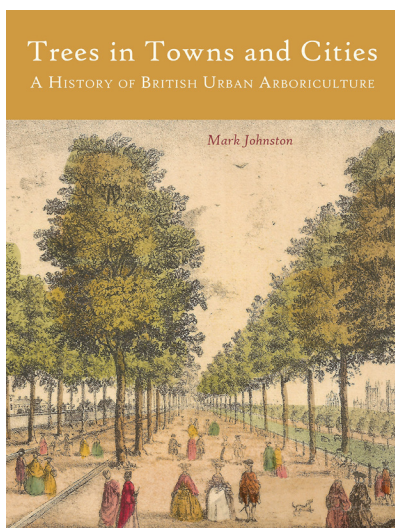


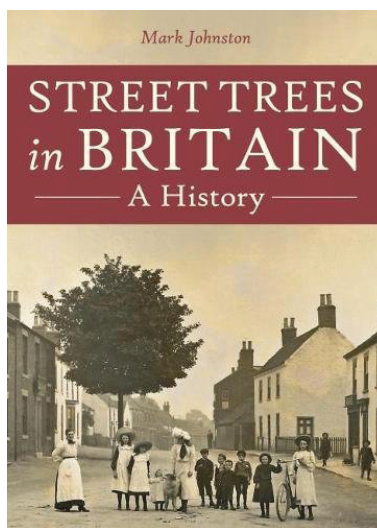
**Trees in Towns and Cities:  
A History of British Urban  
Arboriculture**

Mark Johnston  
Published by Windgather  
Press, 2015  
Paperback. 256 pages  
ISBN: 9781909686625  
£39.95



**Street Trees in Britain:  
A History**

Mark Johnston  
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ISBN: 9781911188230  
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These pioneering titles on the history of trees in British towns and cities walk one through the evolution of styles, trends and planting methods, as well as the care and use of trees in creating British urban landscapes. Though there are numerous books on the history of urban parks and open spaces, few focus on trees planted within them, nor do they address the subject of street trees and urban arboriculture. The author perceived a gap in the literature and delved deep into rare and old history books to gather information, illustrations and photographs to produce these two titles. The content within most chapters is described chronologically with some topics beginning in the Roman era however, there is a distinct focus on the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Progression through the chapters highlights major historical events that have changed and shaped the urban landscapes of today and people's attitudes towards them.

The author of these titles, Mark Johnston, has over forty years practical and academic experience in the urban greenspace industry. Initially working as a tree surgeon, Mark began to gather qualifications and a local authority tree officer position beckoned. This led to private consultancy, government advisory and university lecturing roles. This eclectic range of experiences and achievements puts the author in good stead to pronounce with considerable authority on these subject areas.

The first title, *Trees and Towns in Cities*, opens with a chapter that offers a much needed foundation in describing the origin and evolution of professional arboriculture. It explains how arboriculture is a relatively new concept that only in recent decades has managed to separate from its derivative origins in horticulture and forestry. European and American influences on the development of British arboriculture, the prominent individuals involved, and the founding of tree councils and societies are also discussed. This chapter prepares the reader for repeated reference to elements of forestry and horticultural practice that frequently appear throughout both books.

With past experiences in urban street tree maintenance, the standout chapters for this reviewer were those with a more practical element that dealt with subjects such as threats to urban trees, planting designs and the maintenance and management of street trees. Chapters describing threats to urban trees give interesting descriptions of conflicts between tree care and the development of urban environment through time. The overarching threat, from which all others stem, is the pressure from urban expansion. The author explains how increasing populations inherently result in competition for space, be that for development, infrastructure and services or for access. With each competitive factor comes a related pressure (literally) on the soil resulting in root zone compaction or pollution. These pressures are described in detail giving examples of the development of industrial towns and cities, their negative effect on the urban landscape and how some of these issues were resolved.

Topics such as disease outbreaks and war are also extensively considered in both books with descriptions of both positive and negative effects on urban greening. The Black Death in Britain caused a sudden decline in human population and an increase in naturally colonised tree populations in derelict sites. By the time the human population within the cities had recovered many of these trees were mature enough to force development to work around them and thus dramatically shaped the layout of many towns seen today. War had an opposite and negative effect on urban trees, particularly during World War II. The extensive bombing of southern British towns and cities was focused on parks and open spaces where defence forces based themselves for an unobstructed view of the skies. Inevitably, many trees in these parks were damaged or destroyed and due to the economic strain on resources at the time, these trees were not replaced or maintained. This issue of funding, or the lack of it, for urban greening purposes is a common theme in multiple chapters.

The second title, *Street Trees in Britain: A History*, is not a continuation of the first and is quite separate in its subject matter. Some topics are covered again, but the author's awareness of this is evident as repetition is kept to a minimum and only for context. The third chapter, Remnants from Past Landscapes, offers an interesting and somewhat heart-warming section on individual trees and their heritage value. It describes the historical and cultural significance of prominent stand-alone trees, how over time they have been adversely affected by urban development and the efforts that were made to retain them. Only eight individual trees are discussed in this section with approximate planting dates, their management and maintenance time and, for most, their inevitable demise. Johnston traces the remnants of some of these individual tree characters, some subtle and some distinctly less so, and examines their marks on local history, traditions and landmarks, e.g. where local businesses use the name of a tree or local festivities are centred around the remains of a tree. For example, the Mayoral gavel of the Town Council of Bexhill-on-Sea is carved from timber of the Old Walnut Tree which once proudly stood in the centre of a major road junction at the seaside town.

There is also tremendous comedic value to be enjoyed in both these titles, as seen through the article extracts from publications such as *The Garden* and *The Gardeners' Chronicle*. Authors of these articles expressed contravening views to the practices of the time by their use of colourful and inordinate language, thereby throwing caution to the wind and braving backlash responses. They would regularly call out local authorities on what they regarded as poor management practices, or fellow authors on loose recommendations, and in a style that the risk-adverse society of today would prefer to avoid. Phrases such as "...simply ludicrous" and "...not one iota of knowledge" are examples of some of the language that had this reviewer quietly chuckling. Unfortunately, many of these criticisms were directed at practices that are still evident in urban landscapes of today. Poor decisions in planning, tree selection, maintenance and, in extreme cases, tree removal can frequently be recognised in many Irish towns and cities. It seems that we may still have much to learn from the mistakes of the past.

The detail into which some topics delve may be of more interest to individuals working in local authority planning or as tree officers. Countless hours of research by the author is evident in the extensive reference lists following each chapter, which could point the interested reader towards further publications to improve their prowess. With this said, these two titles are most certainly not exclusively aimed at the professional audience. They are well written, presented, at times comical books, packed with interesting illustrations and photographs that make for easy reading by a wide audience.

*Damien Maher*