



▲ The J.J.L. team from left to right: Tom Church (apprentice), Tom Parkinson (qualified arb), Warren Wood (level 3 qualified arb) and Jason Lomas (level 3 qualified arb).

▼ The team was using a static block pulley which they said is better able to take the shock when 'dropping' big branches.

Apprentice arborist now says, 'you're hired'.

IT'S ALWAYS A PLEASURE TO MEET SOMEONE WHO HAS TAKEN AN EDUCATION AND USED IT TO ADVANCE THEMSELVES. DR TERRY MABBETT SPENT A SUNNY MAY MORNING WITH AN ARBORIST WHO HAS DONE JUST THAT, AND QUICKLY TOO.



I first met Jason Lomas at Capel Manor College (Enfield) in August 2013. He was on the Level Three Advanced Trees and Timber Apprenticeship course and I was there to write an article for *Forestry Journal* (Capel Manor College – setting the pace for work-based education and training, January 2014).

On the menu that day was surveying techniques for trees and timber including resistograph and sonic tomograph, ably instructed by Derek (Mac) McFarland, then Trees & Timber Apprenticeship Manager and Deputy Head of Arboriculture and Countryside. At that time Jason was employed by PJ Musk Trees at Waltham Abbey in Essex and Broxbourne in Hertfordshire.

JASON LOMAS AT J.J.L. TREES

When we met up again in May 2018 Jason already had his own arboriculture company, with three full-time guys on the books. This time I was here to do a story on Jason, his team

and his company, J.J.L. Trees Ltd.

J.J.L. Trees is at Crews Hill in the northernmost reaches of the London Borough of Enfield. Jason and his team (Tom Parkinson, Warren Wood and Tom Church) were on a residential property at Cuffley village (Welwyn Hatfield District) just across the county boundary into Hertfordshire. Modern-day Cuffley is part of the 'old' Enfield Chase that once covered north east Middlesex and south Hertfordshire, an area still heavily wooded today from its medieval roots. Cuffley is surrounded by extensive ancient woodland. Many post-war properties were apparently built in wooded areas and some of the original woodland and hedgerow trees still grace the well-kept grass verges and large gardens.

This appeared to be the case for the several large common ash trees that J.J.L. Trees was reducing that day. At 70 to 80 years old and rooted across three adjoining gardens, with canopies impinging on even more, these big, open-canopied ash trees appeared to pre-date the residential properties.



◀ The ash tree occupied a narrow space between two large outhouses, one each side of a boundary fence. The neighbours had cut their side off before building their outhouse, leaving the team without a safe dropping zone and not the best rigging point.

▶ The logs can be seen cradled here, reducing the drop of the logs over the outhouse. The outhouse belonging to the householder commissioning the work had a strong, flat roof so the team established a rope and pulley system, controlled from the ground by Tom Church, so that everything could be lowered onto the roof for cutting up by Warren Wood.



work and any plans for company expansion. Jason was using the Petzl Zigzag climbing system. "I bought one to give the system a go and loved it," said Jason. Warren Wood said lots of people still prefer to stick with the traditional Prusik knot system, the way it has always been done. Tom Parkinson said it is essentially about wariness of any new innovation irrespective with people probably not comfortable using unfamiliar things that they may not necessarily understand. "That is true of any situation, although I guess even more so when you are climbing to the top of a 25-metre tree," added Tom Church.

Jason said the Zigzag system performed better in bigger, more open-canopied trees like the ash he was working on because there is less chance of side loading. "We are using a static block pulley which is better able to take the shock when 'dropping' big branches. This system is designed to take a force of up to 100 kN and can be used with lowering ropes up to 22 mm, although we are using 16 mm rope," he said.



▶ Jason was using his 'old-school' Stihl 200T despite having newer model saws, reason being reliability, performance and ease of maintenance and repair. Jason was using the Petzl Zigzag climbing system. "I bought one to give the system a go and loved it. I've been encouraging my guys to climb using it," he said.

ensure that nothing subsequently lowered gets snagged up," said Tom. On this occasion Jason was using his Stihl 200T, despite having, and sometimes using, newer model saws. However, they are looking to go electric and are currently waiting for a new range of models to hit the market before making a move.

With Jason back on terra firma and during a well-earned break I asked the team for more detail on this job, other recently completed

RICH VARIETY OF WORK

Around 90% of J.J.L.'s current work is for private homeowners, though clearly of great variety and interest. Jason recalled a job done at Broxbourne in the Lea Valley region of East Hertfordshire on a massive 35 m high Atlas cedar which in anyone's currency is a big tree for a small, suburban garden. "It was a difficult job because in size and spread the tree had a dropping zone covering several properties, including fences," said Jason.

"The tree was densely shading a number of properties including conservatories and gardens," said Tom Church, while Warren

commented on the tabular nature of the canopy. "Though not as flat as Cedar of Lebanon, the Atlas cedar canopy is sufficiently tabular to accumulate snow, increasing the load-bearing forces and causing serious branch breakage," said Warren. "The local authority had agreed to a 30% reduction of this TPO tree but in the event we did not go that far. Instead we gave the tree a good, professional thin with a light reduction of leaders, fearing that a 30% reduction would slaughter this fine specimen," said Tom Parkinson.

Pleached-tree work is becoming a speciality for J.J.L. Trees. The company already has two such customers, one using 'red robins' (*Photinia x fraseri* Red Robin) and the other hornbeam, which together with lime and beech are favourites for this particular 'silviculture'. "We look to train the trees once per year for the first four years and then start trimming work twice per year to generate dense foliage," said Jason.

Tom Parkinson commented how pleached-tree work is a fiddly job, requiring every branch to be untied and pulled into position and place before re-tying. "An often overlooked benefit of pleaching is encouragement of species like hornbeam and beech to hang onto their leaves (albeit dead and dry) right through the winter, thus adding to the attraction," said Tom Church. Pleaching is clearly a highly specialist method of growing and managing trees but also good bread-and-butter work because the arborist has to revisit the client on a yearly basis to train and trim the trees.

The team especially likes tree planting work as a refreshing change from drastic reductions and tree felling - sadly becoming all too necessary and frequent - while giving the feeling of creating something of lasting value. One recent planting job in particular stands out. In November 2017 they planted a mature root-balled *Prunus ukon* (Japanese flowering cherry) at a property in Hampstead (northwest London) which cost the client £750 to buy. However, J.J.L. Trees clearly did a good job because the tree flowered profusely in April 2018.

J.J.L. Trees recently worked on a very large and old white-flowering horse chestnut just outside Cockfosters Underground station (North London terminus on the Piccadilly Line). Anyone familiar with this area of North London will recall this 100+ year old tree as an iconic landmark in the area. J.J.L. Trees carried out a 40% reduction and reported the tree as 'free' of bacterial bleeding canker, a disease which has done for so many other horse chestnut trees in this area. "We continue to come across diseased, veteran horse chestnut trees in this suburban area of North London, especially in Cat Hill on the border between the London Boroughs of Enfield and Barnet and only one mile from our now heavily reduced, but still thriving, 100+ year old tree at Cockfosters Station," said Jason.

PESTS AND DISEASES NEVER FAR AWAY

Old horse chestnut trees in these urban/suburban locations invariably have TPOs but one unlikely benefit of this for arborists can



A The Jensen chipper was kept busy throughout the morning.

be making the paperwork and permission for tree removal that much easier. Old, bulky-branched, white-flowering horse chestnut trees are notoriously unstable even when healthy, due to the inherently moist and soft white wood drying out quickly following any damage, subsequently causing potentially serious branch cleavage and breakage. "Any additional aggravating problems caused by bacterial bleeding canker to these big, old and often unstable trees frequently means felling and stump removal is the only realistic safe option," said Jason.

I asked the guys about *Chalara* ash dieback which appears to have gone off the radar unusually quickly, considering it is now endemic on common ash - which was probably the UK's number two native tree. Surprisingly, none of the team has knowingly come across the disease but perhaps this is peculiar to London. I explained how despite claims of ascospores flying over the North Sea from the Low Countries to infect ash trees in East Anglia, detailed research in Belgium showed most spores rarely rose much more than a metre from the ground after release from fruiting bodies on dead ash leaf stalks. This makes regenerating ash seedlings, coppiced ash growth and hedgerow ash shrubs most vulnerable to infection. There is not a lot of this type of ash growth in London, but venture north onto road embankments in mid-Hertfordshire where regenerated ash trees are dying back or east into the coppiced ash woodlands of south Essex and the disease is there for all to see.

There was another ash anomaly, this time associated with firewood. "We accumulate a lot of wood so we decided to set up a small ancillary firewood business which currently shifts a dozen 3.5 cubic metre loads each

year," said Jason. "If there is any preference, it is for oak and cherry," said Warren, while Tom Parkinson and Tom Church expressed surprise (as I did) that customers are apparently 'snubbing' ash for the fire or stove despite its long-held pedigree as 'logs to burn' and being the only wood purported to burn green. But perhaps this is just another London thing?

And what about OPM, now the bane of arborists London-wide as the pest picks off the last several London Boroughs still free of a breeding population? The London Borough of Bexley in the extreme south east of the capital is the most recent to be hit. I distinctly remember back in 2013 at Capel Manor College when all the London-based apprentices told me how they had encountered OPM and were already engaged, with their employers, in its active management by spraying and nest removal.

"We have encountered OPM within the London Borough of Barnet at Cricklewood in the south of the borough, close to the A5, almost certainly associated with what currently appears to be a difficult-to-eradicate population taking in adjoining areas of Brent and Camden, with Hampstead Heath and its countless oaks, including hundreds of veterans, not far away," said Jason.

However, what they did not know was that there was an OPM outbreak in Crews Hill less than one mile from their yard. The infestation first appeared as a red dot on a Forestry Commission OPM distribution map in 2017, close to an area where I regularly conduct woodland research. I find it absolutely crazy that arborists in the vicinity of new, outlying outbreaks like this one are not informed directly by the relevant UK plant health authority for their [the arborists'] own health and safety, if nothing else. But not to worry because J.J.L. Trees now knows the location of this very local outbreak of OPM - yet another golf course which the pest appears to have



A Top: the cedar was densely shading a number of properties.

A Pleaching can be a fiddly job.

a penchant for, on this occasion Crews Hill Golf Club on Cattle Gate Road in the London Borough of Enfield.

INSPIRING LOYALTY

Jason Lomas is both professional and personable, qualities which have clearly been important in inspiring a high level of loyalty amongst close working colleagues during what are still the formative years of his career.

Tom Parkinson worked alongside Jason at their previous local authority arb contractor employer. "When Jason asked me to come and work for his newly established company in October 2016 I jumped at the chance,"

said Tom, who had come into arboriculture relatively late at the age of 25 and completed all his tickets at Capel Manor College, which clearly has a lot of good things to answer for.

"Jason and I worked together at PJ Musk Trees," said Warren Wood, adding how it was Jason who got him into arb seven years ago. When J.J.L. Trees was established Jason asked Warren to join him. "I was reluctant at first due to concerns around job security but eventually said yes and I have never looked back," said Warren, who spent three years full-time at Capel Manor College gaining Level 2, 3 and 3 extended in Forestry and Arboriculture. Tom Church is the 'new boy on the block', joining J.J.L. Trees three months ago having started Level 2 NVQ Arboriculture at Capel Manor College in June 2018.

And the loyalty does not stop there because Jason's past employer, PJ Musk Trees, often passes work the way of J.J.L. Trees when a job is on the edge of the area in which they traditionally work. Jason says J.J.L. Tree's

sphere of activity is roughly one hour's drive out of Crews Hill, Enfield, including, for instance, virtually the whole of Hertfordshire to the north and east London and south Essex due east.

EXPANSION PLANS AT J.J.L. TREES

"The next step for J.J.L. Trees is two arb teams, but to successfully sustain multiple teams every day we really need to secure at least one local authority client," says Jason. He is looking to the London Borough of Barnet and hopes to put in a tender for work very soon. "I know the officers and the geography of Barnet from working right across the borough for previous employers. Indeed, it is in part thanks to the residents of Barnet that I was able to set up J.J.L. Trees so quickly and securely. We would be working on council-owned trees and householders would come along, apparently impressed with our quality of work, and ask whether we could, at another time, carry out tree work for them. Seeing a company and employees working for their local authority will generally reassure residents about the quality and safety of the work carried out," says Jason.

Jason admits that starting up on your own is like entering a 'whole new world' but says things are getting easier and better, especially with paperwork and administration under control and all company information computerised. J.J.L. Trees is aiming to become 'Arb Approved' by the end of 2018. Everything so far had been on the plus side so I asked the guys about any current problems in the industry which they felt were affecting them.

Tom Parkinson commented on current pricing practices 'at the top end' whereby big arb companies indulge in bouts of mutual 'throat-cutting' in a race to ground zero on price. Warren mentioned the ever-present problem of cowboys who they often see as a guy up a ladder clutching a chainsaw. However, Tom Church thinks things are improving from the client angle, with potential customers increasingly aware of the need to only hire professional arborists to ensure work of a high standard and with a high regard to safety too. "The Internet helps," said Jason. "Customers can search for recommendations and use bona fide sites like 'Checkatrade'."

A RICH WORKING ENVIRONMENT

During the three-mile drive back home to Potters Bar Tom Parkinson and I talked about the potential of this 'neck of the woods', which I know well from childhood, for the professional arborist.

A mixture of small commuter settlements and still-rural villages, well-heeled and well-wooded with large gardens and lots of trees. Thankfully, landowners and councils over centuries have been careful to preserve the essential character of this area, despite it being so close to the metropolis. Consequently, the area has more than its fair share of ancient and veteran trees, especially English oak, ash and beech, with their roots in the woodland and wood pasture of the 'old' Enfield Chase and its environs. This is truly a rich environment for an arborist to work in - in more ways than one.