DISAPPEARING AVENUES: LIVING FEATURES IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Clive Mayhew BA (Hons), MICFor, M.Arbor.A., CEnv

Arboricultural Consultant, Robertsbridge, East Sussex

Email: Clive@cmarb.co.uk

Summary

Avenues remain as extremely popular landscape features both within the public imagination and the professional psyche. But do they always warrant the totemic attention they attract? Far from being a perennial favourite of the historic designed landscape, the planting of major avenues appears to have been restricted to rather narrow historical periods. While many avenues are without doubt significant landscape features of considerable importance, some are not. The management of declining avenues is often governed by a dominant presumption of interventionist 'repair'. The author advocates, however, that sensitive management of that decline may often be a more appropriate management technique, with the emphasis placed on stabilisation, conservation, and the protection of habitat.

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that everyone loves an avenue.

This statement is beyond question or dispute it seems, and it reflects a mood perfectly summarised in the following:

> 'From the cherry tree-lined streets of Welwn Garden city and the beech tree-lined roads of Aberdeenshire, to the places along The Mall in London and the streets of central Milton Keynes, the tree lined avenue is a ubiquitous and popular planting style, able to transform an area, largely by defining space…' (AAIS, 2004)

There's more:

> '… A walk in the 'enclosure' between the colonnades of mature trees forming an avenue across an historic park can be a relaxing experience; sunlight and breeze filtering through the foliage can evoke a peaceful attitude of mind particularly if there is an accompaniment of bird song.' (AAIS, 2004)

The undoubted authority that avenues are able to exercise over the eye and soul is clear; they are bold, they focus, they frame, they are an exercise in power, they demonstrate control over nature - and perhaps with such megalomaniac attributes it is small wonder they can exert such an unchallenged grip on our collective imaginations.

Avenues - the case against

Those fortunate and wealthy enough to be hiring a leading designer to landscape their 17th century estate would have expected something in the style of the classical French school in return. This would have resulted in their parkland being filled with vast numbers of trees planted in a complex arrangement of radiating avenues - enclosing, defining and

dominating the landscape in imitation of the style of the great gardens of France, such as at Versailles.

A century and one war later however and everything had changed. With an army massed across the channel, our French cousins were now the hated enemy and the days of their gardening style dominating in Britain were numbered. Le Nôtre was replaced by Brown and across the land formal avenues were ripped out in favour of firstly allegorically romantic landscapes, soon to be followed by the 'naturally' picturesque.

A common feature of these styles is that the avenue was no longer pivotal, and for decades remained a distinctly unfashionable landscape feature; indeed it appears that the main periods of avenue planting were restricted to between 1600 and 1700, and from 1851 to 1900, and were not a style so ubiquitously pursued as we might think . (CRANE, 2001) For some the opposition was both instinctive and eloquently expressed; Humphry Repton (1752 –1818), the man who first coined the job title of landscape gardener, makes his view clear while commenting on the avenues at Langley Park in Kent:

> '… but the eye soon becomes wearied with the dull repetition of equi-distant trees, however venerable in themselves; besides all novelty or diversity of situation is totally done away with by surrounding a house with avenues, since the view from every seat in the kingdom would be reduced to nearly the same Landscape, if looking along a straight line betwixt two green walls can deserve to be called a landscape.' (REPTON, 1790)

His solution was to be anticipated:

> 'I shall dismiss this subject by merely saying, that I am of opinion the great avenue towards the church should remain … and that every trace of the others should be obliterated with all the caution and respect that is due to trees of such magnitude. (REPTON, 1790)

Figure 1. '…if looking along a straight line betwixt two green walls can deserve to be called a landscape.' Humphry Repton. 1790

From Repton's point of view avenues are single dimensional, unsubtle, boring and old fashioned. He recognised that: 'Several species of pleasure which … are all in some degree

excited by the long perspective view of a stately avenue' (REPTON, 1790), and did not advocate their removal in every instance - but he did see avenues as a limited and limiting feature in the landscape. Repton was also arguing from a point of view where he considered he had something better, more subtle, more interesting to offer in terms of landscape design than 'two green walls', and he was not alone. For a century differing schools of landscape theory contested for supremacy amid the vagaries of changing fashion, but always with a dominant eye towards the evocation of a 'naturalistic' landscape, in which rigidity and formality were marginalised.

Without doubt many avenues fully deserve the adulation they receive, but others do not, being little more than rows of trees planted against something solid and linear: a road or path most frequently fitting the bill. It is tempting to suspect that these opposing rows of trees are often planted because the designer had not the wit, the will or the imagination to create something more subtle or more interesting; and in the worst case scenario the visual subtleties of earlier designed landscapes can be destroyed by this rigid adherence to 'path side' plantings.

Avenues weave their magic on us all and arboriculturists are not immune to their spell. The reverence in which they are held can lead to myopia of discussion - where it is the avenues and only the avenues under consideration, resulting in their becoming detached entities divorced from the *context* of the landscapes in which they were planted. For decades the academic arboricultural press, when discussing historic landscapes, has almost entirely restricted itself to individual trees or avenues. Rarely are the subtleties and nuances of the English school of historic landscape planting explained or debated, with the precise placement of tree clumps and individual specimens to create subtle vistas that are so 'natural' they are often overlooked or worse still have had later avenues scythed across them.

Figure 2. '… being little more than rows of trees planted against something solid and linear: a road or path most frequently fitting the bill.'

It is as if *all* avenues are precious and revered and *all* must be repaired and saved. These isolated totemic features can receive the undivided reverential attention of contemporary arboriculturists - with the desire to use their new found theories and developing science to heal, renew or replace. The emphasis often seems be on *active* intervention. Sarah Crouch frames her thoughts on the conservation of avenues through the language of 'repair.' (CROUCH, 1994). Brian Crane, in a paper which evaluates various options for neglected avenues, spends fifty-four pages advocating that 'a number of management options are

available, with a strong emphasis on replanting,' while devoting just four lines to an approach entitled 'Do nothing.' (CRANE, 2001) The AAIS's Practice Note 9 'Management of Avenue Trees' recognises that the approach of minimum intervention has a place within the range of management options, but it is a place that is grudgingly earned:

> 'However, a minimum intervention strategy may actually require fairly intensive management because the need to cater for the safety of people and property may have heightened significance.' (AAIS, 2004)

Other professionals however do not seem to leap in the same way as we do in order to repair and rebuild ruinous historic structures. There is no discernable clamour to 'repair' Stonehenge for example, and the emphasis on archaeological endeavor lies in recording, containment, and protection, underpinned by the principle of 'do no harm' to the artefact. How stark in contrast is such an approach to that taken on many a declining historic avenue, where time has broken the original unity and the resultant gaps are enthusiastically patched and plugged by old trees being removed and new saplings planted. Perhaps we should take our lead from the archaeologists occasionally, and adopt – or even embrace – management prescriptions relying less on the saw and the spade and more on the understanding that time brings irrevocable change - which we can oversee but not reverse.

Buxted Park

Buxted Park is located in East Sussex, England. It is an 83.43 hectare (206.16 acre) site which comprises of a substantially intact park of the early nineteenth century, enlarged from an earlier eighteenth-century one. It incorporates elements of a seventeenth-century park which had in turn developed from a medieval one. The park is listed grade II* on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest. A comprehensive commentary on the history and development of the park was undertaken in 1991. (CBA, 1991)

Figure 3. The Ordnance Survey surveyor's notebook drawings of Buxted Park and its avenues c.1800

The site supports a mixture of unimproved grassland, lakes, parkland trees, and areas of woodland which supports a large invertebrate population. It was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1989, the SSSI citation stating that:

> The park has been found to be of exceptional importance for conservation of invertebrates, especially beetles and flies which are found on the marshlands and riverbanks, but more importantly, found in association with over mature trees and dead wood. Rot holes, sap runs and fungi growing on trees are of particular significance. Three nationally rare species of beetle; *Ptenidium gressneri*, which is an extremely small brown-black beetle, *Aderus brevicornis* and *Prionocyphon serricornis* are associated with rotten wood of large, old trees, the latter species with water-filled holes. One other nationally rare beetle, *Aleochara sanguinea* has been found in putrid fungi. Over fifty nationally scarce beetles have been recorded, along with several nationally scarce flies, including the hoverfly of fen and marshes, *Orthonevra brevicornis* and the large-headed fly of woodland in southern England, *Nephrocerus flavicornis*. (ENGLISH NATURE. 1989)

Many of the 'over mature' trees mentioned in the citation exist within a single row lime avenue. While it is impossible to give an exact date that the avenue was planted, the most likely one is the late seventeenth century, possibly in 1684 when the property was held in trust by the Marsham family who created a similar avenue at the same time at their new mansion of Mote near Maidstone. (ACTA, 2009) The established avenue is clearly shown in the surveyors handbooks and the published first edition Ordnance Survey maps of c.1800.

In common with much of the south east corner of England, the avenue at Buxted fared badly in the 'Great Storm' of October 1987 (MAYHEW, 2007) and a subsequent gale in January 1990. Following these weather events numerous trees within the avenue were blown over, with many dislodging their neighbours in a 'domino effect.' Most of the trees which did not fail were storm damaged as a result of limb breakage throughout their crowns. For many arboricultural practitioners the post 1987 management prescription for Buxted would have been relatively straightforward, and would have entailed the removal of wind throw, the selection of other 'suitable' trees for removal, and replanting. The prescription followed today might well be similar - if undertaken with a little more recognition and respect for the remaining veteran trees. Essentially, the default arboricultural response when faced with a 'declining' avenue is to be highly interventionist.

Figure 4. Avenue trees at Buxted toppled in the great storm of October 1987.
This picture was taken March 2010

Many avenues were damaged in a similar way to Buxted and many were subsequently subject to 'repair' by the often fevered activities of those wishing to clear up following the storm and 'heal' the damaged landscape. But Buxted was different; here no one came, the fallen trees were not removed and gaps were not replanted, and that is how the avenue has largely remained since 1987, severely damaged by the great storms but largely untouched ever since.

Managing decline

Viewing the avenue at Buxted today provides an insight into the changing nature of landscapes over time, and the way in which management input can be influenced by an understanding of that change.

Firstly, we are familiar with the concept of 'avenue decline' and the resulting effect it might have through the sequential loss or failure of individual trees. As this occurs, the avenue gradually – almost imperceptibly - loses its unity and gradually ceases to become an 'avenue' in the accepted sense of a regular, linear, generally uniform tree feature. In normal circumstances this change may take many decades, and can be interrupted at any time, if an approach of 'repair' is initiated, but at Buxted much of that decline was compressed into one storm: Buxted largely lost its avenue identity overnight.

Secondly, since 1987 the avenue may have remained untouched, but it certainly has not remained unchanged. The fallen trees have suckered both from their root plates and along the length of their trunks. Many of these suckers are now large enough to be classed as trees in their own right. Other shoots have re-grown from the original shattered pollard points, forming large crowns, while ground flora and a shrub layer has emerged, and the visual uniformity of the whole feature has begun to blur – the avenue is fading away and something new is emerging in its place.

Figure 5. The avenue at Buxted is beginning to fade
and be replaced by a linear woodland.

Seeing the 'avenue' today encourages one in the direction of a perception shift. A shift which recognises that the time of the Buxted avenue is now over. Events and the passage of time mean that the avenue has now effectively become part of the history of the site. It can be compared perhaps to the stones at Stonehenge; some remain upright but many have fallen. The structure has in part gone, though the evidence of its existence is still there for those who wish see. This is precisely what has happened at Buxted. Much of the avenue has gone, though much still remains, and it will be possible to find evidence of its existence on the ground for decades - perhaps centuries - to come. Any attempt however to manage or 'repair' those remains specifically as an avenue would require an undesirable degree of brutish intervention.

But we are often reluctant to release our grip on declining avenues - even when we know in our hearts that they have gone and should really be allowed to slip away. Perhaps the parting could be eased through a change in terminology? What would happen to Buxted avenue if we began to call it something else, something closer to what it *actually* is - namely an emerging (linear) lime woodland? It would change the emphasis of management from intervention and restoration to one of stabilisation and conservation. It would recognise and accept that the regeneration will create a new feature, which enhances and complements the other conservation elements of the site. It would also recognise that there are issues related to public usage, footpaths, safety etc which still need to be addressed. Eventually the 'avenue' will become engulfed - in the same way that layered hedgerows and boundary trees merge into later growth woodland – and the evidence of the avenue will become part of the archaeology of the site.

Conclusion

One day agreement may be reached about what to do with the gap-toothed remnants of these once great avenues, but until that day comes managers are invariably left with a choice between radical intervention and woolly compromise. I warm to neither.

Figure 6. The Buxted avenue has much to offer for the future
– though not as an avenue.

Adopting an approach of managed decline, far from being a counsel of 'do nothing' can be a positive and dynamic option for mature avenue management, and its use deserves to be

supported and more widely advocated. It is management with a light touch that is subtle and sophisticated, intelligent and dignified. It may not have the drama of the chainsaw, or the missionary zeal of a tree planter, but for Buxted it means that the veteran trees are still there, valuable emerging habitats were not destroyed, and disconnected rows of uneven aged trees were not created in the name of avenue repair.

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