News & Events

Oliver Rackham OBE
17 October 1939 – 12 February 2015

Ian D. Rotherham

When Oliver Rackham died suddenly in February 2015, his passing sent a shock wave through a vast network of researchers and enthusiasts interested in trees and woodlands. Many people were touched and inspired directly through Oliver or indirectly through his masterly writing.

Over a career spanning around 50 years, Oliver Rackham studied, in particular, British and Mediterranean landscapes and countryside, especially the trees, woodlands and wood pasture. He wrote and lectured on his chosen subjects with informed passion and a sharp, critical observation. His books and articles included the landmark, popular book The History of the Countryside (1986), The Last Forest (1989) on Hatfield Forest and many others, such as Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape (1976 and 1990), and his seminal Ancient Woodland: Its history, vegetation and uses in England (2003). His final ‘major’ book on British trees and woodlands was published in 2006 – Woodlands in the New Naturalist Series.

Rackham also studied and published extensively on the ecology of Crete and his volumes The Making of the Cretan Landscape (1996) and The Nature of Mediterranean Europe: An Ecological History (Grove & Rackham, 2003) are the definitive accounts.

The award of the OBE in 1998 for ‘services to nature conservation’ – amply deserved – was followed in 2006 by his appointment as Honorary Professor of Historical Ecology in the Department of Plant Sciences, University of Cambridge. He was made Master of Corpus Christi College on 15 October 2007 until 1 October 2008.

Oliver was passionate about his trees and woods, and up to the time of his death still gave lectures, ran regular field courses and even sought out new ‘tree’d’ landscapes to discover. At our ‘Trees Beyond the Wood’ conference in Sheffield (Rotherham & Handley, 2011), he sent his apologies because he ‘had a once in a lifetime chance to visit Ethiopia’.

With his passing, we have lost a giant in arboriculture and a huge inspiration for all who love trees, woods and forests. However, one senior colleague who knew Oliver well said to me that we should try not to mourn but rather to celebrate a lifetime of huge significance.

Additional references


Shaping new apprenticeships: have your say

The arboriculture, forestry, horticulture and landscape industries are set to benefit from new apprenticeships designed to supply companies with high quality talent.

The new pilot standards, known as trailblazers, have been developed as a result of a 2012 government review which found that there were key areas of the apprenticeship programme where substantial improvements could be made. The Trailblazers Apprenticeship standards will ensure apprenticeships are more rigorous and responsive to the needs of employers, with the aim of producing a fresh supply of talented entrants to all major UK industries.

Employers in forestry, arboriculture, horticulture and landscape are being urged to take part in a short consultation requesting their views on the proposed new apprenticeship standards. The consultation will run until 26 May 2015. The standards, which have been developed by various industry bodies led by Bartlett Tree Experts, outline key competencies, skills and knowledge required for apprentices.

In addition to technical content, there will also be a focus on work ethic and requisite behaviours for each role.

The employer-led apprenticeships will also serve to address recruitment issues which have often afflicted the sector, as apprenticeships will be available to both school leavers at the start of their careers and older people looking to change careers. Research by Populus, conducted for National Apprenticeship Week, shows that 80% of employers questioned feel that apprenticeships reduce staff turnover.

The economic benefits of apprenticeships are also clear. According to the National Apprenticeship Service, businesses who hire an apprentice report an average increase in productivity of £214 per week. Furthermore, apprentices often pay for themselves within a few years and can improve a company’s bottom line by boosting productivity. Government funding towards apprenticeships will also be available to encourage businesses to recruit apprentices. It is therefore imperative that employers in the forestry, arboriculture, horticulture and landscape industries are able to express their views on the Trailblazers Apprenticeship standards to ensure they are fit for purpose and result in a highly motivated, highly competent workforce.

Simon Rotherham, Managing Director of Beechwood Trees and Landscapes, commented: ‘As a company that already employs apprentices, we have found them to be a great asset to our business. Involvement in the development of this new apprenticeship scheme is vitally important to ensure that the learning criteria meet the requirements of both employers and learners.’

To have your say on what the future workforce will look like, visit the webpage where you can read the standards before completing a short survey.


The consultation closes on 26 May.