

TAMING NATURE

Tree surgeon ANDREW STEWART offers a personal reflection on how money and power affect ideas about land management.

On a warm summer's day about thirty-three years ago, I climbed my first tree as a tree surgeon, at Hadspen House, near Castle Cary in Somerset. We were working on the ridge above the house, where a Corsican pine avenue stood either side of an earth track, and a grassy expanse separated aged oak and ash woodlands. A pair of gnarled veteran oaks stood in the field, festooned with contorted, iron-hard deadwood.

Harness on, I was shown two of the three knots a tree surgeon needs, bowline and prusik, tying the latter from the tail of the former. (The third is a carter's hitch, for tying down a load or winching). I was to climb a copper beech, tie-in, then lower myself down, just for practice. The beech needed no work, something that would later change drastically. When I reached the top I sat on a branch amongst the dark burgundy foliage and slung the end of the rope through a fork. I realised then I had forgotten the knots. I called down for help but my teachers had wandered off.

The extent of our occasional work back then involved making trees safe over the garden car park, summertime woodland clearance, winter replanting, and felling for timber. We thinned an east-facing stand of quality ash, some 30 metres tall. The natural regeneration meant wading rather than walking through the wood. One lunchtime I stopped early and sat on a log. A hare ambled in from the bright harvested cornfield beyond the hedge and stood two metres in front of me sniffing the air. We contemplated each other for ten minutes before it loped away, disturbed by a vehicle horn announcing lunchbreak. In winter 1993, south of the A371, ten of us lined up with sacks of whips and set off planting a native tree avenue nearly half a mile long, now marked on ordnance survey maps.

Paul Hobhouse owned the estate at that time, and lived in the house. A Canadian couple managed the garden, with its renowned *hosta* collection. A friend's daughter ran the tearoom in the scruffy old gardener's cottage. A cabinet maker had his workshop in the low barn behind Laundry Cottage where he lived with his partner and daughter, next door to a long-resident old Scottish couple. Belted Galloways and sheep grazed before the house, where an occasional cricket match was fought between local pubs. Permissive paths criss-crossed the estate for dog walkers and ramblers.

A Fashion for Subjugation

In oak years, those two gnarly oaks up on the ridge were barely out of nappies when lawyer Henry Hobhouse II, ancestor of Paul and nephew of 'successful' Bristol merchant Isaac, bought the estate in 1785. Isaac Hobhouse owned ships that plied the Triangular Trade, from Bristol to West Africa, from there to the Caribbean, then back to Bristol laden with tobacco and sugar.¹

There are figures for the 'commodities' shipped from Africa to the Caribbean on the infamous middle passage between 1722 and 1747. The difference between human cargo embarked



Hadspen, 1910. The horse-chestnut at top right was felled by the author in 2017 to make way for the formal garden design.

(19,068) and disembarked (15,554) is 3,514. All such numbers around the slave trade are tragic and iniquitous, but those 3,514 people, discarded somewhere between the bight of Biafra and Montserrat, constitute one of the most heartbreaking.²

Others had owned Hadspen before Henry bought it with money inherited from Isaac. William Player, another lawyer, was the first in the 1680s. Workers directed by Player built the house, and laid out his new garden along classical lines, following contemporary fashion. Though England's aristocracy are largely of Norman-French descent, their houses and estates are often Italian. Stourhead, Stowe, and Basildon Park are all Palladian, as was Hadspen.

The lineage of these influences leads back to Renaissance north-east Italy, where city merchants, also flush with vast import-export profits, bought surrounding land and had rural palaces built. Their gardens became idealised spaces where paths, beds and topiary were intended to demonstrate human control, cosmic harmony and, most important of all, their owners' prosperity. Under the patrician direction of wealthy men who presumed to know best, nature was tidied up, or, to put it another way, subjugated, like the evicted peasants, victims of this transition from feudalism to capitalism.

Henry's builders extended Player's house, and his gardeners altered the grounds. By this time, the late 18th century, fashion had changed and English designers, like Humphrey Repton, sought to merge such houses' grounds into the wider, yet still manufactured, surrounding countryside. Nature was 'improved' and became a garden.

Like their Italian forebears though, these estates remained elaborate displays of wealth and power, reflecting their owners' innately superior attributes. The Arcadian parks became forms of "conspicuous consumption which shone with the malignant glamour of money".³



Hadspen now, with the new vegetable garden in the foreground.

Extreme Tidiness

The Hobhouses owned Hadspen until Niall, son of Paul and his first wife Penelope, sold it to ‘Koos’ Bekker in 2013 for around £12million. George Monbiot says every billionaire is a policy failure. On this year’s ranking of the 2,668 global billionaires, Bekker, with \$2.3billion, comes in at number 1,341.⁴ He made his money in South African publishing, media, and e-commerce, and by investing in Chinese multinational Tencent. His farm/hotel outside Cape Town, Babylonstoren, grows grapes, coffee, and tea. Hadspen, his English version, has apples, cheese and venison.

Over the years I have worked for several mega-wealthy people. They may not be a representative sample, but they have all shared an obsessive urge to impose order on the natural environment. Bekker’s reimagining of Hadspen has taken this compulsion to new extremes.

Tree surgery is a particularly embedded job. You dwell in nature again, within the landscape rather than as a detached observer outside it. Up close and personal with these extraordinary plants and their occupants, the world is seen from the tree’s perspective, an experience deepened by knowledge of how it exists and functions. Trees add another layer over their entire surface area every year, requiring enormous energy and resources. This is why veteran oak trees appear to be dying from the top down; they cannot support all their limbs, so shut down the higher ones to concentrate on maintaining less distant lower branches. What remains above dies and becomes long-lasting deadwood, a vital habitat. It’s also why trees’ trunks put out lower, leafy epicormic growth – literally setting something aside for old age.

At Hadspen, implementing Bekker’s vision meant removing all deadwood and epicormic. This applied not just in the formal gardens; woodland, hedgerow and field trees were all subjected

to this extreme tidiness. The scrub beneath was strimmed or flailed into submission by manic little Bobcat machines.

Ecologist Aaron Ellison argues it is wrong to think of nature in balance.⁵ On the contrary, organisms battle to survive against ceaselessly changing conditions – weather, water, pests. Introducing additional stress into this system, through faulty human notions of order, actually creates the opposite; chaos. Species leave or die, biodiversity declines, disease enters.

Yet, devolving from individual private ownership and control, an ersatz landscape aesthetic endures, as Hadspen shows – 500 years old and counting. The poet Cowper, in 1785, noted that estate “improvements” were “fed with many a victim”.³ The direct casualties are obvious, but ultimately everything is harmed; the accelerating chaos is clear to all who care to notice.

Enter The Newt

The estate is not called Hadspen anymore. It’s now “The Newt in Somerset”. Before the extensive building work could begin, planners insisted the resident newt population be protected, frustrating and delaying Bekker’s plans. Several miles of thick black plastic fence, about 60cm high, was erected to shepherd the newts down to a new small lake. Years afterwards, the fence was rolled up and thrown in skips, and Hadspen House was renamed in honour of the spared amphibians.

The newts were the lucky ones. Like most woodlands these days, Hadspen’s are weirdly quiet. This is unsurprising, as former residents’ habitats and feeding sites have been systematically excised. Red and fallow deer now occupy the old ash woodland – any chance of natural regeneration ended. Besides, the ash – diseased and out of favour with Bekker – are being methodically removed, no matter Forestry Commission advice to the contrary.



Left: Hadspen under Paul Hobhouse's ownership, before 2013. The large trees shown here – tulip tree, chestnut, copper beech, ash – have now gone. Right: Hadspen now. This impressive new vegetable patch, unlike the old walled garden, is exposed to the prevailing south-westerly.



I felled an ash by the glass-fronted restaurant. A new path was under construction and a major root, torso-thick, had been severed. A metre or two's re-routing would have avoided this. A two hundred year old plane was felled to make way for an estate road. A specimen Monterey cypress, not native, but impressive nevertheless, was felled for the car park. These are just the most obvious examples. Questioning such decisions apparently made me "sentimental". These trees and their embedded networks of flora and fauna are the lost and unknown victims of Bekker's schemes.

Capital, not Ecology

In YouTube videos 'Newt' staff now eulogise about the estate's richness as they collect fungi beneath trees I climbed to peel off ivy and to remove branches, epicormic, deadwood and hollow stubs where birds and bats might have fed, roosted and nested. A few performance habitats have taken their place – bird and bat boxes are visible in the denuded trees. Although fungi live largely underground, at Hadspen even this does not ensure safety. Hillsides have been moved, terraces constructed, slopes graded, roads re-routed, tunnels dug, and miles of new tracks laid. The aesthetic imperative overrides more profound, holistic considerations. The richness on display here is capital, not ecological.

In 2016, at lunchtimes, I used to sit in the truck and count the diggers I could see: usually about 20. They were there for years. I looked across the fields where we played cricket, now scraped and laid with hardcore for the contractors' vehicles and pre-fab offices. Thirty-six tonne stone lorries came and went all day, every day, first to bring the stone, then to take it away again. Once, I watched a hare make its way through a field away from all the disturbance, stopping now and then to decide where to go. I lost sight of it as it hopped along the edge of the A371.

'Providing jobs' was claimed to be the rationale for all this, and still is now that the hotel/spa/gardens are finished. (The cheapest room I could find online cost £595 for one night.) Bekker hasn't stopped. He continues to buy up surrounding land and houses that take his fancy, paying above the market price, perpetuating a private property paradigm that locks out locals and exacerbates an already etiolated sense of community. One farmer declined to sell; "Where would I go? If a house

comes up in the village he'll buy it, won't he." Another woman was affronted Bekker *hadn't* expressed interest in her house.

Bekker was approachable. He was curious about tree surgery, admiring of the bravery and skill. I argued the case for epicormic and deadwood, and wrote a report about veteran tree care. I suggested that an estate tree nursery using collected seed would be better than importing semi-mature trees, root balls the size of small cars, on low-loaders from the continent. Once, as we walked along the ridge reviewing the work done tidying the pine avenue and that pair of oaks, now shorn of deadwood and epicormic, I challenged him on the removal of the increasingly scarce habitat. He listened, but insisted his plans be executed. The birds, he reasoned, could feed elsewhere. I wish I'd asked, "What happens if 'elsewhere' has also gone?"

Around 2017 I refused to work there anymore. I'm lucky I could make that choice. I no longer came home sick to my stomach with what I'd had to do for money. This is where the 'jobs' excuse wilts. When a mega-rich capitalist engages in this kind of spending they may create jobs, but only as an incidental result. Yet somehow the credit still accrues to them, and the nature of the work is rarely questioned. "Think of all the jobs", people still say. "Yes, but..." I reply, and explain the damaging consequences. "Still, looks lovely doesn't it", comes the reply. Money's malignant glamour shines on.

At the top of that beech 33 years ago I did work out those knots and lower myself down, slightly nervous I had tied them right. Turns out I had, I'm still here, unlike the beech itself. But two things occur to me now about Hadspen. First, it strikes me that others would benefit from lowering themselves from their lofty perches down to ground level. Second, looking at those photographs, all taken from roughly the same spot, I wonder, "Which landscape contains the most newts?"

SOURCES

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3. Daniels, S., (1993), *Fields of Vision*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
4. <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>
5. Ellison, A.M., (2013), 'The suffocating embrace of landscape and the picturesque conditioning of ecology,' *Landscape Journal*, 32/1. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/28945366.pdf> See also Cosgrove, D. (1984), *Social formation and symbolic landscape*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press