

Profiles in Arboriculture

Dr Dealga O'Callaghan

When Dealga O'Callaghan went to University College Dublin he was hooked by biology from the start. With an interest towards the organic sciences, he focused on zoology, botany and biochemistry and later qualified with honours in zoology with an emphasis on entomology. He stayed with the university to study for a PhD in behaviour modifying chemicals – pheromones – and through the course of the research became very interested in bark beetles. After qualifying with his PhD he began a Post Doctoral Fellowship at New York State University at Syracuse where he joined a team actively researching the possible use of pheromones in the control of Dutch Elm Disease (DED). The team (Jerry Lanier, Milt Silverstein and John Simeone) used pheromones to assess elm bark beetle populations. The 'trap tree technique' work involved poisoning infected/dying trees with cacodylic acid (an arsenic-based chemical) which attracted the elm bark beetles to the tree to breed and subsequently killed them. The elm trees along Washington Mall are still standing due to that research technique.

In 1980, after 2½ years in the USA, Dealga and his wife Marguerite had just had their first child and decided to move back to Britain. Dealga was offered a Forestry Commission-sponsored Fellowship at Salford University working with Colin Fairhurst and Steve Kirby, looking at DED. They published extensively on DED and their research established that the trap tree technique employed in the USA was not appropriate for the UK context.

During his third year at Salford, Dealga accompanied some Masters students to Lancashire College of Agriculture and Horticulture and met some of the lecturers. A couple of months later the college advertised for a lecturer in horticulture (with an interest in arboriculture). By having to sample trees in the USA, Dealga had learned how to climb trees and to use a chainsaw and while at Salford, he and Steve Kirby had set up a small contracting business felling dead elms, so he had some practical arboricultural experience as well as his educational and research knowledge. Dealga applied for the job at Lancashire College and started as lecturer in 1983.

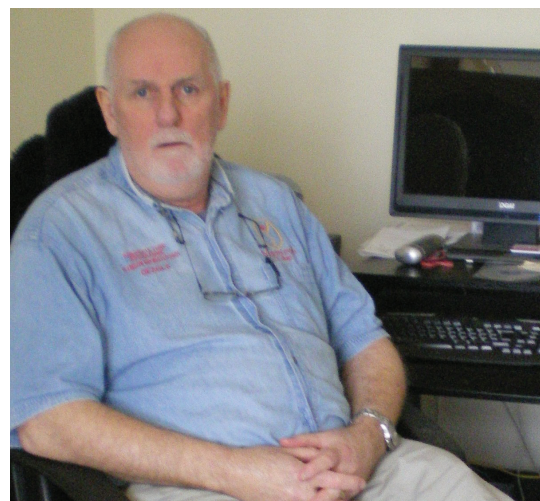
Lancashire College

Although primarily an agricultural and horticultural institution, there was already an arboricultural lecturer at the college (Ben Andrews) who was teaching the arboricultural elements of the National Diploma in Horticulture. In his second year at Lancashire College, Ben Andrews took early retirement and Dealga was appointed as arboricultural lecturer. Dealga wanted to expand arboriculture at the college in a similar way to how Merrist Wood and Askham Bryan colleges had developed. He proposed a full-time one-year National Certificate in Arboriculture which was validated in 1988. This was the first full-time NC Arboriculture course outside Merrist Wood.

Lancashire College (now Myerscough College) then began to align itself with Preston Polytechnic (now University of Central Lancashire) seeking to develop higher education courses, which culminated in Preston Polytechnic agreeing to validate the first Degree in Amenity Horticulture.

Despite some reluctance, Dealga (as the only member of staff with a PhD at that time) was made Course Manager of this degree. The course ran from 1989 into the early 1990s. During this period, Dealga had begun the process of trying to get a BSc Arboriculture course running at the college (this was successfully validated when Gerald Bonner, Dealga's successor, was at Myerscough).

While working at Myerscough, Dealga had developed a private consultancy base in the area. Construction was taking off and stronger planning tools such as conditions and TPOs were being employed to protect trees. Dealga began by working for a number of small builders in the Liverpool area and as his reputation grew his consultancy developed throughout the North West region. A turning point came in 1991 when a landscape architect that Dealga knew (Ian Clare) was commissioned to undertake a landscape study for a new golf course development on Fota Island, County Cork in Ireland. Dealga was asked to consult on the arboricultural aspects and felt not only that this project was made for him but that it was a large enough project to allow him to make the break from Myerscough College and pursue consultancy full-time. O'Callaghan Associates (OCA) was born.



(Photo: Jo Ryan)



Maple tree transplant exercise at Myerscough College. (Photo: Dealga O'Callaghan)

Stanley Park in Liverpool, taken when OCA did the early tree survey work associated with the restoration of the park. (Photo: Dealga O'Callaghan)



O'Callaghan Associates

Mike Lawson, a former student at Myerscough College, later joined OCA, followed by Alistair McLeod and Andy Needham. From their experiences in development work it became apparent to OCA early on that the arboriculturist was going to have to start talking the language of the developer and planner. Helped by some influential tree officers (notably Les Round at Trafford and Giles Nance at Liverpool) Dealga and Mike developed the first Arboricultural Implications Study and Method Statements for trees in relation to development. With some big developer clients onboard, OCA were in a position to influence the area of trees and development; one service they offered local authorities was to write their Supplementary Planning Guidance in relation to trees and development. Also at this time OCA had the foresight to link up with the first port of call for many developers – planning consultancy firms.

In 1989 Dealga was presented with his first experience of a planning appeal and it was also the first time he worked with a top planning barrister, Andrew Gilbert, from whom he learnt a great amount about planning, writing and giving evidence. This experience gave Dealga a taste for expert work and he went on to work with Andrew on many prestigious cases, including an S46 application at Woodford Aerodrome in Cheshire, Manchester Airport 2nd Runway and the development of Beaconsfield Services on the M40. Consequently, the focus of OCA divided: Dealga's strength went into planning and development which inevitably spilt over into the legal side and expert work. Meanwhile Mike Lawson focused on subsidence; 1995 saw the first major drought after the 1975-76 event and building subsidence really became an issue. Mike pursued this area and



Car park at Beaconsfield Motorway Services where Dealga was involved from the planning stage – through the public inquiry to implementation. The backdrop is ancient semi-natural woodland protected and retained on the site. (Photo: Dealga O'Callaghan)

headed to southern England to open an office there.

Also in 1989 the Electricity Act was passed and the first tranche of privatisation in the electric utility companies occurred between 1989 and 1994. OCA felt they had taken the company as far as they could but saw huge potential for expansion and needed serious capital to grow the business. Dealga approached Chris Asplundh of Asplundh Tree Expert Co. to see if they would be willing to invest in OCA if they were to pursue the utility companies. Dealga was put in touch with Environmental Consultants Inc. (ECI) who invested in OCA in return for trying to sell the UK utility market for them. While still employed by OCA, Dealga was seconded to ECI for two years and as project manager in the UK he won some substantial utility contracts for them, including a two-year contract to manage the tree clearance on the Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) system.

ISA

Dealga joined the ISA in 1986 as a

member at large. In the same year, Dealga and Jeremy Barrell organised two four-day hands-on workshops at Myerscough College with Alex Shigo, whose research was beginning to have a great influence on arboriculture. Alex Shigo's research into tree biology and his effective and simplified methods of disseminating his work had a great influence on Dealga's own teaching. In 1991, while still at Myerscough, Dealga was invited to present a paper at the ISA Conference in Philadelphia. It was at this conference that the British delegates began to informally discuss the idea of an ISA Chapter in the UK, intended to complement the existing Arboricultural Association. This idea was later consolidated when ISA Executive Director Bill Kruidenier and ISA President Don Ham, who were keen to see the ISA become truly international, made enquiries about the potential of an ISA Chapter in the UK. After some discussions, the critical mass of 50 members was achieved and the ISA UK/I Chapter was founded in 1992. Dealga has always maintained that there should be one arboricultural trade organisation in the UK (AA/UKISA Chapter) but despite numerous ongoing talks between the AA and ISA this has not happened.

Work Changes

In 1998, as Dealga's secondment with USA company ECI was coming to an end, he was busy working as the general conference chair for the first ISA conference to be held outside North America – in Birmingham. Dealga was aware Myerscough College was looking to appoint a Head of Arboriculture and after several meetings he was offered the post and began work on condition that he was allowed to continue to work freelance for OCA. By this time OCA had opened two offices in the south, in Colchester and Reading, and was dealing increasingly in subsidence work.





Dealga with Bill Kruidenier, former Executive Director of the ISA, Cambridge 2005.

(Photo: Dealga O'Callaghan)

During this period at Myerscough, Dealga ran with an existing idea for an on-line arboriculture degree and got it up and running. Myerscough was also working towards, and subsequently got, the status of National Centre for Arboriculture. Newton Rigg College had merged with the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) as the National Centre for Forestry. These two National Centres, UCLAN and Myerscough, developed the Faculty for Land Based Studies and were looking for two Heads of Department, one for forestry and one for agriculture. Dealga was encouraged to apply for the position of Head of Forestry and although he was shortlisted, he made a decision to stay in the private sector working with OCA.

In 2003 a surge of subsidence claims hit the UK and OCA found themselves snowed under with work. As this settled down and more staff were taken on to deal with subsidence issues, Dealga happily returned to his planning-based work. At the beginning of 2008, while still working at OCA, Dealga noticed an advert in Horticulture Week by E.on Central Networks for a Tree & Vegetation Planning & Policy Manager. He was astounded to see they were asking for experience in the very areas he had been working in with ECI ten years earlier. Subsequent to the ECI work Dealga had also collaborated with Don Ham in writing the Certified Utility Arborist Handbook and so felt he was in a good position to apply. His application was successful and he began work with E.on Central Networks in June 2008.

Dealga believes utility arboriculture is just beginning to take off in the UK and Ireland and feels that he is in the right place at the right time. He considers the biggest difference between working in the private sector and with E.on is self-

worth; he feels valued for what he is – a chartered arboriculturist who is brought in to put in place tree and vegetation policies, procedures and operational guidance documents and to be available to engineers and other professionals – and is listened to.

Arboricultural Education

Dealga first joined the AA in 1980 when he returned from the USA. He feels that the arboricultural industry has matured greatly over the last 30 years. He believes strongly that education is the fundamental building block of arboriculture but that a good sense of business is also important.

While visiting friends and colleagues in the USA back in 1991, his eyes were opened to how contracting and consulting were being run successfully as a business, with real focus and planning. In the early years of arboriculture in the UK there were many vocational arborists basically running tree cutting companies but there were only a few being run as a real business, notably Beechings of Ash and Southern Tree Surgeons. In a similar way Dealga began undertaking consultancy to a high level that was only being carried out by a few other individual consultants at the time. Other consultants later came through and arboricultural consultancy began to grow.

Perhaps as a result of their experiences in appeals and inquiries, Dealga and Mike Lawson spent a lot of time re-visiting and rationalising many accepted arboricultural givens. They tried to understand the relationship between water uptake by trees and subsidence in order to discover what research underpinned NHBC Chapter 4.3 and whether more recent research could stand up to scrutiny. With the help of Les Round they went back to the first principles of tree biology to formulate an overview. They found that the NHBC table of water demand of trees does work – not on the basis of water demand – but on the rooting pattern of trees. These research findings gave them a more scientific footing on which to base the arboricultural mortgage training course they went on to develop.

Dealga believes that it is essential to get education right; his teaching method builds on tree biology because he believes this to be fundamental to all other areas of arboriculture. Once this is there all other things fall into place. His experience with subsidence taught him that a grounding in science was lacking in the available arboricultural education courses. When the degree at Myerscough

was put together he ensured that all the tree basics such as biology, physiology, dendrology, and soil science were covered in the first year, as these formed the foundation and were the areas that would be revisited again and again in subsequent years.

Dealga loves working in the industry and has truly enjoyed himself in all the aspects he has pursued. It has taken him all over the world and to places he would not normally have visited. He has been involved in education twice, built up a large company, been involved in high level consultancy, and is now working for a large utility company. He feels that it is his duty wherever possible to give back to the industry; he is an examiner for PD Arb, is happy to talk with consultants and offer his opinion, and he loves his lecturing work. Dealga insists he has always tried to be honest and honourable in his conduct and work despite being the victim on a number of occasions of dishonourable behaviour within the industry. Dealga, the angry young man, may have mellowed but his enthusiasm for arboriculture is constant. Indeed, his guiding principle – to seize the day – is something he excels at.

Jo Ryan



(Photo Jo Ryan)