

# A lifetime working with trees

**DONALD RODGER** operates his arboricultural consultants business from a small high street unit in the sleepy East Lothian town of Gullane. Donald has spent a lifetime working with trees and the premises where James Hendrie met up with him are part of the culmination of his plan to operate a professional independent consultancy.

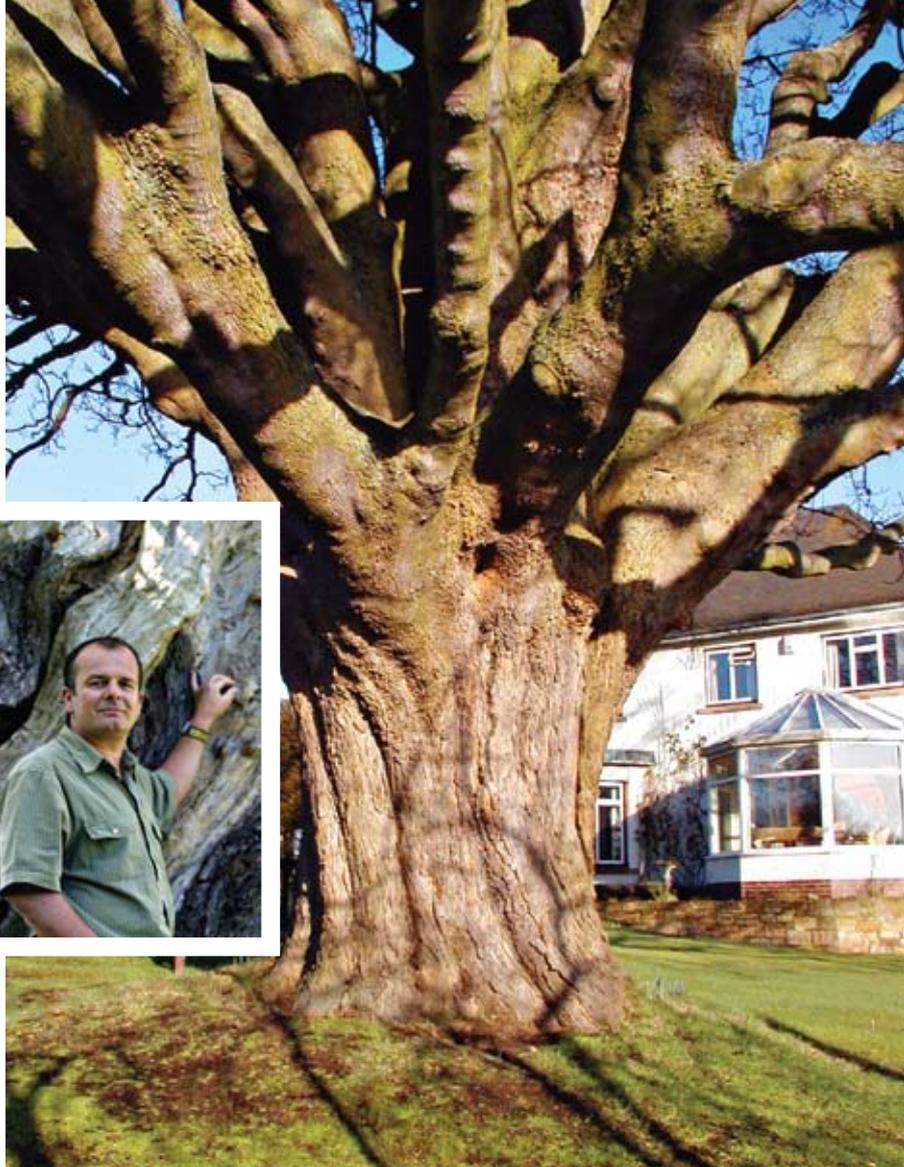
It was way back in 1996 that Donald took the plunge and set up in business for himself, after a career that up to then had seen him work for local authorities on the other side of the fence. Despite no family background in forestry or arboriculture, he had an interest in nature and working outdoors. This interest saw him attend Aberdeen University, from where he graduated with a BSc (Hons) in Forestry in 1983.

"The 1970s and '80s was the time that the fledgling arboriculture industry was starting to emerge onto the scene and so there was a great interest in trees and their wellbeing. Even at this stage I could see there would be business opportunities in the future," Donald told me. However, it was to local government that Donald embarked on his early career working with trees, starting in Irvine and arriving in Bolton – via Maidstone!

His first job after graduating was with Cunninghame District Council as a training officer working with young people in a range of environmental disciplines, with a special focus on woodland management and tree care. He then became a tree and landscape officer for Maidstone Borough Council where he managed the council's tree stock and woodlands. He controlled the council's arboricultural squad and worked closely with the planning department offering guidance and advice on tree preservation orders, planning appeals and any other areas which involved woodland and trees!

At Bolton he was the council's senior tree and woodland officer, covering the areas that he had been responsible for in Kent but additionally he was involved at a more strategic level as he was quick to point out: "I played a key role in producing a Woodland Strategy for Bolton, a major policy document which provided a long-term framework for the positive development of the borough's woodland along multi-purpose, sustainable principles."

By the mid 1990s, after having spent more than a decade south of the border, Donald and his wife decided to move their family back to their native Scotland and an opportunity arose to take up a position as a coordinator for the West Fife Woodlands Initiative. This was a partnership project jointly funded by FC Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage, Fife Council and Fife



Enterprise, and had the simple aim to increase woodland cover in the area.

On returning to Scotland his thoughts turned to setting up his own consultancy business. "It seemed like a natural progression to me, my experience gained working within local authorities had given me good grounding and also allowed me to understand how they worked and viewed planning applications and any other woodland and tree issues," observed Donald.

He juggled two jobs, continuing to work in West Fife while building up contacts and work for his consultancy business which he operated from his home to keep overhead costs to an absolute minimum. "It was a leap into the unknown – I was leaving the safe world of local government and moving into the big bad world of the private sector!" Donald said. It seems he need not have worried, as almost from the start work became available and has continued to the current day.

Donald believes that it is the quality of service he offers that has played a major part in his success. "I offer a highly professional service based on reliability, honesty and a hard work ethic and, as a result, I have built a healthy client list and have been fortunate to gain a continuous stream of repeat business."

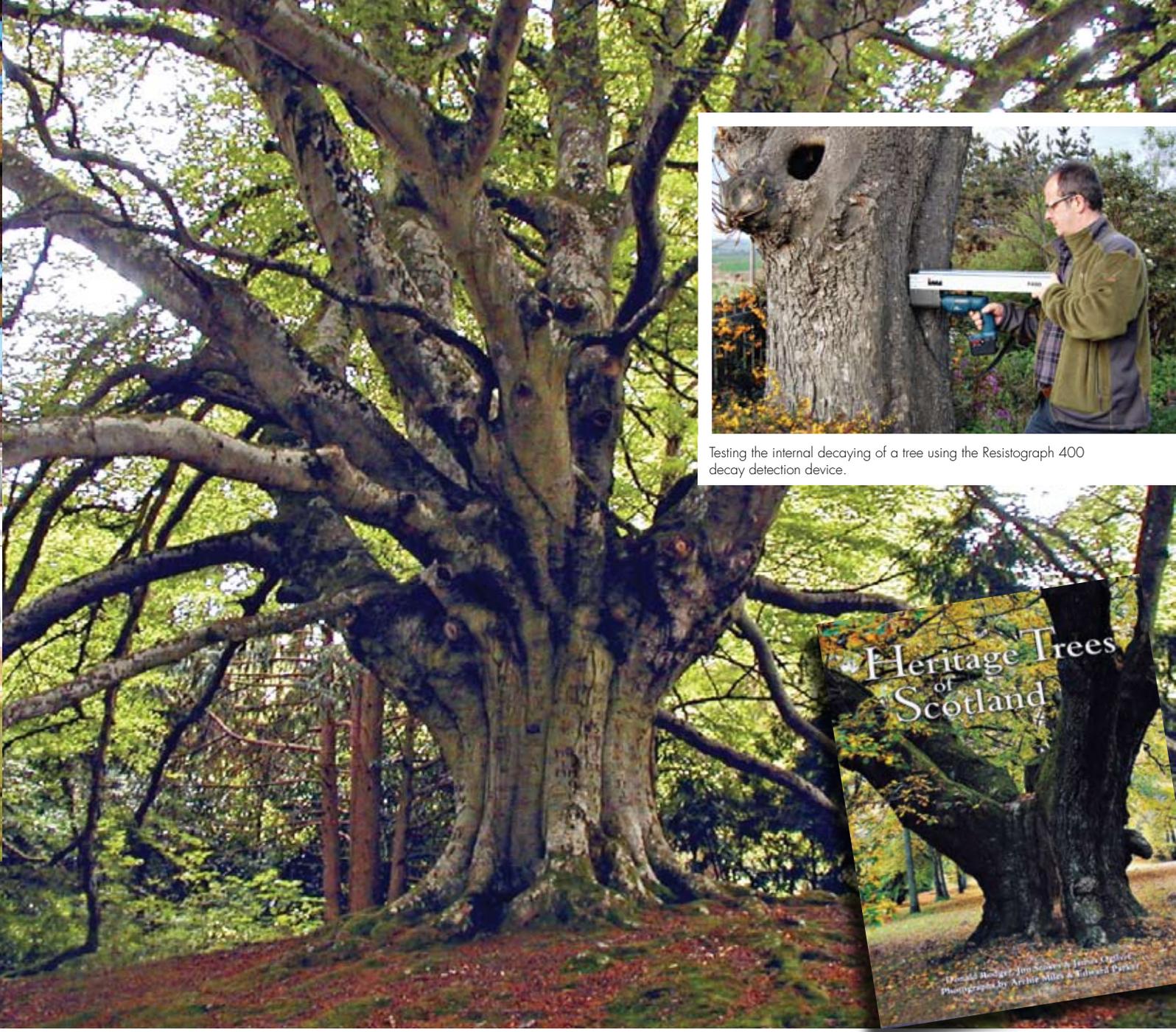
Initially Donald concentrated his focus on tree planning and development work for a number of large house builders and developers, producing survey and management plans for the trees that were going to be impacted by the proposed building work. His local authority background allowed him to advise what would be viewed as realistic in terms of the final planning application.

I wondered whether this has resulted in any conflict with

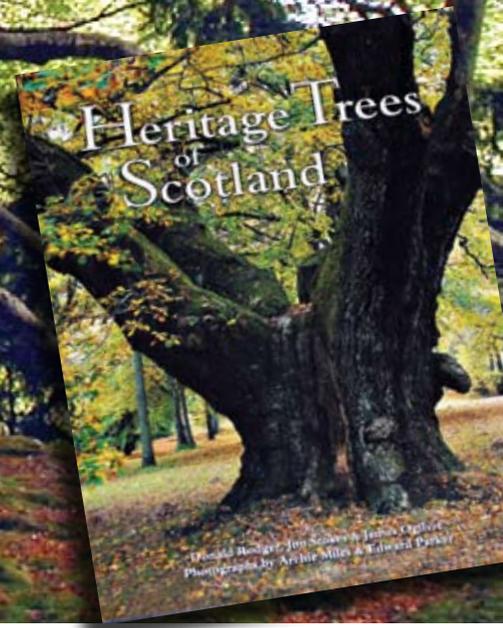
A veteran pollarded Sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) which was discovered as part of the Edinburgh Heritage Tree Project.

Donald receiving the Ken Martin Memorial Award for Services to Arboriculture in Scotland from the Arboricultural Association Scottish Branch Treasurer Eric Hamilton.





Testing the internal decaying of a tree using the Resistograph 400 decay detection device.



One of the heritage trees which are featured in Donald's book *Heritage Trees of Scotland* – a Kilravock beech tree.



his beliefs of tree care, but Donald was quick to point out that, "I offer the best professional advice but I am not seen as a 'yes man' to the developer. I always strive to get the best outcome for the trees, while taking a realistic and pragmatic approach to the construction process."

With the collapse of the property market and the severe cutbacks of new house building around 2007/08 Donald learned a good lesson about placing too much focus on one aspect of the business. "I had a lot of my eggs in the one basket and overnight a lot of work dried up. With hindsight, it was perhaps a bit short-sighted but it focussed my attention on developing more the other aspects of the services that I offered my customers."

One such area was that of tree safety inspections and safety audits. This has reaped rewards, with more landowners, private industry, schools and local authorities becoming concerned about potential litigation following incidents involving trees and the general public. Donald has built up a portfolio of what has become repeat work on a cyclical basis and the trees that he has inspected have to be revisited more than once over a fixed period.

A spin-off from this part of his consultancy work has seen Donald used as an expert witness in court cases. This has involved him preparing detailed reports on any legal

matters which might concern those who are responsible for trees as part of their business or private portfolios.

Donald has also found himself travelling extensively throughout Scotland, but primarily in the central belt, dealing with potential tree issues and problems to a wide range of different clientele. It is this meeting and travelling that he finds enjoyable because of the variety of work it offers and the many different people and indeed trees that he has to work with. Indirectly, this part of the business has led him to becoming involved in the more specialist arboricultural consultancy business of heritage and veteran tree management.

"The heritage trees started as a hobby, but as I was doing my general arb work I discovered many old trees and started to take their measurements and research more about them. Fairly soon people started sending more information and I became recognised as a bit of an authority," said Donald.

Not only has this seen Donald gain work opportunities connected to heritage trees throughout the country but it has also led him, in conjunction with others, to having published two books on such trees. *Heritage Trees of Britain and Northern Ireland* was published in 2004 and *Heritage Trees of Scotland* followed two years later.

"It is very important that we celebrate and protect these trees; many will be around long after we are not!" Donald passionately told me.

In his experience though, with age comes potential issues. This is where he has found a niche, with the ongoing management of some of the countries oldest and most valuable trees in places such as the historic pinetum at Scone Palace. He has also offered his professional advice and expertise in this area to interested groups and industry bodies. "I enjoy talking about trees and I consider myself quite fortunate that I have in effect turned a hobby into paid consultancy work because of the experience that I have developed over the years."



Measuring the height of a tree using the TruPulse Clinometer.

Aware of the wide range of equipment used by contractors, I was surprised to hear that there was very little equipment he required. "The main tools you need are your eyes, and an experience of working with trees. You need to be able to look at a tree and assess its health and safety without the need to call on a wide array of equipment."

There are however a few pieces of kit that do help him to assess the trees that he works with. "A good sounding hammer is a tried and tested way of picking up defects," he told me, and then highlighted some of the more technological pieces of machinery. He uses a Resistograph F400 Micro Drill, which effectively uses a specialist drill bit to measure the resistance that it receives from the tree as it is drilled into, giving its operator a graphic printout. "It gives you a quantitative idea of what is happening and allows you to spot decay deep inside the tree, thereby allowing informed decisions to be made," said Donald.

Another more expensive piece of kit Donald uses is the Picus Sonic Tomograph System. Although he does not have one himself he

does have access to this machine if he feels that it is necessary to use it. In effect this system uses a number of sonic sensors which are placed around the tree concerned to detect the waves that are sent through the tree. Data is then collected and mapped into a two-dimensional colour tomogram. "Healthy wood simply transmits sound better than wood that is damaged or decayed. The data derived from using this machine offers more information to assist in the decision making process."

For tree surveys Donald uses Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and Geographical Information (GIS) to map trees in location and record data – a far cry from the days of using paper and a clipboard, he told me. Tree heights are measured using a TruPulse Clinometer, which is a laser rangefinder, inclinometer and compass all rolled into one. New technology does help but, as Donald told me, he still goes to jobs with a compass, measuring tapes, binoculars and various probes to help him as well. He was quite philosophical in summing up the contribution that equipment has made to his work. "I can't imagine going back to the old days but the job is about selling expertise and knowledge, and not about getting bogged down with expensive pieces of kit!"

Donald gave me an overview of some of the jobs that he has worked on. The jobs involving planning and development are wide and varied, dealing with major house builders down to individual owners and certainly more routine than some of the jobs involving tree safety and heritage. He recently carried out a major survey of tree safety for Stirling Council and helped them to map onto their computer system the location of their tree stock, as well as working on a management plan for the council.

He carried out a similar exercise for the Helensburgh Tree Conservation Trust. Donald said, "They were keen to find out about their trees and the conditions that they were in. It was a big job with lots of trees but I was pleased with the result." Following his recommendations a programme of work and tree planting was implemented.

More recently Donald carried out a major survey of Fife Council's premier area of open space – Pittencrieff Park in Dunfermline. This involved a major survey and mapping exercise and the preparation of a management plan to guide the long-term development of the valuable tree cover.

It was clear from talking to Donald that he has a special feeling for working with heritage trees. He has an association with the Scone pinetum (*essentialARB* February 2012) which he described to me as 'a premier tree collection which had not been looked at in a long time'. "I mapped everything, each species and collection and worked out how best to manage it – maintaining the existing and replanting to continue its evolution."

He is also particularly proud of the work he has carried out for the Edinburgh Heritage Tree Project, where he built up a record of the fifty heritage trees in the capital onto

a database which is now used to assist planning applications. He believes that the trees of value and heritage in Edinburgh are now dealt with in a different way and, as a spin off, a tourist heritage tree trail has been developed.

I could not end my visit without asking Donald's views on the industry. With regard to how the consultancy side had changed in recent years, Donald felt that while it had not massively changed, the recession had certainly 'rocked the boat'. He feels that the industry is now recovering and made the interesting point that the industry appears much bigger in England and less so in Scotland, telling me how proud he is of the fact that he is the only AA Registered Consultant in Scotland! [Ed's note: I understand from the AA that as of February 2012 there are actually two now!]

"There is a rigorous vetting process to get through and a requirement to demonstrate a broad portfolio of work. There are other consultants in Scotland but nobody has this professional recognition," he told me. He is also a firm supporter of the AA's emphasis on continuous personnel development for its members and is an active member of its Scottish branch committee. Also a fellow of the Institute of Chartered Foresters and feels that membership of such bodies helps him to gain business as clients are reassured to see this industry benchmark on his website and letter heading.

Donald believes that arboriculture is well placed at the moment industry wide, with plenty of work and more new entrants to the market place. There is a natural progression in his opinion for contractors to move into consultancy or for others to follow the route he did from local government. In Scotland he feels that the current level of activity is very sustainable, with enough work for those that are currently operating; although he did say that there may come a point when saturation is reached.

Overall he is positive for the future. "There is a growing recognition of the importance of trees in our lives, peoples' awareness is rising all the time; there is an appreciation of the value trees bring, particularly in our towns and cities," he told me. With this he believes will come more need by those who own and are responsible for trees to keep them safe and healthy.

I wondered what he might be doing in ten years time. He smiled and told me simply, "Doing very much what I am doing now. It's not a job to me, it's a vocation. I have a passion for trees and I cannot imagine me not being involved in working with them."

Donald is very much a man who has devoted his working life to looking after and caring for trees, a fact that has recently been recognised by the Arboricultural Association Scottish Branch presenting him with the Ken Martin Memorial Award for services to arboriculture in Scotland. Having met him and spent time with him at Gullane it seems to me that he is very deserving of this accolade.

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