

# Ready for the

THE ROAR OF CHAINSAWS IN A PARK CAN SET OFF PANIC ALARMS AMONG PARK USERS, BUT ACCORDING TO **DR STEWART HARDING** OF THE PARKS AGENCY, FELLING TREES CAN BE A VITAL PART OF PARK RESTORATION PROJECTS



NOBODY LIKES TO see trees being cut down, especially when it happens in public parks. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in public parks and their regeneration. Many projects have received grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) which has been a pioneer and a major funder of these initiatives. Its influence has gone far beyond merely giving grants; it created and implemented a holistic approach to plan-led, whole-park regeneration and management, based on understanding the park's origins, the way it has developed and what people want from it today and for tomorrow.

However, park managers have had to face criticism and anger from members of the public when such projects have involved the felling of trees as part of a conservation management plan. These reactions are understandable, since:

- People generally do not like changes in their environment and it takes patience and persuasion to convince people that losing trees may be painful in the short-term, but can be of long-term benefit.
- Because pro-active park management has declined radically over the last three decades, people are unused to seeing a comprehensive and responsible approach to tree husbandry: this should involve strategic planning for cycles

of planting, nurturing and shaping, surgery, and removal at the appropriate times. The roar of chainsaws has become unfamiliar and sets off panic alarms amongst people who do not understand what is happening or why.

- Trees have become valued not just for their aesthetic qualities but for their environmental worth in: locking-up carbon; replenishing and cleansing the air; and providing wildlife habitats.

My aim is to explain why tree-felling in park regeneration projects can be desirable and necessary in the short-term in order to realise long-term and sustainable improvements. As this is such an emotive subject I do not expect everyone to accept the arguments, but the hope is that people will see that tree-felling in these schemes is not merely an arbitrary and unjustified homage to heritage but that there are sound reasons for this sometimes drastic action.



It should be borne in mind, though, that the HLF is a heritage body and, as such, is duty bound to emphasise the historic attributes of parks and consider these alongside other material interests. This article therefore sets out the justification for tree-felling in parks of acknowledged historic importance. It accepts that urban parks belong to the tradition of designed landscapes and consequently looks at the issues from historical and design perspectives, as well as from the point of view of present-day users and managers.

## The origins of designed landscape

The natural landscape of lowland Britain is woodland which remains the default landscape type to which land reverts. Any land which is neglected will develop, through succession of bramble or bracken, to woody scrub which, in turn, gives rise to woodland. It follows,



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# chop?



Both images: Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council

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therefore, that any landscape not covered by a tree canopy is the result of interference in the process of natural succession through the mechanisms of cultivation, forestry practice or grazing with animals. Nearly all non-woodland landscapes are artificial. Land management is basically a system for preventing woodland becoming the dominant vegetation, at a desired point along the spectrum between bare land and dense woods.

The medieval ‘forests’ were legally defined tracts of land with a mixture of land uses: woodland, wood pasture and small open fields and clearings which were reserved principally for hunting, initially held by, or off, the Crown. As the power of the Crown declined many ‘Liberties’ were granted as favours to the aristocracy (or simply taken – literally ‘taking liberties’) and the Royal Forests gradually gave way to a large number of deer parks in private ownership.

From the end of the 17th century, the scenic qualities and possibilities of deer parks and open countryside began to be appreciated by the landowning classes.

The development and application of the principles of gardening to extensive tracts of mixed landscapes in the 18th century led to a style of land management which became famed throughout the world as the ‘English landscape garden’, said to be this country’s greatest contribution to European art.

The purpose of these intensively designed and managed landscape parks was principally the pursuit of pleasure: as well as hunting, patrons enjoyed a delight in scenery and aesthetic effects. Parks also embodied developing ideas of the beauty of nature and the nature of beauty and thus offered spiritual uplift and emotional satisfaction. The key elements in the design of landscapes for pleasure were carefully located and artfully designed buildings; blocks of woodland to shape, contain and enhance topography; trees in clumps, groves and singly; water in lakes, ponds, canals, rivers and streams; and, critically, sweeps of open grassland to flow between and unify these basic elements.

All of these ingredients of the landscape park were subject to the

greatest scrutiny and debate and refined in pursuit of the ‘perfection of nature’. Successful manipulation of the ingredients of design depended on the ability of the landscape designer to connect with the ‘genius of the place’ so that small adjustments would release and realise the place’s inherent natural beauty (or ‘capabilities’ as Lancelot Brown would say). For 200 years, the concept of landscape gardening was refined and adapted through various styles and fashions as tastes changed, but the basic principles and elements remained intact: namely the visual interaction between the various building blocks – buildings, trees, grass and water – and the way these affected mood and enjoyment.

A continuity of understanding and a vocabulary of landscape design were developed from painting, poetry and literature and the work on the ground of the leading landscape gardeners like Charles Bridgeman, Alexander Pope, William Kent, Thomas Wright, Lancelot (‘Capability’) Brown and Humphry Repton.

The tradition of design for private estates provided the inspiration for public landscapes. The country house style provided the basic template for public parks, but was adapted to meet the demands of mass enjoyment, while continuing to utilise the familiar palette of trees, grass and water to reveal the glory of nature through controlled views and vistas. To the 18th century belief in the uplifting qualities of composed landscape had been added the conviction of the great moral philosopher, John Ruskin, that appreciation of landscape could lead to the salvation of the soul.

## The role of trees

In historic landscapes, trees provide not only enclosure and the skyline views on the park boundary, but also the vertical structure of the design. As such, they are as important as the buildings – the mansions or park ‘follies’ – which were also seen as enhancing the beauty of nature. Because of their profound impact on the character of the place, trees are critical elements in the manipulation of landscape. Consequently, they were placed, whether in groups or singly, with absolute precision and great attention was paid to form, colour and habit in the selection of species in order to achieve the desired effects. ▶

Above: Alexandra Park, Oldham. The research required for a major HLF-funded project showed that the trees overcrowding the promenade and making it unwelcoming (left) were a post-war introduction. The public has responded very positively to the change (right)

Below: Entrances need to be welcoming. In Telegraph Hill Park, Lewisham, some careful tree clearance and pruning has lifted the gloom (left) and restored public confidence to enter this revitalised park (right)



Above and right: Ashton Court, Bristol, where a major HLF-funded restoration has commenced. The removal of a single tree (right) reveals the mansion from a key viewpoint on the drive (above)

Far right: Sometimes it is self-sown trees that come in following a period of neglect (top) that must be cleared. In Telegraph Hill Park, Lewisham, HLF funding enabled an old toilet block to be refurbished and provide a base for on-site staff (bottom)

◀ The 20th century saw a discontinuity in the tradition, understanding and vocabulary of landscape design, even to the degree that landscape professionals over the last few decades have received scant or no training in the history of the English Landscape Garden style. Thus, there has been a breakdown in understanding of how historic landscapes work in terms of design which has had unfortunate and damaging effects.

### Overgrown woods

The unchecked succession of land to woodland through the survival of self-sown trees, known as ‘volunteer’ or ‘weed’ trees, is particularly damaging to pleasure parks. Woodland edges become lost, obscuring the visual definition and interaction between grassland and trees; woodland blocks coalesce preventing visual and physical connection with further parts of the park; the artful dramatisation of the topography is weakened; ornamental woods become choked and woodland walks become enveloped and impassable. These concerns are not just artistic; overgrown woods become oppressive and inimical to pleasure. They can feel very unsafe or become no-go areas and unusable by most people.

There is an argument that the wildlife value of overgrown woods makes up for the loss of visual and physical access. But, in my experience, this is seldom the case. Woods choked with a large number of volunteer stems rarely thrive as the competition for light, air and nutrients becomes increasingly fierce, resulting in poorly formed and weakened specimens. Trees planted for their ornamental beauty or botanical interest tend to succumb rapidly under



such conditions, as do veteran trees which can be overwhelmed by the shade cast by taller, more vigorous, younger trees – typically sycamore, birch and ash.

Management for public access by selective felling and the creation or maintenance of paths and clearings generally brings gains in increasing the biodiversity and ecological richness of the woodland. It also has the additional advantage of encouraging managers and the public to consider just what kind of woodland character they want to achieve. Unmanaged woods in urban parks tend to offer progressively less for people as time goes on, and wildlife too can diminish, at least until a natural structure becomes established over a very long period of several generations.

### Uninformed tree planting

The problem of overgrown woods could be put down to budget cuts and lack of understanding of the processes of woodland succession, leading to

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inaction. The other serious problem with trees in public parks comes from the opposite – action, but action uninformed by a holistic view of the park and its origins.

Tree planting schemes are always popular, but until initiatives like the HLF’s Urban Parks Programme, many tree-planting schemes, although well-meaning, were not carried out in the context of the overall design, character, appearance and use of the park. Trees were more often than not planted wherever there was a big space, without the realisation that the ‘big space’ served a very important purpose in the way the park was used and enjoyed. Species selection was made with no awareness of how the form, colour and habit of the trees would impact on the park and trees were generally planted in evenly spaced blocks with no consideration given to grouping of trees to achieve landscape effects.

It was not just community and volunteer schemes which planted trees in



Both images: Malcolm Bacchus, Telegraph Hill Society



such an unguided way. Park professionals too were generally unaware of the design principles which underpinned the layout of the park and tended to plant trees, often left over from planting projects elsewhere in the council area, without any strategic purpose. A favourite habit was to plant luridly coloured, garden-scale trees, for a nice bit of colour, or to plant only alongside paths for ease of mowing. As time went on parkland specimens and clumps which died were not replaced, or replaced only with pathside trees: the result was parks with huge areas of empty grass criss-crossed by double lines of trees which fragmented the park into isolated, and small, self-contained landscape 'cells'.

An unintended consequence of this subdivision of landscape parks was that it became easier for sections of parks to be sliced off for car-parks, swimming pools, sports and leisure centres and other non-leisure developments as they were regarded as 'screened' by trees and, therefore, unimportant.

Training of modern arboriculturalists is also oblivious to historic landscape design theory and practice. In the past, designers were happy to plant forest size trees very close together in groups which were gradually thinned out. Grown in this way the trees become tall and stately and the grouping gives a powerful impact as well as a picturesque effect.

Today's training seems to dictate that each tree is planted in a generous space of its own and little or no provision is made for thinning and shaping. Thus, the all-important sweeps of grass running through and connecting different parts of the landscape are disturbed or infilled, and trees dotted about and grown in this way tend to become multi-stemmed and increasingly wide, rather than tall. That may be fine if that was the design intention, but most of the people originally planting these trees would have had a tall and stately specimen in mind rather than the overgrown bush which often results.

The combined effect of these gradual and accidental changes can completely alter a park's character and the way users respond to it. If designed landscapes are seen as works of art, random tree planting is akin to scribbling on a Constable or a Turner or stone cladding a brick town-house. The loss of sight-lines means that visitors easily lose their bearings, and feelings of well-being are replaced by uncertainty and fear. Sadly, the urge to improve the place in the light of these uncertainties is usually manifested in yet more tree planting and a forest of finger-posts – unnecessary if the connectivity of the landscape is conserved.

### The restoration process

Clearly, landscape restoration must consider the issue of the removal of unwanted trees. This is best done as part of a landscape management plan. If properly managed, such plans also provide the vehicle for involving the public in the future of their parks. By making clear all of the interests parks represent, the need to balance all of these interests also becomes apparent. Generally, members of the public understand and accept that some unwelcome short-term changes can be in the best long-term interests of the park ▶

## Maintaining tree avenues

Many historic parks, both private and public, have avenues of trees as major landscape features. These would almost always have been planted as single-species and even-aged trees, with the aim of achieving a uniform structure and appearance. Avenues decline over time through tree mortality, damage by storms and lightning, and through uneven growth caused by variable soil and microclimatic conditions. Sooner or later the breakdown of uniformity in avenues has to be dealt with, as part of the natural cycle of growth, decay and death. In the great storms of 1987 and 1990 which afflicted the south of England, many post-mature avenues were left in ruins and much thought was put into their renewal. The options are few and the results can be very different from the original design intention.

### Gapping up

Ruined or depleted avenues may be gapped up with the same or different species. This gives immediate continuity of the avenue as a feature and allows the remaining trees to grow on. However, the disadvantages of this method are that planting and establishment conditions may be difficult within the line of the avenue because of depleted or diseased soil; surviving tree roots and their susceptibility to honey fungus; and competition for light, air and nutrients. From a landscape point of view the greatest problem is that a uniform avenue can never be achieved, so that the particular beauty they offer, in fact the whole point of avenues, is lost for the present and denied to future generations.

### Replanting

Avenues may be replanted inside or outside their original line and allowed to grow up while the remaining original trees gradually succumb or are removed. This also has the advantage of continuity but the drawbacks with this approach are many. The critical proportions (width compared to height) of the avenue are lost; the relationship with eye-catchers or vistas at the ends of the avenue is disturbed; and uneven and unbalanced tree-growth results from the proximity of the trees retained on either side.

### Clear felling and replanting

The most satisfactory approach is also the most radical and the most potentially unpopular with the public. This is to clear fell the avenue, remove all old roots, cultivate, feed and refresh the soil and to replant with same age and uniform trees of the original or other preferred single species. This does mean the sad loss of the old avenue but it is surprising how quickly young and vigorous trees fill the void. Sometimes it is necessary to change the original species choice; many old avenues were elms, now usually replaced with limes as the tree most similar in habit. Sometimes people prefer a lighter or denser canopy, or have a particular preference for certain species.

These decisions should be part of a strategy which has the support of managers and the public. Clear-felling of avenues can appear overly drastic and many local authorities shy away from the threat of adverse publicity. However, it can be the most responsible approach to careful husbandry and the planting of semi-mature heavy standards can have an immediate and pleasing visual impact. Once established the avenue will again be capable of giving people pleasure for generations to come, while simultaneously preserving the carefully designed character and appearance of the original design intentions.



Above: In common with many public parks most tree-planting over the last 20 years has been alongside drives to make life easier for gang-mowing but without any understanding of the landscape design (top). Here in Ashton Court, Bristol, some trees have been removed (bottom) before the visual extent of the park was lost



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and the community it serves. In grant-funded schemes, involving millions of pounds, the benefits to users in better facilities, cleaner and higher quality environments, better supervision and greater safety will usually be accepted as outweighing the short-term loss of trees in landscape restoration.

All parks have their own characters and characteristics, a different 'genius of the place', which makes them special. The importance, strength and effectiveness of design can vary. On some sites of high historic and academic interest, design is of the utmost importance and it is incumbent upon heritage agencies to conserve, repair or restore its integrity.

In reaching decisions about which trees to keep and which should be removed, there is no slavish adherence to historic design on a tree-by-tree basis. Rather the aim is to restore the essential features of the designed landscape structure, in terms of the massing, grouping and location of trees. Only trees which interfere with important aspects of the design will be considered for removal.

Typically our parks have many more, and much bigger, trees than originally intended. In some places, for example town squares, trees may have grown so large that the square can be completely

shaded for most of the day. In parks, the uplifting grandeur of the landscape can be compromised by the intrusion of trees of all different sorts dotted randomly around the place.

The landscape management plan aims to improve the existing tree stock and explore opportunities for further planting in a way which leaves the design intact, or enhances some aspect of the park, such as increasing biodiversity.

Similarly, despite the common perception, there is no requirement dogmatically to return the landscape to a specific historic period in regeneration projects. Public parks are recognised as evolving over time, with each decade adding its particular contribution. The overwhelming aim of HLF-funded projects is not to put the park back in time, but to conserve the best of the past alongside the best of the recent additions and to add facilities to enhance people's enjoyment further. Sadly, the severe decline in funding and understanding of public park design over the last 30 years often means that the more recent changes have been to the detriment of the park and it is these that the park management plan seeks to undo. Mainly this was due to a loss of skilled staff and managers which, in a pioneering initiative, the HLF has addressed through revenue-funding the return of park managers, park-keepers and gardeners.

### Public perception of tree removal

Tree removal undoubtedly provokes an emotional response, but there is no question of the park becoming a tree-less zone. Parks usually have hundreds or thousands of trees and can easily bear the loss of a small proportion that were over-mature, unsafe, poorly placed or of an inappropriate species for the site. Nearly always, tree removal is accompanied by the planting of a greater number, but in more appropriate places and of sympathetic species.

If parks are to continue providing pleasure and to retain the artistry of their designs, they have to be managed. It was the breakdown of informed management that led to the problem of trees in the wrong place. Once management is again properly geared to conserving parks in an informed way, the problem of any other than routine tree replacement will disappear.

### Managing public perceptions

Long before the HLF public park projects, there were many commended landscape restoration schemes in which tree removal was a critical element. The success of the restorations of the Lost Gardens of Heligan, Cornwall, and Painshill Park, Surrey, for example, depended on a robust attitude to felling unwanted trees. HLF-funded schemes in which major tree removal contributed greatly to their success include Alexandra Park, Oldham, and Heaton Park, Manchester.

Many such whole park projects require lengthy and patient public consultation exercises. At Heaton Park, the support of the public was gained by enabling the public to visualise the effect of the changes through producing computerised 'before and after' views, in the manner of Humphry Repton's famous Red Books in which he presented his landscape designs to clients.

But local authorities have become very wary of committing to potentially unpopular tree-felling within larger projects. However, the success of other projects around the country and a burgeoning understanding of good landscape management are bringing about a revival in strong leadership in park management. Members of the public are much more easily persuaded of the need for some tree-felling if they have confidence that the council knows what it is doing.

It is essential, therefore, that park and project managers bring senior executives and politicians on board, so that there is political support at a high level from the outset. A robust support for a course of action that has been decided through lengthy assessment and consultation is the best form of defence. There will always be a few objectors who will be immune to any justification, but their unwillingness or inability to look at the whole picture tends to isolate them as single-issue agitators.

Finally, practitioners should take comfort from the fact that if tree-felling is well thought out and comes from a comprehensive understanding of the landscape, the results will meet with great public approval.

The Parks Agency would welcome reports from park managers who have carried out tree-felling with an appraisal of its difficulties and successes. ■