

Great Trees Of Sheffield 2017

The Melbourne Rd Martyr Oak

A Submission By

David Long (Sheffield)



The Melbourne Road Martyr Oak grew in Stocksbridge, Sheffield, on Melbourne Road, at the upper end of an alley between houses on Oaks Avenue and Woolley Road (OS Grid Ref: SK 262 984). This view is looking along Melbourne Rd, toward the junction with Woolley Road. The photographs herein were taken by me on 25th January 2014.



This view is looking along Melbourne Rd, toward the junction with Oaks Avenue (which doesn't have any oaks, or any street trees).

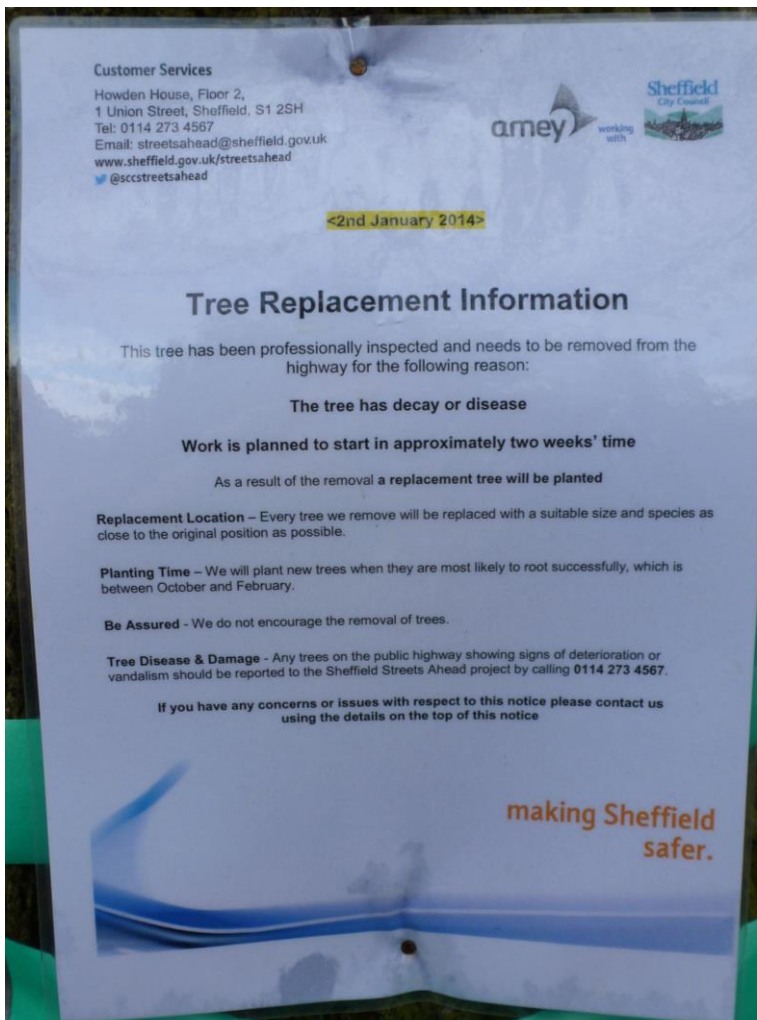
This old oak was one of Sheffield's hidden gems: the Melbourne Rd Martyr Oak. It grew in Stocksbridge, on a residential street, on a valley side, high above a noisy steel works. It was certainly a contender for Sheffield's oldest street tree. A local ecology professor (from Sheffield Hallam University) stated that it was 450 years old [1]. It had a girth of 3.95m at hugging height [2]. The tree existed long before the modern steel works. As the steel works grew, homes were built on nearby fields, to accommodate the workforce. The developers retained the tree. They clearly appreciated that this tree was something of a local landmark, as possibly the oldest tree in the valley, and one of the oldest in Sheffield.

In early 2014, a notice was attached to the tree stating that the tree "...needs to be removed..." because "*The tree has decay or disease*". Locals began to question whether the tree really needed felling. That's when I first learnt of the tree.



In June 2013, Chicken-of-the-woods fungus was spotted on the tree (near ground level) and this was enough to convince Sheffield City Council that the tree “needed” felling.

For many decades, the tree had been sensitively maintained by occasional crown reduction (a “hair cut”). This had reduced the weight of the crown and the magnitude of forces acting on plant parts. Put simply, timely pruning had successfully been used to retain this tree, even with a fungal infection. The fungal infection had not negatively affected tree health, nor had it significantly compromised structural integrity. The tree was healthy and safe. It could have been safely retained, long-term, by timely pruning.



The tree was felled on Monday, 1st April, 2014. In response to local opposition to the felling, a detailed investigation of the extent of decay within the tree was undertaken on 27th January, 2014 (using sonic tomography) [2]. The investigation was undertaken by an independent arboricultural consultant. The results confirmed that the tree was structurally sound and could be safely retained long term, by occasional, timely pruning (crown reduction). Sheffield City Council and their highway maintenance contractor (Amey) suppressed publication of the consultant's report until 26th April – four weeks after felling. Questions were asked of the Sheffield City Council Cabinet Member for Environment, Recycling and Streetscene: Cllr Jack Scott (Labour). It took him four months to respond to those [3]. However, Cllr Scott did answer one question the same day it was asked, on 5th April (the fourth day after felling):

Question:

“Will you be urging the Council to formally adopt a city wide Tree Strategy, as defined and recommended by the “Trees in Towns 2” report, commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government, published in 2008?”

Response:

“WE DO NOT presently **HAVE A STRATEGY** solely for trees. **MY VIEW IS THAT THIS WOULDN'T BE VERY HELPFUL** given they are an intrinsic part of the broader environment and ecology. However, I am confident that we have adopted very good practice in this area [...]
In my view, current documents are sufficient.”

The Melbourne Rd Martyr Oak was just one of Sheffield's 35,057 highway trees [4] that are managed as part of a £2.2 billion, 25yr highway maintenance project: the “Streets Ahead” project. The project began in August 2012. A private contractor – Amey – is responsible for delivery of the project. The project includes resurfacing Sheffield's highways (carriageways & footways) and replacing all street lighting. When the project began, mature trees, such as The Melbourne Rd Martyr, accounted for 73.8% of Sheffield's street trees (25,877 trees) [4].

For me, the acts and omissions of Sheffield City Council and Amey, surrounding the felling of this healthy, mature street tree, opened my eyes, for the first time, to the reasonably foreseeable, significant loss of highway canopy cover that was likely to occur throughout the city during the Streets Ahead project – in particular during the first five years. This period is known as the Core Investment Period. It is the time during which all lighting and resurfacing works are supposed to be completed.

At the time this tree was felled, citizens had not been told how many street trees could or would be felled. We did know that felling would continue for the duration of the Streets Ahead project [5]. It was also clear that without a strategy to guide and inform policy, plans and decision-makers, blunders could be frequent and that most of Sheffield's mature street trees could be felled as a result of over-zealous &/or incompetent assessment and interpretation of assessments by Amey and Sheffield City Council. The majority of Sheffield's mature street trees are associated with damage to footways and kerbs (carriageway edging).

We now know:

- I. the Amey PFI contract for the Streets Ahead project permits the felling of 67.7% of Sheffield's mature street trees [6];
- II. no assessments of likely impact on highway canopy cover have been undertaken;
- III. no valuation of trees, or the range of valuable ecosystem services that they afford to communities and neighbourhoods, has been undertaken;
- IV. cost:benefit analyses do not take account of the value of trees or the range of associated eco-system services [7];

- V. over four years in to the £2.2bn city-wide highway maintenance project, no alternative highway engineering specifications had been commissioned or drafted for consideration as a means to retain healthy, structurally sound, mature highway trees, as an alternative to felling [8];
- VI. due to resource limitations and poor management decisions, Sheffield City Council do not have sufficient personnel in their Highways PFI Client Team to adequately supervise, monitor, audit works in close proximity to trees, or enforce compliance with current good practice [9].
- VII. *“the Streets Ahead highways maintenance contract is based on the principle of performance self-monitoring... self-monitored by Amey”* [10].

It was the felling of this tree that caused me to ask the above question. As a direct result, Sheffield Tree Action groups now campaign for Sheffield City Council to formally adopt a tree strategy as policy, in fulfilment of their seven year old policy commitment to have one, and to put in place adequate steps to ensure that all tree populations in the city are managed sustainably, in compliance with the range of current good practice guidance and recommendations that both Sheffield City Council and Amey claim (falsely) to comply with and aim to “build on” (See the SORT letter dated 29th January 2016 [6b]). Also see:

<https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/comment/629#comment-629>).

It is hoped that a tree strategy (drafted in accordance with, and incorporating, current good practice guidance and recommendations) will encourage and enable an open, honest, transparent, fair, consistent approach to community involvement and the stewardship and use of trees and tree populations. It should ensure greater accountability and that assessments are balanced, undertaken by competent people, and that acts and omissions are proportionate, adequate, defensible and not unduly influenced by transitory or exaggerated opinions or vested interests.

The premature felling of this particular tree served as a harsh reminder to me that not all decision-makers are competent, credible or trustworthy. The empty space where it once stood now reminds me of how important it is that decision-makers have an appropriate combination of education, training and experience relevant to the matters they are responsible for.

To discover more about this tree, please see the following links:

<https://sheffielddreemap.wordpress.com/stories/the-melbourne-rd-veteran-oak/>

<https://sheffielddreemap.wordpress.com/2015/11/07/new-amey-planned-fellings-added/#comments>

NOTES:

1)

6 Reasons To Stop The Sheffield Chainsaw Massacre (An article from Sheffield Hallam University):

<https://ianswalkonthewildside.wordpress.com/2015/11/02/sheffields-chainsaw-massacre/>

2)

The arboricultural consultant's *Report Summary* for the Melbourne Rd Martyr Oak:

https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/sites/default/files/files/Melbourne_Road_Oak_Stocksbridge_2014%20-%20Report_Summary.pdf

3)

Questions presented to Sheffield City Council's Cabinet Member for Environment, Recycling and Streetscene (on the 30th April 2014) and the responses received (on 27th August 2014), with regard to felling of the Melbourne Road Martyr Oak and arboricultural management in general, can be found in the comments section of the webpage accessible via the following link:

<https://ianswalkonthewildside.wordpress.com/2014/04/03/not-a-good-time-to-be-a-tree/>

4)

Slideshow summary of the findings of *Sheffield City Highways Tree Survey 2006 – 2007* undertaken and presented to SCC by Elliott Consultancy Ltd:

https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/sites/default/files/files/Elliott_SCC_Highway%20Tree%20Survey%202006-07.pdf

5)

Biggest Ever Scheme to Improve Sheffield's 36,000 Street Trees (News from The Star - a Sheffield newspaper - dated 15th February 2013):

'Steve Robinson, head of highway maintenance at the council, which is working with contractor Amey on the project, said: "Overall there are 36,000 highway trees and there are 1,250 across the city which we are taking out and replacing.'

"In all areas where trees are being taken down – unless they are deemed dangerous and have to be removed immediately – members of the public are being informed via a notice on the tree and letters to neighbouring residents.

"We will be planting replacements straight away or in the next planting season, which runs from November to March."

Mr Robinson said the replacement of dead and dying trees will be among an initial five-year phase, while **maintenance and pruning of the remaining trees will be over the 25 years of the contract with Amey.**'

Source:

<http://www.thestar.co.uk/news/biggest-ever-scheme-to-improve-sheffield-s-36-000-street-trees-1-5412367#comments-area>

5a)

Sheffield Council All Set To Axe 1,250 Roadside Trees (News from The Star - a Sheffield newspaper - dated 16th April 2013):

'Highways officials have revealed 1,250 trees deemed to be 'diseased or dying' are to be felled on streets across Sheffield. And hundreds more trees could also be felled where they are deemed to be damaging road surfaces or 'causing a hazard' such as when roots break through the pavement surface.

[...]

Work is being carried out by contractor Amey, which is responsible for maintaining all 35,000 trees on the streets of Sheffield.

Sheffield Council said the 'dead, diseased or dying' trees had been identified in a survey.

[...]

The total number of healthy trees to be chopped down has not yet been decided.

*A Sheffield Council spokeswoman said: "Our arboriculturalist specialists and highway engineers have identified trees that are dead, dying, diseased **or damaging** the highway.*

*"In many cases, there is a potential risk to the public created and work will be prioritised according to risk. **Tree removal will only be undertaken as the last resort.**"*

[...]

*Sheffield Council said some healthy trees which caused a hazard to blind people, or pushchair or wheelchair users, **could be** removed. [...]*

Source:

<http://www.thestar.co.uk/news/sheffield-council-all-set-to-axe-1-250-roadside-trees-1-5587392>

6)

Steel City Highways To Be 'Streets Ahead' Under PFI (a news item by LocalGov, dated 13 November 2012):

[...]

“Sheffield City Council has embarked on what is the largest highways Private Finance Initiative (PFI) programme in the UK, in a £2bn deal with private sector contractor Amey, who will deliver the far-reaching project over the next 25 years.

[...]

Supported by the Department for Transport, which is to pump in £1.2bn over the life of the contract, Amey will also replace all sodium street lighting with LED intelligent technology, **undertake a city-wide programme of highway tree replacement** and complete all other winter maintenance and street cleaning duties as part of the contract.

[...]

No less than 80% of the total works programme will be completed in the first five years, with ten times the amount of road works being completed than before, and the financial incentives are in place to ensure that Amey delivers on time.

[...]

The core investment phase will see the majority of the city’s roads resurfaced and around half its footways repaired, while **some 1,000 highway trees a year that are not ‘fit for purpose’ could be replaced (eventually, up to half of the 36,000 total might be substituted** with more appropriate, highway-friendly alternatives.”

Source:

<https://www.localgov.co.uk/Steel-city-highways-to-be-streets-ahead-under-PFI/26710>

6a)

Transportation Professional - a Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation publication (December 2012 issue):

“**OVER THE FIRST FIVE YEARS** of the 25 year Streets Ahead deal...” AMEY will be:

“**REPLACING HALF OF THE CITY’S 36,000 HIGHWAY TREES**”.

(The Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation, 2012, p. 12)

6b)

See Appendix 9 (pages 201-203) of the letter from the *Save our Roadside Trees* (SORT: originally Save Our Rustlings Trees) Sheffield Tree Action Group (STAG), dated 29th JANUARY 2016. The letter is online, at the Stocksbridge Community Forum website:

https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/sites/default/files/files/SORT%20LETTER%20TO%20THE%20CABINET%20MEMBER%20FOR%20ENVIRONMENT%20AND%20TRANSPORT_29th%20January%2C%202016_v51.6_Corrected_1.pdf

The SORT letter was DISTRIBUTED TO EVERY COUNCILLOR IN SHEFFIELD, as part of the hand-out for the petition with over 6,295 signatures that Nether Edge STAG presented to SCC on 3rd February 2016.

7)

See the letter from the Streets Ahead Customer Services (Amey) Fulfilment Team, addressed to citizens of Sheffield, authored on 8th July 2015:

“Questions were asked at Full Council as to how the Council captured the value of trees. The model utilised by our inspectors both from planning, conservation, parks and Streets Ahead is TEMPO which is utilised to establish whether a tree is eligible for a tree preservation order.”

Source:

<https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/sites/default/files/files/SCC%20Rustlings%20Road%20Trees%20Response%20July%202015.pdf>

8)

See the following PDF document:

https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/sites/default/files/files/6Ds_SCC%20%26%20AMEY%20HIGHWAYS%20INFRASTRUCTURE%20ASSESSMENT%20CRITERIA%20-%20LICENCE%20TO%20KILL_1.pdf

Also, see:

<https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/comment/752#comment-752>

&

<https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/comment/753#comment-753>

9)

FELLING: SCC/AMEY INCOMPETENCE AND DECEIT: A LETTER TO THE STAR (by a Sheffield arboriculturist):

<https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/comment/698#comment-698>

10)

A petition update, published by the Save Our Roadside Trees (SORT) Sheffield Tree Action Group, dated 8th November 2016*:

<https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/comment/673#comment-673>

&

<https://www.change.org/p/sheffield-city-council-streetsahead-sheffield-gov-uk-save-the-12-trees-on-rustlings-road-sheffield>

*Later the same day, over half way through the two month window of opportunity (30th September to 16th December 2016) to complete an online feedback survey for the new draft strategy**, Sheffield City Council published a *Corporate Tree Risk Management Strategy*:

https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/sites/default/files/files/SCC_Corporate%20Tree%20Risk%20Management%20Strategy%20ver%2004-%2016_Created%2028th%20September%202016_Published%20after%2030th%20September.pdf

** To 1st May 2017, there has been no progress update on development of the draft tree strategy:

<https://www.stocksbridgecommunity.org/sites/default/files/files/SCC%20Trees%20%20Woodlands%20Strategy%20Consultation%20Draft.pdf>