

Forging new arb careers through community forestry

If there's ever been a time to promote the importance of trees – to people's health and wellbeing, as a crucial means of mitigating the detrimental effects of the climate emergency, and as essential wildlife habitats, to name just a few benefits – then it could be argued that time is now.

While trees, and especially tree planting, have been firmly put in the public consciousness (for example, through national initiatives such as the Queen's Green Canopy), most people who are not already working with trees are unfamiliar with the word 'arboriculture'. This lack of awareness partly explains why anyone interested in starting a career in our sector can face one or two challenges in getting a foot in the door.

Once such path for arboriculture newcomers has recently been forged in Sheffield, thanks to funding provided by the Green Recovery Challenge Fund, the Woodland Trust and South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. This funding has enabled Sheffield City Council to reinstate its Community Forestry team (funded up to 2023), as well as partnering with Sheffield & Rotherham Wildlife Trust (SRWT) to create new trainee positions in Urban Forestry.

Three of the team, Jess, Joe and Stella, who are all new to arboriculture, share their perspectives about their work and their hopes for future progression in the sector.

Jess Eaton-Fearne (Urban Forestry Trainee – SRWT)

'In April 2021 I started working as an Urban Forestry Trainee thanks to the Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The role involves studying part-time for a Level 4 Diploma in Arboriculture with The Training Tree and gaining valuable work experience with both the Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust and the Community Forestry team at Sheffield City Council.

'Since I started, I've felt like a sponge, absorbing information wherever I can. There are so many fantastic resources available online and in books, through webinars and forums, that it has made learning enjoyable and consistent. I notice so much more about trees now than I ever did before, with a greater understanding and appreciation of how these majestic organisms work.

'One of the things I love about the job is getting out and about. Whether it's carrying out a site visit, meeting somebody new and hearing their expertise about trees, or planting trees on a community planting day, I much prefer having a job that allows me to get outside some days and be connected with nature – unlike the 9–5 desk-based job I was in previously.

'If anybody is considering a move into the arboriculture sector but is a bit daunted by all the changes that would mean for them, be assured that this is definitely a good one. Feeling tired at the end of the day because you've been walking for hours through woodland is a much better feeling than being tired from staring at a screen for eight hours! My mind and body are thankful.'

Joe Thomas (Urban Forestry Trainee – SRWT)

'Having graduated in 2020, I was very fortunate to begin my career with an exciting role as an Urban Forestry Trainee with the Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust. As part of the role, I am studying for a Level 4 Diploma in Arboriculture, which I've found to be the perfect opportunity to specialise the knowledge I gained from my rather broad biology degree.

'As well as working with SRWT, the role is in partnership with Sheffield City Council's Community Forestry Team. This has given me a huge variety of opportunities to gain experience within the industry, from tree planting and maintenance events with the community, to caring for trees across the city. I especially appreciate the chances to shadow tree officers undertaking routine tree inspections and ash dieback surveys, understanding the biology of trees and how they interact with the world around them deeply interests me. I have thoroughly enjoyed many aspects of this role, and it has only inspired me further to pursue a career in arboriculture.'

Stella Bolam (Community Forestry Project Development Officer – Sheffield City Council)

'If you'd said to me this time last year that I'd be working in arboriculture, I wouldn't have believed it because I'd only recently decided to change my career. It was summer 2020 in the middle of a Covid lockdown, when my interest in working in the sector was sparked. Like many people I had already reconnected with nature on my daily walks in our lovely local parks. My interest in the tree sector was sparked by attending a Zoom webinar about arb careers for women, hosted by Sheffield Tree Week.



Left to right: Joe Thomas, Stella Bolam and Jess Eaton-Fearne.

'At that point, I was a self-employed copywriter, with a background as a journalist. My love for nature and trees in particular was deep-set from childhood and I'd grown increasingly environmentally aware.

'I was lucky to be able to get involved in some tree planting volunteering at Sheffield City Council, while being self-employed and studying Level 2 Certificate in Arboriculture. In 2021 year I was delighted to join the Community Forestry team and am studying for my Level 4 Diploma in Arboriculture, like Jess and Joe, but I'm self-funding my course

'Our team essentially works with community organisations and schools to plant trees and improve public green spaces. I've found that having my writing and marketing skills set has made some aspects of my role quite straightforward – for instance I've worked in digital communications for a long time so designing an eye-catching poster and creating text for social media posts to promote our planting events comes really easy.

'On the other end of the scale, getting to grips with a 4x4 pick-up van and ensuring all the logistics of tree planting are correctly followed has been a steep learning curve but I'm really enjoying the whole experience.

'Working outdoors and getting my hands dirty planting and caring for trees after so many years of office life is probably my favourite part of the role – as well as meeting and helping such a variety of people across the city who are interested in trees as I am.

'I know there are many paths that can be taken in arboriculture and I'm not sure what I'll be doing next. I'm naturally drawn to environmentally focussed work and have an interest in agroforestry, having up until recently volunteered in a sustainable food organisation.

'While in this role I've learnt about the practicalities of tree care, alongside my L4 studies. It's a position which has people at its heart too so I'm always mindful of the arb mantra, "Right tree in the right place" because I've realised that a person's negative or fearful attitude to trees can often stem from not following these wise words.'