

London Tree Officers Association

– *stronger together*

DR TERRY MABBETT RECENTLY MET UP WITH BECKY PORTER, EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE LONDON TREE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION (LTOA). HERE, HE SHARES HER OBSERVATIONS.

When I embarked on a series of articles on the work of the tree officer, I had in mind my first hand observations of public servants 'out on the stump', working extremely hard under palpable pressure, within the confines of their local authorities, besieged by an ever-demanding public representing a full range of views on the place and value of trees in the environment.

Following publication of the second article (The Tree Protection Officer: Rebecca Farrar at the London Borough of Harrow; essentialARB, Winter 2016), a south London tree officer and LTOA member contacted me and said: "Tree officers tend to keep themselves rather isolated, so it is always helpful to see what everyone else is doing."

Colin Chambers, one of the founding members of LTOA and who featured in the fourth article (A tree officer looks back to the future; essentialARB, Summer 2016) echoed the sentiment. Colin, who was trees and woodland officer at the London Borough of Hillingdon for 26 years, said: "Tree officers are often positioned in a parks department, where they find themselves working with people who think completely differently and who have a totally different take on trees, even though everyone is working towards the same best outcome for green open space."

So much for history, but how does LTOA fare today with escalating urban pressures squeezing out trees and swingeing cuts in funding from central government clearly impacting on tree officers' ability to secure the health and well-being of the capital's trees? In order to find out I went to meet with Becky Porter, LTOA's executive officer, at the organisation's headquarters at the London Borough of Camden's civic offices in King's Cross. I entered Camden Council's brand new, state-of-the-art offices and was 'digitally escorted' to Becky Porter's office by a completely computerised system with a strong scent of Huxley's Brave New World and just a whiff of Orwell's 1984 along the way.

LTOA IS BORN AND GROWS UP

The LTOA started life as a professional association in 1982 to help tree officers do the best job possible. After a few years as an essentially *ad hoc* informal grouping, LTOA became more formalised, with local authorities paying subscription fees for their employees and with the appointment of a co-ordinator, which evolved into Becky's current role as a full-time executive officer, unusual for tree officer associations in the United Kingdom.

Becky has been LTOA executive officer for the past 17 years. She says her more broadly environmental background fits perfectly with her position, especially so when you consider priority topics at LTOA include air pollution. I asked Becky about the aims of LTOA's 'founding fathers' when the fraternity was established almost a quarter century ago. Becky explained how LTOA was set up to formalise networking amongst tree officers to share common problems and develop solutions. Publications, onsite visits, training courses and seminars have become increasingly important parts of the framework on which these aims and goals are achieved. "LTOA's provision and delivery of technical education allows all tree officers in London and beyond to follow best practice in the fast-changing world of arboriculture," said Becky. With this in mind I asked how priorities for LTOA had changed over the last decade. "The single, and increasingly, most



The Hardy ash, definitely a female tree with dried bunches of ash keys formed in 2015 still hanging in early April 2016.

important priority is dealing with exotic insect pests and diseases including oak processionary moth and Massaria disease of London planes which are currently focussed on London and its immediate environs," said Becky.

With more than 150 tree officers covering 32 London Boroughs and the City of London, plus 65 associate members including tree officers from outside of London, arboricultural consultants, arb contractors and plant nurseries, a unified approach to best practice and outcomes through cooperation and networking via the LTOA is essential. I asked Becky if there was a particular reason why LTOA headquarters were embedded in Camden, apart from the fact that the borough is in a fairly central position. "Camden Council has generously hosted LTOA for 17 years," said Becky, adding how the council supplies office space, looks after the finance and provides line management.

WORKING PARTIES

Given the large number of members, the wide area covered and the diversity of disciplines (e.g. tree protection, tree operations and woodland) and the problems faced by the capital's trees, the continued success of LTOA demands a strict focus on specifics, achieved by the association's working parties including:

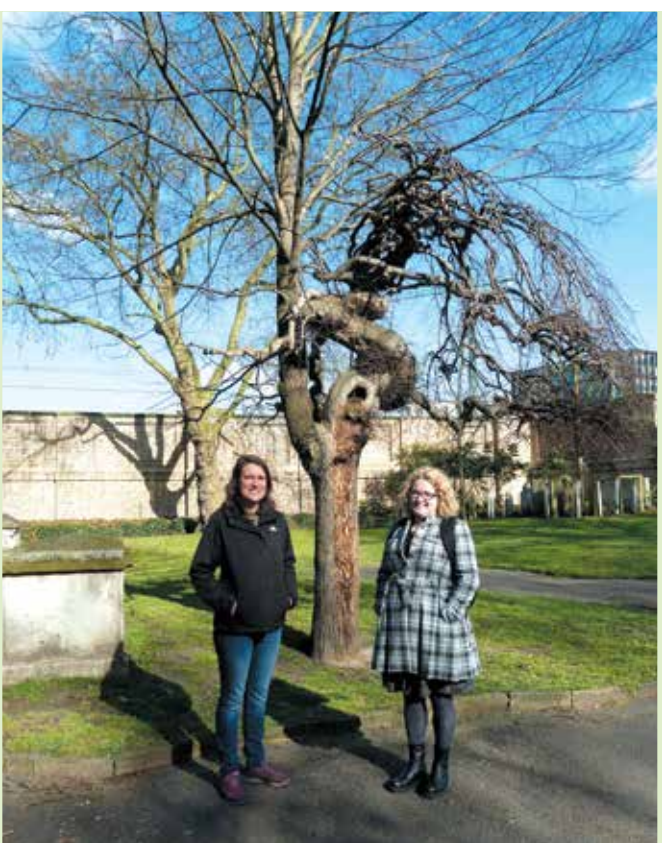
- Human health and trees
- Biosecurity
- Planning
- Trees and building subsidence
- Surface materials around trees in hard landscapes
- Public relations and communications
- Tree service models



London plane trees are prized for their tolerance to air pollution. This avenue of London plane trees is along the walkway which separates Green Park from Hyde Park in the London Borough of Westminster.



View of St. Pancras Old Church showing the great number of very large and old London plane trees in St. Pancras Gardens.



Colleen O'Sullivan (left) and Becky Porter (right) with one of the wych elm trees with its intrinsically contorted branching structure, in St. Pancras Gardens.

With concerns about air quality in London hitting the headlines I asked Becky about the human health and trees working party and LTOA's approach to what is clearly a potentially massive problem for every living thing in the capital. "LTOA's focus is on how we can plant trees in areas where there are pockets of pollution to alleviate problems with air quality. We have traditionally relied on particular tree species, like London plane with its proven tolerance to air pollution, and to the extent that 10 per cent of London's trees are planes. London plane will always be a key species in our London city environment but LTOA is committed to diversification of the urban forest using both traditional and novel tree species," Becky told essentialARB.

I suggested that the biosecurity working party is perhaps the one with its work cut out at this time, given the increasing number of exotic insect pests and plant pathogens affecting the country's trees, with London clearly receiving more than its fair share. Becky explained how the biosecurity working party has offshoots which consider specific tree pest and disease threats like OPM. Of significant current concern is the ongoing problem faced by London plane, traditionally a main bulwark tree species used against air pollution. This stalwart species now has its own pest and disease problems – first in the form of Massaria disease which hit the capital's trees some 3 to 4 years ago. This is not a lethal disease, but affected trees often shed large scaffold branches without warning and therefore require significant pruning for safety reasons.

"However, we now have a completely different beast in the form of the plane wilt fungal pathogen 'waiting in the wings' in European countries like France and Italy where it is causing lethal disease to plane trees. This disease has the potential to change the game for London's huge plane tree population should it ever get into the United Kingdom," said Becky.

The trees and building subsidence working party has focussed on a 'risk limitation strategy for tree root claims' which is set out in an LTOA document. Guidance notes produced by the working party on 'Surface materials around trees in hard landscapes' set out all the surface materials (e.g. gravel, bonded gravel [with resin], rubber crumb and many others) that are laid down around trees in hard landscapes. This particular working party is currently looking for new surface materials that will simultaneously allow water to penetrate the ground and people to walk over it without one compromising the other. Becky told essentialARB how the 'public relations and communications' working party meets on a regular basis to communicate what LTOA does to a wider audience.

OUTSOURCING OF TREE OFFICERS AND THEIR WORK

'Tree service models' is the working party topic of most immediate importance to tree officers themselves, and the long-term integrity of the trees in their care, given the ongoing staff cuts resulting from a contemporary trend for councils to outsource tree work. Becky explained how this could involve outsourcing the tree officer, the tree operations or just the tree inspection side of the council's work. Becky told essentialARB how local authorities are adopting an increasingly wide range of innovative tree service models which must provide the same level of vocation and care that has always been the hallmark of the capital's local authority tree officers.

Becky says that you need a healthy and motivated population of tree officers to ensure a healthy and sustainable tree population; without professional people, both hands-on and in charge, involved in the guardianship of trees, then tree health will suffer. "The public moan that not enough trees are being planted and that too many trees are dying, but what they don't understand is how it is not enough to put a tree in the ground and then simply walk away and expect the tree 'to make its own way' in the world. LTOA is firmly focussed on both tree planting and retaining what trees we have already got through continual post-planting inspection and intervention," says Becky.

Especially so for trees planted in the urban environment, where root space is limited and trees are up against man-made pressures like concrete infrastructure and traffic pollution, which exacerbate natural pressures like drought and the accompanying lack of plant-available soil moisture. "Trees need watering post-planting, which must be facilitated by a 'watering budget' designed to support watering for at least 2 years post-planting. During this 2-year period and beyond, trees require inspection. If you don't regularly inspect them you simply don't know what is happening to tree health and therefore public safety, as well as tree longevity," Becky told essentialARB.

[Author note: I have seen first-hand the consequences of not having a 'dedicated' tree officer in-house. Repeated failed plantings of excellent and clearly expensive planting material due to a lack of post-planting mulching and watering. And acute health and safety hazards created when mature roadside trees, including full-blown horse chestnut trees, having succumbed to bacterial bleeding canker and secondary pathogens are subsequently left standing, 'dead as a doornail' for several years.]

SEMINARS, TRAINING COURSES AND SITE VISITS

LTOA organises a series of technical seminars, site visits and training courses to keep tree officers updated. Recent events included a bats and woodland training course which took place in March/April 2016 with a follow-up course in autumn 2016 focussing on bat surveys; a study visit to the National Elm Collection in Brighton and Hove in West Sussex; the first European visit by LTOA to Malmo in Sweden which included the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) at Alnarp and the forthcoming National Tree Officers Conference taking place this month (9th November 2016) at Telford in Shropshire. "We run 4 seminars every year and recently flew in a tree officer from Turin to advise us on the fully integrated Italian approach to the management of plane wilt disease. This involves tree officers and multiple government departments with the emphasis on sanitation and tree inspection," said Becky.

I was invited to attend an LTOA seminar held in the council chamber of the London Borough of Merton at the civic centre, Morden, in south London on 27th April 2016 which was an extremely well attended meeting with speakers on a variety of in vogue topics. A welcome by the chair (Richard Edwards) and an LTOA update by Becky Porter as executive officer were followed by an introduction from Jim Hillier of Hillier Nurseries in Surrey and Hampshire which had generously sponsored the event. The main programme covered a range of interesting topics and speakers including 'GLA, Natural Capital – making the case for investment in green infrastructure' (Andrew Jones), 'Key findings from the London i-Tree project' (Craig Harrison, Forestry Commission) and 'Survey of London Woodland' (Jessica Rothwell). However, the two presentations that caught my eye were the 'OPM update as Forestry Commission (FC) funding is continuing for 2016' (Andrew Hoppit, OPM Manager FC) and 'Ceratocystis platani (plane wilt) – Europe and UK' (John Parker, Transport for London).

I came away from John Parker's account of plane wilt convinced that if this highly dangerous and lethal fungal disease ever got into the UK it could be a game changer for the capital's trees and a 'face changer' for the London landscape. However, I was quietly reassured after learning that LTOA is leading the way on keeping this pathogen firmly beyond Britain's shores by carrying out annual protected zone surveys for the Forestry Commission.

A sumptuous buffet luncheon generously provided for delegates at Ganley's Irish Bar in London Road, Morden (courtesy of Hillier Nurseries), went most of the way to temporarily blot out fears about tree pests and diseases!

ON THE STUMP WITH LTOA

I couldn't finish the day without being close to living trees, which you might think an unlikely event given our location between

two of London's biggest and best known national rail terminals, King's Cross and St Pancras International.

But nothing could be further from the truth, and I was not disappointed because Becky Porter and her Camden colleague Colleen O' Sullivan (arboricultural officer with Camden Council) introduced me to a priceless and highly historical green open space just a stone's throw from the LTOA's offices.

This was St Pancras Gardens, full of iconic trees and steeped in London's rich history. St Pancras Gardens was opened in 1877 and redesigned to its present form in 1890–91. The main sight to see is the 'Hardy tree', a common ash encircled by tombstones moved and stacked in the 1860s when construction of the London Midland Railway and St. Pancras station required part of the old churchyard.

Colleen said her focus is on the inspection of Camden's 28,000 council-owned trees. "We inspect our trees on a 3-year cycle with visual and physical methods and internal surveying using resistograph and tomography (Picus) digitally operated techniques."

This was early April 2016 and Colleen said the department had recently taken delivery of a state-of-the-art Picus Treetonic 3. By using electronic impedance technology this instrument passes an electric current through the standing tree to measure the electrical properties (impedance) of the wood. This in turn provides information on the chemical properties of the wood determined by water content and chemical ion content which combine to affect the flow of electricity.

From these electric current measurements, an accurate assessment of the structure and condition of the wood can be obtained. "Many interacting factors are involved but, put simply, wood without much moisture indicates structurally unsound biomass with cavities and voids," said Colleen, adding how it is essentially the same setup as the standard Picus tomograph but without the electronic hammer and nails.

Colleen showed essentialARB the 'Hardy ash' which had been internally surveyed using this electronic impedance technology in October/November 2015. Also in the gardens, notable for their size and age, were two old, contorted wych elms, as well as many old London plane trees dating back to the 1860s.

The roots of this old green space go back to construction of the London Midland Railway in the 1860s, when the grounds and churchyard of St Pancras Old Church (reputed to be one of the oldest sites of Christian worship in England) were cleared of gravestones that were subsequently stacked in piles. The 'Thomas Hardy ash tree' is clearly the most famous living landmark in these gardens. It was planted in the centre of a neat pile of gravestones as a living and evolving monument, and is now well and truly embedded in the moss-covered gravestones that encircle it. The



*'Surface materials around trees in hard landscapes' are the subject of an LTOA working party. This shows a recently planted *Ginkgo biloba* tree with a neat circular surround of 'bonded gravel'.*



London plane is the classic pollution-tolerant tree for inner city locations. However, LTOA is endeavouring to diversify the urban forest in this respect with other species that show the same degree of tolerance to pollution and therefore suitability for inner city locations. Like the Catalpa trees (Indian bean tree) which have been ably demonstrating this capacity for many years in Parliament Square at Westminster.

job of clearing the gravestones and removing the interred remains fell to one Thomas Hardy. Whether he was actually responsible for planting the tree which bears his name is unclear. That apart, the ash tree is a truly remarkable and fitting memorial to the association between this charming park and a young nineteenth-century architect who would become one of England's most highly respected poets and novelists.

The visit was all the more poignant for me because just weeks

before, St Pancras Gardens had featured in 'New Tricks', one of the BBC's classic TV programmes about three retired detectives working on 'cold cases' for the Metropolitan Police. This particular cold case was closely associated with one of London's largely forgotten rivers, very near at hand although completely out of sight. Passing very close by but underneath us was the River Fleet which rises on Hampstead Heath. In the early 1800s the River Fleet was a navigable surface river, but now flows underground through Camden and the City of London including Fleet Street of newspaper fame and into the River Thames.

All in all it had been an amazing day around trees and tree officers.



This pollard is one of the biggest and oldest London plane trees in St Pancras Gardens.

What you need, when you need it.



STIHL

020 8676 3010
www.frjonesandson.co.uk

