

THE TREE SCENE IN BRITAIN

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I ALWAYS HAVE A FEELING that Americans imagine Britain as one huge garden populated by ancient rustics, kept in order by benevolent policemen with funny hats; and guardsmen who all lodge in Buckingham Palace.

Certainly we have all this, but as I learned on a visit to last year's International Shade Tree Conference in Portland, the problems of the arborists both in Britain and in America are extraordinarily alike. Everything from business administration to public relations, to staff problems has exact parallels.

The main thing we do not have is your magnificent equipment. Perhaps if we had your tax system, enough money could be left in companies for capital outlay of this kind.

Not much interest was taken in preserving trees in England until after the last war. This was odd because the English tradition of horticulture was very strong and in fact the many fine gardens that were being made had trees and shrubs brought to them from all over the world. They flourished in our temperate climate, so well in fact that this has been given as a reason for the complacency regarding their upkeep. The philosophy was why worry when all is going so well.

The odd gardener and esate owner attempted crude methods of bracing when the need was very obvious.

All sorts of jollops had been slopped into cavities, most of which did more harm than good.

The most ambitious undertaking was usually lopping, topping and removal of branches. This work was carried out by people without much skill or experience and the results were often drastic both for the tree and the operator. During the twenties one or two people filtered back from America who had been trained by Davey, Bartlett and the other big companies. They practiced—usually in a small way—very expensive treatments to very special trees. Then the war came and everything stopped for six years. People who returned found a legacy of neglect. Gardens were overgrown and trees had been felled for timber. Municipal officials were trying to reclaim and maintain their existing gardens in addition to creating new ones, to cater for the massive housing developments which were taking place at that time.

As agricultural land was lost to industry, trees took on a new significance. There were no longer enough to go 'round, as more and more disappeared under the bulldozer.

Residents, committees and local amenity societies became very tree conscious. This demand for tree care was the climate in which professional arboriculture, on a properly organized commercial basis, emerged in England.

Five Pounds and a Motorcycle

After some preliminary maneuvering and learning the profession in other companies, I met Tom Wilson, a Canadian from Manitoba, and we set up our present company, The Southern Tree Surgeons, Ltd. At its outset this was not the most magnificent undertaking, as we had five pounds and a motorcycle which I had borrowed from my brother. It was a great day when we acquired our first, second-hand van for the magnificent sum of fifty dollars. At least we had started to come in from the cold.

By our basic nature and business practice, we carried out our work as conscientiously as we could, and to this extent virtue was certainly rewarded. We eventually had our first man and gradually over the years others came and till at the present time we are a staff of 45 people. We are the largest arborial contractors in the United Kingdom. Things have certainly evolved a great deal from that first precarious outing on the motorcycle.

We soon realized that traveling

was costing us a great deal of money, although even then it was nowhere on the scale that you undertake in America. In this congested island, a journey of 100 miles can take anything up to three hours; so you can imagine that some deployment of our forces was necessary if we were to work competitively in other areas. We coped with this problem by setting up four branches strategically placed about the country, and put them in charge of our most experienced personnel who were able to work entirely on their own initiative.

Labor Costs and Charges

When we first started to expand, some 10 years ago, costs were vastly different from what they are today. It is rather difficult to give you exact comparisons for that era as the value of the pound is considerably different from what it is today. At that time a top climber earned around £7. 10. 0. (\$20) per week, and we charged him out to the client at 4-5 pounds (\$11) per day. Taxes have increased and the cost of living has gone up to the extent that a top man will now get around 25 pounds (\$70) per week, in addition to which he often has the use of the van after hours.

This may sound a fairly lucrative business, judged by American standards, but bear in mind that each individual today costs us 5 pounds before he leaves the yard on Monday morning and various social benefits. We also have what is called a Selective Employment Tax for people in what are termed non essential industries. Today we charge these men out to the clients on a basis of between 12 and 14 pounds (\$33-\$39) per man day. If we are staying away from home, accommodation is added to this charge.

Contract on Exact Quotation

In England all work is done on an exact quotation and not, as I found in America, on cost-plus certain percentages all of which were based on the time taken. People here like to meet you with an exact appointment (and if you are 10 minutes late, they are most unhappy). They will tell you exactly what they want done, and they expect you to submit an exact quotation for what ever has been agreed. Most of the disagreements in this country that do occur are the results of loosely worded arrangements, or no proper contractual procedure. If we went on cost-plus, I am sure we would spend most of our time in court trying to get our bills paid. I know there is

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The typical Southern Tree Surgeons crew is shown below. At right, they're getting instructions from Bill Matthews. Some jobs take them more than 100 feet into the air, such as the one on the previous page and at left.



more risk to exact bids but on the other hand there are fewer arguments also.

The climate as regards competition is now very similar to that in America. Nearly all public work is put out to tender, and we have exactly the same problems with loosely worded specifications put out by people who have no real understanding of the work.

Organizations and Education

We are trying very hard to improve the situation by meeting and lecturing to public figures and organizations to get across to them that they need an expert to prepare and administer tree work in exactly the same way that they are prepared to accept experts in other fields. The trouble is with trees that everyone is an expert. It was this sort of aggravations that prompted us to form our own professional association and this we did some four years ago when the Association of British Tree Surgeons and Arborists was started.

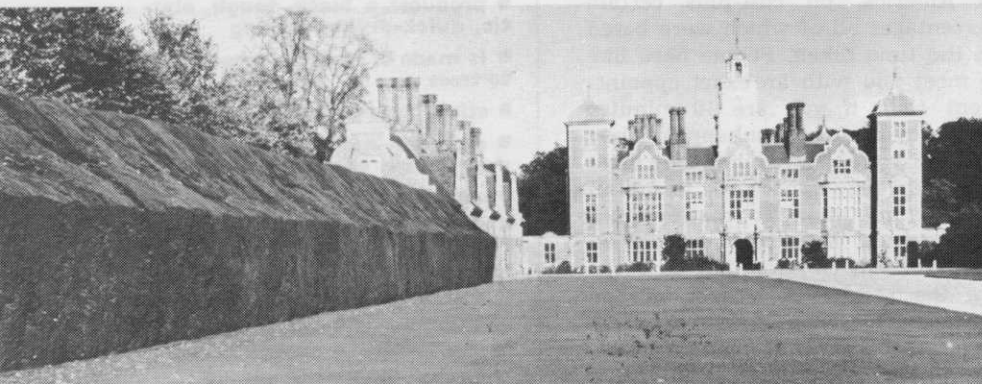
We started off by arranging public demonstrations to which we invited all the important people to show them exactly what good tree work

was. This had two objects, to stimulate interest and to try and prevent some of the atrocities that had gone on when tree work was carried out by any Joe who happened to knock on the door, largely because the people had no idea at all of what was needed, or how tree work should be carried out.

These demonstrations created a great deal of interest and culminated in our organizing a three-day 'teach-in' on arboriculture at a well known horticulture school. When it became known that this course was on the stocks, the response was overwhelming. It was the most over-subscribed course this institute ever had. We took some 80 people, and organized three days of lectures and practical demonstrations.

The principal of the college then became interested in forming a definite department to deal with arboriculture and we eventually decided that the greatest need was for practical operators, and this led to organizing a 12-week course in tree surgery, and hiring a permanent instructor to go on to the staff. We now have the first three or four courses behind us and a great deal has been learned during this first training session. It is now obvious that people need longer practical experience, and to this end we have re-designed the course so that inter-company training is carried out during normal operations. What was formally a 12-week concentrated session is now being divided into two- or three-week chunks over a period of 18 months to 2 years, during which the students will return to the college at intervals to take examinations in various practical skills which lead to a final examination during which they will be able to qualify as craftsmen.

We have managed to get a nationally recognized examining organiza-



Grounds around Blickling Hall, Norwich, Norfolk, are under the care of Southern Tree Surgeons, the largest arborial contractors in the United Kingdom.

tion to accept this scheme, and have thereby established the first step in a career structure in arboriculture in this country.

In addition to these practical examinations we have two other main qualifications which are awarded by the Royal Forestry Society. These are a Certificate and a Diploma in arboriculture. The Certificate could be regarded as the intermediate stage and the Diploma as the advanced.

With all this eruption going on, and people becoming more aware of the need for arboreal training, other courses and 'teach-ins' started to pop up all over the country. In order to prevent confusion, we called a national symposium to discuss education in relation to arboriculture and the result of this is that a committee has been set up, with representatives from all interested organizations, to get the thing on a properly organized footing and to prevent confusion which could be caused by small break-away groups.

In our own company, we are finding that the old philosophy of taking the first guy whom comes through the door disappeared some years ago. We are now trying for the well educated lad who not only knows **what** to do but **why** he is doing it. Our own operations have extended throughout the British Isles, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the Channel Islands. As you can imagine, this causes some very complicated costing problems, and we are beginning to wonder if the enthusiasm with which we rush hither and thither is often a little misguided when we come to do our sums at the end of the contract.

Sir Winston Churchill and the Cedar

In common with many of our American counterparts, one of the most rewarding things of this work is that one is constantly meeting interesting and important people, and we have certainly had our fair share of these. We have worked for most of the major institutions, Windsor Castle and lately at the Queen's own country residence at Sandringham in Norfolk. One of our more interesting early contracts was for Sir Winston Churchill at his home at Chartwell in Kent. This incidentally was also one of our most difficult contracts in that Sir Winston had instructed that a dying Cedar be reduced. This was a fairly routine job apart from the fact that the tree was situated in a wood shed at the junction of four rooves and

every piece had to be taken down by erecting a scaffold frame around the tree, cutting it off in foot chunks, splitting them and dropping them down through a foot gap between the tiled roof and the tree. When we were half way through this operation, Sir Winston came down the garden and said it had gone far enough. There were about 12 ft. of Cedar bole sticking up in the air without a single branch on it at this time. "Leave it," he said, "and let it shoot out again." We protested at this and told him there was no

likelihood that Cedar would shoot or put on any growth at all from such a stump. But the great man persisted, "leave it," he said, "if I am wrong, it will not be the first time." We could not help but wonder what had happened the last time he was wrong.

The tree of course did not shoot, and we were summoned again some six months later to reduce it down to the nearest live branch because, as he said, "it looks like a factory chimney."

We worked there almost every

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year for quite a long time, and toward the end of his life we used to watch him sitting alone on his seat by the lake, feeding his black swans of which he was very fond.

Dutch Elm Disease Heavy

One of our great needs is for more research into broad-leaved tree problems. Our own state foresters are very good when it comes to anything coniferous but as broad leaves have not been considered a very good commercial crop over the last 30 or so years, very little has been done about problems which are peculiar to them. This year in particular we have been plagued by the worst attack of Dutch Elm Disease for the last 30 years, and in some parts of England up to 90% infection has been recorded. There also have been serious outbreaks in other places, and we hope this scourge is not going to take hold of the English Elm the same way that it has done in America. Another problem which is causing trouble at the moment is canker of Plane, and as usual we are calling on all the information we can find from America, which has so often proved in-

valuable to us over the years.

Tree Care Equipment

And so we have arboriculture as it is in Great Britain today. There are a number of modern companies with up-to-date equipment, branchwood, chippers, stump choppers, and so on. Safety equipment is now generally used, and, of course, all these things are based on American know-how or in many instances are the actual American machines imported into this country. As yet it is difficult to convince our manufacturers to take arboriculture seriously, rather than regarding it a minor market.

One of the main impressions in America was of the enormous capital outlay that goes into your companies. This may be due to the difference in the tax structure, and to some extent to the higher standard of living. We can not in this country, as yet, afford things like highlift platforms, which I saw operating in America by quite small companies. Even such things as brushchippers have to be bought very carefully over very long periods. The stump choppers are owned by private contracting firms who work for us on a sub-contract basis.

Chemical Program Small

One thing that we do not have over here, which seems to be the mainstay of many American companies, is an elaborate spray program. There is hardly any spraying at all carried out in England, largely because there is no need for it. We have used small knapsacks sprays for dealing with outbreaks of Marssonina Salicifolia, which affected all our weeping willows badly some two years ago, but even this seems to have died out during the last year and the willows are returning to normal.

Allied Industries Growing

During the course of our development, we have noticed a similar development of allied professions concerned with visual amenity. Probably the most important are landscape architects who are now properly organized with their own institute and no major contract is undertaken without calling in one of their members.

The movement of semi-mature trees also has been promoted vigorously, largely by our Nationalized Coal Board, who have used trees extensively in reclaiming open cast sites.

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