

## The first landscaper

Whilst admiring one of the great vistas to be found in Windsor Great Park, with the magnificent long distant views of the castle standing on its hill surrounded by a scatter of ancient oaks, roundels and younger trees in the foreground, I ask the question “who really was our first landscaper?”. Who was the first person to appreciate such a parkland landscape?. Was it in fact William the Conqueror when he stood on what we now call Castle Hill and looked around all points of the compass where the chances are he saw the surrounding countryside as what today we call parkland.

Did he decide to build on Castle Hill not only for the well known reasons such as defence, protection, and the excellent hunting possibilities offered by such a landscape but also because of the view? Was he in fact our first landscaper?

A very recent concept put forward by Frans Vera is that our original vegetation cover of Europe was not the popularly held belief of wall to wall forest but actually a mixture of parkland, savannah and scrub interspersed by patches of woodland groves. Many would say “sounds very similar to our present day landscaped parks.” To many naturalists and arboriculturalists, Vera’s concept has been well received. (exciting). It answers so many questions about the anomalies found in the dense forest hypothesis. Many now consider the Vera landscape concept to be a landmark revelation and have named it ‘Vereland’!

For landscapers and arborists alike, it solves the burning question of why all trees prefer to be open grown and then go on to perform much better. An open grown tree with its far greater area of leaf surface is obviously much more efficient at gathering energy from the sun than a woodland tree with its much smaller crown. Not to mention the added benefits to mankind today as a carbon sink and producer of oxygen.

Returning to the open grown tree there is a fascinating old saying ‘the oak tree grows for 300 years, rests for 300 years and spends the next 300 years gracefully expiring’. It is interesting to speculate all those centuries ago was this person ever our first tree observer. Our views of trees and tree planting stem from this observation. Linnaeus, the great naturalist, watched jays collecting acorns and burying them for their winter larder – some of which went on to become open grown oaks. He named the jay *Garrulus glandarus* which could be translated as chattering acorn gatherer.

Who was the first landscaper? Was it nature or was it man? We know many of the famous landscapers built on mediaeval landscapes so should we go further back in time?

Leaving reality behind, it is perhaps worth considering that the great oaks growing naturally in a parkland setting in any concentrations that William the Conqueror had ever encountered were perhaps the trees he saw on his arrival in the UK. (Battle Abbey) We recognise today that ancient trees in any numbers are an extreme rarity outside the UK right across continental Europe north of the Mediterranean. If our ancient trees were the first he encountered did they stir the same emotions as experienced by such people down the ages as John Muir when he saw the giant sequoias in California. Inspiration, great pleasure, excitement etc presumably followed by

tremendous urge to protect and conserve so that others that follow might share in their magnificence and beauty. Some might say not unlike the UK's band of brothers the Ancient Tree Forum / Woodland Trust partnership.

And in fact it is well known by our neighbours to the point where even individual trees of any reasonable age and stature can be found on maps and often given an impressive name such as Chene de Jupiter in the great forest of Fontainebleau. It is a sobering thought that in Fontainebleau there are less than 10 trees that remain in the 10,000 ha of commercial forest that even begin to reach the majesty and stature of this giant impressive oak and unfortunately now dead.

The ATF WT partnership statement says that we wish to see no further avoidable loss of ancient trees.

In this context these charities would be considered as conservation bodies and the Oxford dictionary "conservation – preserve, keep from harm". No where are there words or phrases such as "creation, recreation or restoration" however when these words are included in the definition then surely landscape architects join the ranks of conservation.

Conservation is generally viewed by the public by those concerned with wildlife and the wider countryside. Many in the landscape architect profession might comment of course we have always been conservationists so what is the point that is trying to be made?