



barrell
TREE CONSULTANCY

Arboricultural consultancy in Britain

Article 1/5 for ISA Arborist News (February 2012)

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Compared to the United States, arboriculture is a relatively new business in Britain, with its formal beginnings only dating back to the 1960s and 1970s. After a very slow start, caring for trees in the urban environment is now a thriving enterprise with great prospects for those who choose it as a career. Jeremy Barrell, originally a forester but now a consulting arborist based near London, has witnessed the emergence of arboriculture from those early days to become the force for good it now represents. In this first article of a series spotlighting what is happening in Britain, Jeremy explores the origins of tree consultancy and the opportunities this career path offers for practical arborists.



British consulting arborists are increasingly being employed to inspect trees and advise on safety management.

Despite the global economic crisis affecting all our lives right now, Jeremy believes the future is full of promise for arborists. Trees are in the ascendancy and for those with the management skills and experience to deliver their benefits, a new age of respect and recognition is emerging.

The following article was adapted from an item first published in The ARB Magazine, the quarterly magazine for members of The Arboricultural Association (www.trees.org.uk).

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The Evolution of British Arboriculture

The Dutch elm disease epidemic of the 1970s kickstarted British arboriculture. Big profits from cutting down the dead trees and then selling the valuable timber attracted foresters from the woods who adeptly turned their hands to the complexities of removals in confined spaces. They were the forerunners of today's thriving contracting industry, which now has the skills, equipment, and procedures to match any in the world.

In tandem with this boom in the practical business of pruning, removing, and planting trees, a whole new area of expertise advising on urban tree management emerged; urban foresters, or tree officers as they are called over here, were born! Britain has a small land area for a large population, and as far back as the late 1940s, the government had recognized the need to restrict urban sprawl out into rural areas that were needed for food production. This resulted in a series of national planning laws that legally restricted uncontrolled development into the countryside. These laws also recognized the importance of protecting existing trees in urban areas and the planning benefits of planting new trees. Today, all new planning submissions must treat existing trees as "material considerations," identify individuals that are important enough to be "material constraints," and make provision for the planting of new trees. Furthermore, the legislation allows important trees that may be under threat to be legally protected.

As soon as laws affecting trees are made, the need for professionals to advise in a management role emerge, and this has been a primary driver of British tree consultancy. As municipalities began to

actively enforce the tree elements of these planning laws in the 1970s, it has become essential to have consulting arborists represent both sides of the process. With the demand came professional recognition and professional salaries, two very important ingredients for attracting the high-caliber people needed to argue the case for trees to the other professionals involved in managing the urban environment.

In the public sector, from the 1970s onward, more municipal authorities began to employ tree officers, to the extent that they are now accepted as an integral and essential part of administering the British planning system. Private sector consultancy was slower to develop, with only a handful of consulting arborists earning a living solely from providing advice as recently as the early 1990s. Up until then, most consultancy business was conducted as part of a contracting enterprise; more of a lucrative side-business than a mainstream operation. However, a dramatic increase in the volume of consultancy work in the 1990s and 2000s saw a flurry of sole practitioner businesses start up to service the demand. Of these, only four or five expanded to become larger successful practices employing more than 10 to 15 staff, and most of those are struggling in the current economic climate.

Today, a significant proportion of British arboricultural consultancy is engaged in servicing the planning-based requirement for advising. Indeed, assessing the quality of existing trees, how to protect them during construction, and how to retrofit new trees into existing urban areas, keeps many consulting arborists busy. Additionally, the abundance of shrinkable clay soils in

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London and other cities, combined with structural damage being a commonly insured risk, has seen the emergence of specialist advisors on how tree root growth can damage buildings. The technical issues are complex, tree advice is essential and the sums of money involved are significant, which makes this another area where consulting arborists are very active. Finally, managing tree safety is gaining an increasingly high profile because the harm from tree failures is particularly newsworthy. In recent years, tree inspections and managing tree risk has become a common aspect of tree consultancy. Interestingly, unlike in the US, very little of our work relates to tree valuation, and so that aspect of consultancy is not well developed in the UK.



Trees can cause significant structural damage. The expertise of consulting arborists is needed to find sustainable solutions that allow trees and structures to coexist.

Climate change is focusing attention on trees and tree managers

In a broader context, the Climate Change Act (2008) legally binds Britain to achieving massive reductions in carbon generation, aiming to avert the most extreme predictions through mitigation plans and to reduce the physical impact on our population through adaptation measures. Although life seems to be dominated by our ailing economies right now, there is little doubt that climate change will drive future decision making and the pressure to move our lives onto a sustainable footing is already showing.

Beyond these short-term economic distractions, increasing canopy cover where we live and work has tremendous potential to make life more comfortable during expected weather extremes. Advising on climate adaptation holds a strong and vibrant future for arborists because tree benefits are numerous, the public has an instinctive affinity towards trees, and we have the management expertise to deliver green relief when it will be most needed. No other professionals can do this; this is why arborists matter, and why there is a great future in arboriculture.

Developing the skills to meet future needs

If arborists are to effectively service the increased demand for management skills, then they need to match the standards of delivery set by other recognized professions, such as surveyors, planners, and lawyers. However, arboriculture is small compared to these more established disciplines, and many of the detailed protocols and procedures needed to deliver a full spectrum of consultancy services have not yet been developed. Professional practice

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demands high ethical standards of behavior, a capacity to clearly reason and communicate, and the ability to write — skills that the practically orientated often find difficult to master. Although there is still much work to do in adapting and developing high-end professional services, there is a wealth of practical

expertise at the craft level, which is an essential prerequisite for delivering management solutions that work. In short, many arborists are in good shape in terms of practical expertise, but a focus on developing professional practices should be a priority for every individual wishing to move into consultancy.



Trees are an integral component of sustainable development. A significant proportion of British consulting arborists provide management advice relating to trees on construction sites.

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Making the move into consultancy

Whether you are a contractor thinking about consultancy, an urban forester wanting to move on, an existing consultant with hopes of moving up the ladder, or a migrant from another discipline considering a career in trees, the questions are always the same: Can arboriculture be a fulfilling career? Do you have the skills to succeed? What do you need to do? How can you find help and how do you progress as quickly as possible? If you have professional ambitions and are not sure what to do next, here are three ways that will help enhance your credentials. Each of the following approaches are time-consuming and require a high level of professional experience, but all have their own unique set of benefits when completed.

- **Arboricultural Association (AA) Registered Consultant:** The AA is a British organization servicing both contracting and consultancy interests (www.trees.org.uk). It administers a Registered Consultant scheme, which is widely accepted as one of the toughest tests of an individual's consultancy skills and achievements against a very high standard. Candidates have to submit a variety of formal reports covering a full range of consultancy matters, from construction site management through to working as an expert witness. If these meet satisfactory standards of presentation and content, the candidate is invited to an interview. The interview lasts about two hours and is intended to test the candidate's ethical competence as well

as the obvious requirements of needing to write and communicate at the highest professional level. It is an extremely challenging process and not for the faint-hearted, but it is the ultimate achievement for any aspiring consultant. There are currently 47 individuals listed on the AA website.

- **The Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) route to chartered status:** Chartered status has the benefit of being recognized in many countries and across most occupations as a standard measure of professional achievement. The ICF (www.charteredforesters.org) administers the process in Britain and has made significant progress in the last decade to improve accessibility for arborists. Entry is at the Associate level, where a member undertakes a two-year period of recorded work, followed by a written submission and interview. Associates are expected to become chartered within 10 years. Senior practitioners who can demonstrate their achievements can also apply directly. If successful, their experience and understanding of professional practice are explored at interview. Successful applicants can choose between the Chartered Forester or Chartered Arboriculturist designation, each conferring the same status. Once chartered, a member is known as a Professional Member (MICFor), with the option to apply to progress up to Fellow (FICFor) after five years of membership (with at least

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10 years of professional experience), making this designation a comprehensive and important consultancy achievement.

- **The American Society of Consulting Arborists (ASCA) Registered Consulting Arborist (RCA):** In the US, the ASCA (www.asca-consultants.org) administers the international RCA designation that is relevant to arborists around the world. To begin the process, it is compulsory to attend an ASCA Academy, run annually at a different US location each time. During four days of intense interactive training, there is a focus on report-writing skills and ethics, culminating in a 2.5-hour, 100-question, multiple-choice exam, where delegates must achieve a 70 percent mark to successfully graduate. This gains entry to the next phase, which is a succession of writing assignments, where candidates are sent a consultancy scenario and must write their own report. This is independently marked against a published set of criteria, with a passing

grade of 75 percent. Two passed assignments later and the candidate moves on to the final phase, which is the submission of one of their own reports for the same marking process. Passing all the stages gains access to the ASCA consulting elite, which is no mean feat in terms of time, effort, and money, especially if you are based outside of the US!

The AA Registered Consultant is a tough route, and only the best progress, so prospective candidates need to brace themselves for a rough ride. The ICF route is similar, with demanding written submissions and a probing interview, plus the bonus of international and cross-profession recognition. The ASCA process is different; there is a strong focus on ethics at the Academy and on writing to a prescribed template for the report submissions. However, the ASCA process is equally demanding and stands at the same level as the ICF and AA options. If full-time consultancy is your aspiration, then any one of these is a great start. Individuals who obtain two of these designations will be set apart from the competition; obtaining all three is about as good as it gets.

The next article in this series will focus on professionalism. Applying high ethical standards in a competitive commercial world is challenging but essential if you are to meet the demands of a professional career. Barrell will explore these complex issues and provide a host of practical tips on what you can do to get the balance right.



Jeremy Barrell has worked with trees all his life, building up a modest contracting business in the early 1980s and 1990s before concentrating on full-time consultancy in 1995. From those humble beginnings, Barrell Tree Consultancy (www.barrelltreecare.co.uk) now has six consultants advising on planning and legal issues throughout the UK.