TREES — POLICY PROTECTION & PROBLEMS

Many of us take them for granted, but trees are the backbone of much of our landscape through the seasons — stately, beautiful and impressive in their botany and ecology, whether singly, as a small spinney, or a wood or forest. Town or country, village or park, trees contribute like nothing else to our wellbeing, our environment and our sense of wonder at nature. They are aesthetically pleasing and inspire countless photographs and works of art.

Ancient coppice edging wildflower grassland on one of our POS reserves — an exceptionally rich habitat.

But, although the good makes the bad seem trivial, there can be problems which, with the admitted eulogy but also scientific notes here, we have done our best to explain and assist you when issues arise.

There are trees on virtually every Betts site. There are a few conifers and a good many exotic and beautiful ornamentals but the great majority are native broadleaves: the oaks, ashes, willows, poplars, elms, alders, maples & sycamores, chestnuts, birches, hornbeams, beeches, hollies, walnuts, planes, cherries, service trees, rowans, limes and others.

BENEFITS OF TREES

Many learned people have drawn up lists of the benefits of trees. Without being too "tree-huggy" or "new age" about it, here are some of them which many of you will recognise as "ecosystem services"[1]:

[1] See our article *Biodiversity Protection and Promotion in our Public Open Spaces* or email us if you would like a free copy.

- Trees support an enormous number of other species in their provision of habitats and food — nesting and roosting sites, substrata for lichens, mosses, algae, fungi, ivy, mistletoe and other plants (>280 species of insect can be supported by a mature pedunculate oak). Trees' contribution to biodiversity is huge, not only in their living bark and foliage, but the dead wood, seeps, sap runs and mycorrhizal relationships of their roots contribute to an extraordinarily complex ecological network.

Many British native woodlands support a carpet of bluebells. They can be seen in spring on some of our sites.

- Trees provide oxygen and purify the air. They absorb polluting gases such as SO_x and NO_x as well as trapping air-borne particulates.

- Trees help combat climate change and the greenhouse effect by absorbing CO_2 and storing carbon. It's been calculated that a hectare of mature trees can absorb all the CO_2 an average family fossil-fuel powered saloon produces in 100,000km.

- Through their shade and transpiration, trees moderate excess temperature.

- Trees save energy. Planted near dwellings and other buildings, they reduce extremes of temperature and thus heating and cooling costs.

- Trees preserve and help purify water by creating shade, thus reducing evaporation from the ground, and by increasing atmospheric moisture as they transpire. They attenuate storm water runoff and filter pollutants through foliage and roots.

- Trees help prevent soil erosion, especially on slopes and in windy districts.

- In sunny weather, trees provide us with shade, protecting us and our children from over-exposure to the sun in hot summers.

- Trees provide timber for construction, fences, furniture, fuel, carving and a host of other uses, as well as nuts, berries and other fruit for birds, mammals and invertebrates (as well as humans — sweet chestnuts, walnuts, crab apples, damsons, *etc.*)

Canopy of pedunculate oak in winter

- Trees add landscape value and are good screens for privacy and blocking unwanted views, adding value to property.

We are very proud of the trees on our land. Most are left alone and allowed to grow and eventually die without our intervention unless they become dangerous or infected by a serious pathogen that might spread[2]. In some cases, we manage woodlands in various ways to create traditional habitats by coppicing, pollarding, glade creation or other interventions. Sometimes this is misunderstood when people see woodland works being undertaken. In other circumstances, colonisation by trees is undesirable for maintaining ecologically important habitats — grassland, heaths, mires and bogs, for example, so then the ecological succession must be controlled by felling, which some see as controversial, but we will always be pleased to explain to you what we are doing if you ask. The Betts family have owned and managed woodlands for eight generations and a woodland reserve in the famous Wyre Forest is named after the Chairman's father, John Francis Betts.

Fine tree specimens are often protected by Tree Preservation Orders, and other means of protecting them also exist, such as British Standard BS 5837: 2012 *Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction,* which will often have been employed to secure the welfare of the trees in the development where you live when it was being built.

We have a few veteran trees in our reserves. These are ancient specimens which can host rare species of invertebrate, such as certain beetles. We take particular care of our veteran trees and ask everyone to respect them.

Problem with a Tree? — Read on

If a tree on our land is causing you problems, please tell us. We will try to help but do please bear in mind the following:

- Trees are not like European Protected Species and owners do not have "strict liability" for them in the legal sense. We have no absolute duty of care, only an obligation to act in a way that is reasonable in the relevant circumstances.

- Obviously, if a tree is clearly dangerous (as judged by a suitably qualified expert) and at risk of falling such that harm to property or persons would be caused, we will always act with reasonable alacrity to remove the danger and remedy the situation proportionately by any reasonable means.

- Remember that trees are valuable for all kinds of reasons (see above) so we will not usually damage, impair or fell them without very good reason.

[2] This is a large and ever-changing subject, but if you see trees that seem ill or have suddenly died, please tell us. There can be many causes, some not serious but other such as ash die-back and sudden oak death are more worrying, especially when you consider how Dutch elm disease killed almost all the large English elms in Britain.

- If roots or branches are encroaching from our property onto yours, you may have the right to cut them back, but you must not destabilize the tree or maim it, and you cannot take such action in any case if the tree is under a Preservation Order. Please contact us before you do anything and we will try to assist but do be aware that you will normally be expected to bear any costs.

- Please remember that the tree was probably there first, often long before your property was built! If you are buying a house near a wood or any tree, you should first ensure that the construction is sound and was undertaken with the tree or trees in mind. Trees grow large, their canopies spread and their roots travel considerable distances. Make sure you are happy about that and will still be so as time passes. Check it all out carefully, using a qualified arboricultural expert if you have any uncertainty, before you sign.

Very old trees like this oak in POS at Worcester are extraordinarily valuable for wildlife.

Newly planted trees

There will often be newly-planted trees and shrubs on recently-designated greenspace. These will normally be protected with stakes, fencing and/or mammal (rabbits, deer, *etc.*) guards. We will remove stakes once the tree or shrub can stand unsupported without bending or moving in the ground. This is usually between eighteen months and three years from planting, but may be longer for larger, semi-mature trees or ones on weak rootstocks. We check regularly and will also loosen over-tight ties if needed, but they do have to be firm in order to prevent the tree rocking. Mammal guards, which may be tree-shelters (solid tubes) or tree-guards (spirals or mesh) are usually removed after three to four years, once plants are fully established with good growth and tough bark.

Stumps

Betts avoid environmentally persistent/harmful chemical herbicide stump treatments. Dead stumps will usually be left to decay naturally. Smaller living stumps will be dug out and then used as part of habitat piles. Larger stumps of trees that coppice (many deciduous trees) and so will grow from epicormic buds, or may regenerate from suckers, will be treated by drilling and filling the holes with rock salt or magnesium sulphate. Conifer stumps are left to decay gradually without further treatment once the tree is felled as they will not regrow.

Tree Bases

Please note that areas at the base of trees will not be cut other than to prevent woody scrub invasion. This helps protect the trunks from accidental damage and preserves the important tree base microhabitat which is where many arboreal invertebrates shelter and pupate.

Further Resources

On our library and publications page of our web site, you can download Dr Betts' paper on Veteran Trees www.bettsecology.co.uk/library-and-publications/.

There is a plethora of books on trees. A comprehensive and reasonably-priced publication is **Johnson, O. & More, D. (2004).** *Collins Tree Guide*. HarperCollins, London, UK.

There is a vast resource also on line. Perhaps start with the Woodland Trust's site at http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/.

Please also read our other policy and biodiversity papers on the web site.

Professional service
Sustainable land management
Better planning results
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