lose the baggage

ICF News (Winter 2015/16)

BTC/109/2015





Arboriculture ... Time to lose the baggage

ICF News (Winter 2015/16)

Consultant Jeremy Barrell FICFor on adapting traditional approaches to a modern context.



Even though dead, "The Hollow Tree" captured public support and donations of CAN\$50,000 to preserve it.

Arboriculture, both as an Industry and Profession, had a low profile in the UK until the 1970s when Dutch Elm Disease hit and suddenly millions of trees had to be felled in urban areas. There were very few climbing arborists and forestry contractors filled the gap, learning fast to adapt their ground-based felling skills into those needed for aerial operations. The Industry never looked back, and is now a thriving example of modern practice and innovation, serving our practical tree management needs. In tandem with this evolution, an increasing public appreciation of the value of trees saw the Profession develop at breakneck speed, providing the management expertise needed to effectively integrate trees and people within the built environment.

Forestry influence

By the 1970s, British forestry had developed a fine tradition of forest management expertise, and many of those influences were "borrowed" by arboriculturists and adapted from a rural, mass management setting, to the urban environment, where the focus was more on individual trees. One such example is the forestry concept of sustained yield, where the management objective is to secure a regular flow of timber products from the forest unit. The arboricultural equivalent is sustained amenity,



Arboriculture ... Time to lose the baggage

ICF News (Winter 2015/16)

where the product is visual amenity instead of timber, but the underlying principle is exactly the same; creating a succession of age classes so that the cycle of removal and replacement has minimal visual impact.

In principle, borrowing is fine when new ideas are thin on the ground and there is some urgency to make progress. Indeed, there is certainly no benefit in wasting effort reinventing work that has already been done. However, as experience begins to highlight flaws in the original adaptations, there comes a time to move on and fine-tune traditional approaches to take account of emerging societal concerns and research. Of course, easy to say, but very hard to do as people become entrenched in what they know and change is the demon to tear down their familiar world. An obvious example of failing to adapt a traditional mind-set into a modern context is the concept of rotation length, i.e. the optimum time to fell and replace, depending on the objectives of management. There is no doubt that it works well in the forest, where the economic benefits are well-understood, but it no longer sits comfortably in arboriculture, and especially with trees that have subtler values beyond the financial.

Rotation length has served forestry well, but it is a forestry construct, and that is where it belongs, in the forest. The idea that there comes a time when all trees need to be felled and replaced no longer has traction in modern arboriculture, and it is time for it to drift out of the common vocabulary. For the bulk of forest and urban tree management, value increases from planting to a point where it peaks and then declines, but for some trees, it is different. For exceptional trees of special interest, value continues to increase over time and beyond death, which renders the idea of a formal rotation length meaningless. Instead, the focus shifts towards retaining the tree, both in life and in death, and genetic continuity, through propagating a new incarnation of the original individual. This fresh perspective has the traditionalists in a spin, so what is it all about?

Special values

Trees can be of special interest for a range of reasons; they can have **scientific** value, so perhaps the oldest, or the biggest, or habitat for a rare species; they can be **visually** important, so a landmark or possessing visual characteristics that make them striking or memorable; and, they can have **cultural** value through associations with traditions or important people, past or present. Such trees come by a variety of terms, with "notable", "scheduled" and "heritage" amongst the most common. Whatever their title, what makes them special is that communities value them to the extent that they are considered worthy of protection when under threat.

The idea that a dead tree can have any value at all other than for timber still prompts scorn from the entrenched, but perhaps it may not be as silly as it sounds. For example, at just over 400 ha and with more than 8 million visitors a year, Stanley Park is Vancouver's biggest urban park, and home to a remarkable tree; it's dead, of course! The Hollow Tree is a standing *Thuja plicata*, thought to be more than 700 years old, which has been a famous community landmark for more than 120 years. However, it developed a lean and, in 2008, the Parks Board agreed to fell it for safety reasons. This



Arboriculture ... Time to lose the baggage

ICF News (Winter 2015/16)

prompted a citizen's response that raised substantial funds to get it stabilised using steel and concrete supports, and it now remains standing for all to see (<http://www.savethehollowtree.com/>). A lot of people went to a lot of effort to raise a lot of money to conserve a dead tree with no obvious value!



Is the forestry concept out of place in modern arboriculture?

It seems that trees of special interest, even if they are dead, can be much more valuable than conventional tree management would have us think. In one direction, they are a living link with traditions and culture from the past, and especially with ancestors who are no longer with us. In the other, they offer a bridge to the future, and a means for our descendants to connect with us when we are gone.

Intangible such benefits may be, but important they are; these are things that matter to ordinary people, something that is easily missed by managers consumed with the detail and pressure of their everyday professional lives.

Jeremy Barrell started his career as a forester, graduating from UCNW Bangor in 1978 and working for the Forestry Commission for two years in Brechfa Forest, South Wales, before turning to the "other side" in 1980. Since then, his forestry background has provided him with a deep insight into the origins of arboriculture and how the two disciplines can work together with mutual benefits. You can read more about heritage trees at http://www.treeaz.com/tree_ah/.