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## **A brief history of the Colne Valley as seen through *Tree People* (2014), the story of the Colne Valley Tree Society**

Geoffrey Cox

*In 1997, I moved to the Colne Valley in West Yorkshire and began volunteering with a local voluntary group, the Colne Valley Tree Society (CVTS), who plant trees in the valley most winter Saturday mornings. A few years later I began working as a music technology lecturer at the University of Huddersfield and gravitated slowly towards digital filmmaking in my own practice and research. Around 2010 these two activities were brought together as I began filming the activities of the Society for what was to become the documentary film, Tree People, a 45-minute film documenting its origins, development, activities and achievements. Consequently, I began to explore the history of the Society and the local area itself as I became aware of just how much of a difference their tree-planting activities over many years had made to the valley's landscape. This article explores the relationship between the historical and social context of the Society and its depiction in Tree People.*



### **Introduction**

Once a relatively barren and scarred, post-industrial area, the Colne Valley is, in its lower reaches, now quite heavily wooded, a 'green lung' for what is an increasingly densely populated area. This transformation is in no small measure due to the 300,000 trees planted by the Colne Valley Tree Society since 1964; documenting this work is therefore of considerable local historical importance. Though there is a strong ecological and environmental message in *Tree People* that may well provide possible encouragement for other groups anywhere in the world, it is not explicitly about this. Rather, it shows what can be done by a group of dedicated local volunteers over many decades who wanted, and continue to want, to make a difference to the environment in which they live – to soften it, to 'green it up' and mitigate the ravages of the industrial revolution by planting trees, and doing so in a place where the commonly accepted notion was that 'trees won't grow here'. Thus the film also concentrates on the detail of the landscape of the valley itself, as well as being a kind of audio-visual poem to the beauty of trees themselves.

## The Valley Landscape

In 1964 the Colne Valley was largely devoid of trees. GP Dr Derek Phillips, the founder of CVTS and originally from Jamaica, talked memorably in an interview in July 2012, of moving to the area in the early 1960s and waking up one spring morning wondering 'where are all the trees'? This motivated him to write a single sentence letter to the *Colne Valley Guardian*, 17<sup>th</sup> January, 1964, asking anyone with an interest in the growing of trees to get in touch with him (6). The response was encouraging and a meeting followed in which CVTS was formed. Retired millworker, Jack Duce, who attended that meeting, wrote a letter to the CVG (14<sup>th</sup> February, 1964) offering an explanation for the lack of trees, summing up that the story was a long and sad one, stretching across hundreds of years 'and has in the main been due to thoughtlessness and lack of foresight throughout that time' (6). This was not far from the truth. The lowland valleys that flank the Pennines would have been covered in dense forests of oak, pine, and hazel during the Boreal Period (c6,000 B.C.) and above the oak limit, what are now barren peat moors were probably covered in birch-hazel scrub (Beresford and Jones 1967, 44). Climatic change to a much wetter though still warm climate c5,000 B.C., led to the formation of the peat, spreading until well after 500 B.C. and much of the upland wood and scrub was overwhelmed. The development of farming during the Neolithic period inevitably led to the clearance of some lowland forests, intensified by Iron Age Man who 'occupied well-drained ground between the blanket peat and [the still wooded] valley bottoms' (46). The post-Roman period probably saw a decline in agriculture and a recovery of the forests to some extent; it is during this period that the last Romano-British stronghold outside of Wales existed - the Kingdom Of Elmet that covered an area roughly equivalent to the West Yorkshire area today. The Kingdom was overrun by the Angles from the neighbouring Kingdom of Deira in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century and the transformation of the woodland landscape of the Pennines grew apace as villagers very gradually but inexorably cleared the forest for agriculture, though for centuries villages were separated by dense, uncleared forest (Porter 1980, 20). It is to this period that we owe the local legend that a squirrel could travel the seven miles from Huddersfield to Marsden, at the head of the valley, leaping from branch to branch without touching the ground, whilst stags were hunted in those forests for at least two hundred years after the Norman conquest (Bentley 1947, 10). The increase in population by the Angles, then the Danes, Norse-Irish settlers and more generally in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries increased the pressure on the woodland and by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of dry stone walling of the Pennine moors, the landscape 'must have looked much as it does now though possibly with more deciduous woodland' (Beresford and Jones 1967, 46). Pictorial images of the area and other textual evidence certainly testify to a greater preponderance of trees at this time but the industrial revolution with its concomitant huge increase in population, infrastructure and pollution laid waste to those remaining woodlands. The Colne Valley was one of the major centres of the industrial transformation of England (if not the world) and formed a major part of the already well-established woollen industry of the area. The domestic, hand-loom based industry gradually then rapidly evolved to fully-mechanised working between 1770 and 1850 (Jenkins 1992, 280). By 1800 there were over one hundred large multi-purpose mechanised mills in the valley, deemed at the time as some of the largest in the world (Brook 1968, 71). The smoke from those hundreds of mill chimneys coupled with domestic coal fires led to a fairly poisonous atmosphere at times and CVTS members talk of dense smogs and poisoned soils even in the early 1960s when the woollen industry was already in steady decline. The still-blackened stone walls in the area are testament to this pollution. And so we reach the time of the founding of the Society, a time, notwithstanding the Colne

Valley's stark and picturesque rough beauty, of a mostly barren, industrialised valley, hillsides scarred and soils poisoned; a time when the common sense view was that 'trees will not grow here'.



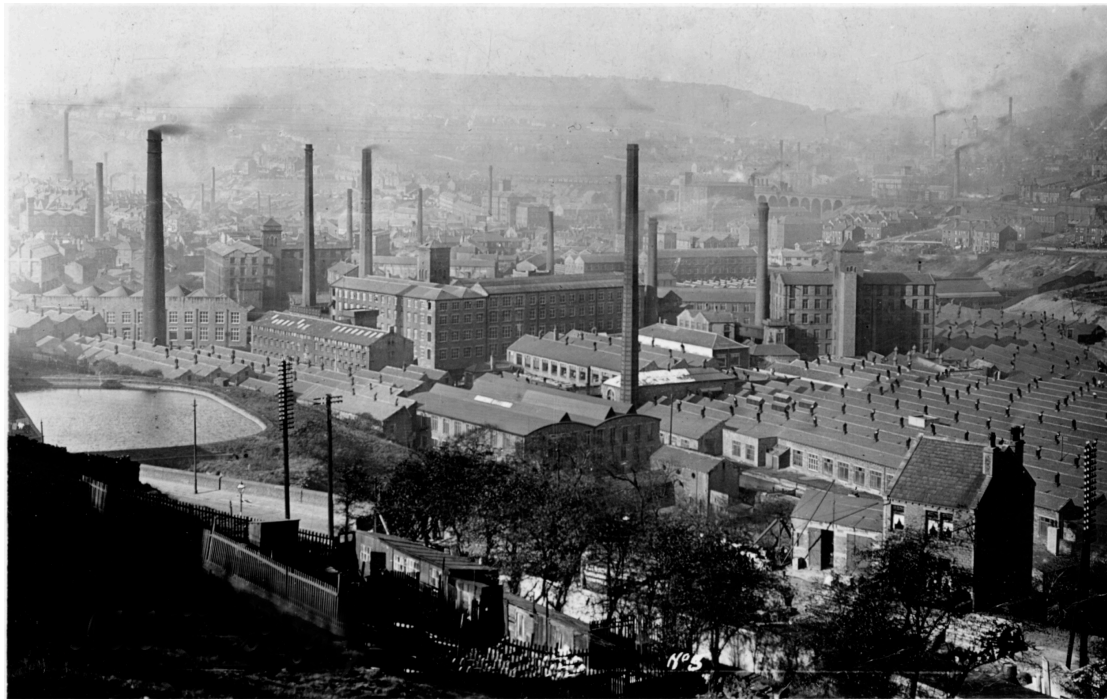
### **The Power of Memory**

This picture seems at odds with any idea that the depiction of the recent transformation of the valley landscape in *Tree People* is drawing on the nostalgic imagination of a past arboreal idyll, a nostalgic trope that has 'always been a part of the environmental movement [...] which [is often] fed by a romantic idea of a simpler holistic past' (Rehding, 2011, 412), given that at the time of the Society's foundation and for at least two centuries before that, the very opposite was true: the local legend of the squirrel leaping unhindered from tree to tree down the valley, is indeed just that, a myth, its cultural memory all but destroyed by hundreds of years of arboreal denudation. Nevertheless, whilst there *is* some element of appealing to a folk-memory of an ancient forested past in the film, part of the nostalgia is actually inherent in the showing of archive film footage of that industrial era, an era about which there is still much nostalgia locally as it represents a time of great endeavour, full employment and a thriving, bustling community. This nostalgia is heavily tempered however by an understanding that the industrial revolution also brought with it great poverty, class exploitation, harsh and short lives, terrible pollution and indeed, a total destruction of the naturally wooded environment. More importantly, the power of memory is also harnessed in the film for the people themselves, in their endeavour, belief against the odds, and in the Yorkshire 'no nonsense' trait of just getting on with it. Their pragmatic approach was simply to plant trees, to see what would happen. They found that the trees grew. Thus the Society's ideology of re-foresting the valley was not especially motivated by wider ecological concerns that were in 1964, somewhat politically nascent in any case. Many of those early CVTS members have now died and as Jack Duce said 'even if hundreds and thousands [of trees] are planted this year we ourselves will not live to see them reach maturity and beautify our valley, but that is no reason at all for not planting them' (CVG 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1964, 6). The very apparent tree cover in the valley today is testament to the vision and truth contained in these words, spoken in the film over shots of newspaper cuttings of the Society's achievements, including the ceremonial planting of the 200,000<sup>th</sup> tree in 1996, and



accompanied by sounds of current planting activity and valley ambience. This is a conscious attempt to evoke the 'power of memory' and 'nostalgic imagination'.

The *motivation* for planting trees is hopefully now clear, but it still needed a dedicated group of people to actually do it. So where does this singular vision, belief against the odds and endeavour come from? It would not be an exaggeration to say that the distinctive individualism and grass-roots activism of ordinary people of the area, over many centuries, is equally as remarkable as the huge transformation of the landscape itself.



### The Valley People

Like much of the Middle Ages, knowledge of the people of the area in much earlier times is very scant but there is no doubt that Celtic peoples inhabited the area within Elmet (established c400) and place-name and blood-group evidence suggests they generally stayed on when that last British stronghold was overrun by the English around 616, 'to contribute to the social framework of later centuries' (Porter 1980, 19-20; Breeze 2002, 164). A recent genetic survey led by Prof Peter Donnelly (2015) showed 'subtle but distinct differences between those sampled in West Yorkshire and the rest of the country' and that 'many of the genetic clusters we see in the west and north are similar to the tribal groupings and kingdoms around, and just after, the time of the Saxon invasion, suggesting these kingdoms maintained a regional identity for many years' (Ghosh, 2105). The distinctive West Yorkshire cluster shows a strong correlation to the area known to encompass Elmet. There is dispute about the meaning of the name Elmet: J.G.F. Hind supports the 'commonsensical' idea that it means elm wood (an early reference comes from Bede who described it as *Silva Elmete*, 'Forest of Elmet'), with the neighbouring Deira, from whence the English invaders came, meaning oak wood (Hind 1978). However, drawing on para-historical sources relating to possible Elmetian kings as well as philology, Andrew Breeze makes a convincing case that its meaning is rather different: '(those who) cut down many, the killers' (2002, 166). This reflects the legendary ferocious nature of the people of the area, drawn on by poet Ted Hughes who prefaces the first edition of his collection, *Remains of Elmet* by stating that 'for centuries it was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hide-out for refugees' (1979). Even as late as 1757 on a visit to the area, John

Wesley's diary records 'a wilder people I never saw in England [who] appeared just ready to devour us' (Hargreaves 1992, 189). Hargreaves labels the area 'a metropolis of discontent' during the industrial revolution with food rioting (1780s-90s), the Plug Riots (1842), Tenants-Rights protests (1950s) and most famously it was the centre of the violent and murderous Luddite rebellion of 1812 (189-90). Liberal candidate for the valley in 1951, Violet Bonham Carter characterised the people as 'hard-headed and warm hearted – the country is wild, bleak, bare' (Cole 2013, 81).

This paints a somewhat dark picture and must be balanced by the flip-side of that rebellious spirit, hinted at by Bonham Carter with her 'warm hearts', that reveals a place of great independent endeavour, community spirit and creativity. For two-hundred years or more the Huddersfield area and particularly the Colne Valley, has seen the 'existence of dozens upon dozens of sporting clubs, musical societies, political clubs, [naturalist societies] and churches [...] its citizens [...] active, community-spirited amateurs' (81). The numerous brass bands of the area earned it the name of the 'land of puff and blow'. Writing in 1908, a music journalist described the people of Huddersfield as giving 'probably more time to music than do those of any town of a similar size in England' (Russell 1992, 653). It is therefore no surprise that between 1820 and 1914, the Colne and neighbouring Holme valley produced over sixty amateur musical societies alone (1992, 654), the most prominent being the Colne Valley Male Voice Choir and the Slaithwaite Philharmonic Orchestra. The use in the score for *Tree People* of the local Slaithwaite Brass Band (formed 1819), probably the oldest in the area (Russell 1992, 662), is therefore no coincidence. This is not only because of the potential for 'the commemorative and community-building powers of music [being used] in the service of ecological approaches' (Rehding, 413) but because appealing to the power of memory is an 'area in which music is known to excel' (412): brass and wind bands have been part of the bedrock of amateur music making in the valley for 200 years, so can be immediately related to, by local residents at least, with a cultural memory of them extending deep into the past.



Importantly, these musical and other societies acted 'as an important force for social integration', bringing 'together a broad spectrum of social classes' (Russell, 660). As Russell points out, 'it is through popular leisure that communities develop key elements of both

their own self-image and that of others' and that 'what people do in their "time off" is a much more important historical issue than is sometimes appreciated' (675-6). In summary, Cole describes the valley as 'inspiring', its citizens positive, active and critical (and quoting one time local MP, Richard Wainwright), with 'a deep understanding of the needs of the individual citizen as against the state and big business' (2013, 82). There is a distrust of ostentatious wealth and the independent mindedness meant the valley was 'more resistant [...] to the stirrings of class consciousness [...] and [with] a distaste for class conflict [...] The professional, the employer, the waged labourer, the aged and the disadvantaged, all were part of the same community' (83-4). It is, of course, against this background and the history of amateur endeavour in the valley generally that a society such as CVTS came into being and indeed whose various and varied members down the years, fulfil Cole's description: current CVTS membership is indeed made up of all of the above, including those new to the area and from different ethnic backgrounds.

It is now hopefully easier to understand why and how a society such as the Colne Valley Tree Society could come into existence; how it could flourish and achieve much on a purely amateur basis, solely in its members' leisure time, with dogged bloody-mindedness, with a varied social make-up, (including the contribution of key 'in-comers', such as its founder and indeed, myself) and without overt political motivation. It is worth noting that the attitude of local people to this in 1964 was sceptical, the 'common sense' view being that 'trees will not grow here'. It was not hostile however and though there has been occasional vandalism and opposition to tree planting schemes by those whose own nostalgic vision sees the barren hillsides as the natural look of the landscape, as well as a gradual accommodation by the Society of the ecological concerns of bio-diversity, the work has been supported and encouraged by the local community and local authorities alike. As Jack Duce said in 1964, the society came together with the simple aim to do something about the comparative 'treelessness' of the valley: 'co-operation, not conflict, will solve the problems of the world today. The treelessness of Colne Valley is a problem that can be solved [...] it merely needs a start to be made here and to watch the results grow'.

*Tree People* is a positive film, showing how dedicated human action can engender recovery in a ravaged landscape. It draws on nostalgia to show how memory can be both a positive force for change as well as a complex conundrum. Trees are symbolic in many ways, not least because of their long lives, often outstripping our own and by hundreds of years. Thus there is a certain melancholy note in the film, especially towards the end, as it becomes clear that many of the pioneering tree people themselves have died and only saw the fruits of their tree-planting labours partially, if at all. This melancholy is present despite their understanding that this was 'no reason at all to not plant them'. But those fruits of their and continuing Society members' labours are obvious today and though it cannot be said that a squirrel can now jump from tree branch to tree branch down the valley's entire length, as in the days of Elmet, with the exception of the sprawl of the valley's larger villages, it almost can.

**Geoffrey M. Cox (March, 2015)**

*Tree People* is available on DVD for £7.50 (all proceeds to CVTS). Email [g.m.cox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:g.m.cox@hud.ac.uk) for details.



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