

Municipal Arborist Exchange

From Newport Rhode Island to the States of Guernsey

by Scott D. Wheeler, Trees & Parks Supervisor, City of Newport, Rhode Island



The spectacular 28.5-mile (45.9-km) cliff path is cut back by Guernsey's privatized State Works using only scythes.

To begin the account of my arborist exchange, I must first address the question I am most often asked: *where is Guernsey?* It is the second largest of the Channel Islands, located 30 miles (48 km) off the French coast but tied politically to Great Britain as a “Crown dependency.” Although there is a strong British influence, Guernsey is relatively independent, with its own parliament and laws.

The island has a rich history that dwarfs that of colonial Newport, but a connection can be found in Newport's naval history and the fleet of Guernsey privateers that brought wealth to their island in service to the Crown. The Napoleonic and World War II fortifications that dot the coastline are a reminder of the island's past military importance as dictated by its location and strong tides. Guernsey has a temperate climate with mild winters and cool, sunny summers—sunny, at least, compared to Great Britain—making it a tourist destination. It was once a major grower of greenhouse tomatoes, with 15% of the island covered in glass at one time.

Instead of being isolated from the world, the people of Guernsey seem to have an entrepreneurial spirit and a talent for recognizing economic opportunities beyond their shores. Examples include privateering, stone quarrying, greenhouse crops and, most recently, offshore banking. What is striking is that as the island has nimbly managed these economic changes, it has largely preserved its historic buildings, rural character, and land use patterns. The current layout of land parcels and rights-of-way is remarkably similar to that found on maps from the late 1600s.

The trip had a stressful start with hours of security delays at London's Gatwick Airport, but I was revived when my gracious host, Andy McCutcheon, Guernsey's principal arboricultural officer, delivered me to his former “bachelor pad” for a short nap and a hike. As I walked the well-maintained trail around the adjacent reservoir with views of the ocean past small, enclosed fields with Guernsey cows, I felt like I'd awoken to a new world.

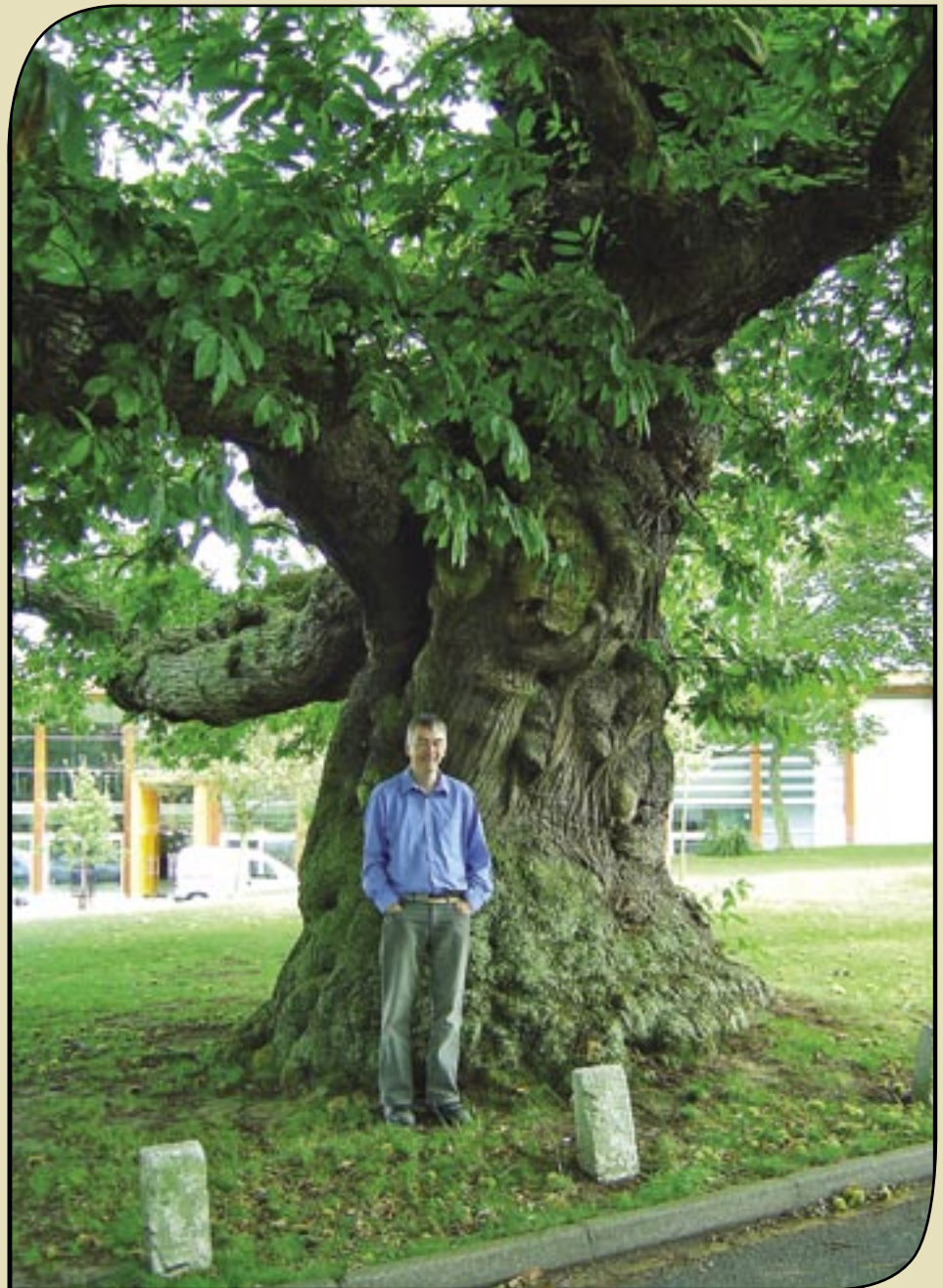
Andy moved to the island as a technical officer for the greenhouse industry. Following that industry's decline, he broadened

his plant skills to include arboriculture and became the island's first arboricultural officer. His impressive knowledge of plant diseases kept me scrambling for my pathology reference books during his visit to Newport.

The crisis that brought Andy to arboriculture is far too familiar: Dutch elm disease. What is unique is that the Guernsey elm (*Ulmus minor* subsp. *sarniensis*) represented over half the tree cover on the island. To save its namesake elm, a sanitation program was implemented that removed elms at the first sign of disease. Approximately 1.5 % of the elm population was removed each year for a total of 50,000 trees over 14 years. The program kept the disease in check until a period of drought drastically increased mortality. In 1992, they abandoned sanitation in favor of replanting.

As Andy explained, tree planting in Guernsey is not a straightforward affair. The island has no domestic tree nurseries, requiring plant stock to be shipped in from abroad. Most of the original elms grew in high earthen banks of stone and compacted soil that line streets and farm fields. These conditions are not conducive to the use of a backhoe for planting. The narrow lanes leave no room for traditional street trees, and the patchwork quilt of agricultural land has strong planning controls that limit forestation. Where space is available, strong winds often increase mortality.

After mixed results with public subsidies for the private planting of large trees, it was determined a more cost-effective method was needed. Andy began utilizing 16-31 inch (40-80 cm) whips of native species that are inexpensive and can easily be shipped. The smaller trees proved easier to plant and more adaptable to the wind. To aid in establishment and protecting the trees from rabbits and inadvertent mowing, Andy used growth tubes mounted to wooden stakes. In Newport we do not plant trees smaller than 1 3/4-inch (4.4-cm) caliper, believing they would not survive—but given Guernsey's success, I think small trees could be used more. In Guernsey, 7,000 trees were planted at 800 sites over 14 years, but as time passed, the financial



Andy McCutcheon shows off the oldest tree in Guernsey, a 300-year-old sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*).

resources dwindled, and the island no longer has an active tree planting program.

In Guernsey, public trees are mostly limited to parks and the grounds of public buildings. However, the scope of Andy's job is extensive, because the removal or lopping of almost all private trees requires government permission. I witnessed the challenges of this task when we visited Braye Du Valle House to evaluate a Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) dying of butt rot that held an artifact of the German occupation.

German soldiers garrisoned at the house had inserted metal rungs into the trunk to form a ladder to a high lookout in the

tree canopy, with views of the nearby beach. The rusted metal rungs were clearly visible the length of the trunk, tempting you to ascend them. The owner was distressed about losing the tree, as it was clearly the centerpiece of an oft-told story, but it was a hazard to the adjacent street. The solution agreed upon was to leave the longest length of trunk possible to stand a bit longer as a piece of history.

Commercialization has been a source of innovation for Guernsey. States Works, the equivalent of our Public Works, is now a “trading board” operating within a government department that actively competes for public contracts with other vendors. Ian McEwan, a senior manager with States Works, explained that after years of shrinking budgets, the department was commercialized to permit it to solicit private work.

Although private companies have successfully out-bid State Works for much of Andy’s contracted tree work, States Works has grown overall and provides such diverse services as building

maintenance, road construction, grounds care, interior office plants, and amenities for weddings. At their maintenance facility, I was struck by the mix of high-tech and traditional methods employed. For instance, to efficiently spray weeds in street cracks, they use a machine that can pick out green leaves and precisely deliver herbicide. In contrast, the vegetation along the 28.5 miles (45.9 km) of cliff path is maintained by crews with scythes to avoid degrading the natural setting with the noise of power equipment.

One of the most daunting vegetation maintenance tasks is the cutting of roadside hedges comprised of trees, shrubs, and vines growing over earthen stonewalls. By law, all vegetation must be cut back from the road by the property owners twice a year, in June and September. “Granite rash” is common on the sides of cars, as it is increasingly difficult to judge the road width as time passes from the last cutting. I felt fortunate to be chauffeured by Andy because even if I could navigate the maze of roads, I would have been a nervous wreck every time a car passed with



Guernsey’s trees must tolerate coastal salt spray and high winds.



A successful hillside planting of common alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) established using whips and growth tubes



An extreme example of Guernsey's narrow lanes, bordered by vegetated earthen walls

inches to spare. Volunteer parish constables enforce the cutting, a thankless task I would gladly take a pass on in Newport.

In my meetings with Guernsey arborists, planners, ecologists and land managers, I was struck by how similar their motivation, struggles, and commitment to preserve the natural environment is to that of my colleagues at home. I am deeply grateful to the people I met for taking the time to share their insights and knowledge but most of all I would like to thank Andy McCutcheon and his lovely wife Rachael for making me feel so welcome during my stay. I would also thank Doug Still, the SMA and the exchange sponsors—the City of Windsor, Amereq Inc., and Asplundh Tree Expert—for making this exchange possible and recognizing the value of bringing municipal arborists together to share their knowledge and passion. 🍃

Scott D. Wheeler
Trees & Parks Supervisor
City of Newport, RI
(401) 845-5802
swheeler@cityofnewport.com

In the September/October Issue of City Trees

- Malaysia's Tree Planting Campaign
- Building Bridges with City Departments Part II
- Dealing with Tree Grates

