

Power to the Peaceful, 3 years of community action to save our street trees

Le pouvoir aux gens de paix - 3 années d'actions citoyennes pour sauver les arbres de nos rues

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Background - Building a City in the Trees.

The City of Sheffield is well-known for its trees. Many hillsides too steep for building remain as woodland and in the 19th century there was extensive planting of new avenues of lime, London plane and other big trees. The pioneer was Thomas Wostenholme, a wealthy manufacturer who had visited Boston in the United States and was impressed by the tree-lined roads.

He and other successful steel manufacturers invested their profits in building houses for sale or rent. Wostenholme led the development of a large area to the southwest of the city, called Nether Edge, and employed his architect to lay out a pattern of lime tree avenues surrounding his new mansion, Kenwood.

This pattern was followed in other parts of the city before 1914, often including schemes for residents to pay for plantings in their own streets. During the 1914-1918 war trees were planted in Oxford Street as memorial for dead soldiers, possibly one of the first memorials of that war, and after the war a number of streets were planted with war memorial trees. The best known is Western Road, a long avenue of 64 trees planted in memory of former pupils of the Junior School in that road.



Memorial Avenue in Western Road, Sheffield

In the second half of the 20th century, new schemes were introduced as new houses were built and residents also contributed to the cost of tree planting in their streets, usually smaller species such as cherry. This is significant because some of the people who paid for the trees outside their homes, or their children, still live in the same place today. Naturally they have a strong association with 'their' trees.

One famous road, Abbeydale Park Rise, has a long avenue of old cherry trees rising up a hillside and they have become a big focus for community activity in that road. As well as events when the cherries are in blossom, attracting visitors from across the city, the residents have installed decorative lights in all the trees and the

spectacular illuminated avenue attracts a second wave of visitors at Christmas, a great source of pride for the residents.



Cherry Avenue in Abbeydale Park Rise, Sheffield

Towards the end of the 20th century, the City Council created the *Nether Edge Conservation Area*. Conservation areas have significant architectural heritage and they are protected by strict rules on what kind of development is allowed, for example the building materials that can be used. The official description of the Nether Edge Conservation Area (SCC, Undated) makes it clear that the tree-lined streets are one of the most significant features of the area, defining its character as an important urban landscape.

13.9 A defining characteristic of the area is the vistas framed by trees along a number of its streets. Montgomery Road and Rundle Road possess particularly impressive long vistas almost along their entire length.” (SCC Undated)

2007-2018 - The Battle for Sheffield’s Street Trees

The problems for Sheffield’s Street Trees started to develop in 2007 when the local government misread a survey of street trees in the city (Elliott 2007) and decided, incorrectly that 75% were near the end of their life. There had been a lack of regular maintenance for many years so work was needed but a large proportion of the larger trees are healthy and estimated to have a further 100 years of life.

At the time Sheffield had a long-standing problem due to lack of money for road maintenance and the roads were in very bad condition. The national Government agreed to pay half the cost of a very big programme (£2.2bn) to renew and care for all the roads in the city, from main highways to small streets. However, the government also insisted that Sheffield use a particular system of funding, the PFI system designed to keep public debts out of the government’s accounts, which gave control of the roads to a single contractor for 25 years.

Thus, the contract, which started in 2012, had rules and assumptions which would be largely unchanged until 2037. One of those assumptions was that there would be a need to replace up to half of the city’s street trees, most of them in the early ‘investment’ phase when the roads were renewed over the first five years. Because a big part of the contents of the contract were secret from the public, for ‘commercial confidentiality’, it was impossible to know what was planned for the trees or why.

By 2015 citizens were beginning to see plans for tree felling that caused great alarm. The early stages of the work had been in the outer areas of the city on roads where there was more space and greenery, and a more deferential, conservative-minded population who did not question what was happening. By 2015 the work was being planned for inner suburbs which tend to have a higher proportion of environmentally aware citizens and a less deferential culture and the first local campaign groups were formed to protect trees.

In 2015 the first group of residents came out to block access to their street, Wayland Road, when tree fellers arrived and a tree camp was set up to keep watch on a well-known avenue, Rustlings Road where a large number of trees were condemned. There were also some public meetings at which Local Government officers, mainly highway engineers, faced very angry citizens and it became clear there was wide opposition, the City Councillors and their officers were becoming concerned and, although the work at Rustlings Rd and Wayland Rd was postponed, protestors started appearing at felling sites across the city and preventing work by standing under trees.

By the end of 2015 it was clear there was a big problem, a large number of local groups had formed and a city-wide coordinating group (STAG - Sheffield Tree Action Groups) was formed. The City Council decided they must respond and set up an 'Independent Tree Panel' (ITP) with experts to scrutinise the tree programme. However, they believed that the ITP would endorse their plans and in fact it appears that it was not possible for the council to change the plans significantly.

At the same time Campaigners took the City Council to court to obtain a ruling that the scheme broke laws on environmental impact assessment and consultation. Although this was not successful, the court case and the ITP process meant that very little tree felling took place in the first half of 2016.

But later in 2016 the contractors started making more aggressive efforts to fell trees including 'dawn raids' to chop down trees before campaigners were aware, the police were called out by the contractors and although they were reluctant to intervene, eventually the contractors persuaded them to use an anti-trade union law to arrest people who were preventing tree work.

This led to a scandal in December 2016, when a large force of contractors and police came to a famous avenue, Rustlings Road, to fell trees in the darkness at 5am. The public outrage at residents being woken up by police in the night and two retired ladies being arrested in their night clothes for refusing to move from a tree outside their houses, caused great embarrassment but efforts continued until the 'Battle of Chippinghouse Road' in February 2017.



Seven tree protectors waiting for arrest on Chippinghouse Rd, February 2017. Two more were arrested the next day.

After a week of angry conflict in which 9 people elected to be arrested rather than move from under the trees they were protecting, a radical lawyer, Paul Powlesland, produced a legal opinion which showed the police that the arrests were illegal, and campaigners were able to continue to prevent fellings by 'hugging' trees.



Celebrating trees on Chippinghouse Rd, February 2017

For the next year Council and contractor tried a series of legal moves, using police and private security guards to enforce fellings, but the ingenuity of the campaigners enabled them to develop new ideas to counter each new legal move and eventually, when the contractors could only work with an army of 30 police and 20 security guards to protect the felling of a single tree, tree felling was economically impossible and paused.



Security guards preventing protests, Meersbrook Park Road, 2017



Mass Tree Hug, Meersbrook Park Rd, 2017

Today - Stalemate

We are now in the middle of protracted negotiations between City Council, Contractor and Tree Campaigners to see if a compromise solution can be found but there is still a large number of people willing to go out on the street to defend trees so there is no certainty what will happen next.

The events in Sheffield have attracted national and international interest. The UK Government has attempted to intervene and recently introduced new rules for tree management and new money for street tree planting, inspired by the Sheffield protests. Other towns and cities have stepped back from tree felling plans and although the future of Sheffield street trees is still uncertain the sustained and organised efforts of our campaign has led to big changes in national understanding.

Sheffield has always been a home of radicalism, in 1932 Sheffield people marched out onto moorland near the city to claim the 'right to roam' over land blocked by rich landowners. There were arrests and outrage at the protests but today those pioneers are celebrated, and they are credited with gaining a legal right to roam in the countryside throughout the United Kingdom. We hope today's Sheffield troublemakers will achieve something as important for our urban forests, including those precious memorial avenues.

References

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Chris Rust is Emeritus Professor of Design at Sheffield Hallam University and Co-Chair of STAG - Sheffield Tree Action Groups. He is also a musician and songwriter.

He has worked as an industrial designer, a musician, and an academic, he has been chair of the International Design Research Society and his last academic role before retirement was Director of Sheffield Institute of Arts, which is Sheffield Hallam University's School of Art and Design. In his research he encountered the developing body of knowledge connecting people's health with access to green space in their daily lives.

Since retirement in 2012 he has worked on a community cycling development project and been an active member of the campaign to save street trees in Sheffield from destruction due to an ill-designed highway renewal project. He is also a member of 'Break a Leg!', a voice, clarinet/saxophone and guitar duo performing jazz and folk songs and their own compositions.

Chris Rust est professeur honoraire de design de la Sheffield Hallam University et co-président de STAG - Sheffield Tree Action Groups, le collectif des groupes d'action citoyens pour préserver les arbres des rues à Sheffield. Il est également musicien et auteur de chansons.

Au cours de sa vie professionnelle, Chris a travaillé à la fois comme designer industriel, comme musicien et comme universitaire. Il a présidé l'International Design Research Society et, pour son dernier poste à l'université avant son départ à la retraite, il a dirigé le Sheffield Institute of Arts, l'école des beaux-arts et de design de Sheffield Hallam University. Ses travaux de recherche l'ont conduit à s'intéresser au lien entre la santé et l'accès, au quotidien, des personnes à la nature, un lien qui s'enrichit sans cesse de connaissances nouvelles.

Retraité depuis 2012, il participe à un projet de développement du vélo en ville et est engagé activement dans la campagne pour sauver les allées d'arbres de Sheffield de la destruction programmée en raison d'une politique de renouvellement de voirie mal conçue. Il est également membre de 'Break a Leg!', un duo vocal de clarinette/saxophone et guitare qui interprète ses propres compositions ainsi que des classiques du jazz et des chansons populaires.

