

Research Report

# Trees, people and the built environment

Proceedings of the Urban Trees Research Conference 13–14 April 2011





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Proceedings of the Urban Trees  
Research Conference 13–14 April 2011

Hosted by  
The Institute of Chartered Foresters  
at  
The Clarendon Suites,  
Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK

Edited by  
Mark Johnston and Glynn Percival

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Enquiries relating to this publication should be addressed to:

Forestry Commission  
Publications  
231 Corstorphine Road  
Edinburgh  
EH12 7AT

T: 0131 334 0303  
E: [publications@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publications@forestry.gsi.gov.uk)

If you need this publication in an alternative format, for example in large print or in another language, please contact the Forestry Commission Diversity Team at the above address. Telephone: 0131 314 6575 or email: [diversity@forestry.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:diversity@forestry.gsi.gov.uk).

The editors can be contacted at:

E: [mjohnston@myerscough.ac.uk](mailto:mjohnston@myerscough.ac.uk)  
E: [gpercival@bartlettuk.com](mailto:gpercival@bartlettuk.com)

General enquiries relating to the conference can be sent to:

Institute of Chartered Foresters  
59 George Street  
Edinburgh  
EH2 2JG

T: 0131 240 1425  
E: [icf@charteredforesters.org](mailto:icf@charteredforesters.org)

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# Introduction to the Conference



Our urban forests, the trees and woodlands in and around our cities, have a vital role to play in promoting sustainable communities. As the most important single component of green infrastructure these trees can provide numerous environmental, economic and social benefits, contributing enormously to the health and welfare of everyone who lives and works in the urban environment. As concerns grow about the quality of the urban environment in many towns and cities throughout the world, the importance of protecting and expanding our urban forests can only increase.

Urban forestry itself can be defined as a planned, systematic and integrated approach to the management of our urban trees and woodlands. It was a desire to emphasise that third element, the integrated approach, which was the initial driving force behind the development of this conference. Let me explain the background.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, a series of Arboricultural Research Conferences were held in Britain, supported by the Forestry Commission. I was fortunate to attend some of those events along with many tree officers, tree consultants, academics, researchers and others. Although widely regarded as providing arboriculturists and some landscape practitioners with highly relevant information about current research on both urban and rural trees, for some reason they did not continue. However, in those research conferences and in many other arboricultural events I have attended in recent years, there was one fundamental weakness. Invariably at these events, it was just 'tree people' talking to ourselves. Those professionals who really had such an impact on our work – the landscape architects, engineers, surveyors, architects, ecologists, conservationists and others – were just not there or at least very thin on the ground.

I have always been keen on the idea of resurrecting those early research conferences but this time with some crucial differences. After sharing my thoughts on this with a few close colleagues, a small group of us decided to make our ideas a reality. Right from the outset, we agreed on two crucial points about our proposed research conference. First, we believed the focus should be specifically on urban trees, to reflect the vital role that our urban forests can play in creating healthy and sustainable towns and cities. The conference would 'showcase' the very latest research on the subject of urban trees and the management of the urban forest. Secondly, and most importantly, we needed to reach out to all those other professionals, apart from arboriculturists, that have such a major impact on the urban forest. Fortunately, the recently formed Trees and Design Action Group (TDAG) had already made a significant start down that road by providing a forum where natural and built environment professionals could engage with each other on issues relating to trees in the urban environment. Building on TDAG's established contacts, we invited a wide range of relevant organisations to nominate representatives to join a steering group to lead the development of the proposed conference.

The first meeting of the Conference Steering Group took place in Birmingham in January 2010 attended by 12 representatives of relevant professional bodies and other organisations. There was considerable enthusiasm for the idea of the conference from all present and some very useful suggestions on how to develop the research aspects of this. However, there was no consensus on how the event could be organised or when it could be held. After the meeting, support for the proposed conference continued to grow rapidly but no individual organisation appeared keen to take a lead and offer substantial material support to ensure it would happen. It was at this point that the Institute of Chartered Foresters (ICF) stepped forward. The then President of ICF, Bill MacDonald, was quick to recognise the importance of holding this conference, and the value of the partnership of organisations that had already agreed to support it. Consequently, ICF made an offer to the Steering Group to host the event as its National Conference for 2011. The Steering Group would continue to be responsible for deciding the conference programme and other academic aspects of the event, while ICF would provide the administrative and other support required. The Steering Group readily agreed to this proposal.

Another important factor in enabling the Steering Group to deliver the conference was the early and significant support of the Forestry Commission. Not only did it play a crucial role in facilitating the event itself, it also undertook to publish the conference proceedings, thus ensuring that there would be a permanent record of all the vital research that was being presented.

We were also fortunate in gaining support for the conference from HRH The Prince of Wales, a very prominent champion for trees and a sustainable urban environment. Although HRH was unable to attend the event in person, due to other commitments around that time, he was able to send a very pertinent and personal message of support to the conference delegates.

When the conference was eventually held in April 2011 it was an outstanding success. With nearly 400 delegates, it was one of the largest tree conferences ever held in Britain. Most importantly, the conference achieved its main aim of including the other relevant non-tree professional bodies, particularly from the built environment sector. A number of senior figures from these bodies acted as Session Chair for parts of the conference and there were a significant number of their members as delegates.

The success of the conference was due to the efforts of many different organisations and individuals, and too numerous to mention everyone individually. However, I want to thank the members of the Conference Steering Group who represented the various partner organisations. Without their support, commitment and hard work, we would not have been able to maintain that unique partnership of relevant organisations. And without their efforts to promote the conference to their members we would not have had anything like the number of delegates we achieved.

On behalf of the Conference Steering Group, I want to thank the ICF whose vision and leadership in offering to host the event was pivotal in ensuring it actually happened. In particular, we want to thank Allison Lock and her team at ICF for the very professional way in which they delivered the organisational aspects of the conference. For many of those attending, this was their first experience of an ICF organised event and a great many subsequently commented on how well the event reflected on the standing and professionalism of the ICF.

Lastly, on a personal note, I want to thank two individuals who played a vital role in the success of the whole conference. They are Keith Sacre of Barcham Trees and Sue James of TDAG. Without their enthusiasm, commitment and expertise, much of what we achieved would not have been possible. They not only played a crucial role as members of the Steering Group, they also gave me invaluable support and encouragement at those times when I was in danger of being overwhelmed by the task of 'keeping the show on the road'.

There can be no doubt that this urban trees research conference was a remarkable success. The event itself and the quality of the papers in the conference proceedings are testament to that. However, ultimately, it should be judged on what lasting impact it has on developing a more integrated approach to the planning and management of our urban forests. An excellent start has been made but everyone involved in the conference must ensure that those gains are consolidated and built on. One way might be to organise another research conference in the future. Another is to support the continuing work of TDAG.

**Mark Johnston**

Conference Chair and Chair of the Conference Steering Group

# Message to delegates from HRH The Prince of Wales



## CLARENCE HOUSE

I would first of all like to say how very sorry I am not to be with you for this crucially important conference. Throughout the world, trees are a life-giving resource and, when you consider the Rainforests – teeming with species often unknown to humanity – it is easy to see why. However, far too few people seem to consider the importance of trees within the urban environment.

Urban forests provide us with numerous environmental, economic and social benefits and contribute enormously to the health and welfare of everyone who lives and works in the urban environment. They have a particularly vital role as part of the development of truly sustainable communities.

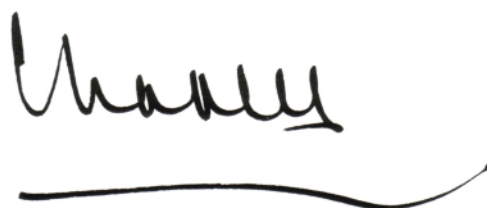
For many years I have believed that urban planners should consider trees as an integral part of any development and I have tried to pursue this approach throughout the Duchy of Cornwall, whether at Poundbury, Newquay or elsewhere. Our experience has shown the benefit of designing new trees into the scheme from the outset, so that services can be diverted well away from roots, giving the trees a chance to thrive. This also reduces the necessity of providing elaborate and expensive subterranean tree planters. Also, with the increasing prevalence of diseases, it is important to select the appropriate species of tree for a particular area, and this is where the skills of the arboriculturalist are especially relevant.

Your conference is desperately important as it brings together, for the first time in Britain, all the relevant professional bodies concerned with trees, landscape and the built environment. As you know far better than me, the protection and expansion of our urban forests requires a truly integrated approach. Too often, over-complex bureaucratic processes can make it difficult, if not impossible, to plant the variety and number of trees our urban areas really need. To overcome this inertia, it is vital that we ensure as many people as possible understand the true value of urban forests. I am, therefore, delighted to see that you will be learning about the ecosystem benefits from urban trees in Torbay, as well as discovering how New York City has used research to justify its important “Million Tree” programme. New Yorkers are unashamedly making the case that planting trees is one of the most cost-effective ways to help support the local economy, through cleaning the air and improving property prices. There is surely much that we can learn from their experience...

In a fast-moving metropolitan environment it can be easy to forget the relevance of arboriculture. It can seem quaint to suggest that simply planting more trees can provide answers to many of the challenges facing towns and cities, but I am sure you all agree that it is in fact by embracing the value of natural solutions that we will make lasting progress.

This brings you all my very best wishes and I much look forward to hearing the results of your deliberations.

HRH The Prince of Wales

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charles", with a long, horizontal, wavy flourish underneath it.

# Opening address



I'm really, really pleased to be here because this is heart and mind stuff for me. When I spoke at your [the ICF conference] dinner last year, I said I believe that we've got a huge opportunity if collectively we pull together around this environmental agenda, across the sector. Forget our differences and play to our strengths. Try and influence the way people are thinking so that they buy-in to the importance of trees in society, to the importance of diverting funding to make sure that we have a greener world – a better world to pass on to our kids.

Well, 12 months ago who would have thought we'd have had the few months that we've just had? Who would have thought that trees, forest and woodlands would have been front page, the biggest item in any MP's mail, interviews right and left and centre. The passion of the people coming through? Who would have thought that we'd have seen people collecting together in really cold conditions in their thousands to make their point and say: 'trees, woodlands and forests matter to us'? Who would have thought that forestry would be the debate around bars and coffee shops as well as around Westminster to the extent that it has been? Who would have thought that we could have ignited that degree of passion in a nation around our trees?

I'm so pleased that that happened. I'm delighted that the nation spoke. It was the start of a conversation, but it was also only the beginning, because for me one of the really important outcomes that has to come from that sort of national focus is the change in what we spend our money on, in our personal lives, in our everyday lives, in our working lives, and at a national budget level.

For me, what really matters is that we don't only think of our heritage forests – really important though our heritage forests are, though I defy you to define that – but also about those woodlands, and those trees in our parks, on our streets, and on the edges of our towns and cities. They are the heritage woodlands for the people that live there. Where was the debate around that? I didn't hear much of it.

I think what I'd like to hear at the end of these two days is a consensus in the room that we are going to cruise on that fabulous wave of national support that we have for woodlands, trees and forests and push it like mad, personally and professionally, to make sure that this is a watershed moment in how we think about our environment and trees within that environment from now on.

I come from the north of England, you can tell. I've worked with people in the Mersey Forest and the Red Rose Forest, and very recently in the White Rose Forest. I used to be a leader of a council pressing for more green spaces in our towns before it was fashionable to do that.

I also used to be the Chair of a health trust which made me passionate about the work that we are doing at the Forestry Commission with the NHS Forest, to make sure that our health centres are also environmental health centres. That the charitable monies held within those fabulous institutions aren't only spent on what's happening inside, but what's happening outside.

I chair something called 'Incredible, Edible Todmorden'. I have to mention that. We want more orchards. We want all our schools to have trees surrounding them. We want to make sure that every health centre is surrounded by orchards. We want to make sure that every tenant on every estate has access to land to grow what that tenant wants to grow. We want to bring the woodland into the heart of our towns and our cities wherever they might be.

In all these organisations I have seen the importance of the environment to all our lives. At the Forestry Commission I'm terribly proud of the work that we do: the work that we do on education, the work that we do on reconnecting people to our environment, and the standards that we set, and help others to work to, to make sure that we are delivering sustainable woodland and forestry management across the piece.

We're not going to stop doing that. That is our core business. To make sure that we work effectively in the future in partnership across our public forest estate so that those wonderful woodlands and forests that people stood up and were counted for are maintained in perpetuity for our children and continue to deliver the public benefits that they do today.

We will continue to do that but, more and more, we need to have a dialogue with many more people across the length and breadth of this country. It's really important that we take the message about rethinking investment plans, rethinking management plans from the very heart of our cities right out into our deepest countryside, beyond the bodies represented in this room today.

Whilst we're here together, environmentalist, tree people, we get a real buzz. We think it's really funky, and that most people think the environment is great. Well that's not how the world is because there's a load of people out there who don't share our passion. There's a load of people out there who have a deficit to deal with. There's a load of people out there who've had to make a lot of people redundant. There's a load of people who think there are more important things to deal with than trees. We need to show them that the environment and these difficult challenges are not mutually exclusive.

We'll be hearing lots today about examples all over the globe where passion for trees on our streets in our towns and cities can lead to a better understanding of the environment, and that's what we need. More people understanding environmental wellbeing equates to their own wellbeing. If there's one thing that drives me at the moment, it's not the aesthetic; it's the survival of this planet.

At the end of the day we need ideas of how we can inspire more people from tenements, from our villages, our hamlets, from the Manchesters, the Birminghams and the Cardiffs of this world, to get the importance of their environment. I would like people to sign up to a 38 Degree poll that asks what are we doing about climate change? What are we doing about investing in the smartest, greenest resource we have? How will we make a difference to our kids' futures?

What are we actually doing about that? Taking the heart, marrying it with the minds and creating a drive and a movement that says collectively we have a real opportunity to make a difference to our quality of life, not just today, but tomorrow.

We all know that trees, woodlands, forests, orchards, whatever they might be, have a fabulous impact on the way we feel. We're mapping happiness at the moment. Did you hear about that the other day: 'mappiness'? It's really great. You map how people feel in different areas and then you ask: 'What sort of area was that?' Do you know when people feel great? When they see trees, when they're in forests, when they're in woodlands, when they're in parks. That's when they feel great. It might sound a bit tree-huggy for some of you in this room, but the thing for me that's important is that David Cameron [Prime Minister] thinks it's great, and that's good.

We need to recognise that and not be too snobby about it. Recognise that we need a hook into mappiness when we're telling our story. What we are missing is that drive and passion at a grass roots level over and beyond the 38 Degrees. People don't live their life in silos. If they feel good about something, if they feel great about a product, that'll affect their spend. If something makes them happy and they want to repeat that experience, that will change what they vote for, and what they vote for will allow us to put the environment centre stage, and have the sorts of uplift that Professor Read in his report on climate change demands of us, of all of us. It's not, 'well I would if I could but I'm really pressed at the moment'. While our personal circumstances are being challenged, the planet, the ability for us to survive, our environment, is slipping through our fingers.

So, what really matters is we listen to the people. We see the opportunity to build on that passion. We extend that dialogue collectively with them. We help them to see it's not just about the heritage forest, but it is about the woodlands and it is about the town centre places, and it is about the community forest.

And it's not all about money. I have never worked in a public body – and I've worked in them for 20 years – that ever had any money whether it was a local authority or whatever. Of course it was really hard, but it was also great because I would say to somebody, what would be really fabulous is if you came along with me and I used a bit of your budget and you used a bit of my budget and that led to us thinking differently. We each gave a little bit, and we got a really creative solution.

I need to see change. We need to see change. We know everything we need to know about what needs doing. We just need the will to do it.

So, for me, what's really important today is that you, the ICF, have had the leadership and the foresight to bring together people from a range of backgrounds whose common focus is their passion and their knowledge and their experience about trees and their importance and how to manage them sustainably.

We are, in this room, one sector. We need to talk with one voice. We need to be clear what our message is to those with influence. We need to be clear how we are going to communicate that message to the general public. We have the advocates in this room. Some can do it at a government level. Some can do it in an area forum. Some can do it at planning committee. There's all sorts of champions in this room. We need during the course of the next two days to find the mechanisms to allow them to function, to allow them to inspire, to allow them to make the difference.

I believe that we can do it. I believe we have to do it. I think we have examples of great practice all over the place that instead of just packing and putting on a shelf, we need to share proactively.

There's no certainty in these things, but the one thing that is certain is that we cannot miss the opportunity to come up with some really positive messages at the end of these two days. To say: 'Do you know what they're doing in New York, know what they're doing in Canada, why can't we do that? I'm going to go back and speak to the leader of council or the chair and do something about that'. If we missed that opportunity to really raise our games individually, then collectively we will have let a truly historic moment slip through our fingers.

There are several programmes at present that can help us. We've got the Woodland Carbon Task Force looking at ways of getting more investment in our woodlands. We've got The Big Tree Plant. So needed, but also so in need of funding.

We've got the Independent Panel on Forestry. I'm a big fan of the Independent Panel actually. That might seem a strange thing for me to say, but I believe we have an important platform in the panel to raise the profile of trees again and help continue the public dialogue we all want. And I think we stand a chance of having some really interesting recommendations that we can start to work on together.

So, well done for calling this conference together; it's been a long time in the coming.

The Forestry Commission has been through the mill, as have many of you in this room in the last few months. But we are as committed and as passionate as we always have been to make sure that the importance of trees becomes centre stage in people's lives, and that the knowledge that we have and the experience that we have is shared collectively, not just on the Forestry Estate but throughout the sector. Not just with traditional friends, but through the International Year of the Forest with a much broader church. I am committed to make that happen.

From local government countryside officers, landscape planners, foresters, from deliverers of community forests, from politicians to policymakers, without you standing up and being counted on this issue, it simply won't happen.

What I said last year is: 'I'm up for it if you're up for it'. If you want to make a difference, want to have your messages heard, I want to help you deliver those. We *can* deliver those. It isn't politically contentious. It's a survival plan. So, let's get on with some great futures, and let's make sure that we see this as the watershed moment that it is.

Thank you very much.

**Pam Warhurst**

Chair, Forestry Commission

