As front-line guardians 'Tree Officers' are truly precious people and as valuable as the trees in their care. Most trees 'under the wing' of the typical local authority tree officer are single standalone specimens within the amenity and landscape sector but a surprisingly high proportion, and more than you might think, are in established woodland. These tree communities and associated biodiversity account for a high proportion of semi-natural woodlands within and around our cities and towns. Many are authenticated ancient woodlands and all the more valuable given their urban, suburban and peri-urban positions.

The tree officers I know are invariably retiring in nature and character, and are far too busy and indeed overworked to indulge in accolade and fame even if they wanted or sought it. They are the unsung heroes of the tree world, continually under high and often unreasonable public pressure including frequent abuse from equally vocal pro- and anti-tree lobbies.

Many like me, who live and breathe trees, may find it hard to believe there are some out there who simply don’t like trees, but be assured they exist. I have seen and heard them firsthand, berating and abusing their local tree officer who has to 'put up and shut up' lest the abuser complains to the ward councillor and sets in motion an invariably unpleasant chain reaction.

Be that as it may, the twin priorities of tree officers are the promotion and preservation of trees for the benefit of the environment while ensuring public safety at all times – aims which are not always easy to square. Compounding the situation are divergent public views which seem to crystallise most clearly when street tree work is pending. On one side are those who would happily see every tree in the road taken down, usually for the most ridiculous of reasons (“flashers can hide behind these big trees, you know”). On the other side is the compulsive ‘tree hugger’, blind to even the most glaringly obvious safety risk and who would happily leave a tree standing, even if they ended up hugging a scaffold branch in bed after the tree came crashing in through the window.

Dr Terry Mabbett

Determined to meet with a wider range of tree officer, I set off on a short and easy ride to see Bob Clarke, Arboricultural Officer at Watford Borough Council, one of my neighbouring local authorities in the southwest corner of the county of Hertfordshire.

The meeting was recommended and arranged through the good offices of Hertfordshire arborist Shane Lanigan, owner of Urban Forestry, at nearby Abbots Langley. Weather-wise I could not have chosen a worse day. On this supposedly summer’s day the rain tipped down all day but could not wash away the experience, expertise and knowledge gained by a tree officer with 29 years of service at Watford Borough Council.

Outside of Metropolitan areas Watford, at 7 miles long by 2 miles wide, is one of the smallest local authorities in England but that doesn’t make Bob Clarke’s job any easier. If anything, his job is a whole lot harder, and more critically important too, striving to maintain trees within such a small and densely populated (93,000+) commuter area on the very edge of London, typically experiencing high commercial and residential development pressures.

“As arboricultural officer I am responsible for all tree-related matters including those along Watford’s roads, streets and thoroughfares (under an agency agreement with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC)), but not trees along the A405 and A41 designated trunk roads which are maintained under a different HCC contract and never under Watford’s remit,” Bob told essentialARB. Tree-related matters cover planting, maintenance and felling/stump removal for which Bob uses Fletchers Trees, based at Cheshunt in East Hertfordshire.

ROUNTON HOUSE – HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AND ANCIENT WOODLAND

“A key part of my job is close cooperation and liaison with the planning department on all aspects of TPOs (Tree Preservation Orders), conservation works and planning applications,” said Bob, adding how this includes everything from major commercial developments to small domestic situations. Despite the rain we made for one such major development at Rounton House in Watford’s northern suburbs. On the way, Bob described how Rounton House was originally a large Victorian house in substantial grounds, now the site of a new...
Bob said the whole area was covered by a woodland TPO, the beauty of which is that all trees, irrespective of size, are protected, including those less than 3.5 m tall which cannot be assigned an individual TPO. Trees less than 3.5 m tall could reasonably be inherently small species such as box and wild service, as well as regen growth (seedlings and saplings) of almost any species. Woodland TPOs are clearly an advantage for the local authority; as all trees (including saplings and seedlings) within the defined area are protected, this prevents developers from picking off individual trees, since any transgression within the defined area is covered by a single order.

“We brought in Martin Hicks from the Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre who assessed and authenticated the site as ancient semi-natural woodland,” said Bob, adding how the site actually underwent initial and partial development in the 1970s when some of the woodland was felled to make way for development. Forty years on, things are considerably tighter and the remaining semi-natural ancient woodland is now equipped and protected by a surrounding 15 m ‘buffer zone’ with strict rules and regulations relating to what trees can be planted as well as the nature and magnitude of tree reduction allowed.

**TPO in tandem with planning recommendations**

Rain was still pelting down when we arrived at Rounton House, so we sheltered under a large, leaning beech on the edge of the woodland which was just as Bob had described, and typically Victorian and definitely gloomy on this wet and deeply overcast day. Mixed in with native broadleaves were huge exotic conifers, planted by the Victorian owners, their canopies now completely saturated and offering distinctly less protection from falling drops of water than the full-canopied beech tree.

Sure enough, just metres away and despite the rain, there was a hive of activity as some clearly smart houses were going up towards an overcast sky. However, with the ‘buffer zone’ firmly in place it all seemed tranquil enough and a million miles away from the environment.

As regards TPOs, and our role in their granting, application and monitoring, we at Watford have strived to make things as clear and easy as possible, by using our GIS system to put all historic TPOs onto a mapping system made available to the public, thus avoiding instantaneous answer for the bona fide contractor and the public, thereby avoiding major problems through not stopping or delaying tree work. “It will not stop the
‘cowboys’ but does allow the householder to check before being bulldozed into potentially illegal tree work by the unscrupulous out there,” he says.

“We only get involved if a TPO is contravened,” Bob told essentialARB. “The few minor breaches we do get are essentially unavoidable and are usually down to ignorance rather than wilful illegal action. When this occurs we tend to issue cautions rather than prosecuting straightaway. The dividing line regarding pre-emptive tree work is whether a TPO would have been granted if applied for in the proper way. At this stage we will hand out an official caution but will not hesitate to prosecute if there are transgressions beyond this point. The majority of people actually taken to court for breaching a TPO submit a guilty plea,” said Bob.

TREE SPECIES PLANTING AND SURVEYS

Perhaps one advantage of working inside a small, compact area like Watford is that tree surveys are easier to manage. The last tree survey in Watford recorded 5211 trees with some major genus counts of: Fraxinus (ash) – 190; Aesculus (horse chestnut) – 115; Tilia (lime) – 291; Acer (sycamore and Norway maple) – 522; and Prunus (cherry) – 322.

“Prunus, and especially gene or wild cherry (Prunus avium), can be a nightmare on these local soils which are essentially flints with clay hogging type materials and very hard. The roots can’t go down and react accordingly by generating a mass of suckers. We don’t plant any Prunus in hard paved areas,” said Bob. I asked about some of the more unusual species used. “We use Ginkgo biloba (maidenhair tree), despite it being not too quick growing, because once established you get a very drought-tolerant tree with a tight crown, ideal as a street specimen. Malus tschonoskii (Pillar crab apple) grows and develops into a good-looking tree; the downside is high susceptibility to apple scab and apple canker diseases.”

At this point I asked Bob about his experiences so far with the classic contemporary exotic tree insect pests and pathogens now confronting tree officers, especially in London and the Home Counties. “We have a number of horse chestnuts in Oxhey and Cassiobury Parks and have already lost a few to bacterial bleeding canker, while all the white-flowering horse chestnuts are perennially plagued with horse chestnut leaf miner,” he said. Bob’s advice is to plant Indian horse chestnut (Aesculus indica) which essentially avoids both bacterial bleeding canker and leaf miner.

“There are no confirmed reports of Chalara ash dieback in Watford but there again we do not have a lot of common ash. Most of our planted ash is Fraxinus ornus (manna ash),” said Bob. Interestingly, Chalara has not yet been confirmed anywhere in London or immediate Home Counties towns like Watford. Common ash is an opportunistic coloniser of empty ground and that is at a premium in these built-up areas in and around London. Perhaps the most immediate and serious threats for Bob Clarke and Watford’s trees are oak processional moth, now only a stone’s throw away to the south in the London Boroughs of Harrow and Barnet, and oriental chestnut gall wasp found this lime, then well past their sell-by date and intrinsically too big for the narrow roads and streets of 20th century Watford.

“Getting the new trees established was the hard part,” said Bob. But he had clearly succeeded because as I stepped out of the car I was confronted by an avenue of immaculate and majestic-looking ‘Columnare’ (upright) Norway maple (Acer platanoides ‘Columnare’). “As you can see they have proved to be a huge success,” said Bob, though adding how some were already too large after 30 years’ growth for the situation. Pin oak (Quercus palustris) was also recommended at that time for the replanting programme and, according to Bob, has proved its worth, producing trees of a good size and shape, fine colour and resistant to traffic fumes.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Before leaving, I asked Bob about his time in the arb world prior to Watford. I was guessing that he had started out in the 1970s, coinciding with the Dutch elm disease epiphytotic which quickly put paid to around 25 million elm trees, and which I completely missed because I was studying and working abroad. I was spot on, because Bob had started out as an apprentice arborist with Leicester City Council in the 1970s and spent the first several years of his tenure felling, cutting up and disposing of huge elm trees. He remembers there being few chainsaws and using crosscut saws to fell and cut up the elm trees.

“The exceptional long hot summer of 1976 was the worst time,” said Bob, “with huge English elms weighing in at a DBH (diameter at breast height) of 1 metre and 80- to 90-foot tall, succumbing to the disease in just 6 weeks from the first signs of an infection. We tried our best to save the trees using trunk injections of new systemic fungicides which had recently come onto the market. But this was a big and cumbersome job, typically requiring the injection of 8 lb of liquid fungicide formulation contained in 2 containers with 4 nozzles from each container inserted into a full-grown elm tree,” said Bob.

Bob recalls using a commercial product based on carbendazim, one of the MBC (benzimidazole) fungicides (also including benomyl and thiophanate methyl) which had arrived on the market in the early 1970s as some of the very first systemic fungicides available to the industry. These ‘prototype’ systemic fungicides lacked the within-plant movement displayed by modern systemic fungicides like the triazoles (e.g. propiconazole). As such they were unable to reach the very tops of mature elm trees – one of the reasons why they failed to save the English elm.

All in all, it was a very constructive and enjoyable day and, in spite of the rain, I had learnt something old and something new.