

# GREENER HOMES & BUILDINGS SHOW 2008

## THE LANDSCAPE INDUSTRY

### *At the Cutting Edge of the Green Agenda?*

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#### INTRODUCTION

*“The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age;”*

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

Ireland and the Irish have much in common with Wales and the Welsh, including the character of our fine landscapes, the passion and doggedness of our rugby teams, a respect for good beer and our heart-wrenching, sad songs.

I am passionate about landscape. I believe that our landscape, its quality and diversity is important for all of us, young, old and in between, it defines our distinctiveness. The landscape industry has an important role to play in shaping the landscape that shapes our identity.

I am not here to tell you what to do with your landscape. But I am here to share and exchange with you our mutual experiences and knowledge of landscape and the landscaping industry. My experience of the landscaping industry relates to the Irish scene, maybe it is better here in Wales?

When I qualified after 5 years study from UCD, Dublin with a degree in Horticulture in 1969, I thought I knew a lot. After 38 years involved in all aspects of the landscape industry in Ireland, initially as an award winning landscaping contractor with a small nursery and garden centre and latterly as a Landscape Design & Environmental Consultant and with an active life-long interest in environmental and heritage organisations; I realise how little I really knew back in 1969 and worse still, how much I have still to learn!

#### AGAINST THE ODDS!

Working in the landscape sector of the construction industry is rather like being on a fourth division team that gets through the first round of the FA Cup competition – people are amazed that you got that far, they are mildly supportive of what you have achieved against the odds and they expect that the big boys will wipe out before too long!

The landscaping industry had the original green agenda – even if it was sidelined into providing the green sauce for the main course most of the time. The green agenda has been hi-jacked by every Tom, Dick and Harry in recent years.

I will admit that the landscaping industry operates in frontier territory with its fair share of cowboys. But there are many good people involved who daily face demoralisation at the obstacles faced in the landscaping sector as contractors, nurserymen and women, landscape architects and designers, artists, botanists, town and country parks staff, suppliers, manufacturers and officials. I am speaking of the compacted subsoil, the contaminated topsoil, the savaged roots and branches of mature trees, the buried blocks, timber, re-enforcing iron, left-over concrete and the slash of the quantity surveyors cost-cutting knife!

My own frustration boiled over in 1994 when I called for a National Landscape Policy in Ireland – I attracted an audience of good people, but they were too few and I'm still calling! I thought such top-down action would move the goal posts. I also realised at the time that there was a bigger playing pitch out there, leading me to participate actively in the development and promotion of the European Landscape Convention – an extraordinary Council of Europe convention for the whole landscape and everyone living there – Ireland and the UK as ratifying states are committed to its implementation . I have made some very modest progress on both fronts through a range of initiatives.

I am here in Builth Wells as a member of the International Centre for Protected Landscapes team based in Aberystwyth, working on behalf of the Wales Assembly Government to assist Fforwm Tirlun, the Wales Landscape Industry Forum in a review / restructuring exercise to prepare the industry for the challenges that lie ahead.

### THE CUTTING EDGE?

It is important that the landscape industry be strongly represented at the Greener Homes & Buildings Exhibition, because it has a major role to play in the Green Agenda; in fact you could say it is at the cutting edge of that agenda.

Anticipating future trends is never easy as James Goldsmith, financier, so cogently observed “If you can see the bandwagon, you are too late!”

Forecasting bad news is not easy either and those environmentalist who have been forecasting global warming for many years were often treated like the boy in Aesops Fables who cried “Wolf” once too often. The Global Warming Wolf has been hiding in the forests, but now that we have cut them all down he is snarling his way down the hillsides chasing that lonesome bandwagon.

As this is the professional/industry day at the exhibition, I suspect that many are here because they recognise or at least suspect that the Green Agenda is going to be very important for construction industry – its businesses and professions in the future and they realise that there are changes coming down the line that will have implications for them,

if they are to sustain and grow their businesses and stay abreast of developments as professionals and officials. You will already have heard of various new environmental regulations and legal requirements that are here already or on the way.

### THE 'JARGON' FOG!

I have been involved with environmental movements and environmental issues for many years. One of the difficulties I have had is the proliferation of jargon words that the experts have lumbered us with, often obscuring and confusing the message for many people. You hear terms like local agenda 21, sustainability, zero carbon, carbon sequestration, ozone layers, ozone holes, resource depletion, climate change and global warming itself.

Global warming often can be the hardest one to grasp particularly if you are soaking wet and cold or you feel that January was every bit as long as it was thirty years ago. I spend a lot of time trying to translate these terms into easily digested images or examples.

I can describe global warming very simply. When I went into the landscape business at the beginning of the 1970's we did not commence cutting lawns until April and maybe even May and we stopped in October. There was a dormant season from November to March, when grass and trees and grounds-maintenance contractors took a well-earned rest. The leaves were all down by the end of October and did not begin to re-emerge until March. Now just 38 years later we effectively are cutting grass for twelve months of the year and trees like Birch and Alder are producing catkins in December before they have lost their last few green leaves!

### GREENING F-WORDS

Back in the seventies you wouldn't dare plant a whole range of tender and indeed exotic plants like eucalyptus, cordyline and even Griselinia hedging, because you knew they would be either killed or severely burned every winter by a combination of heavy frost and/or deep snow. The most important word in the reference books was 'frost-hardy'.

All of that is behind us, for the present at least, in the South of Ireland.

On the other hand just as one F-word melts away, another has come F-flooding in as was witnessed with the devastation suffered recently by the low-lying areas of England and Wales.

So global warming appears to be very manifest locally. Broadly, I am not quite convinced that we in Western Europe will suffer any more than we suffered in the past because of climate change, we will just suffer differently. But the ice caps are melting, I would not fancy the chances of those living on low-lying land and on a global scale the potential impacts are very serious and devastating for many people living in such areas - most of them already poor and impoverished.

## THE CAKE OF LIFE!

Sustainability is perhaps a more interesting and challenging word. I would suggest to you that sustainability is about achieving the impossible - having your cake and eating it at the same time.

The cake represents the resources of the planet – the air, water, soil, biodiversity on land and sea, minerals and metals, hydrocarbons, cultural heritage and human knowledge. Throughout the developed and developing world the human race is often described as the consumer society and we are certainly consuming the resources of the earth at an ever increasing rate.

I do not wish to sound like a doomsayer, but the reality is that you might usefully view planet earth as our communal bank savings account. It originally had an exceptionally healthy balance in the black – overflowing in fact. But we have been making hourly withdrawals for far too long and very few deposits. We have been like those poor sub-prime borrowers that are wreaking such havoc on our foolish, improvident banking systems.

If we haven't already received the 'letter' from the Planet Bank manager, calling us in for a chat, we can all expect one very soon. If we set about greening our homes, buildings and landscape we just might postpone that fateful day.

## FACING UP TO THE LANDSCAPE CHALLENGE!

But I have to ask if the Landscaping Industry is really at the cutting edge of the Green Agenda? I know that it should be, but is it? Yes, we cut our share of grass, hedges and trees – but that is not quite the cutting edge I had in mind.

Landscaping could have a major role to play in sustaining all of the resources that I have mentioned above. Just consider trees alone and I appreciate that trees are planted by many other sectors besides the landscape sector, but the benefits of trees in both the urban and rural environment are very significant.

Each year an acre of trees can store 2.6 tonnes of carbon, remove between 287 and 651 tonnes of sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, ozone and particulate matter from the air and provide about 2.8 tonnes of oxygen.

Tree cover over permeable surfaces can reduce surface water run-off by as much as 40% and reduce the costs of treating storm water run-off by decreasing the volume of water handled during periods of peak rain events.

Energy used in houses with surrounding trees can be 20 to 25% lower per year than that for similar houses in an open area. Wide belts of tall dense trees (30 metres in width) combined with soft ground surfaces can reduce noise by 50%. Trees are a renewable

building material and a renewable source of energy.

Trees play a significant role in defining landscape character. Human beings have an affinity with trees and enjoy having both visual and physical access to woodlands and forests. Human beings may also fear and feel threatened by woods and forests

We have become very conscious of the problems with water, both the scarcity of it in drought periods and the excesses of water during flooding. Landscaping has a dual role to play here - plants can be chosen to adapt to the prevailing climatic conditions and avoid the need for watering during drought periods and indeed landscaping can be carried out on a large scale in such a fashion as to retain water in the ground and of course a more recent debate has been about the whole issue of paving over front gardens and landscaping has solutions for that problem as well.

Landscaping has a role to play in sustaining biodiversity on land and water because well thought out landscaping can sustain and support biodiversity in both urban and rural areas.

With regard to minerals and metals we face challenges ourselves in that currently we probably use far too much by way of extracted stone, gravel and paving - some of which is coming from very far away (China & India) with many environmental miles under their belt and we need to look at ourselves as to how to make adjustments there.

With regard to hydrocarbons - landscaping can be wasteful of hydrocarbons, where we cut grass far too regularly and adopt approaches to landscaping that have a high input of fuel. Landscapes can be designed in such a fashion as to require greatly reduced inputs.

What of the chemicals that pollute the water of our rivers, lakes and aquifers – here there is a challenge again for the industry which has become far too dependent on pesticides, herbicides and insecticides. Just remember the ‘Agent Orange’ that destroyed the Vietnamese forests and unborn generations of its children was a cocktail of many of the herbicides we have used in the past.

Cultural heritage is a landscape narrative enriching our daily lives and the skills of the landscaper can be used to preserve and protect and indeed continue the skills and crafts of cultural heritage.

A diverse landscape, responsibly and creatively constructed, managed and maintained is an educational resource for the whole community and sustains our knowledge and respect for plants, insects, birds, wildlife etc.

Good urban landscapes encourage healthy, socially-supportive communities.

## LANDSCAPE POLICY & THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

The landscape industry should be to the fore in calling for a National Landscape Policy and the enthusiastic implementation of the European Landscape Convention. They are just barely beginning to shake themselves up in Ireland – how is it in Wales?

The Industry needs to recognise the importance of its own role and the responsibilities involved. Equally there is a need for the greater construction industry with which it is closely allied and the wider society to recognise the importance of the landscape industry - it is a two-way process.

The landscape industry is made up of many small enterprises, businesses and practices. Each can do its own sustainable bit, but by working together in co-operation, collaboration and creation it can be an important force for change and a source for employment and development in Wales.

I believe we are at the beginning of a very exciting period for the landscape industry and by extension for the whole construction industry both in developing projects and in maintaining and caring for projects subsequently in a truly sustainable manner.

### IT IS TIME TO SPEAK OUT!

We have a choice as always – we can wait until circumstances and legislation force us to change or we can get out there and build that bandwagon of vision and change.

In Ireland there was a farming tradition known as the ‘meitheal’ when neighbours came together to undertake big jobs such as saving the harvest on each others farms. I am sure that there was a similar tradition in Wales. Saving the planet might seem like an impossible task – we can but try and trying together seems like a more sensible and less lonely way to go about it - ensuring that the landscape of Wales in the future is not alone sustainable, but also that it is an even better place in which to live than it is now.

The landscaping industry needs to reclaim its position on the green agenda – to speak out and make its voice heard, the construction sector needs to sit up and listen to such voices and Fforwm Tirlun, the Welsh Landscape Forum is an existing framework, ready and willing to facilitate that conversation.

I do not wish to pre-empt the actions that might emerge from those meetings, but I would hope that you might witness a growth in landscape awareness and respect, where public and private developers would recognise that they are not merely ‘movers and shakers’ they are landscape ‘shapers’ with each intervention big or small, changing the bigger picture for better or worse; where the construction design team might respect the existing landscape characteristics and ingredients and integrate landscape concerns at the beginning of the project (including walking the site before putting pen to paper!) and where the design of the landscape both hard and soft is based of a multi-functional role whose aim is to maximise nature, facilitate active and passive human use and yet provide

a landscape setting for the development that whilst different, is still as good or better than its predecessor.

If I may respectfully suggest – the Welsh Assembly Government could greatly aid all of these processes by formulating a Welsh Landscape Policy and Strategy for the wider landscape, providing a framework for everyone concerned with both Tirlun and Tirwedd.

This exercise has belatedly just begun in Ireland, thanks to a Green Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government – perhaps we should work together. We might each get a better outcome trying to outdo each other!

Let us strike a match to that prophetic ‘green fuse’ that Dylan Thomas so eloquently described in a poem that recognised that each of us only has the one life, the one chance to become part of that green force before the ‘crooked worm’ comes a’ calling.■