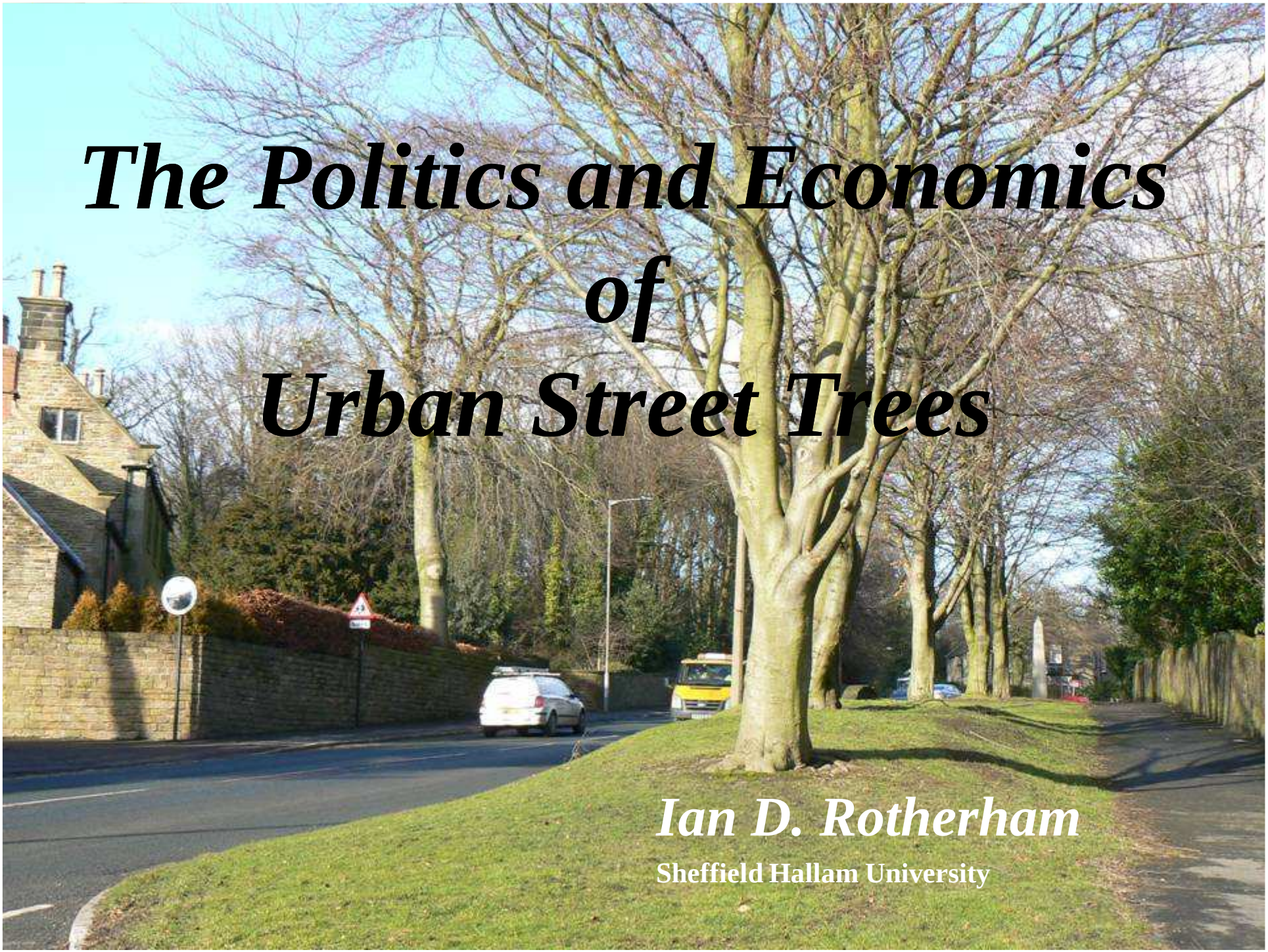
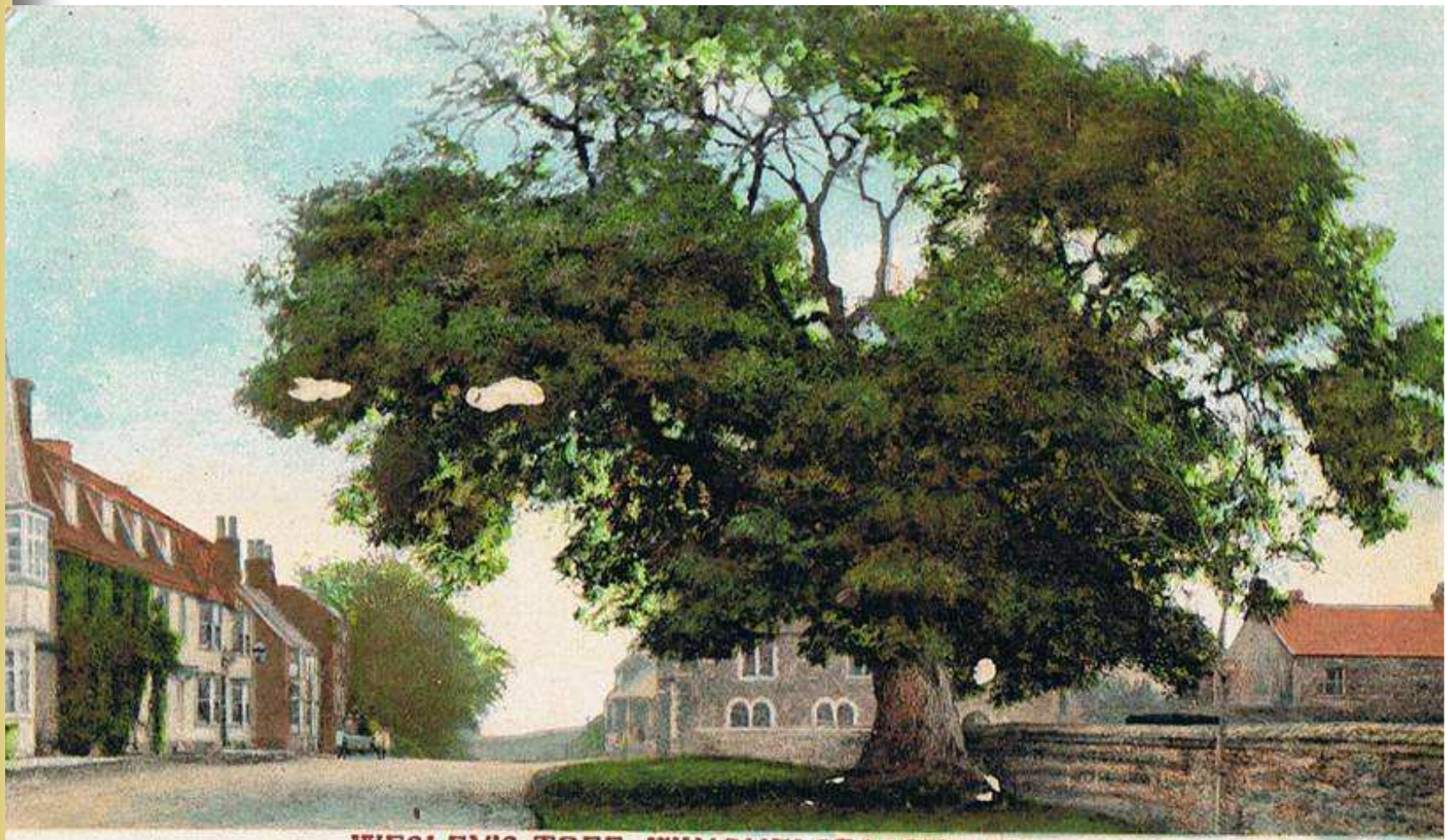


The Politics and Economics of Urban Street Trees

Ian D. Rotherham

Sheffield Hallam University

Street trees????



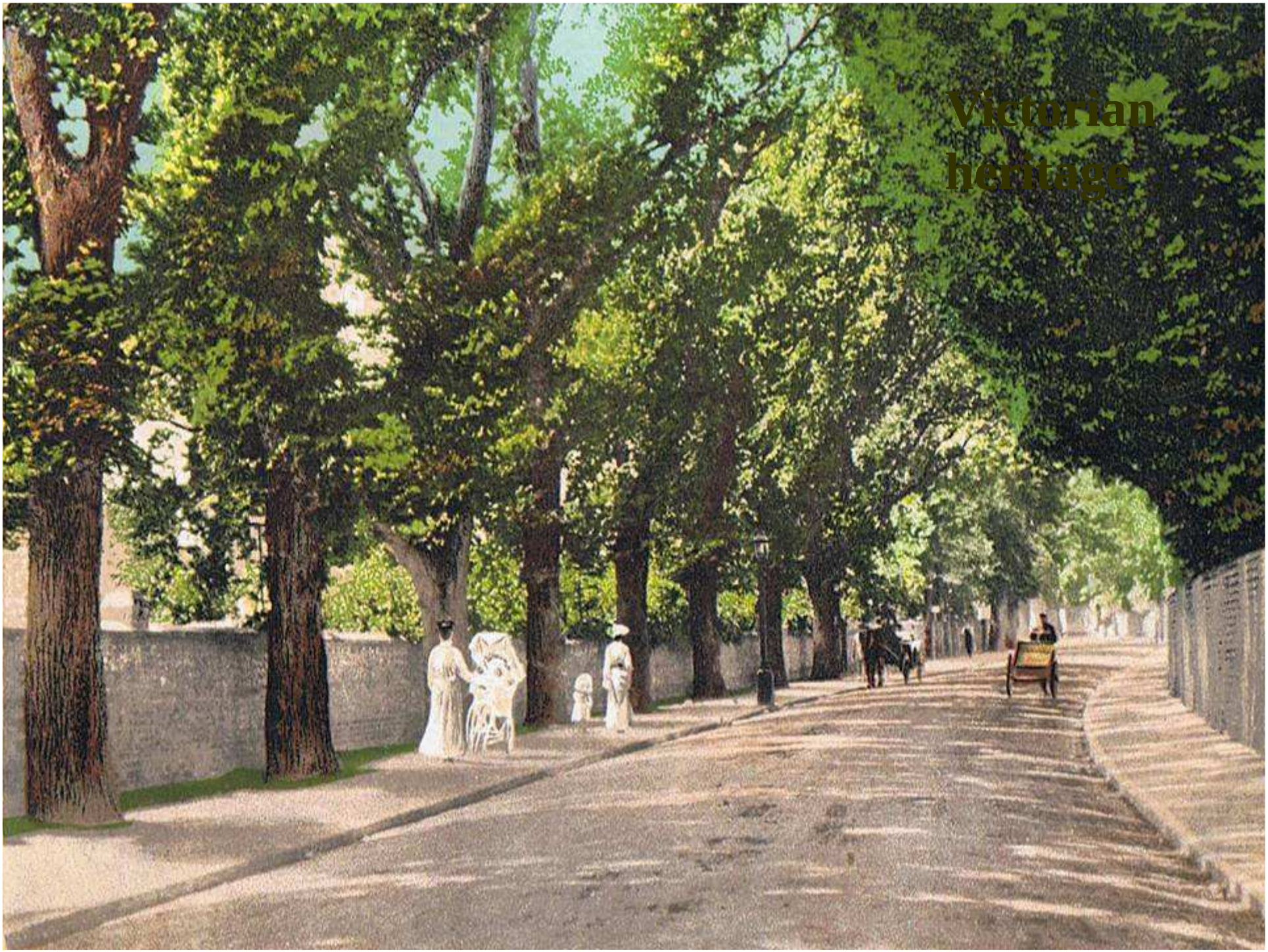
WESLEY'S TREE, WINCHELSEA, SUSSEX.

Under this tree the great John Wesley delivered his last outdoor sermon.

"I stood under a large tree and called to most of the inhabitants of the town "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, Repent and Believe the Gospel." *Extract from Wesley's Diary, Oct. 7th, 1790*

Great Value

- Absolutely clear that street trees and particularly urban street trees have great value.
- Much of the value cannot be given a price.
- Attempts to place a value and especially a price on street trees are especially problematic.
- But there are also risks and costs – real and perceived


Victorian
heritage

VALUE & PRICE

- **It is possible to place a monetary value on a tree and its contribution to an amenity, and hence a price for any replacement cost.**
- **Approaches such as that of Helliwell have also been tested through due legal process and the findings upheld.**

…. But when we talk of street trees we are dealing with much more than trying to attempt to assess a compensation-based approach to loss of amenity.

- **How we accommodate a valuation system which fairly appraises aspects such as local heritage and distinctiveness of place, of wildlife habitat, and of community '*ownership*' of a particular locale, is, to put it mildly, very difficult.**

- **Some such trees may be several hundred years old and in effect are irreplaceable; their value is incalculable but they are certainly not worthless. This short paper considers the issues and underlying trends.**

The benefits of urban street trees

It is now becoming accepted fact that trees in urban areas have particular '*worth*', and as a part of the urban forest, urban street trees are especially important.

Some of the benefits associated with urban street trees include:

- A green & high quality environment
- Noise reduction
- Visual enhancement
- Moderation of extreme weather and '*climate-proofing*' of urban areas
- Reduction in costs or expected costs of air-conditioning *etc*
- Moderation of precipitation runoff and flood-risk through interception at canopy level and root-pits acting as '*soakaways*' to take surface runoff into groundwater

- Removal of particulate pollution
- Enhanced house values & '*desire to live*' in a locale
- Enhanced urban ecology, biodiversity, habitat continuity & connectivity
- History, heritage & connectivity with the past

Heritage Trees become urbanised

- Local distinctiveness & cultural identity
- Urban seasonality
- Community & individual health – physical, mental & spiritual
- Associated with (13) major financial saving for the health and other services

There is a downside too……

- **The trees which deliver the most significant benefits are obviously those which are the biggest and the most long-lived.**
- **Whilst nice rows of small Almonds or Cherries enhance visual amenity they do little else; it is the old forest trees, often despised by planners and managers which help in climate-proofing and flood attenuation.**
- **It is these trees in an urban environment which require the most care and the greatest expenditure.**
- **They also carry the greatest attendant risk if failure occurs.**
- **In terms of gradual damage such as uplift of pavements *etc*, all trees, if not effectively planned and managed, can have adverse impacts.**

YA53 LHX

The politics of urban street trees

- This then leads to the issues relating to the politics of urban trees in general and street trees in particular.
- The perceived costs and damages associated with big forest trees in the urban catchment are high.
- The perceived risks, whilst in reality very small, are also considered large.
- CONSEQUENT INSURANCE COSTS AND ISSUES
- The inspection, care, maintenance, and where necessary remediation or removal cost associated with these big trees are high, and compared with rural grown trees their lives are shorter and more fraught.

Public too may worry about damage……

- **…….to pavements, the inconvenience of autumn leaves, impacts of clay movement on building foundations (which removal may exacerbate), branch fall in high winds, guano from nesting or roosting birds (and even noise from the same), and collateral damage to nearby properties if failure occurs.**
- **And may seek compensation for 'damage'**
- **These concerns may lead to external political pressure to '*do something*'.**
- **Combined with the feeling that these trees are somehow '*inappropriate*' along urban residential roads, and that the costs of the maintenance and the pressures of responsibility placed on local authorities are onerous, builds an unspoken consensus for removal.**

Not just big trees
which cause problems

BIG TREES – BIG BENEFITS

- **Yet it is these same trees, largely planted by enlightened Victorians or the planners of the early twentieth century, or subsumed into the urbanised landscape from the countryside as twentieth century towns sprawled across their rural hinterlands, which give the maximum benefits.**

- **It is these trees which give character to suburbs such as Sheffield's desirable Fulwood or Nether Edge for example.**

- **It is certainly these trees which will help climate-proof our towns and cities in terms of future climate change scenarios and extreme weather events.**

WHAT ARE THE THREATS?

- Ever since we invented the modern town or city, the big trees have been under pressure.
- Pioneering work in North America and in Europe good practice in terms of care and maintenance, have been developed.
- But this requires money and skilled staff in order to deliver it effectively on the ground.
- Urban street trees have long been the **Cinderella of local authority expenditure**
- Ongoing care and maintenance have frequently been replaced by pulses of intensive, often drastic, **‘*maintenance*’ or ‘*safety*’ works**.

So once again we face drastic cuts in public services and especially in local authority provision.

- **This will leave street trees especially vulnerable since they have no voice and cannot '*speak*', at least not to most of us.**
- **With the politics of street trees this is a potentially very bad scenario.**

- **In Sheffield for example, some of the city's leafiest and greenest areas could be under threat due to proposed public sector job cuts.**
- **This may spark a debate on the future of street trees in the city, or it may be done by sleight of hand.**
- **Whichever political party now governs this will not be high on the agenda.**

Policies & Visions

- **Many CURRENT POLICY AND STRATEGY STATEMENTS and initiatives which relate positively to street trees.**
- **One in particular that provides a very robust platform from which to take the dialogue forwards.**
- ***TREES IN TOWNS II* REPORT which provides a very comprehensive and well-evidence grounding for the issues and future debates.**
- **The problem really, is that it is unlikely that many politicians or planners will take the time to read it.**

CONCLUSIONS: Champions for street trees and the decision-making process

- **Unlike a parkland or even some urban woods for example, street trees have few publicly accessible and site-specific management plans, and almost no '*friends*' or at least friends groups.**

Consultation & Empowerment?

- When trees are felled and the stump grinders swiftly move in to remove all evidence, one questions the degree to which the community and local householders were consulted?

- To what extent too would they understand the implications for their house values and even for their health? I wonder.

HENLEY AVENUE 8

ISSUES OF ‘POWER AND INFLUENCE RELATIONSHIPS’

LOBBY GROUPS WITHIN AND AROUND LOCAL POLITICS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

Decision-making & policy

Risk, liability, insurance and cost

£££££££££££££

The table in the written paper is a gross simplification of these complex issues but is useful in highlighting some broad truths.

EMERGING EVIDENCE-BASE to support the value of street trees and to promote their benefits and the need to maintain, manage and enhance them as a vital component of the urban forest.

KEY TO ACTION is not merely through evidence but through champions at every level.

BUT - Who are they and Where are they?