

EDITED EXTRACTS FROM INTERVIEW WITH DAVID SCOTT

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CHIEF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT FOR WARRINGTON NEW TOWN DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
(WNTDC)

David Scott began working for WNTDC in 1972. After leaving the Corporation, he founded The Environment Partnership, an environment design and planning consultancy which now has offices around the UK, the head office is in Birchwood.

The recording begins mid-conversation, I had asked David about how the landscape of Birchwood was affected by the change in its stewardship from the Development Corporation to Warrington Borough Council which happened from 1989 onwards.

SF: And what do you think, basic maintenance meant then [in the 1980's into the 1990's]?

DS: Well, obviously, just not letting it go to wrack and ruin. But it- I don't think it allowed enough money for operations that we were doing, [...] I had good budgets, lots of contingencies; I think the Borough Council didn't get that really. [...] they only were given enough money just to maintain it 'basically', no special budgets, really. I think what they didn't do was thin the trees, that was a major part of our management. We obviously planted far more trees than you really need, you plant them as 'whips' and then as they begin to grow, you thin out the ones you don't want. We planted 'nurse' species, to help the other species. So we're looking for, perhaps, oak / ash woodland, in the long term, but we planted fast growing species first, then thinned them out. And of course, the Borough Council didn't have enough money to do that, possibly they didn't even have the *expertise* to do that, because as you say, they were more horticulturally minded than perhaps forestry minded; we were creating forest, in Birchwood so you needed people with forestry knowledge more than, perhaps, horticultural knowledge.

SF: when you go back now, do you think [...] can you recognise that?

DC: The forest 'concept' is still *there*, but it's extreme now, it's become , if you go down the expressways, the trees come right up to the verge and that wasn't the intention; there should be more a feeling of space when you go down the road as well. And I think there needed to be views opened up to some of the development, you can't see it; you go through Birchwood now, it's - solely woodland!- Which is nice but I think it becomes a bit claustrophobic, the landscape, the feeling, I think people can be a bit fearful of that. Even in the car, not just walking along paths and things. But I don't blame the Borough Council for that- to some degree maybe. But I think they did have a difficult job.

SF: [...] it's another Conservative government now but ...

DC: I think local authorities now are even worse, than in that. Budgets have been impaired so much that there isn't the money to really look after landscape as it should be looked after. I

remember David Cameron, not long ago, saying people should get out into the parks and maintain them themselves- I think that's terrible, that you have to rely on that!- people maintaining public parks themselves, even in the Victorian era, when there was a lot more poverty, the parks were well maintained. So I think 'austerity' in the parks has, gone too far.

SF: I know in Birchwood now, my understanding is not very detailed but there are a lot of 'friends' groups- Friends of Forest Park, Friends of The Walled Gardens-

DC: That's good- I think that's really good.

SF: [...] what I can gather from social media is, they seem to be trying to raise money. They're doing a lot themselves.

DC: I think that's what the government wants, people to do that. And I think, to some degree, I support that.

SF:- to *some* degree.

DC: But I think there's a limit to what people can achieve, in terms of their expertise, as well- not just money. But it happens all over, where I live ... Cullercoats and Whitley Bay, people are out there, weeding the place, because they don't want it to look a mess.

SF: But I think with Birchwood, the sheer scale, and the fact that, as you said, you're dealing with a 'forest' ... that's not something people can particularly take on as a voluntary group.

DC: No, exactly.

SF: Large scale, this is ... it requires a lot of equipment and a lot of knowledge!

DC: I go to London quite a lot, my other son lives there, and we go to Regent's Park, and that is *very* well maintained. So some local authorities *do* have the money to do it, because they have a lot of rich people living there, who not only demand it, but they have the monies coming in from council taxes they collect. Whereas places like Birchwood and Cullercoats, Whitley Bay don't have that, the rich people – and the money coming in, so it's much more difficult to keep the place looking good. I think my local council have done fantastic, what they've done to revitalise the promenade but it is hard work for them when they've got other competing ... social care budgets ...

SF: Exactly – and I suppose ... that uncertainty about not having the possibility of EU funding in the future.

[...]

SF: when I think of Birchwood, it *is* such a ... to me, a unique place, created on the basis of this partnership New Town [...] it's somewhat outside of Warrington –

DC: It's like a little New Town on its own isn't it, I know what you mean. The M6 divides it from the rest of the town and it's 'hemmed in', like it's in a little box – you've got the M62, the M6, the railway line, and alright, you've got landscaped farmland one side but the rest of it is all boxed in and I always see it as a little New Town on its own. And some people call it Birchwood New Town. I mean, Birchwood was my favourite district, because I when I first started, before I became chief landscape architect, I was principal landscape architect and Birchwood was my district. Other people had Westbrook, Bridgewater, we did have someone in Bridgewater but it really wasn't taking off, and then Padgate was a different- like 'group leader'. And then obviously I took over the whole lot, eventually. So Birchwood I knew from, *right* from the beginning –

SF: When did you start with them?

DC: I started in 1972, February. Not much had happened, no trees planted, my boss was pretty miffed to be honest, he was ... they hadn't done *anything*, really. Eventually he went off to New Zealand, that's when I got his job and eventually I was elevated up to chief landscape architect. My first remit, he was under pressure from Hugh Cannings' boss, he was deputy and the old man who ran it then was under pressure from the general manager "we're never going to get some trees planted" –

SF: So was it always an idea ... to have this 'forest' –

DC: Oh no, that didn't come until later. The first thing was just, get them planting areas of land that we knew were owned by the Borough Council, that the Development Corporation had acquired. So it was just trying to get some trees in the ground, to make some ... public statements, to get people interested. We started very small scale [...] I said about getting contractors in to do that work, and we did it on a small scale at first and then gradually, I got – when I was made chief landscape architect, then I started assembling a really good team around me, and Rob Tregay joined then, I can't remember exactly when Rob joined, but the seventies, late seventies. And Rob was a fantastic guy, really dynamic, eventually became my deputy and he was very instrumental in the 'ecological approach'. He came from Manchester university, and Alan Ruff was ... teaching on the course about ecological landscapes, to his students – so Rob was full of it, when he came. And of course- I had appointed an ecologist as well, at the time, who was also full of it. So they were the two galvanisers – so I wouldn't say it was my original idea at all, I saw it as something that ... I think this is what we want. So I promoted it in a big way but Rob, and Duncan Moffatt, who sadly died, he ... they were the ones that really made it happen.

SF: I sort of think [...] New Towns, this blank canvas idea – okay, it wasn't a blank canvas, it was an ordnance factory, but, once you've cleared that out of the way you've got this blank canvas; do you ... are you thinking about 'place identity', the way a place feels, from the very beginning?

DC: Yeah, of course. When you say we cleared it out of the way, we had a plan for Birchwood, as it was *being* cleared away; I mean, obviously a little bit started being cleared away before

the plan but as the plan emerged- the district park, which is now called Forest Park, wasn't on the plan. So the plan that Austin Smith Lord, where Hugh'd been, and Hugh was involved in that plan – didn't have a district park at all. And I came along and said, well we've got a park here, with all these residents – sorry, a district, with all these residents, where's the major park for them all? "We can't find any room for it". Anyway; I was on the planning team for Birchwood so I was ... shouting my mouth off about this ... so, anyway, they managed to locate a park, right next to the M6 motorway and I said, that's the wrong end of the settlement, people who're living in Gorse Covert, *miles* to get to the park, do you *really* want a park right next to the M6 motorway? The traffic, the noise, the fumes? So they said, well, we can't spare any more land, financially; this is where we need the employment, this is where we need residential development. And the bunkers area was just white, on the plan, and 'white' land meant, it had a little notation to say that it was not developable, within the plan period. I said, "you can't leave four derelict munition bunkers in the middle of all this shiny new scheme, that we're doing!" "it's going to cost so much money to knock them down all this research we've costed it all because of the way the munition bunkers are constructed".

SF:- to withstand bomb blasts.

DC: Yeah. They were reinforced with concrete, and also the bases were reinforced as well. The only thing that wasn't reinforced was the roof – so if there *was* an explosion, it literally 'went through the roof', it didn't go out to people working nearby. This is very sensible. So the roof was really thin – that's why they didn't keep them, by the way, that was the real reason we didn't keep them, the roof had deteriorated so much, it was unreinforced. The chief engineer said, if we'd used it as a museum, which we had plans to do, the roof could have fallen in. And no-one was coming up with the money to rebuild the roof, so they were filled in with pulverised fuel ash.

SF: People are not happy about that in Birchwood!

DC: What, the fact it's filled in?

SF: They got filled in! I've spoken to a couple of people who are-

DC: No, I agree, I was very against it, I wrote pleading letters to the general manager, it didn't work, he wouldn't have it. Anyway going back to the bunker site, I took it on board, myself, to try and look at the costs that the engineers had come up with, see if I could pare them down – I thought that was the best location for the park because it was central and it connected with the greenways, along the roads, connected to Risley Moss, great, this big green space in the middle. And so I produced the paper with drawings and what I did was to put the park *above* the bases of the bunkers, [...] So that's- and then I asked the engineer to re-cost it, and of course the cost came down dramatically. So I took the scheme to Hugh and said- that's what I recommended. And he looked at it, and I'll never forget what he said, "David, your idea of building a park on these bunkers is bonkers!" I said, okay. So, I went away, he came back to me

and said “I’ve been looking at this again, David, I think it *could* work – are you telling me this drainage?” “Yeah, perfectly feasible.” “it is a good location” So, that’s how the park evolved in that location. And where the park was *going* to be, by the M6 motorway, is Birchwood Science Boulevard, which has made masses of money for the Development Corporation.

SF: Huge, yeah.

DC: [...]The other interesting thing was, all material from the ordnance factory ... all the buildings, talking about four hundred hectares of land- as you say, the biggest reclamation site in Europe, at the time, the general manager said to me, and the chief engineer, “I don’t want any of this material going out of Birchwood, I don’t want this going on the roads of Warrington, you’ve got to accommodate it all within Birchwood”. [...] you would have had to take it outside the town, somewhere. So it’d have been going through Padgate, driving down the M6 motorway[...] . And for me, this is useful, I can use this – because Birchwood is flat [...] I can create some land form. [...] We wanted to build noise attenuation, around the motorways, so instead of having just fences we could create landscape around it. And the golf course was good, that was positioned, that location, again – Locking Stumps couldn’t be built right next to the motorway, because of the noise, again – that’s why we put the golf course there. And we built mounds all over the golf course – with the material from the ordnance factory.

[...]

The other thing though, the engineers - if it wasn’t reinforced, some of the demolition material, they would crush it – so, they had a big crusher on site, crushing it, and that *then* would be taken out of the area because that – you know, you’d get money for that. So general management’s only saying stuff that had no economic value, so they did get rid of that, - and they used a lot of it in the roads in Birchwood, to create the foundations. So then you got all the mounds along the expressway, they were all man-made, all along Gorse Covert, which is now a nice walkway, planted. We did ‘mounding’ schemes for all those roads and the golf course. And we used some of it in the parks as well [...] The other useful thing was, when they built the ordnance factory, a lot of it was peat- Risley Moss, as you know, is peat; it extended across into Oakwood, so when they actually built the ordnance factory in Oakwood they just bulldozed a lot of the peat off, they took- it was on the top surface, to get down to something below – they could build on. So we found this great mound of peat; “this is fantastic”, because we only had really poor soil, subsoil, so to plant trees you need something a bit better than that. But that was one of the things as well, the quality of the soil was why we came up with the ‘ecological approach’ as well –

SF: Really?

DC: Yeah because if you want to ...- trees will grow in most, well, *some* trees will grow in most soils, willow and alder, ‘pioneer’ species will grow in very poor quality soil, in subsoil, even. Whereas shrubs need better quality soil – more nutrients and things. And so what we did was

'rotavate in' the peat – and we actually imported some peat, as well, from a local farm, to where we wanted trees that needed that, the sort of soil conditions. But that was a big factor in going for the natural landscape, we knew that would grow in these 'inhospitable' soils. Whereas if we were doing more horticultural designs, you would need quality topsoil. Anyway, we used that peat, spread it on the mounds, cultivated it all in, planted it, planted it like that, and now it's a forest. It's amazing how the golf course mounds - driving down the motorway, I look at it and I think "if people only knew what was under there!" and I was worried, I think somebody said "what happens if all the soil washes through all the crevices?" because obviously you couldn't compact all the rock, the pieces of brickwork, I said "we might have the biggest rock garden in the world!"

SF: Well, things would grow in that!

DC: Oh yeah – you can plant pit heaps, they plant slate quarries in Wales, the technique there, I remember a lot of research on land reclamation, I did my thesis on land reclamation – in Wales they would use old socks, they would put the tree, you know, the 'whip' – which come bare-rooted, as you know, the roots are just bare, and they would put it in the sock and fill it with some decent soil and then just drop it into the crevice of the slate quarry. And they would grow.

SF: That's kind of the spirit of the ecological approach in some respects isn't it, you plant what is there already sort of thing – I believe there would have been a survey done, to see what plants were growing amongst the ordnance factory –

DC: You probably would know anyway, from studying land reclamation, what species were used. But we obviously knew quite quickly; Birchwood's got birch, that was like a weed, across the moss. And in fact when I first came there we organised, to get staff motivated, plantings – we'd have a day where staff would go out and we'd go to Risley Moss and we'd lift some of the birch, there were too many-we were trying to thin the birch, we would lift the birch, and they would come out, like ... complete, root ball- the peat was so damp and solid, you could just put your spade in, lift them out, big root ball on it- so once you planted it, you knew it was going to take. Straight away. And we had kids involved in that as well – daffodil planting, they did a lot of bulb planting, particularly on the roads leading into town.

SF: [...] can you talk about the importance of landscape design to a 'sense of place' ? it seems very ... important in Birchwood, somehow.

DC: Yeah, well we obviously realised that people were coming from Manchester, primarily; Liverpoolians were coming to the west side of the 'divide' (!). But they were coming from Manchester – out of terraced houses that were being demolished, so they had no gardens ... so they probably knew very little about landscape. We, obviously, through the ranger service in particular – they didn't have that initially – wanted those people to understand that they were being given gardens, they were being given this new landscape – so there was a lot of talks given by the rangers, displays in the ranger cabins that explained a lot about the new landscape.

I remember getting lots of letters from residents saying how wonderful it was, how great that they'd moved from an area with no landscape, and they were getting this ... beautiful landscape, new forest – even though they were only whips, still – they did understand that they would grow into trees, and it would be – they could share the *vision* with us. I think the 'sense of place' – I think basically we wanted it to be a forest, really, we wanted the buildings to be sat in a forest. That was the main 'sense of place'. That didn't come straight away, that wasn't something that Rob and Duncan said initially, but gradually we realised what we were achieving. But it needed, obviously, this plan that we all stuck to. So that little plan I sent to you, with all the green – we actually, and I think that was my job, to make sure that we all achieved that. So I programmed all the work; I knew when we had to let a contract for different areas, I was involved with all the engineers and they would say when they would release the piece of land when *they'd* finished with it, I had to be in there straight away, getting it planted. So it was really like having one big jigsaw, that I was the "chief jigsaw man" (!) – and there were lots of other people having a piece of the jigsaw to put into that place. And I think it then – I mean, I was the one who called it Birchwood Forest Park, because I'd read about forest parks in Holland and I think we needed something to "what are we going to call the whole of this landscape?" As it happened – the main district part became the one with the name on the door; you couldn't put "Birchwood Forest Park" on the golf course and the expressways but they were all part of-

SF: Part of it, yeah – which is something I now appreciate, having seen these photos that you sent me.

DC: The district park was the core of the parks, if you like – that's where the ranger building was, that's where the carpark was. But you could go out from there and walk along the rest of it – and of course, Risley Moss had its own identity as well. But I think that was the main 'sense of place' – but then, each residential area had its own sense of place as well – the designs for Oakwood were very different for the designs for Gorse Covert; Gorse Covert, again, a little but more formal, like an 'avenue' approach. Locking Stumps – the designs evolved with the design of the housing, there was a landscape architect involved with different residential areas, there was a Gorse Covert landscape architect, Locking Stumps landscape architect – and Rob Tregay was the Oakwood landscape architect. And you have to give the landscape architect some freedom of expression. But they were working with architects who did have a say in it as well, they'd be wanting to say, well I'd like a bit of formality. And so I think the 'sense of place' came from architects *and* engineers, and landscape architects all working closely together.

SF: Do you think there was a sense of a consideration of the way that the three, Locking Stumps, Gorse Covert, Oakwood – connected, as regards the residents? I'm thinking about the social aspect, once people had moved in, how they're going to relate, come together, in different social spaces?

DC: No I don't think we did think about that too much. I think Gorse Covert was primarily private housing. Politically, these things change as well so Oakwood was primarily housing for rent,

social housing as it's probably called now – with some private elements, but Gorse Covert, by that time, politically social housing, was becoming more taboo – “we want more private housing here”. I don't think we could have had much influence on that. So, you've got a different style of landscape, as well – private housing almost demands more private space for themselves, social housing people say “you look after this space for me”, and so Oakwood was smaller gardens, but perhaps bigger areas of communal landscape –

SF:- yeah –

DC: Whereas Gorse Covert, a lot more private properties with front gardens, car park outside, own drive. And more difficult a challenge for the landscape architect, in the private housing. And it still had its little parks, school, and there was some social housing but it was more retirement properties. So I don't think we did have a great deal of help in the interaction between the different communities in that way. But obviously the landscape in Gorse Covert was definitely governed by the landscape architect, still, one of the ecological landscape architects, him and Rob and Duncan were very much involved in that side of it, they wrote papers together on it – one of the papers I sent to you was written by a guy called Roger Greenwood as well as Rob Tregay and Duncan Moffatt. And Rob Tregay's wife was very much involved in- she wasn't his wife *then* but she was very much involved in Locking Stumps, she was the landscape architect for Locking Stumps-

[...]

SF: what did you think would be the benefit for residents, of the ecological planning approach?

DC: Well I think they would get a more 'instant' landscape; because what we did was a lot of what we call 'advance planting'; so we actually planted out in Oakwood before the houses-construction was started. So that was one of our big policies, was to try and get the landscape in. Gorse Covert, as well, we planted Gorse Covert – I've got slides of Gorse Covert planting which looks great, not a house to be seen! So advance planting, so when people *arrive*, there were leaves on trees – they weren't very *big* trees but! I think that was important, that people didn't come to a demolished site, basically. I think they could then, they respected the landscape much better. And if we were just putting it in while they were there, I don't think they would have shown the landscape the same respect. So I think that, instant, obviously, the ecological planting, goes quicker than ornamental stuff; it's cheaper, obviously, to buy the trees, as well, people are not necessarily worried too much about that, but it's getting that instant impact which I think they liked. They felt they were coming to something green and pleasant, straight away. So they were not just planting, there were grassy areas as well, in advance. And we just – we had to really know where the housing was going to go, so that was really important that we get the engineers surveying all the sites, and we protected it all with fencing – and woe be tide anybody that- ! Duncan, the ecologist, was a *very* strong character – if anybody'd gone on his trees- He eventually became landscape manager as well, he managed the plantations as well and he was very fiery so, no-one would dare stand on his trees!

SF: [...] When you do the planting, it's there, residents move in – what control, really, have you got then, do you just sit there and hope, that the kids aren't going to be knocking trees down (!) –

DC: Obviously, as I say, we fenced it off ... we used to buy bulk rolls of, it's called cleft chestnut fencing, it's like a stick on a wire-

SF: I remember them, yeah.

DC ... we had our own direct labour force, as well, when, so I used to buy it and supply it direct to the contractors because, obviously, you buy in bulk, you get it cheaper. And we could control the quality of it, and the design of it – you could get cleft chestnut fencing in different sizing, we want it to all look the same. And we would put notices up, and we did a lot of leaflet dropping as well, we had our little leaflets in all the parks, as well. And so there was a lot of marketing and promotion of the landscape by the landscape architects themselves and they obviously wanted – if you've designed and built something, you want to look after it. So they were regularly out on site, we had clerks of works on site all the time. So if people were deliberately vandalising it, we'd have had people seeing it, stopping it. But I don't think people *did*. It wasn't a major issue.

SF: No. People liked it, people respected it, they wanted to-

DC: We didn't get kids running riot I don't recall any major incidents. There might have been the odd one, but nothing major that we couldn't control. But we certainly did a lot of- through the ranger service, as well. The landscape architects would produce the little brochure – and the ranger service would do a lot of distribution. I think the ranger service helped in a *big* way.

SF: Oh yeah, that was like the mouthpiece wasn't it really? Going to schools-

DC: They helped in a big way to make sure the landscape was well looked after, they understood the landscape as well. They would have regular meetings with the landscape architect, and decide policies.

SF: So at any point, did you consider any negative effects of that planning approach, maybe density?

DC: I think I always worried that in the future that if it wasn't looked after then it could all be a bit of a disaster. We had one major problem with shopping trolleys – that was the thing that ... - Duncan especially, went *mad*, come in my office [grumbling sound] – so I left it there! – but they were shopping at Asda, it's a bit of a walk, and they would do their shopping and then they would just leave the trolley in the 'landscape'.

[...]

One of the problems of *natural* landscape is, it does collect litter more. So if you get shrubs that were nicely rounded off, the litter can sort of blow over it but when you've got vegetation that's

lots of branches, and prickly, then it collects litter. And so what I did at the time was set up, throughout the whole town, a litter-picking programme. So we had separate contractors to pick litter; I had to write a paper to the board and ask for funds to do this. [...] I did that in Runcorn as well, it was very successful – but Runcorn was a nightmare for litter and fly-tipping and dumping, so they- their responsibility was not just paper, it was anything that had been dumped. The only worry about doing that is if people know you've got that they tend to say, oh that's one way of getting rid of stuff ... I'll just put it in the bushes and they'll come and collect it. But it did keep the place tidy.

[...]

SF: What would Birchwood be without the landscape?

DS: Well I think I was helped by the chief estates officer. He went off to America to look at ... sites in America. But he was interested in business development, not really that bothered about the residential side. Birchwood Science Park was the first commercial science park in the UK – he went over to Silicon Valley and he saw how the Americans were putting big ... IBM ... businesses right in the middle of this lush landscape. And he said “that's what we need”. So when he came back and started to shout about landscape, that was the best thing that could've happened so Mr Binns [General Manager of WNTDC] obviously supported him -the chief finance officer didn't see it that way – but he said “look, if we want to attract big companies, they want to be sat in a nice landscape, for their employees to look out onto, to sit out in the summer” – and that's how Birchwood Science Park came about. So we got a nice landscape structure – and British Nuclear Fuels came there and built that building [...] twenty million pounds. And I remember going to the chief officer's and asking for twenty *thousand* pounds – to do the landscape structure in Birchwood Science Park and he said “it's going to cost a lot more than that!” And the chief finance officer was quibbling about it. And I brought this paper saying, “one building, twenty million – I'm only asking for twenty *thousand!*” It pales into insignificance compared with ...

SF: Is it an expensive business, landscape design? [...] one of the arguments you seem to use is 'actually, it's more economical, this ecological approach'. Was [the landscape of] Birchwood expensive to do?

DS: No. Compared with the buildings, it's peanuts, absolute peanuts. When you think, the Science Park now, with all those buildings on it, TEP's office is on it, that's just one – lots of really nice buildings on there. You've got Birchwood science Boulevard as well, that's a similar concept [...] twenty thousand is like a drop in the ocean. So It was always a very small sum of money. Obviously for things like Birchwood Forest Park would have been probably 200,000 to do all that work. But the finance officer had to do his job a bit like government now, making people work on a shoestring. But in the end, on the last day of the Development Corporation – I was working for Gillespie's then – we all came out the door and the [inaudible] door was closed and we all went across the road to the pub – the Town House I think it was called- and

he was in there with his finance guys and he came over to me and he said “David, you were right, and I was wrong”. I thought that was really good of him to say that. He said “I think what you’ve achieved is fantastic, and it’s brought a lot of business to the town”.

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