



## From the Chairman

**A few weeks ago I was walking, between meetings, along Vauxhall Street in London. I often walk in London. It is a useful way of looking at young tree planting and observing for myself some of the successes and failures associated with retrospective planting in the hostile urban environment.**

Vauxhall Street is in the London Borough of Lambeth and has a particular resonance for me as I grew up there and played in it and the surrounding streets as a kid. My primary school sits squarely in the centre and memories abound. The built environment is largely unchanged; there have been minor modifications and changes of use, but the fabric remains for all intents and purposes as it was.

However, the ambience of the place has been transformed by tree planting. Successive plantings of *Betula utilis jaquemontii* have created an avenue of young trees along the full extent of the street. All looked healthy, are growing well and have been accepted as an amenity by the community. The signs of vandalism or any other damage were minimal.

I have known the tree officer at Lambeth, Dave Paul, for nearly 30 years so I picked up the telephone rather than just dropping him the obligatory email, text or social media message to compliment him and his contractor, City Suburban Tree Surgeons,

on their success. Using his mobile number (getting through to a local authority using the office number is increasingly difficult if not impossible), I was quickly chatting with him, but our conversation primarily concerned his impending redundancy, which took effect from 31 January.

This started me thinking about local authority tree officers in general. They have their critics, and like all of us they have blind spots, but what is true is that they are essentially the custodians of urban, publicly owned trees in this country. They manage tree populations of anything between 10,000 and 20,000 and upwards, are responsible for keeping those trees safe, for safeguarding heritage and marker trees within their localities and are largely responsible for ensuring the publicly owned urban tree estate is rejuvenated by new planting.

This young tree planting particularly interests me as it is the tree officer who has to plan retrospective planting. The luxuries of infrastructure development, extensive substrate volumes and other modifications are more often than not denied by budgetary and other considerations. Yet in Lambeth, Dave Paul and his team have achieved minor miracles with retrospective planting. Retrospective tree planting is one of the subjects avoided when the Trees and Design Action Group, BSI and others outline best practice. It is, in my opinion, based on years of experience as a nurseryman and as a local authority manager responsible for urban tree planting, one of the most difficult scenarios for successful tree planting. Dave is not alone. Recent visits to Southwark, Merton, Camden and Hackney have demonstrated similar achievements, with areas transformed because of tree planting. I am sure that there are many, many more examples from across the country.

Yet Dave's redundancy made me think of the pressures now facing those working in the public sector. How many other tree officers are under threat, what impact are universal and savage budgetary cuts having on their ability to sustain their valuable and crucial work in sustaining the urban tree populations in public ownership? The work of tree officers is largely ignored, accepted as something that just happens. Rarely do they attract praise

and commendation for the work they do. Yet it is the public estate, which generally only represents between 40–50% of the total tree population in any given urban area, that sets the standard and provides the framework against which all other environmental modifications take place.

So what is the position nationally with regard to tree officers? How many others are faced with redundancy? How many tree sections are being shrunk? How many are being absorbed into general parks and open space management? How much of the public tree estate in the urban environment is being passed to non-arboricultural specialists? How much is being contracted out? I certainly don't know and I am not sure anyone else does really.

Tree officers are well represented. The work of the London Tree Officers Association, the Municipal Tree Officers Association, the National Tree Officers Association and other regional groups is well respected and widely known. They provide a valuable service in terms of information dissemination and support. Yet, it seems to me that tree officers and the valuable work they do are under varying degrees of threat across the country.

Vauxhall Street is just a small example of that work, a drop in the collective ocean, but it seems reasonable to assume that without Dave Paul or his equivalent nothing would have happened there.

With the strength of the Arboricultural Association, its ever-increasing Parliamentary contacts, its national and now increasingly international contacts, the calibre and quality of its membership, surely there is a role it can play in supporting tree officers, in emphasising their value, in promoting the work they do, or is it another case of death by a thousand cuts and we, as an industry, will not realise what we had until it is irreversibly changed or gone for good?

Keith Sacre

Are you a tree officer? Please complete our questionnaire so we can gather evidence to present to government. See page 29 and [www.trees.org.uk](http://www.trees.org.uk).



**Ambience transformed: successive plantings of *Betula utilis jaquemontii* have created an avenue of young trees along the full extent of Vauxhall Street, Lambeth.**



## The Bishop's Plane

Tom Wilson, Barcham Trees

**We are blessed in the UK with a wealth of notable trees in our historic landscapes, parks and gardens. This is a rich gene pool of tried and tested trees, some of them truly standing the test of time. It is easy to take the London plane for granted in the UK as we have magnificent specimens in our towns and cities and I'll wager that many of those associated with iconic landscapes have not changed for the last century. However, mature trees are continually being lost as our townscapes develop. I believe it is important to retain not only as many trees as possible, but also their heritage.**

That's why at Barcham we have developed our heritage tree range. This is a range of young trees taken from excellent specimens throughout the UK. However, rather than babble on about the range itself, I want to tell you the story of one of the trees specifically, from which we have taken material to grow on.

The Bishop's Plane in Ely, Cambridgeshire is not just another plane: it is believed to be one of the first London planes ever planted in the UK, and it was planted at the Bishop's Palace by the Bishop of Ely at



The Bishop's Plane, King's School, Ely. (Jeroen Philippona)



The Bishop's Plane in winter silhouette. (Jeroen Philippona)

the time, Peter Gunning. The tree is said to have been gifted to him and is estimated to have been planted around 1680. Not only is this tree one of the oldest but it holds the national record for its girth – measured at 10m back in 2009.

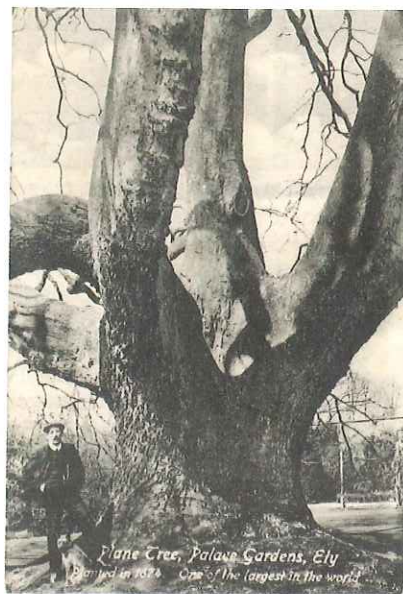
If you have visited Barcham over the years, there is good chance you have seen the tree as it was a staple of a nursery visit, and no matter how many times you visited, it never got boring. The tree is a long way off being the tallest but what it lacks in height it makes up for in girth! The tree boasts an impressive trunk and the enormous root plate extends far out into the lawn. It supports three colossal stems which over the years have been heavily cabled and braced. As you can see in the black-and-white photograph, the tree did originally divide into four stems but over the years sadly one failed at the union, opening up some decay. However, the tree still seems to be in good physiological health with plenty of new extension growth.

While it is a lovely story to be able to plant trees with such a fantastic heritage, there are also other benefits to planting trees with known heritage or provenance. Like racehorses, it's imperative to identify the trees with the best form and a proven track record to breed from as this ensures the best chance of growing healthy trees with longevity. All too often in the nursery trade we see a tree with disease resistance or pest resistance and solve one problem but then create another in that the tree may be susceptible to tight union or breakages, such as *Platanus x acerifolia* 'Vallis Clausa'. The Bishop's Plane must be one of the original crosses between *Platanus occidentalis* and *Platanus orientalis* and

this could be useful for future disease-resistant planes.

None of this would be possible without the permission of the current owners of the palace and the tree, the King's School in Ely. While the young trees are some years from reaching sale, it is brilliant that the school has recognised the importance of propagating from this specimen and is behind the project. With the help of grounds manager Will Temple we took our first hardwood cuttings two years ago. They are now putting on good extension growth and coming along nicely in our fields.

We invited the schoolchildren to visit Barcham to learn about the processes behind propagating trees and it was great to have some many enthusiastic young people on the nursery keen to learn about trees.



The tree now supports three colossal stems but originally had four. Over the years one failed at the union, opening up some decay, but the plane still seems to be in good physiological health.



Saplings at the nursery.