

# URBAN FRINGE FORESTRY IN GREAT BRITAIN

by Marcus Sangster

**Abstract.** In England opportunities for urban people to recreate in the nearby countryside are very limited. The current "Community Forestry" initiative provides incentives and support to landowners to encourage increased public access to woodlands and to open the countryside. In the United Kingdom, two government agencies, the Forestry Commission and The Countryside Commission, have targeted 12 areas to renew the urban-fringe landscape. Each area is drawing up plans for integrated landscape management using objective assessment techniques evolved by the two Commissions. Grant aid is available to landowners for management as well as new plantings. Local partnerships have been set up in each area to include landowning and environmental interests plus local governments and local and national volunteer groups.

The Forestry Commission is the state forestry service responsible for forestry in mainland Britain. Although the Commission's responsibilities cover all aspects of tree management, it is in woodland management and establishment, rather than with individual trees, where our greatest achievements lie and where our efforts have been focused.

Here I have adopted a very broad definition of arboriculture, concentrating on the advances we are making in the United Kingdom in urban and urban-fringe forestry. It is a story very much influenced by our ties, going back almost three decades, with the US Forest Service and given an important fillip by an extended visit from Larry Henson a few years ago. I set current activity in an historical context, explain an important recent initiative which aims to renew entire landscapes close to our historic industrial centres and I touch upon likely future developments.

A thousand years ago England was already becoming an urban society. Over 85% of the towns and villages of today had already made their appearance. Clearance of woodland to agriculture had reduced woodland cover to less than 20%, the lowest in Europe. Today at 7% England still has the second lowest woodland cover in Europe, only Ireland has less.

## The Historical Context of Urban Forestry

In 1779 a little iron bridge (Fig. 1) was built by Thomas Telford in the English Midlands to span the gorge of the river Avon. It was the first time in history that iron had been used in that way and it heralded the start of the British industrial revolution. A revolution based on the exploitation of plentiful natural resources of coal, limestone and iron and which resulted in the rapid urbanisation of our society.

By 1850, 54% of our population was living in towns of over 50,000 people. By 1900 that figure had risen to 80%. Today less than 2% of our population is employed in primary agriculture and forestry and our agricultural industry, for its size one of the most productive in the world, produces barely 1.5% of our GDP.

A price has been paid for this early industrial success. In 1986 over 175,000 acres of land, mostly around our towns, and don't forget that we are a small country, was classified as being in need of remedial treatment (We use the term "Derelict"). During the past twelve years in England alone nearly \$1.5 billion has been spent



Fig. 1. Telford's 1779 iron bridge in Shropshire, England. The start of the British industrial revolution and the urbanisation of British society.

restoring 390,000 acres of such land. Between 1982 and 1988 derelict land continued to be formed at a rate of over 5000 acres a year as our old industries gave way to new.

Nowadays modern England is one of the most densely populated countries in the developed world and our population of about 55 million is almost entirely urban. Although divorced long ago from their rural origins the English still retain a romantic and cultural attachment to their beautiful countryside though most have very little understanding of rural life.

Under the English common-law, land has always been regarded as a scarce resource to be held as private property and protected by laws of trespass. This is different in continental Europe where land was more freely available and where today woodlands are far more open to the public. Our pattern of land tenure, with almost all of the countryside around towns in private ownership, means that opportunities for townsfolk to enjoy quiet recreation in the countryside are very limited.

In the last fifty years the introduction of highly mechanised farming into our hand-made landscapes has not always been a happy experience. These industrial and agricultural activities combined with the general pressure on urban fringe land from utilities, waste disposal and other services has left the countryside around many of our towns structureless and unattractive.

Rural Britain can, however, be stunningly beautiful. Areas such as the ancient Royal Forests managed by the Forestry Commission receive millions of visitors each year with little detriment to their international status as sites of great biological importance.

### **Community Forestry - A Partnership**

Until the early 1980s it is fair to say that the uplands of Scotland and Wales were our priority areas for new forestry. Since then, however, we have concentrated, as a matter of government policy, on promoting new woodlands in the lowlands close to centres of population. Timber production is no longer an overriding objective and we are concerned to make the benefits of multi-objective forestry available to the population close to their homes.

In 1989 we formed a partnership with the Countryside Commission which is the body charged with advising our Government on countryside access and landscape. The objective was to repair some of the damage done to our urban fringe landscapes.

Twelve areas varying in size from 30,000 to 50,000 acres were chosen for an experimental initiative called Community Forestry. In each area a partnership was set up involving local government, which is responsible for administering our planning regulations, landowners, the two national partners, officers from agricultural and nature conservation agencies, local voluntary groups and local private enterprise. Each of these local partnerships employs a small team of full-time professionals. The first tasks of these teams has been to analyse their area and then draw up a plan to articulate the objectives of the partnership, saying how they might be realised in this local context.

### **Working With Complete Landscapes**

New woodland has been chosen as the central endeavour for these schemes which are intended to repair the scars of our industrial past because it is by far the most potent tool for making extensive change within a landscape (Fig 2). I do not need here to elaborate on the benefits of forestry for recreation, wildlife and timber. The new woodlands will be grant-aided through the Forestry Commission's "Woodland Grant Scheme" which will ensure that they comply with our very sophisticated environmental guidance.

We are not, however, intending to blanket these community forests with trees. Present tree cover varies between 3% and 7%, we hope to increase this to between 25% and 40%. Our landscape is an agricultural one and we foresee agriculture continuing as the main land-use within the forests. Indeed we hope that the woodlands will be an asset to farmers looking to diversify their enterprises.

Draft plans from the first three forests have now been prepared. The core of each is an objective assessment of local landscape types undertaken by private consultants but using methodology developed by the two partners over several years.



**Fig. 2. Woodlands are the most potent tool for introducing extensive change into a landscape.**

In conjunction with local research into recreation and environmental requirements, these assessments have allowed the teams to make recommendations on the scale and nature of the woodlands to be established within the various landscape zones they have identified.

Each of the forest plans extends from the edges right into the heart of the conurbations using transport corridors, canals and the vestiges of countryside not eclipsed by the coalescence of the villages that expanded so rapidly two hundred years ago. These are very much urban forests. A good example is the Forest of Mercia which lies to the North of Birmingham and the Black Country in the Midlands. Over 3.5 million people live within 25 miles of the forest.

### **Supporting Community Forestry**

How do we hope to achieve our aims from these early beginnings? The starting points are the forest teams who are on the ground to promote these concepts, provide advice to local landowners and work with the partners to develop local ideas on how we should proceed.

The Forestry Commission has a range of grant-aid on offer. This year we introduced a new incentive especially aimed at landowners close to towns to encourage them to plant new woodlands to which the public would be allowed access. The initiative is a priority for research and our scientists are available to the teams to provide a very high level of technical support.

In the early 70's Forestry Commission recreation and design staff made many visits to the United

States. We have developed the ideas we gathered then to the point where we in our turn have an international reputation for our forestry design, providing advice to a number of European governments. Again, Community Forests are a priority for training and specialist advice from the Forestry and Countryside Commissions.

Trees will be only one part of the forests, the open spaces are equally important. Here the Countryside Commission has recently set up a wide-ranging grant scheme which gives incentives to farmers to provide public access, improve nature conservation on their farms and manage their land in sympathy with the local landscape.

In many areas hedges and scattered hedgerow trees can give an impression of an intimate wooded landscape in country which is in fact very lightly wooded. Again, our hedges are historic features. This month we will be introducing new grant aid for landowners willing to repair and maintain their hedges.

The Countryside Commission already has well-developed mechanisms for supporting countryside recreation including provision of footpaths and car parks, training of volunteers and professional countryside staff and support for local self-help schemes.

All this means that in the twelve Community Forests we have now established a comprehensive package of incentives, advice and support for countryside management. The package covers all the separate elements of the landscape except for the buildings themselves and provides for nature conservation and for sport and recreation by local people.

Community Forestry is one of a number of recent urban and urban fringe initiatives we have underway. I have highlighted it because it is the most significant and our experiences in developing it will bear directly on the others. Similar initiatives using different mechanisms are underway in central Scotland and in the Welsh Valleys and we are also supporting an entirely urban forestry initiative in the Black Country in central England.

### **Promoting Forestry Around Towns**

What are the difficulties we face and what must

we do to succeed? A lot of what we want to do has already been done elsewhere and I am sure that we have much to learn through contact with bodies such as ISA. We will certainly be looking to adapt best practices wherever we find them to suit our circumstances. The initiatives we have started are experimental and undoubtedly will evolve in time.

An immediate task is to demonstrate that what we are doing is worthwhile and can be supported by rational argument based on facts. In the last five years the techniques for valuing social benefits of activities such as forestry have become much more sophisticated. We are currently undertaking a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of these initiatives.

We have a political task which can not be understated. At a time of recession and in a society whose priorities have an over-riding urban focus we need to gather the support of other government departments concerned with land-use policy. We must, of course, make a convincing case to the Treasury.

Lowland Britain is very intensively farmed. Traditionally farmers rented their land from big landowners who retained title over any trees. In consequence our farmers have absolutely no tradition of managing woodland. Farm incomes are under pressure and moves towards agricultural reform on an international scale mean that landowners are faced with great uncertainty. These are not really the best of times to be trying to persuade farmers to make radical changes to their land management.

We are starting now to expand the training available to farmers and we are also researching ways in which agricultural practices familiar to farmers can be adopted in lowland forestry. In the longer term this will be one of our most important promotional programs. We will also keep a weather eye on the levels of incentive and review them as circumstances change.

I spoke recently to Dean Apostol, landscape architect in Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon. Dean told me about development control in the United States and I understand that the approach differs from state to state. In Britain, as in most of Western Europe, development is very tightly

controlled and is important in our local politics.

I have already touched upon the interaction between development control on the urban fringe and land speculation. This presents an almost insuperable difficulty. Ordinary land values close to towns routinely average ten times the value of similar rural land. If development permission is granted on a piece of ground then that difference can rise to a hundredfold and the landowner stands to make a fortune. Our local government partners have a crucial role to play in developing ways of dealing with these facts of life.

Some of our landscape practitioners are very good indeed. Others are most used to designing in an architectural and urban context. We are hoping to achieve much by improving their understanding of plant biology and the need for maintenance. We can also expand their knowledge and experience of cost-effective tree establishment systems so that money is not spent needlessly. One of my jobs at the moment is to develop a plan for influencing key people and organisations to improve professional standards in parallel professions.

Education is a core objective of the forests. Each forest has been charged with developing formal links with education authorities in their locality. The forests will also become the focus for community interest in the countryside. Our experience in this area is limited and we are hoping to make great advances through community forestry.

A most difficult job is letting local people say what it is that they want and become involved in bringing their ideas into life. Although the Commission has had some notable local successes sharing management of woodlands with local voluntary groups, we want very much to improve the mechanisms available outside the State sector. Again, this is an area where we are looking to the Community Forests to help us develop our ideas. It is also becoming an important research area for us.

I hope I have shown here that foresters in Britain share a common vision with ISA members from many parts of the world. In Britain we know that there is much to be gained from sharing ideas and experience.

## Summary

England is one of the most densely populated countries in the developed world. The British Forestry Commission is promoting urban and urban fringe forestry in a landscape renewal initiative focused on 12 historic industrial areas.

## References

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**Résumé.** En Angleterre, les possibilités de récréation dans les régions limitrophes sont très limitées pour les habitants des villes. Le programme «Community Forestry» fournit actuellement des incitatifs et un support aux propriétaires terriens pour encourager l'accès aux boisés par le public et

ouvrir les campagnes. Au Royaume-Uni, deux agences gouvernementales, le Forestry Commission (Commission forestière) et le Countryside Commission (Commission des campagnes), ont ciblé 12 sites afin de renouveler le paysage à la lisière des zones urbanisées. Chaque site est l'objet d'une planification d'exploitation intégrée de son paysage selon des techniques objectives d'évaluation élaborées par les deux commissions. Des subventions sont disponibles aux propriétaires pour l'aménagement tout comme la réalisation de nouvelles plantations. Un processus de collaboration locale a été mis sur pied pour chaque site et qui inclut le propriétaire et les groupes environnementaux en plus des gouvernements locaux et des groupes de volontaires à l'échelle locale et nationale.

**Zusammenfassung.** In England sind die Möglichkeiten der städtischen Bevölkerung nähergelegene Landschaftsbereiche neuzugestalten sehr begrenzt. Zur Zeit bietet die "Community Forestry"-Initiative Anregungen und Unterstützung für Landbesitzer, die Landschaftsteile zu öffnen und der Öffentlichkeit Zugang zu Gehölzen ermöglichen. In Großbritannien haben zwei Regierungsorganisationen, die "Forestry Commission" und "The Countryside Commission", 12 Gebiete ausgesucht, in denen stadtnahe Landschaftsbereiche erneuert werden sollen. Zu jedem Gebiet werden Pläne entworfen für eine integrierte Landschaftsverwaltung mit Hilfe objektiver Bewertungstechniken, die durch die beiden Kommissionen festgelegt worden sind. Finanzielle Hilfsmittel sind für Landsbesitzer vorhanden, um Pflege und neue Pflanzungen zu finanzieren. Örtliche Partnerschaften sind in jedem Gebiet gegründet worden, um die Anliegen der Landbesitzer, der Umwelt, der Kommunalregierungen sowie von kommunalen und nationalen Helferguppen mit einzubeziehen.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

With this "Call for Presentations," the Arboricultural Research and Education Academy (AREA), a special interest group of the ISA, invites you to submit a written abstract for a presentation that can be developed into a session for the 69th annual ISA Conference, to be held August 8 - 11, 1993 at the Bismarck Civic Center, Bismarck, North Dakota. Both research and educational topics are welcome. Information presented must be original. Individuals presenting papers or posters will receive complimentary conference registration. All presenters will be invited to submit a full manuscript for publication in the *Journal of Arboriculture*. All abstracts are to be mailed to Dr. Gary Watson, The Morton Arboretum, Lisle, Illinois, 60532. Phone (708) 719-2415.

**Oral presentations.** Abstracts to be considered for an oral presentation must be received by Friday, January 31, 1993. Your written abstract should include

a 150 - 200 word description of the topic/research findings to be covered in your presentation. Reports of organized research studies will be favored for oral presentation. The oral presentations will be on Tuesday, August 10 and will be approximately 25 minutes in length.

Members of AREA's Board of Directors and the ISA staff will evaluate the abstracts on these five criteria: overall quality and amount of work, appropriateness of topic, well-defined focus, practical applications of the material, and timeliness and attractiveness of the topic to a diverse audience. Abstracts accepted, but not selected as oral presentations will be invited as poster presentations.

**Poster presentations.** Abstracts for posters are due by April 15, 1993. Poster authors will be required to be available for discussion of their posters on Monday, August 9 during the opening of the exhibit hall and on Wednesday morning, August 11, at the AREA program.