

Trees in the Archives

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I had never considered the importance of timber in the economy of the West Midlands before I embarked (!) on this review of trees to be found in the City Archives. The countryside of yore was, without doubt, a leafier place: but trees come in all manner of shapes and sizes and the variety of references will, I hope prove of interest.

Perhaps the oldest trees in the Archives (though we do not know what the wood is from) are the medieval wooden Exchequer tally sticks from a collection of Sir Benjamin Stone's. Notched to record the financial transactions of the medieval world, with notches of different sizes representing different sums, they were then split down the middle so that the two halves "tallied" for future reference. Those in the collection include some in Hebrew¹. An explanation of their use and collection can be found in 307193 [IR 59].

Birmingham's oldest Charity, Lench's Trust, founded by the will of William Lench in 1525/6, made provision for the repair of the highways and of Deritend bridge. This involved the use of a lot of timber, as can be seen in the bailiff's accounts of the 1630s:

6 April 1630

paid to Yale the carpenter for worke and tymber to the bridges 3-9-10d

April 1633

Rec[eived] for bark trowst and kiddes of two trees 0- 2 - 8 [A kid, in this sense, is a bundle of sticks or branches for firewood]

1634 Includes payments for tymber, stumps, stakes, car[riage] of stones, gravell sand and workemen to mende the wayes in the further end of More street

In 1686 John Brigens was paid to undertake repairs to the market cross:

paid John Brigens as followeth for 142 foot of board 23/7, for 52 foot of quarters 9/9, for 15 foot of timber 15/-, for 80 foot of spars 7/-, for 1 standard 1 8d, for 6 peeses 7/6, for 2 men 11 dayes worke 31/3, for joyneing worke 6/6, John Brigens allowed for old timber 5/-, bated 9/7 [Total] 4-7-6²

Deritend was further distinguished by trees as can be seen from a memorandum in the register of St John's, Deritend. The final page of the first baptism register records:

Mem [orandum]: The Yew Trees in the Chappel Yard were planted Septemb[er] 30 1713 The Lime Trees before the Minister's house were planted in ye Spring 1721 as also ye Poplars round ye Garden³
Alas, no more

The Midland Forester by a Wood man of Arden : descriptions of trees, timber uses and production, planting and care of trees, miscellaneous newscuttings about timber, verses, calculations...



All these appear in a collection of papers in a notebook which started off as an analysis of Aristotle's Ethics by an Oxford student in 1814, later the Reverend W R Bedford of Sutton Coldfield, who presented the notes to the Library in 1891. The notes on trees and timber seem to belong to the 1820s and 1830s and seem to include many papers about timber plantations in Scotland.

The introduction, to the general reader, gives three ways in which planting may be profitable to the owner of an estate:

1 By the production of Timber

2 By affording shelter

3 By adding picturesque beauty to the surrounding neighbourhood, which would add considerably to the value of the estate if undertaken "in areas of populous increase" like Birmingham. The description of the Mountain Ash is picturesque:

A small forest tree - but one from its light elegant foliage and white blossoms in summer and its bright red berries in winter is always ornamental. It is raised from seed which requires preparation in the rotheap, grows rapidly and is an excellent nurse in exposed situations, delighting in light sandy soils - It is a good coppice tree being useful for hoops and other purposes - The timber is sometimes used by wheelwrights, but principally to make barrel staves particularly for herring casks - In Scotland the bark is used for tanning leather, and the berries for dyeing tartan.

The description of the removal to Chatsworth of 'a large and beautiful weeping ash, which had been upwards of 40 years in a Garden nr Derby' by the Duke of Devonshire - "with the assistance of 40 labourers and several horses" is interesting. The tree was removed and "loaded upon a machine - The machine with the tree affixed was moved from Derby about six on Friday evening and tho the tree and earth attached to the root weighed nearly eight tons it reached Chatsworth without halting and without accident at 12 o'clock the following day - The distance is

28 miles - some of the roots extended 28 feet and the branches measured 37 feet from the centre."

The 'Rules for general planting' convey the voice of experience; young trees, for example, are compared to students:

If you buy your plants from a nursery garden do not be deceived by the flourishing appearance of the young trees - the finest leaders have generally the worst roots, and as they are youths of the longest standing their tutor is anxious to send them out of his garden to make room for an importation of freshmen - Make him pull up some of these gay looking youths and shew you what means they can bring with them to support their extravagance - A good bushy rooted plant of only 2 feet is worth half a dozen of your straggling rooted dandies.

He goes on to advise against 'mail order' as a means of obtaining cheap plants: they will most likely be poor quality, or even dead on arrival!⁴

In 1791 the freeholders and inhabitants of Sutton Coldfield put various propositions to Sutton Corporation Committee, including one about trees in the park:

That no more Timber be fall'n, nor Grants of Leases of any of the Corporate Possessions made without the consent of a Majority of the Freeholders and Inhabitants at a Public Meeting to be call'd for the Purpose - But, with such Consent, the Underwood, or even the timber Woods in the Park may be Leased for Annual or other Falls, or fall'n to raise Money for or towards the support of the poor and the Benefit of the Parish in General.⁵

One might expect the landowners of Birmingham to be concerned about the timber on their country estates but there is certainly evidence to show that Birmingham itself was not devoid of greenery, indeed fruit trees seem to have been particularly cultivated; it is heartening to think that there was something to vie with all that flesh being slaughtered in the Bull Ring! An indenture of 1 October 1733 leases 'a piece of land from Moses Guest, cutler, son of William Guest, late of Birmingham, maltster, and others to William Hay of Birmingham, toymaker, part of an orchard called Guest's Cherry Orchard, fronting the street called Cannon Street for 5 yards, 34 yards long and bounded also by... Needless Alley, with free liberty of a common road 10 yards broad, now staked out through the said orchard; also a street... laid open through another orchard adjoining called Walker's Cherry Orchard...'⁶

Nevertheless, it is perhaps a little surprising to find that a Birmingham timber company existed, though only for five years. The timber trade obviously made a rapid decline at this point and the profits were too small to continue. On 13 May 1816 an extraordinary general meeting was called to dissolve the company.⁷

A great variety of trees flourish in the archives of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. A trail through the gardens, describing trees along the way, begins with

The Spindle Tree (near the entrance), *Euonymus europaeus*. A small tree with inconspicuous flowers, but pretty pink or red fruits resembling a Cardinal's hat. Its wood is tough, but its uses are now limited to the gypsy trade of skewer making.

The Plane tree, *Platanus orientalis*. A large specimen



grows close to the new refreshment room. It may be recognized by the bare patches upon the trunk, left by the deciduous scales of the bark, which fall off from time to time. It is a first class city tree, and thrives well in London Squares, where it is called the Button-ball Tree, from its round fruits which hang on loose strings like buttons.. The wood of the Plane Tree is very beautiful, but of poor quality. It is employed for minor ornamental purposes, such as brush backs⁸

Trees are often planted as part of an official opening ceremony. This was the case with the opening of Calthorpe Park on 23 May 1862, when three trees of *Cedrus deodara* were planted in the centre of the Park by Lord Calthorpe, HRH the Duke of Cambridge and the Mayor, Sir John Ratcliff, in a ceremony dedicating the Park to the people. In 1871, the Parks Sub-committee was instructed to ascertain the cost of providing iron fencing for the three trees. It rather sounds as if the people were not treating them with due care! Calthorpe Park was the second park to be acquired by the City, which as late as 1855 was still without a public space for recreation. The virtual gift of Adderley Park in 1856 changed this. Another responsibility of the Parks Department was the planting of trees in streets and roads. The Parks Sub-committee of 24 April 1890 reported that:

140 new trees had been planted in the several Streets and Roads of the City during the past year ending 31 December 1889 and [the superintendent] was instructed to keep a journal in future stating the names of the Streets and the Number of Trees planted from time to time.

Regrettably, this journal, if it ever was kept, has not survived.⁹

In the 1860s, the appearance of the Bristol Road was enhanced by the addition of trees planted by the Bristol Road Trees Committee, the leading light of which was Robert Pollock. With the permission of the Public Works Committee, a group of gentlemen residing on the Bristol Road decided to canvass the road to obtain subscriptions towards the replanting of trees. By 1868, enough funds had been raised to plant 30 trees; lime trees were chosen, provided by Mr Coudrey of Edgbaston Nursery. Unfortunately, the summer following proved to be one of the driest on record and not all survived, despite extra watering. The initial collection raised £37-1 1-6. In 1875 the Committee handed over responsibility for the trees to the Public Works committee. The Minute book itself was returned to Birmingham in 1960, a century after the Committee first met, sent from New Zealand by the granddaughter of Robert Pollock.¹⁰

The archives which include estate papers and accounts show a thriving business in the sale of timber. The Boulton & Watt and James Watt Papers have much information on the purchase of Watt's estates in Wales for the planting of trees. There are also detailed notebooks kept by James Watt, jnr. which record the planting of a large variety of fruit trees in the kitchen garden at Aston Hall, 1819-1 during his residency there.¹¹

The Boulton family were also interested in fruit trees, as the Pomona Sohoensis illustrates, recording the trees planted at Soho 1811-21, with remarks on the crop and survival of different varieties. There is also a "Catalogue of foreign and native forest trees, flowering shrubs and evergreens, fruit trees... sold by William Butler, Nurseryman, seedsman & landscape gardener, Prescot [c.1810]", which lists 68 varieties of apple, ranging from 'Juncating, early table fruit' to "Delaware Apple, fine & new".¹²

John Gough of Perry Hall gave instructions in 1776 that his 150 oaks at Bescot were not to be sold for less than £220. He had a previously valued the lot of timber to sell for £1,200. Gough was negotiating this timber sale with one Thomas Pearson of Newport, but the sale fell through when Pearson found a supply closer to home. In 1821 the trees at Bescot were still causing problems. John Turner wrote to Gough that:

Mr Bevan of Coton End has fallen two Ash Trees in Besscote Lane that Join one of his Fields. I always thought they belong'd to you as being Lord of the Manor. Bevan says they always belonged to him. I think Mr Fowler had better come over and view the place the place there he can form a better opinion of it. My Wife has Potted you some Butter if you approve of it. You may have what Quantity you like either twenty or thirty pounds. Also has made a cheese if you will please to accept of it...¹³

The archives of Elford Hall are very instructive about the practice of timber felling. Howard Paget kept a 'Labour Journal' of the Elford Estate Timber fall in November 1902. On 3 November, Thomas Bates and his son Homer arrived by the 9.40 train, were met and shown the timber to be felled, which they started 'at the Cliff with No. 10, sycamore'. On 4 November they continued with Spanish chestnut and beech. On Saturday, 8 November, they felled and began to cut up 'Big W[yeh] Elm No.2. Homer Bates falls on his axe and gets hurt. Heavy rain comes on and they leave off early'. [Not much sympathy there !] A wet winter obviously had its problems and the 'fallers' had to be sent home or set to other tasks. On 12 November Bates brought his other son and they finished dressing the wych elm, dressed the alder, felled poplar and turkey oaks, each tree identified by number. The range of trees was impressive, including ash, hornbeams, lime, willow, a walnut in the rectory garden and a crab apple by the riverside.¹⁴

Trees can have other forms. Some of them appear in stained glass, as the several 'Tree of Jesse' windows produced by the firm of Hardman, whose substantial records exist in the City Archives. Occasionally, the firm produced something more unusual, and in 1929 they shipped a window to the USA for the East transept of Briarcliff Congregational Church, New York. The design was for a landscape, a view through blossoming trees and peacocks onto lawns backed with conifers and a distant church. The correspondence shows that Hardman ran an internal competition to produce a design, and the artist chosen was Donald Taunton. There is a contemporary black & white photograph of the cartoon.¹⁵

Many enquirers come to us to travel back to the roots of their family tree. The construction of pedigrees is not new, of course, and many can be found amid the marriage settlements and legal papers. The Adderley family from the 14th to the 17th centuries are depicted with their painted armorial shields on a large roll of parchment in the Norton collection. A later example, with the accompanying research, stories and pedigrees, traces the Minshull family of Birmingham from the 18th century to the present day.¹⁶

I reserve the last example for art and recommend a look at the sketches of Paul Geoghegan, artist in residence at St Dunstan's School, Kings Heath. His illustrated diary for 1993 begins on a cold January day:

Sunday 3 January

Walk up to school after morning mass - wonderful thick hoar frost on the tree tops - all their branches and delicate twigs covered in white frost against a clear blue sky. Bitterly cold morning - too cold by far to draw, so take some photographs of the crown of the big oak and of sycamore and lime trees...¹⁷

In the radio programme 'The Jewellery', compiled by Brian Vaughton in 1963, and produced by Charles Parker, one of the jewellery designers describes his work thus:

...you've just got to wait for Nature to show itself. A changing cloud, a tree being blown in the wind, all give the artist a different conception of what it was like when it was still. A tree has got movement, if it's moving in one direction it's got life, so that if that can be caught by the artist, or depicted in some abstract manner, then he is doing something different to the ordinary person.¹⁸

So ends this short shuffle through the leaf mould of history...

Notes

- 1 DV256
- 2 660542A[ZZ329]
- 3 EP1/2/1/1
- 4 II2106[IIR59]
- 5 329008[IIR10] p15
- 6 252516 [DV 108]
- 7 MS 7
- 8 MS 1520/40/3
- 9 BCC Parks Committee and Sub-Committee minutes
- 10 661973[IIR13]
- 11 B&W/M1/7/4-10
- 12 MBP341/170and198
- 13 Gough383and385
- 14 Elford Hall11160
- 15 Hardman correspondence and photograph 994
- 16 Norton 834 (2744) and MS 1432/M/6
- 17 MS 1949
- 18 CPA/2/79