



Modern arboriculture: time to catch up!

The AA ArbNews (Spring 2015)

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In his 2007 AA Conference presentation '*Trees; urban air-conditioning*', Jeremy Barrell raised the alarm that urban canopy cover was decreasing, and advocated reversing that trend. He identified a range of reasons, from risk-averse advisors to failed new planting to tree-phobic highway managers, but by far the greatest loss was from development. Despite the UK having one of the most sophisticated planning systems in the world, eight years later he sees little significant change; many local planning authorities ("LPAs") are still failing to effectively administer development control and the bulk of developers continue to favour a quick profit over long-term sustainability. There are isolated pockets of excellence from both developers and LPAs, which proves that the system can work with the right inputs, but the good is far outweighed by widespread poor practice. Urban trees are in trouble and their rescue is in the hands of all built-environment professionals, not just arboriculturists.





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Arboriculture is part of the built environment

Principles and practice are moving forward at pace in all sectors of built-environment management, but Arboriculture is struggling to keep up with the times. Recently, there has been a distinct national movement towards recognising the importance of green infrastructure, of which trees are an essential element. From this broad perspective, trees are not outstanding as more important than anything else, but they do stand as equals alongside all the other components that make up the urban places where most of us live and work. Indeed, the speed of this increasing recognition, and the wider acceptance of the value of trees, has surprised some arboriculturists, who now have to catch up if they are to be a part of this bright future.

Historically and currently, government policy has been and is in turmoil relating to urban trees. How often have we all heard the politicians' pre-election posturing with promises to be the greenest ever, only to consistently fail to deliver on the environment, once in power? At present, there is no credible plan to protect London's plane trees from the lethal threat of Plane Wilt now in northern France¹, there is not even a mention of urban trees in the National Planning Policy Framework² and there is no recent survey of the baseline data³ needed to plan our defense against climate change (the data collected for Trees in Towns II is now nearly a decade old!). Remarkably, despite the widely acknowledged importance of urban trees to human health and wellbeing, there is no government department with overall responsibility for national policy! Most recently, this lack of vision and leadership was evidenced by the archiving of the Natural England Green Infrastructure Guidance, a demotion indicating reduced weight as a material consideration in determining planning applications⁴. Urban trees are under threat from all directions, but change is on the horizon, and it is the built-environment agenda that is driving it.

The seed of this change was sown back in 2007, when a group of concerned professionals formed the Trees and Design Action Group ("TDAG") (www.tdag.org.uk). Initially, commentators could have been forgiven for dismissing it as just one more organisation impinging on the fragmented and disjointed world of arboriculture, but TDAG proved to be different. It is not-for-profit, so it has no financial agenda, apart from balancing the books! It is apolitical, so there are no big backers pulling its strings. It has a cross-sector and cross-disciplinary membership, which means it has a much broader perspective than other, more specialised, member groupings. But, most notably, it has proved its worth by presiding over the publication of a series of



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pioneering documents on urban realm management with the potential to initiate a significant increase in tree canopy cover.

Modern guidance to facilitate change

Trees in the townscape: A Guide for Decision Makers and *Trees in Hard Landscapes: A Guide for Delivery* (www.tdag.org.uk) mark a significant change in the type of technical guidance currently available. They differ from the more traditional approach, typified by the British Standards Institution ("BSI") model, in a number of ways:

- **One lead author:** Each publication has one independent lead author with extensive expertise in the field, which has produced a consistency of style and continuity of content rarely seen in previous guidance. Furthermore, each project was completed over a timescale of months rather than dragging on for years, producing current guidance that is relevant and useful at the time of delivery, not out of date.
- **Free from the influence of vested interests:** The traditional approach of inviting representatives of organisations to participate in producing industry guidance is a failed concept because those individuals carry binding influences from the vested interests of their supporting organisations. This fosters a mindset focused on getting the best deal for their members rather than identifying and facing pertinent issues, which invariably delivers compromises, not solutions. In stark contrast, the TDAG model has identified the issues, and investigated and documented how they have been resolved on the ground, a process that offers viable options for other professionals grappling with similar problems.
- **Case study examples:** The publications rely heavily on interviews with individuals who have identified a problem and made a solution work in their circumstances. A focus on case studies documenting practical experiences provides a real-life reference for others to draw inspiration from. This emphasis on what works in practice, rather than organisations' agendas, is an obvious and effective mechanism for empowering individuals trying to make a difference.
- **Ease of use:** Both documents have detailed, complex and extensive content, so they are not designed to be read from cover to cover. Instead, they recognise that users will want to dip in and pull out the content that is relevant to their particular circumstances, and the document structure assists this mode of use. Logical main



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sections, clear colour coding, quick access tables, check lists for action, and a host of other features, enable readers to find what they need, fast.

- **Free, without restrictions on use:** Unlike the BSI model, which uses unpaid contributors to create Standards that are then charged for and copyrighted, the TDAG publications are financed from supporters and free to download, without restriction. Many find this funding model more ethically attractive, with the added bonus that it facilitates the rapid dissemination of important information to where it is most needed, rather than to who is able to pay for it.

The TDAG Guides avoid going into the detail of tree planting, but directly reference another very important document designed to contribute to reversing the trend of new tree planting failures. *BS 8545 (2014) Trees: from nursery to independence in the landscape – Recommendations* (www.bsigroup.co.uk) is a significant divergence from the traditional BSI model. Similar to the TDAG approach, it had one lead author, the reviewing panel were acknowledged specialists selected for their expertise as individuals rather than representatives of stakeholder organisations and it was designed as a general reference framework for action as opposed to a precise recipe for rigid application.

In combination, for the first time ever, these three pioneering publications provide tree professionals, tree enthusiasts and other urban professionals, with the tools to support robust and competent justifications for the retention of useful existing trees and the planting of appropriate new trees.

Political recognition for the importance of PLACE

As the evidence builds in favour of more trees because of the substantial benefits they provide, political support is starting to gain momentum. In January 2013, Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, Communications and the Creative Industries, asked Sir Terry Farrell to undertake a national review of architecture and the built environment (www.farrellreview.co.uk). The Farrell Review was published in March 2014 and recognised landscape as a key element in a new understanding of PLACE based on the core skill sets of Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Conservation and Engineering. This places trees centrally in the urban management decision-making process, an elevated status that Arboriculture has been unable to achieve in isolation.



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In January 2015, during a House of Lords debate on the natural environment, Lord Framlingham made a strong case for a nationally coordinated approach to integrating trees into the design and management of hard landscapes⁵. He referenced the TDAG publications and urged the DEFRA Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord De Mauley, to “*lend his weight to the distribution of these guides, or more particularly their contents, so as to co-ordinate and encourage the most enlightened and best practice everywhere*”. In March 2015, it was announced that a House of Lords Select Committee on the Built Environment, with a remit to scrutinise placemaking and built environment policy, will be set up after the Election⁶.

Trees are moving up the political agenda and it is as a result of their importance being recognised by professionals in the wider built-environment sector. Arboriculture will soon be spotlighted more than ever before as the obvious location for tree management expertise, and it needs to be preparing now to deliver that advice in the right quantity and at the right level. Unfortunately, one of the Profession’s primary documents for showcasing arboricultural expertise and ambition in the planning environment is no longer fit-for-purpose. If aspiring arboriculturists wish to work on the same level as other built-environment professionals, then *BS 5837: 2012 Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction – Recommendations* (www.bsigroup.co.uk) needs to be picked apart and reconstructed to meet the emerging demands of the modern planning environment.

Time for a BS 5837 rethink

BS 5837 was first published in 1980 as the *Code of practice for Trees in relation to construction*. A second edition was published in 1991 and upgraded to the status of ‘Guide’. The third edition, published in 2005, saw its status changed to ‘Recommendations’. The current fourth edition was published in 2012, with a slightly revised title. My experience from working with the three earliest versions is that they all suffered from the shortcomings of the BSI model and each failed to address or keep current with the demands of the modern planning environment. Each was way behind the times, often lacking in the technical and intellectual credibility needed to help arboriculturists argue the case for trees. This significantly improved with the 2012 revision, which more effectively represented emerging good practice and proved to be well-received in the wider professional community. However, a rapidly evolving planning environment is once again leaving it behind, making it increasingly remote from the practical realities of day-to-day tree management on development sites.



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There is an accumulating body of evidence supporting a rewrite of BS 5837, but what lessons can be drawn from past mistakes and current successes to more effectively satisfy future needs? Here are some thoughts on what a more modern review process could look like:

- **Broad framework for action:** It should be based around the BS 8545, TDAG and Farrell Review models, which have been proven to work at delivering relevant and useful guidance documents. Its formation should be driven by the profession, with the lead author and specialist review panel selection based on expertise, not affiliation to organisations. A much broader and larger professional/stakeholder consultation group should be compiled. The lead author does the bulk of the writing, closely communicating with the review panel. That author should be paid at least expenses for the work, supported by the profession. It should be informed by a thorough investigation of what works and what does not, and be based on a survey of views from stakeholders and an analysis of interviews with leading industry professionals. It should be structured to facilitate the dissemination of important information efficiently. The diagrams should be prepared by the Profession and be available free from copyright restrictions. The review process should be based on active engagement, with conflicting positions being investigated by the author/panel before any adjustment to the content. The focus must be on getting it right, not completion by an arbitrary deadline.
- **The review process:** The process starts with an active call for comment from arboricultural professionals and all stakeholders on their experiences, possibly including questionnaires and direct contact; the lead author contacts and interviews key industry figures; the lead author writes a draft text; the review panel scrutinises that draft; the author prepares a wider consultation draft in the context of the panel scrutiny; there is an active consultation with the wider consultation group on the updated draft; that draft is consolidated, incorporating accepted comments; there is an active process for resolving outstanding comments through author/panel engagement; a final draft is prepared and publicly consulted; there is a final review of further feedback; the document is published; there is an ongoing review process based on feedback from its use.
- **Content:** The most pressing area for review is the tree assessment method, which currently has no technical explanation beyond what is published in BS 5837. It has inconsistencies and shortcomings that expose a lack of academic reasoning or support, which is damaging the reputation of tree professionals trying to make a poorly thought out method work in practice. The management process described



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in the current BS no longer reflects the changing local government circumstances relating to resources. It needs to be re-focused, with better guidance for planners on how to manage the process. Similarly, the current advice on Construction Exclusion Zones and Root Protection Areas ("RPAs") is confusing and difficult to administer on site. There needs to be much more emphasis on collaboration, with all the parties working together as a team. Inappropriate and technically unsupported formulaic/prescriptive advice should be avoided, with particular reference to the existing restrictions of new surfacing within RPAs. The importance of plans and their potential as a mechanism for improved communication needs to be developed. The current focus of BS 5837 is on the constraints that trees can impose on development, whereas a more positive and useful emphasis would be on the benefits that trees can impart. The increasing strategic policy support for trees from the health, transport and water sectors needs to be documented, all within the overarching climate change policy framework. There is a clear need for a summary cost/benefit model to help explain that early costs for new trees are paid back with interest exponentially as tree size increases. Strategic tree planting is often as important as retaining useful existing trees, a point in need of greater emphasis. Finally, this is a planning document for use within the planning system, and it should be designed to maximise the assistance to all the professionals that reference it, not just the arboriculturists.

In principle, it would be feasible for the Arboricultural Profession to do this without reference to BSI, but it would be naïve to expect an enthusiastic take-up of an independent document from the wider professional community. The reality is that the continued engagement with BSI offers a significant reputational benefit that would be difficult to match from any other publishing mechanism currently available. Ultimately, these are matters for the Profession to resolve, but I hope that any future initiative will be on better terms than the previous arrangements.

Arboriculture; fit-for-purpose?

To conclude, change is happening very quickly now, more so than ever before, and no matter how uncomfortable and unsettling that is, we all need to plan for a future that is a lot different from the past and the present. I visualise an evolution with a focus on collaboration and creative working to deliver more benefits for less cost, which I believe is feasible. As part of our contribution to that process, in partnership with the



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AA, Barrell Tree Consultancy has agreed to present a series of two-day workshops around the UK in early 2016, which will describe a more refined approach to tree management within the planning system. The content will reflect the issues mentioned in this article and be presented in the context of our 30 years of experience in planning. Of course, from a business perspective, revealing many of our hard-learned secrets is going to be uncomfortable to say the least, but we think that will be a small sacrifice if Arboriculture emerges as a more professional and organised discipline, fit-for-purpose in the modern planning environment.

REFERENCES

- ¹ The threat to England's trees from Invasive Non-Native Species of Pest and Disease (www.zacgoldsmith.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Tree_pests.pdf)
- ² The National Planning Policy Framework (www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf)
- ³ Trees in Towns II A New Survey of Urban Trees in England and Their Condition and Management (www.tsoshop.co.uk/bookstore.asp?FO=1160465&DI=597278)
- ⁴ LI president and others express concern about 'downgrading' of green infrastructure in planning (www.hortweek.com/li-president-others-express-concern-downgrading-green-infrastructure-planning/parks-and-gardens/article/1332057)
- ⁵ Lords highlight need for tree care, biosecurity and role in flood alleviation (www.hortweek.com/lords-highlight-need-tree-care-biosecurity-role-flood-alleviation/arboriculture/article/1329634)
- ⁶ An *ad hoc* Select Committee on national policy for the built environment (www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldselect/ldliaison/127/12706.htm)