



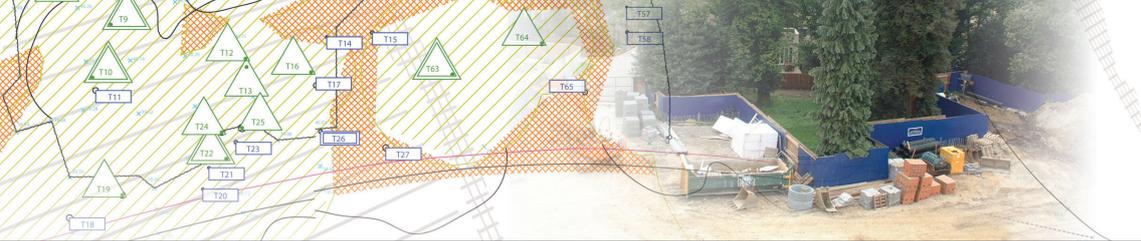
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The British Sub-Standard 5837: where did it all go wrong?

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British Sub-Standard 5837: Where did it all go wrong?

As the AA nomination for Chair of the BS 5827 review group and serving on it as a member for a year before having to withdraw because of a professional conflict of interest, Jeremy Barrell is uniquely placed to comment on the recently published consultation draft. In this preliminary review, his first impressions make worrying reading!

However distasteful it may be to the purists, first impressions do matter and the credibility of any piece of work or organisation is just as much about how it looks as it is about content. This is not new or controversial and all of us make judgements every day based on this principle. For example, if you go into an unfamiliar restaurant for a meal, the feel of the napkin at the table has a huge impact on your expectations. Flimsy tissue and the spectre of the fast food outlet looms; artistically folded thick cotton and your mouth is already watering! Superficial and fickle maybe but that is the way the world works. Despite its mighty standing, the 5837 offering from BSI seems to suggest these rules don't apply above ground level. Not a problem for trees if BSI is the sole beneficiary of its complacency. However, with Arboriculture in the same 5837 bed, BSI failures are our failures and how it performs affects every one of us.

Whilst I fully accept there will always be a range of opinions and mine is no more right or wrong than the next persons, here are a few of my first impressions from glancing through the document:

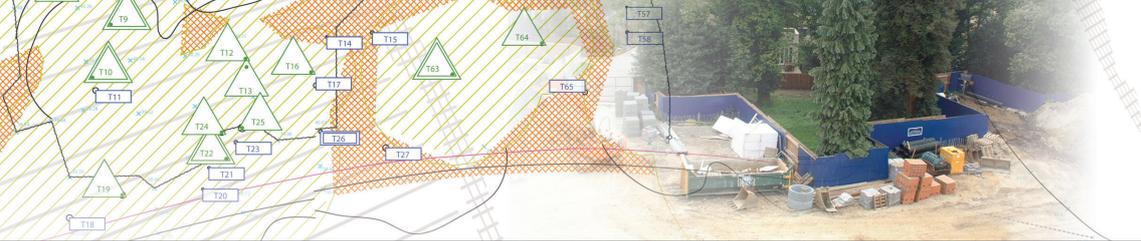
- **Lack of diagrams:** Successfully keeping trees on development sites is about good communication; specifications, diagrams and illustrations are a fundamental tool for getting the message across and there are only two in the whole document!
- **Poor quality of diagrams:** Before you read my view, just take a look at Figures 1 and 2 and see what you think. Amateur, sloppy, scrappy, tatty, pathetic and unprofessional are a few of the words that spring to my mind. Isn't that unbelievable - an organisation with such an impressive Tower and whose business is communication has no graphic design expertise to help with one of the most important vehicles for transferring information!
- **Organisational lead:** Think about what part of the old BS you most often saw reproduced to help protect trees. For me it is the fencing and ground protection drawings; these were probably the most effective part of the whole document for actually making a difference on the ground. Even a cursory analysis of what worked most effectively would have identified the value of specs and diagrams as a key element of any revision. Yet BSI has completely missed this opportunity to build on a known success. It seems fundamental that any review process identifies what the problems are, what worked in the past, what new ideas

are emerging and incorporate all those elements into an overall framework for the review group to work within. Understanding and producing that framework is clearly the responsibility of BSI and yet it obviously didn't happen!

- **Typos and inconsistencies:** This document is riddled with errors and inconsistencies. For example, TPZ is a very useful and recognisable acronym for Tree Protective Zone, and is quite rightly used. The common convention is the first time it appears in the text, the acronym is shown in brackets and thereafter it substitutes the text making it less cumbersome to read every time. Even if one disagrees with the convention, there is a logical requirement to be consistent with the alternative choice. Common sense really, but it jumps all over the place in this document, defying any semblance of logic or consistency. In addition to a graphic designer deficiency, BSI would seem to be short on proof readers as well!

- **Public comment:** I am aware of a number of valid public comments available to BSI but not in this draft. Perhaps the worst example relates to proper consideration of colour blind users detailed below. If BSI have no mechanism in place to ensure that an issue as important as minority discrimination is properly considered in the draft, then I am not overly confident that further comments will be properly considered for the final document!

Of course, there will be endless excuses on why my nitpicking should be dismissed and maybe they have a point. However, I firmly believe there is no excuse for an organisation professing to be setting the standard, not to be meeting the standard at every stage in the process. Attention to detail is a cornerstone of professionalism; on the basis of this draft, BSI is struggling for the First Division let alone the Premier League! There seems to be a culture of complacency in the Tower; perhaps its time to open a few windows and see what's going on outside!



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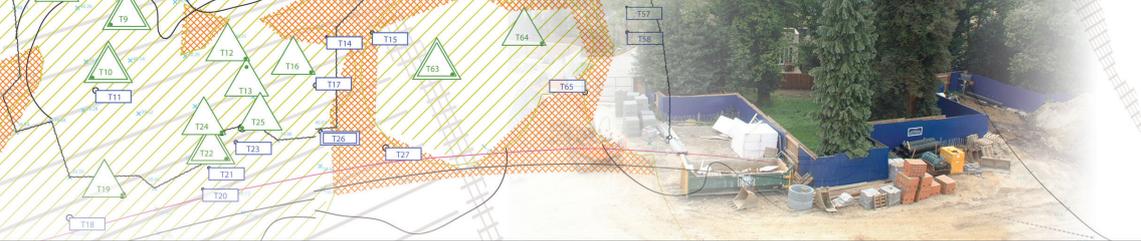
Mortals stared up at the tower in awe welcoming the wisdom within with open arms.

With such a sloppy lead from BSI, the review group obviously faced an uphill struggle but have they risen to the challenge? Well, I think they probably have and credit should be given to them in a number of areas:

- **Structures within TPZs:** One of the most important developments since the 1991 document is the installation of structures within TPZs. If properly specified and implemented,

structures can be installed close to trees without any significant adverse impact and this is acknowledged in the draft.

- **Establishing the TPZ:** Congratulations on getting this off to a good start. The concept of the trunk diameter multiplier to establish the TPZ radius and thus TPZ area is a workable approach to a difficult problem. It still needs a lot more work to get it functional but it is a good start – well done!



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- **Protective fencing:** Fencing probably makes the single most effective contribution to successful tree retention and so it must be right. Despite the pathetic diagram, the review group have got the emphasis right, i.e. that the basis of effective fencing is a robust and braced framework. It was disappointing not to see wooden fencing mentioned as that can be equally as effective so there is still room for improvement. But again, the concept is right and it will benefit trees.

However, hand in hand with justified praise for successes comes the criticisms that must be faced for failures, the most obvious of which I set out below:

- **Table 1:** It should deeply worry all of us concerned with professional standards to discover the BS advice for the colour scheme of one of the most important plans in the whole process, the tree constraints plan, is “Suggested colours are based on four most commonly available highlight pens.” This sounds more like a primary school colouring competition than top end professional guidance!! CAD is the professional tool of choice for plan preparation and for the BS to advocate dumbing down to the colouring book mentality is astounding. And it gets worse; green and pink, the two colours chosen for the best and the worst trees, look the same to people with red/green colour blindness. With one in twelve men sufferers, it is not a small issue and yet it has been completely ignored. Whether through incompetence or wilful discrimination, the facts are the review group had this information and failed to act on it.

- **Visual amenity:** This document has failed to get to grips with the difficult issue of visual amenity in tree assessment. The reality is that visual amenity can never be a reliable assessment criterion because other factors such as safety and inconvenience frequently overrule it. It is disappointing this draft confuses the issue rather than clarifying it.

- **Tree categorisation:** The BS method of categorising trees is 24 years old; it is out of date, confusing and does not work. It is fundamentally flawed because it categorises trees on their good qualities and fails to recognise it is their bad qualities that actually dictates whether they are worthy of retention or not. Here is the reasoning on how trees should be assessed based on the law and government guidance. All trees are a material consideration based on the T&CP Act wording, its interpretation by Mynors and government guidance on making TPOs. We do not have to prove trees are good by identifying their good points; it is a recognised starting point they are all good unless there are sustainable reasons to prove they are not such as safety, inconvenience and good management. This is the logical basis for tree categorisation; all trees are worthy of being a constraint unless they could be removed for these reasons. Ignoring such an obvious and strong position for Arboriculture is surprising to say the least.

- **Ground protection:** Next to fencing, ground protection is one of the most effective ways of protecting trees and yet is hardly touched on in the draft. A diagram that could be copied directly from the BS would be an immensely valuable aid towards implementing best practice. It is an essential element of any comprehensive and credible guidance.

- **Role of the arboriculturist:** Whilst this draft is not just about arboriculturists, they do have a pivotal role throughout the whole development process. Indeed, one of the biggest problems in practice is to get them involved at the right time doing the right thing. Their role is fundamental to successful tree retention and yet it is not clearly described in the draft. It would be helpful to all other professionals within the process and to the arboriculturists themselves to have this clearly set out in one place. A summary would be a valuable response to a known area of confusion.

- **Constraints plan:** The tree constraints plan is a critical document in the planning process because it allows tree experts to pass on technical information to architects (non-tree experts) in a simple form they can easily understand. This is not dealt with comprehensively in the draft and fails to realistically reflect current best practice. The most obvious constraint is the TPZ and that must be plotted as a no-go area. A close second is the dominance/shading, future growth and space for scaffold constraint where soil disturbance is not an issue but occupied buildings are. It is crucial to identify these zones separately and provide guidance on how to do this because that is the only lead architects have on where to put their layout. The current draft provides detailed guidance for the TPZ and virtually no guidance for the other constraints. It will be incomplete until this is addressed.

- **Other issues:** There are many other areas where best practice is evolving that merit more detailed consideration including trenching for services, species for confined spaces, structured tree soil, daylight and wording of planning conditions.

In summary, despite being partially hamstrung by a failing organisation, the review group have clearly made significant progress and their efforts deserve recognition. However, there are some serious failings that must be addressed before this document will be of a sufficient standard for wider release.