

# 35 years in arboriculture

My wife recently received a 30-year NHS long suffering service certificate. This prompted me to note a personal milestone, passing the 35-year employment mark in arboriculture. Since there is no carriage clock or certificate available to us self-employed individuals, I have marked this occasion with a few reflections on my journey, so far, through the industry.

## When I was 17 it was a very good year ... or was it?

- There were no chainsaw protective trousers: when these first arrived on the scene, the best description I can provide is to imagine strapping a winter duvet to each leg and then working with a chainsaw on the ground and aloft, in summer!
- I joined in a serious industry debate speculating that the prospect of tree climbers wearing helmets would be restrictive and not conducive to their well-being.
- A sensible approach to work positioning involved selecting a harness that allowed the user's body to fully rotate through 360°.
- We 'painted' pruning wounds (and in so doing, ourselves and our equipment): I can't bring myself to put in print where we thought the best pruning position was at that time.
- Need to complain (and I did then as much as I do now)? I had to write a letter to the Arboricultural Association. Membership at that time was sensibly based upon objective criteria such as demographic location in relation to The Watford Gap and ability to play golf.
- I had a bank manager who knew my name, visited my business and wanted to give me money.
- There were no mobile phones. Emergency contingency plans consisted of carrying extra money for the telephone box. Manual handling training was necessary preparation for using the first mobile phone and lifting its separate battery case.
- Our in-car navigation system consisted

of a badly coffee-stained A-Z.

- Tree protection measures involved imploring the JCB driver to avoid speculatively placed matchstick-sized bits of chestnut paling fencing.
- Need a report urgently? No worries, we'll fax it over: sorry, you wanted pictures, we'll send these on when they are back from the chemist.
- 'It's in the post' was a plausible excuse.
- The word 'friend' had yet to become a verb: we used to meet face to face and have a proper chat or squabble about trees.
- There was no Google; we had to know it and learn it properly.

## Now 35 years later, it greatly disappoints me that we still:

- Cannot agree how to start, let alone safely operate chainsaws.
- Have too many accidents and keep failing to act on the lessons learned.
- Persevere with a system of training and certification for chainsaw and tree work skills which is, at best, barely fit for purpose.
- Cannot even agree common terms of reference for component parts of trees.
- Support a position where anyone can work on trees, inspect and offer advice, with minimal knowledge, skill and understanding.

Over the years, we have learned to talk a good game when it comes to trees but I perceive no significant increase in public understanding of trees or of our role in caring for them. Our planning system still supports a land grab at the expense of trees and this

is compounded by diminishing resources available for LPAs to operate effectively.

A response to one of my articles published in this magazine suggested that as a profession we are still in our infancy. I'm not convinced that this is the case. Many bodies claim to represent the interests of trees and those who work with them. However, increasingly (and unintentionally) they seem to fall into a self-serving pattern: needing revenue to operate, to pay staff, to represent our views etc. and this inevitably leads to a membership- and market-share-based approach – inevitably, generating income from low-hanging fruit both in terms of membership and selling countless 'training courses' to the same. I hasten to add that this is not intended as an overt criticism and I fully appreciate the many good works undertaken. But, I simply don't believe that this 'inclusive approach' has equated to increased standards and professionalism. We increasingly measure progress and success in terms of people when we should be measuring it in terms of trees.

My best assessment is that over the years, we have possibly moved from swimming in a goldfish bowl to an aquarium. Unfortunately, the persons outside still remain largely oblivious to what's going on inside.

Increasingly, it has occurred to me that perhaps the term 'arboriculture' simply does not fit or encapsulate what we do. Perhaps its concept and intention are too esoteric and opinion driven to sell to the public and broader society. Maybe, at best, arboriculture is a niche under an umbrella of urban forestry? However, regardless of our designation, most of us are in the strange juxtaposition where we rely on commercial return from the commodification of a precious natural asset which, particularly in an urban context, appears to be a route of diminishing returns and a race to the bottom.

Perhaps we are still a profession in its infancy: but based on my 35-year journey it seems that we still have a long way to go to tip the balance firmly in favour of trees.

**Jez Lawton**

## Bill Matthews' commemorative tree planting

On behalf of June Matthews, I would like to express our great pleasure at the marvellous gathering that came together at the Commemorative Tree Planting at Kew for Bill, and to Tony Kirkham for making the arrangements.<sup>1</sup>

When reading an old Royal Forestry Society Journal recently, I came across the following in a copy dated July 1971: 'The first lecture was given by Mr W. E. Matthews on "Tree Surgery"'. Emphasis was placed on the necessity for specialised training, the importance of safety appliances and insistence on their

use. Recognition of defects and weaknesses in trees was shown to be important, and the means of prolonging the life of a tree by antiseptic treatment. Mr Matthews felt that there was an inclination for foresters to belittle the need to specialize in tree surgery and to regard it as of little importance. Coloured

slides showed the variety of defects which could be treated and the methods adopted. This lecture was given in an attractive, racy style, enriched with great humour while showing a masterly command of the subject. One was impressed with the great diversity of treatment, from the bracing of heavy limbs with cables to combating insect pests.'

Now, 45 years later, there could be no finer testimonial.

**Henry Girling**

<sup>1</sup> See 'Remembering Bill Matthews', ARB Magazine 183, winter 2018, p. 14.