

Tree safety management

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing concern over the risks posed to the public by falling trees and branches. A relatively small number of accidents involving fatalities and serious injuries have been prominently reported in the media. There have been a few high profile criminal prosecutions and civil cases arising. Yet the risk of injury to the public remains extremely low, and only a very small percentage of these incidents have occurred on the waterways.

Although trees provide numerous benefits which enhance the attractiveness of waterways they can bring with them a number of significant hazards which need to be managed. These include:

- Damage to waterway structures
- Obstruction of navigations, reducing safe navigable width
- Obstruction of boaters' sight-lines, heightening risk of collisions
- Causing injuries or immersions on boats passing through low overhangs
- Exacerbating drowning risks to persons in the water
- Severe injury or damage caused by falling trees or limbs

The level of risk

The overall level of risk to the public from falling trees is extremely low, representing about a one in 10 million chance of an individual being killed by a falling tree (or part of a tree) in a given year. Statistics collated for the National Tree Safety Group show that on average there are about 5 members of the public killed by falling trees or branches in public places and on highways (this excludes accidents arising from work activities such as tree felling).

Since 1997, when statistics were first compiled, there has been only one fatal accident on a canal caused by a falling tree. This occurred in 2010 on the Grand Union Canal in Buckinghamshire, when a woman was swept from a narrow boat into the water by a falling willow tree and died as a result. There have been other incidents, mostly unreported in the media, in which trees have fallen into canals or onto towpaths, causing property damage or temporary canal closures.

Consistent procedures and public reporting

From enquiries made after the inquest into the 2010 fatal accident on the Grand Union Canal, it emerged that most navigation authorities undertake tree safety management work, but that there is variation between them on the policies and procedures in place. It has been recognised that there is a need for greater consistency. The Coroner at the time also made recommendations on reporting of "dangerous trees" by the public, and whilst it was accepted that establishing a national system would be costly and impractical, many navigation authorities do have procedures to allow the public to report dangerous or overhanging trees, either impeding navigation or posing a public safety risk. A competent tree inspector would need to assess the risk posed by an individual tree and decide on what remedial action is appropriate.

Managing tree risk

Navigation authorities vary widely in the types and quantity of tree hazards on their land and need to adopt a proportionate and consistent approach to their management. This should include planned inspection and maintenance to manage growth, identifying trees or limbs at risk of falling and taking remedial action. It would also include dealing with reports from the public. These plans should be based on established good practice, described in the following section. The plans should also set down the approach to dealing with tree risks from other riparian owners.

National Tree Safety Group (NTSG) guidance on tree safety management

The NTSG was formed in 2007 to agree a nationally recognised approach to tree risk management. The Group was composed of organisations from both public and private sectors, bringing together land owners, government agencies, academics and arboricultural interests to work towards a common approach on how tree owners should manage their trees for safety in ways that are proportionate to the risk posed and defensible should the need arise. It published its guidance in December 2011. The main booklet is titled *“Common sense risk management of trees - guidance on trees and public safety in the UK for owners, managers and advisers”*.

As well as the full guidance booklet, there are two supplementary documents – a landowner summary document for estates and smallholdings, and a householder leaflet for the individual domestic tree owner.

1. *“Common sense risk management of trees - guidance on trees and public safety in the UK for owners, managers and advisers”*. Published in December 2011, available for £19.99 plus P&P. ISBN: 978-0-85538-840-9. Forestry Commission stock code FCMS024.
2. *“Common sense risk management of trees - landowner summary of guidance on trees and public safety in the UK for estates and smallholdings”*. ISBN 978-0-85538-841-6. Forestry Commission stock code FCMS025.
3. *“Managing trees for safety”* - a leaflet for the domestic tree owner ISBN 978-0-85538-842-3. Forestry Commission stock code FCMS026.

Online PDF downloads and hard copies of all these may be obtained from the Forestry Commission's publications website [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/publications.nsf/\\$\\$Search](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/publications.nsf/$$Search). [Search term – “NTSG”]

Other guidance

The Visitor Safety in the Countryside Group has its own on-line guidance on tree safety management at <http://vscg.co.uk/good-practice/published/tree-safety-management>.

The Health and Safety Executive has guidance for its own inspectors – “Management of the risk from falling trees” - on its web site at http://www.hse.gov.uk/foi/internalops/sims/ag_food/010705.htm.

The Inland Waterways Association has a 2007 policy document on its web site at https://www.waterways.org.uk/information/policy_documents/management_of_trees

About AINA

AINA is the industry body in Great Britain for those authorities with statutory or other legal responsibility for the management, maintenance and operation of navigable inland waterways for navigation and the delivery of wider public benefits.

AINA was set up in 1996 with strong encouragement from government to provide, for the first time ever, a single voice on waterway management issues. The broad purpose of AINA is to facilitate the management, maintenance and development of inland waterways as an economic, social and environmental resource. There are 18 AINA members drawn from the public, private and third sectors. They include the Canal & River Trust, the Environment Agency and the Broads Authority in addition to other national park authorities, local government authorities, private canal companies, internal drainage boards and a variety of public and charitable trusts.

Most AINA members are defined as navigation authorities by their own Acts of Parliament (some of them more than 250 years old) which regulate the operation of their waterways. Others, such as some local government authorities, have inherited the status of navigation authority through various statutes. Between them, AINA members have responsibility for over 5,500 km of navigable, inland waterways which include canals, river navigations and lakes.

Since its inception AINA has demonstrated with a high degree of success that by bringing navigation authorities together to share good practice, expertise and professionalism and to speak with one voice when required to do so, it can deliver significant benefits to all navigation authorities, large and small, and also to their partners across the waterways sector. AINA has:

- delivered a valuable resource of more than 25 reports giving good practice guidance across a wide range of waterway management and operational issues
- determined common, industry-wide standards
- delivered, in partnership with regulators and stakeholders, industry codes of practice to facilitate pragmatic and effective industry self-regulation with the effect of achieving significant cost savings for Members or staving off mandatory regulation which would have incurred considerably greater costs for the industry

AINA has become established in the psyche of all parties with interest in the waterways. It has enjoyed regular contact with senior government officials and Ministers in Whitehall and has hosted well-attended national conferences on key issues affecting the waterways. The foundation for all AINA's achievements is its unique ability to represent all navigable inland waterways across Great Britain.

