



Company owner and company climber Matthew Hughes atop his tripod ladder, held in place by groundsman James Raymond, reducing an *Elaeagnus*.

ON May Day morning, Matthew Hughes of Just Trees is in a mature and spacious, privately owned garden in Wickham Bishops, Essex. Matthew, at the top of his tripod ladder, held firmly in place by groundsman James Raymond, is pruning the tops of a 15-foot-high Lawson Cypress hedge using a long-handled tree pruning pole saw.

Both the ladder and saw are some of the core tools in an arborist's kit and crucial when servicing private client bookings at this time of year. This work is a prime example of the seasonal nature of an arboricultural company's work schedule, and one of several similar private client jobs that Just Trees has lined up during the coming weeks.

There are no large canopy reductions or tricky thinnings around utility power lines. There is no windblow to remove or mature trees to take down and, aside from a chipper, there is no large machinery involved. These are examples of work that Just Trees does carry out, just not today. Often, it is smaller works which, when done with integrity and with the site left tidy, fuel word-of-mouth recommendations (the most powerful marketing tool of all).

Matthew says: "For us, spring and summer is often about making gardens, hedges and conifers look nice. It is good to have a change. We have four jobs at this site. Earlier, we climbed and dismantled a 15-foot Crepe Myrtle that was pollarded hard in the past. The tree had a decay fungus in the base. The wood gave way

Fair and just

AN APPROACH PRIORITISING ORGANISATION, TIDINESS AND RELIABILITY IS HELPING TO GROW THE REPUTATION AND THE NUMBER OF JOBS FOR COLCHESTER-BASED JUST TREES.

and came down in the hedge. We are trimming the tops of two conifer (Lawson Cypress) hedges. We will trim the top of an *Elaeagnus* and remove deadwood from that Cherry plum."

Matthew launched Just Trees in 2014. Now 28, he grew up in West Mersea, an island south of Colchester cut off from the mainland during a high spring tide. At 17, he started in horticulture with his father (a landscape gardener). He then switched to arboriculture, joining a tree surgeon (family friend) as a groundsman, learning the basics on the job. As time and money allowed, he enrolled himself on courses at Writtle College (Essex), Easton & Otley College (East Anglia) and at the 'bts Group' Utility & Commercial Arboriculture Training Centre (Needham Market, Ipswich), slowly gaining his 'tickets'.

Building up his weekday work portfolio as a subcontractor, he hired himself out as a 'groundsman with Transit tipper truck and chipper' by the week and as a

'climber' by the day. He built up his own client portfolio working at weekends.

Matthew says: "As I got busier myself, I found people to work with me full-time. I have been through a few operatives now. Some went travelling, some did not like the work. James, a self-employed operative, has been with me over a year. He is keen, interested and wants to learn. It is nice, James and me working together the whole time. We do what we can in a week." When larger works require it, two regular sub-contracting groundsmen help out. "If we could find a self-employed climber who could do everything, from getting up a tree to thin deadwood and leave it looking lovely without damaging anything underneath, and then the next day go and trim up some conifers, it would make life a lot easier."

Operating from a yard in Pelden (near Colchester), a rented 1,000 sq ft unit accommodates a workshop, an office and storage for smaller tools and larger

machinery: a Mitsubishi Canter tipping truck; a red Mitsubishi pickup; a Mighty Bandit Model 75 XP chipper (infeed 7.5 inches x 11.5 inches); a small 20 hp ISEKI tractor; a tipping chipper trailer (with waterproof cover) and a log splitter. Equipment like stump grinders, MEWPs, cranes or a larger tractor-and-forwarder unit are hired in as needed.

In addition to the unit, 1,500 sq ft of outdoor space accommodates a co-product processing and storage area. 25 tonnes of roundwood dry in stacks. Under a tarpaulin cover, 25 vented bags of split logs are ready for sale as part of a new firewood sales and delivery business. To accommodate the 100 cubic metres of woodchip Just Trees produces every six weeks during the winter months, Matthew has built a chip bunker – wooden panels bolted onto sweet chestnut posts – easily accessed by the Eddie Stobart artic that removes the contents every 6–8 weeks.

While most of Just Trees' work is local around Colchester, Matthew has a valued client, a consultant employed by a large construction company, for whom he travels further afield. "One Monday two weeks ago, we were in Berkhamsted in a patch of woodland owned by the company. Following the recent gales, ash and beech trees had partially fallen over or got hung up. It took a day to remove them and make the site safe."

The team stayed in London for two more days to complete works in Ruislip, originally an 'emergency callout' that Matthew quoted for two months previously.

Generally, it is the responsibility of the housing developer to maintain any new-build estate's green infrastructure landscape until such time as other arrangements have been made. "An 18-20 metre high (pollarded) poplar, growing on land owned by the company, a third party, was latterly found to have *Phytophthora* in the roots," says Matthew. "Buffeted back and forwards in high winds, the roots could not take the strain and the poplar blew down across two comparatively small gardens, fences and sheds, a car park and onto the roof of a garage."

The council cleared the poplar's top branches to allow residents access through the car park. "I was emailed photos of the remaining stem and priced the work, saying we would go and remove it there and then. Growing on third-party land and falling across land owned by two private property owners, with no-one wanting to pay out too much," or indeed being clear on whose responsibility it actually was to clear up, "the owners got upset and things got a bit out of proportion. One resident reckoned it took six weeks to sort out."

Just Trees eventually received the go-ahead. "We turned up on site, removing everything we could from the sheds, lawnmowers, bikes and the like. We backed up the Mitsubishi Canter and removed the stem, ring by ring, starting at 15 inches going up to 3-foot



▶ James splits the discs of Crepe Myrtle stem into chunks to be left onsite for the client's own use.

▼ Matthew holding disc of Crepe Myrtle stem showing rot and spongy heartwood.



▲ Loading Crepe Myrtle into the Bandit chipper, which then blows beige chips into the Mitsubishi Canter.

(circumference)." Too big to pick up and put in the back of the truck, the stump was ground out by a local contractor. The chip was tipped at the local green waste recycling centre. The whole job with four men, including a second groundsman and stump-grinder contractor, took two days.

Organising the logistics of large dismantles is a favourite conundrum. Matthew was recently tested by an oversized eucalyptus growing in a tiny back garden in Tiptree. "An arborist had started work on it and, for whatever reason, had not come back. The eucalyptus height, 50 feet, was not a problem. It was the canopy size that was out of control. The house was in a row of shops and neighbours were complaining about the canopy overhanging two gardens either side." The only access to the back was through the house itself.

Two neighbours came to the rescue, one with a driveway running along the bottom of the garden and another with a driveway running along the far side of a neighbouring house, offering access. "Chris Ashworth of Eastern Crane Hire was able to park his lorry at the back and we lifted out the cut pieces, up and over next-door's garden, laying them in the adjacent driveway. James and Trevor (groundsman) dealt with it on the floor, chipping the brush and stacking the wood to one side. The customer agreed to get rid of the logs, so we put them back in their garden, returning the next morning to cut them into smaller pieces."

While Matthew comes across various pests and diseases in the course of his work, the response of certain tree species to last year's heatwave disturbs him more. "In many garden sites, we were cutting



Windblown poplar in Ruislip before clearance.



Neat worksite. Climbing equipment and chainsaws, ladder, ground-tidying equipment, logs, branches and brash. Being organised makes the day's work easier. The random football does not belong to Just Trees.



Matthew with Bandit 75 XP chipper, stolen and returned, after one of his friends saw it being towed by a BMW off West Mersea and gave chase.



out dead trees. To see, time after time, conifers dead from the lack of water and extreme heat or a mature willow struggling to survive when it is so hot and dry, well . . . then when it rains, the water sits on the top of the dry ground. Trees growing at the bottom of a hill, or by a ditch, or growing with a lean at the top of a bank, all become so waterlogged that they just fall over. It is the same as trying to keep a piece of wood upright in a swimming pool. You can't."

What upsets Matthew most is what he observes as bad tree work. "I want to get across the point that there is too much bad tree work going on and not enough good stuff. Pollarding is not the solution to every problem. I have seen nice little birch trees, where deadwooding and thinning would have worked, with side branches pollarded to leave a pole with bits sticking out of the top, almost like the operator ran out of fuel. All this harsh pruning, pines with the tops cut off, leaving a flat table with a ring of green below, it looks like something you find in a fairground."

He suspects that some of this work may have been carried out by unscrupulous individuals using stolen equipment – he has been burgled three times – who then

charge escalating sums for bad work, if the stories that his customers share with him are anything to go by.

Just Trees has work booked a month in advance. When asked how he convinces potential customers that Just Trees is one of the 'good' arborists, Matthew says that he offers to show their liability insurance cover certificate and (when quoting for work) he can generally identify all the shrubs and tree species in the garden by name. What if a client does not know the name of the species in the first place? "Word-of-mouth recommendations," he counters, "is how I get most of my work these days."

Today's booking came via a word-of-mouth recommendation from someone with more than 30 years' experience in forestry, Mick Dunn of MH Forestry Contractors. "I have worked with Mick in the forest and he has worked with me with his tractor and forwarding trailer," Matthew says. "We get on well. Mick has his forestry contracting and milling work and when he gets arb enquiries he recommends me. When I get enquiries for forestry work, I recommend him."

Today's driveway accommodates the Mitsubishi Canter and Bandit chipper

with ease. The garden is close enough to carry out Lawson Cypress trimmings and Crepe Myrtle brash and process through the Bandit into the Mitsubishi tipper truck. James splits the discs of Crepe Myrtle stem into chunks to be left on site for the client's own use. "What is done with the tree is up to the customer," says Matthew. "Some jobs we leave the wood, on others we take whole trees away. The timber that's not so good we chip. What is left, we store for firewood. We began selling firewood two years ago. Last year we didn't have enough dry timber, so I bought in 12.5 tonnes and that has now gone. Once the timber has been dried, cut and stored, we sell about 20 tonnes a year."

Matthew's tripod ladder is a curious thing. It replaced a scaffold tower and is a piece of kit he would no longer be without. "You can adjust the legs. If the ground is uneven, you can have a long leg in a fishpond, a shorter leg in a flowerbed, keeping it square and steady. It came from WJ Green Ltd (Ipswich), where I buy pretty much all of our kit. They check and service equipment too. And, when they are busy, they make you a cup of tea while you wait. A perfect all-rounder really."

Carolyn Locher