

The following is an edited transcript of my interview with Robert Tregay, Warrington New Town Development Corporation deputy chief landscape architect in the 1970's into the late 1980's. Interview was conducted on 16th November 2016 at the premises of LDA Design in Peterborough

RT: I grew up in Cornwall, and my interests were the natural environment, geology, geography, the world around me, and one of the things I always said to myself is, I always asked the question, well who plans where we all live? - and the answer then was probably a chartered surveyor or somebody who lays roads, and maybe a planner, and maybe an architect, and as I went through university, I looked at all of those, and a forester, and I thought, none of those are what I want to do. Just by chance, through an architect in Surrey who I went to see, I discovered landscape architecture and I knew instantly that that was what I wanted to do. Because it combines an understanding of the natural world with, um, art, design, creativity. And it gets things done, gets things built. So, I knew instantly, that's what I had to be. And so, that was the start of it, and the rest of it has just been a straight line from there.

[...] I did a postgraduate diploma at the University of Manchester, in landscape design, and one of the trips we did on the course was to go down the road to Warrington New Town to just, look at what was going on in a new town. In those days, in Warrington, it was very early days; looking back, everybody was young and it was a great era for the generation of New Towns, creating new places. And Warrington was particularly interesting because although the town of Warrington existed, all round the outside were a lot of military sites; the Burtonwood airbase, and in my case, where I started off, the Risley Royal Ordnance factory which was four hundred hectares, a thousand acres of derelict bomb factory and all that went with it. And there were various other sites as well, Bewsey airbase I worked on. And so on. And I was really taken with the opportunity and just applied for a job there, in fact I don't think I even applied for a job, because I just went to see them, because I did a summer job you see, and I worked on a country park, called ... what was it called? - anyway I did a design for a country park as a part of my summer project and then went back and just said "can I have a job?" and they said yes, I've never actually done a job interview in my life! I just had a chat with David Scott and he said "yeah, yeah" and then I started. Looking back, I must of been terribly precocious, because

obviously when you go as a student you know *nothing*, I went there absolutely full of zeal to change the world, it was incredible, looking back, how it all works, when I think of the contrast that we have here, with the control we have over staff and what they do. But basically, I was given Oakwood - "off you go, Tregay!" it was June 1975, there I was, penniless, long-haired, scruffy student, and I was given Oakwood. And as my student project I'd done work on urban forests so I became interested through the influence I think of Alan Ruff in particular, but also Ian Laurie. Ian Laurie published a book called "Nature In Cities" which was published in 1979, something like that, and I wrote a chapter in there, that was the first thing I think I wrote, which when I look back on it, was after about one year of work in Warrington, maybe two, I was just a student, but anyway, I wrote this chapter on Warrington and other things that I'd done because by then I was studying Holland and I'll come back to the influence of Holland and Sweden and so on. And I just had this amazing opportunity, basically. And we [...] had a project team consisting of architects, engineers, social development people, 'land' people, property people. And it was very good. In fact, the way it was constructed is very very similar to the sorts of project teams I work in now in the private sector when we build a 'private' new town eg. Waterbeach. It's constructed in a very similar way. So they were pretty good actually - the people who set it up, the people that led it - Hugh Cannings, who was chief architect and planner, really good guy, very supportive of what we did. So I was very lucky, [...] David Scott, who seemed to us very 'grown-up' and experienced but looking back he was probably only in his late twenties or something. He was the boss and he was a great boss.

[...] I think what I brought to the job, I'd already developed a philosophy, and we called it an 'ecological approach to landscape architecture'. By then I'd been, in 1974, I'd been on a study trip to Holland, I went with Alan Ruff and we looked at the first Westoever [?] Heempark in Amsterdam. We went to various other established heemparks and so on, and then I subsequently went every two years to Holland. [...] I looked at those throughout Europe and the UK, none quite like I developed but they were all influences. So I had to learn about forestry, I learned about wildlife - in addition to mainstream landscape architecture, and sort of put them all together. I think the other key influence was, we were at that time - and this wasn't all down to me, this was just the world we were in at the time - there was a big reaction going on, to what I first saw in my first years as a

postgraduate, so it'd be 1973-4, this was at the tail end of the GLC, Greater London Corporation - and they at that time were building the last of the 'concrete jungles', the big concrete high rise, deck access - that was just going on, late sixties, tailing off into the early seventies, and I think the world was beginning to say, we don't like this, we need to do things in a different way, we need to make housing that's more, that feels more like a traditional house, it's got a front and back garden, a front door, and this was the very very early days of working with nature. So this was Rachel Carson, David Bellamy, in his early years – [...]

SF: So do you see Oakwood, and your approach, as something that could you see any sort of examples in Britain?

RT: No. There was really nothing at that time. [...] There was an ecological park called the William Curtis Ecological Park, next to Tower Bridge - I think the Mayor's office is there now ![...] It was the early ecological parks idea. The thing that I reacted to, against the ecological parks is that they were never done by designers, they always look scrappy. So they were led essentially by wildlife and people[...]. So for me, design is a key element of this, you had to make these places beautiful, cared for, *looked* cared for - if they're going to work socially and ecologically. So all those influences came together, really, at that time. I pretty much started off in June 1975 with a thousand acres, the bombsite, altogether, Oakwood, which was four hundred acres, something like that - completely flat, I've got a photograph of it, completely flattened, I did my first planting contract in February 1977. Opposite or just south of what is now called Pipit Way or something like that, I can't remember the road name but I know exactly where it was, I've got photographs of it. That was planted with light standards, whips and shrubs, on this little plot of ground. And I also then had to develop ideas, because there was no topsoil, of ground improvement, and that's not that complicated. We happened to have some big lumps of leftover peat which had been scraped off the site, to get down to the clay, to build the bomb factory, these were in big heaps on the edge of it, and I used that as ground amelioration. So we didn't use any topsoil, this was one of the big innovations.

[...] we were driven by a concept, and the concept was, these linked woodland belts, established and managed along ecological principles, and to include people as a key element. And the overriding concept of 'nature on the doorstep',

and of people being brought back in contact with nature in their day-to-day lives. That was the overriding concept that people bought into. And then to establish that in a very purist way using ecological principles, native species appropriate to the area and so on. That's what people bought into. The question of ... well there's all this very dense vegetation close to people's houses, and issues of safety - they came later on. Because not having done it before - I mean it's obvious when you think about it, it's obvious but you don't necessarily think of obvious things *that* strongly at that time. If you'd asked me I'd have said well yes, it would be - not having lived through it I didn't know what it means. And what it meant was, people had to get to windows to clean them. Well of course, you know - I didn't think of *that*. So that's one thing you learned, you need a path and you need some clear space. And then issues of safety did come up, well actually we *did* know about that, what we did was we set the vegetation back and there was always grass strips and the grass strips were always mown next to paths because it .. you need space, it needs to look cared for. So we didn't go for the Louis Leroy approach from Holland - the 'wilderness' approach; this was not wilderness, it was still managed nature, and had to be there. And also I think in through the design and the design of vegetation structure, which is what Roland Gustavsson's influence was, you thought about views and you thought about safety. I mean, in one or two cases there was a path that linked the northern edge of Oakwood in to Locking Stumps; I think that was widened out a little bit and there was lighting put in, initially you didn't have lighting on some of these connecting footpaths. So there was work went on afterwards - but the essence of it remained the same and people came to accept that woodland as part of their environment.

[...]We started out with the idea that people are rooted in their landscape. And that the connection with the land, and landscape is a very important part of ... being human - rightly or wrongly - and that therefore, the landscape, then, would help root people to place and a landscape with a strong sense of identity, through its ecology, through relating it to soil types and so on, having Risley Moss Nature Reserve on the doorstep, having wildlife and birdlife on your doorstep would help people root themselves to that place, through nature. Now, whether that's true or not I don't know –

[...]

SF: I think that's - what I've found, through the three interviews - okay, not representative samples but - everybody very much relates to the idea of Birchwood as a green space and knowing, and being happy that that is the case, the change of seasons, and you feel closer to wildlife and so on. That is very much a part of what they appreciate about the place. And then there's all these other issues that I think are really interesting about identity, when social class comes in to it. So the way that the inner ring road of Glover road in Locking Stumps is - the Development Corporation houses on the inside and privately owned on the outside of that 'ring', and there's a social class differentiation there [...] And there's all these subtle things and there's actually a thing about Scousers and Mancunians! So there's all these other influences coming into the 'sense of place' but people will go back to the green space. And actually the first person, the first resident I interviewed, who lives in Violet Close in Locking Stumps is doing a master's degree in ecology at the moment. And she worked for Risley Moss for a bit and I just think that it's all part of her identity, the place, quite deeply.

RT: Well that's wonderful, because that was the plan, without .. as I say, we were naive and young. The social aspects and the things you've just talked about, about identity, from density, whether you're a Scouser or ... I have to say, all that - *now* I understand it, of course, now I'm grown up - *then*, would have flown over my head. I was just, you know - an idealistic kid from Cornwall. I knew nothing about Scousers! I knew nothing about *anything* other than the way I'd grown up. So I simply, and at that age - and I'm sure, presumably it applied to a lot of other people. We knew ... our own class, if you like, we knew our own communities. I knew nothing about Liverpool or Manchester, *really*. So I wouldn't have appreciated these things.

SF: But then I suppose the way that the development corporations operated was, there *were* these social development officers, the actual jobs where - let's actually create a little bit of cultural centre here with the spectrum arena, it's almost somebody else's job - to kind of think about these things.

RT: Well, yes and no, because I think what I said I wouldn't have been aware that over here was a rented sector, because I worked on all those projects, and here was a private one - I wouldn't have registered, socially or politically, I would have registered it from a design viewpoint[...] for me they were all just people living

in houses. Now, the social development department was very interesting - SDO as they were called, social development officer, chief social development officer and the social development department - their job was to try to build community. I can't tell you exactly how they went about it but they would have done things like helping set up, making sure the community spaces - making sure that was used, all that sort of stuff. But what we did, we had a very specific role, and it was very overt, and this was part of the ecological approaches - the ecological approach was not just about wilderness and nature. It was *equally* about people. And I was particularly interested in children, and children's development, and environmental education. So actually I took on a lot of that stuff. I couldn't have done it alone - there must have been someone else doing it as well but I was very very interested and I ended up running the ranger service, I ended up ... - without knowing anything about it, so I learned from the ranger service to be quite honest. It was Ian Parkin who set it up, to his credit. Ian Parkin set up the ... I think we said it was the UK's first ranger service and one, after New York, the world's first urban ranger service, I don't know if it was true but that was what we used to say.

[...]Our rangers were, oh, all interesting people - anyway, towards the end, in the mid-early eighties I ended up in charge of them - without knowing anything about them, I learned a lot from them, they were good people and I learned a lot from them. And so that included the park ranger service for each of the parks and Risley Moss. And I'd already been running Risley Moss but I wasn't in charge of the ranger service, I came in charge of it along with sculpture projects and all sorts of other things. And I also set up an environmental education trust called the ... I remember what it was called, I don't know if it's still there - the North Cheshire Urban Studies Trust, or Urban Education Trust - something like that... North Cheshire Environmental Education Trust - that's what it was called. And I set that up, actually - set up the trust and everything, without knowing anything about trusts. I just got a lawyer to do all that.

[...]SF: The changeover from the development corporation to the, ultimately, the Borough Council - did you ever feel, or fear, at the end of the eighties that something might be being lost or management might change or the ethos would be watered down or ...

RT: Oh it was hugely the case. Because the ... - prior to the handover, the parks department of that time, and I'm being recorded so I have to be careful what I say ... we didn't have a lot of confidence that that ethos would be taken on and we couldn't see any way that it *would*, and here was nothing we could do about it. But I think what's happened is, subsequently, the 'old guard', which are the traditional parks department, who're actually probably very good at traditional parks department stuff - they had nurseries and they did bedding plants and trees and so on. And I think they were very good at it, probably. And then all this stuff came along and it was quite difficult, to take over a great big whole town, with a different ethos. Because the people that came from the parks department are very very different background and ethos to what they were being presented with. But they must have taken on some people there that *did* understand it because you look at it now and ... somebody knows what they're doing. So, somebody made those decisions when the 'old guard' left and new people came in, younger people who understood it.