

Jake Hobson's Pruning Workshop at Lower Heugh Cottage Garden by Trevor Nash

About 4 years ago, the Y&H J.G.S. organised a full day on Japanese pruning for its members in the Sheffield Botanical Garden and adjacent Parks. During the morning session, Jake Hobson spoke of his experiences and training in Japan followed in the afternoon by a demonstration of pruning in the recently created Japanese style garden belonging to Sheffield City Council. Two years ago, the committee considered a similar workshop to be held in our Japanese style garden at Eastby. With this warning, many bushes and trees were deliberately left out of the pruning system so that Jake would have a good choice of options.

The workshop in the Autumn of 2011, when 25 members of the J.G.S. helped create the Emperor's Garden under the direction of Professor Fukuhara, offered a blueprint for a successful day, although this time it was felt impossible to allow 25 members unlimited access to the gardens with their pruning equipment. Jake asked for a



Figure 1: *Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin'

set of photographs of the garden to be emailed to him so he had an idea of trees most suitable for pruning on 29th September, the day chosen some 2 years in advance. However, he also decided to arrive 2 days early to check out the garden, make decisions on suitable areas and plants while allowing his family, Keiko and Digby a chance to see the Yorkshire Dales.

Marian and I have visited the Katsura Imperial villa in Kyoto on 3 separate occasions and with time available waiting for our appointment had walked round the adjacent village where *Photinia* hedges created scenic surrounds to many of the gardens. We only have a short 3 metre stretch (fig 1) but Jake pointed out to us and the group that this plant is perhaps best pruned in spring and mid –summer so that the new red growth has chance to mature and harden before cold and frosty weather becomes common in October . So, not a good idea to prune in late September.



Figure 2: *Chamaecyparis pisifera*

A compact, slow growing *Chamaecyparis pisifera* (fig 2), which offered possibilities for multi-shaping if pruned delicately with scissor-type secateurs, was also considered. However, Jake thought that many of those present would have attempted shaping *Buxus* into globes or triangles on a regular basis. Similarly, the white pine (fig 3) which was developing into a reasonable shape might offer possibilities but the pruning would be time consuming, fiddly, difficult for a group to see and so unsuitable for a one day workshop.

Therefore, the morning could best be spent in the courtyard garden (fig 4) where a group of 9 different conifers had been maturing – some for almost 40 years – long before a Japanese Garden had even been formulated by us. Jake pointed out that the rather pleasant semi-circular wall enclosing the area was almost lost behind the screen of trees and needed to be far more visible, hence a reduction in the density of foliage and general



Figure 3: *Pinus* sp

height was necessary. He suggested that in Japan such a courtyard garden might only have two or even just one dominant species reflecting the main type of tree or bush found on the local hills or mountains, so he opted to prune the older and more dominant *Picea* first and then reduce the size of the adjacent conifers to achieve a more Japanese effect. It should be noted that this garden had not been pruned for the past 2 years, hoping that it might be chosen!



Figure 4: Courtyard garden prior to pruning

Jake began the morning session by briefly outlining the range of secateurs and saws, perhaps more importantly pointing out how they should be cleaned and sharpened during use. A few minutes demonstrating the necessary tools and the use of a holster belt followed, as safety is paramount. The tripod ladder, with its incredible stability despite being placed in many different positions and on unlevel ground, showed the necessity of using the correct equipment.

The location of the courtyard garden allowed all 25 members to have a very clear view from the adjacent lawn and so were able to make suggestions on what and where to prune. The 'seasoned' pruners moved constantly to see the *Picea* from different angles while those with little or no experience tended to stay in a limited area as the new shapes unfolded. Jake constantly involved the onlookers, leaving his ladder to join the group so that everyone could take part in decision making.



Figure 5: Jake Hobson pruning *Picea* in courtyard garden

Starting at ground level, Jake demonstrated how the various branches in the growth rings could be pruned to create different patterns and shapes rather than just a series of horizontal circles. Skilfully pruning back the *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Gracilis' and other conifers, the trunk and branches of the *Picea* were gradually exposed creating a Japanese feel, while the back wall of the courtyard assumed a more prominent role. Finally, after some 75 minutes of discussion, decision making, including pruning the top from off the wall (fig 5), a more finished look was achieved and the members were able to appreciate the changes which had occurred. (fig 6).

Note that, ten days later, a gardening group from a Leeds U3A came for a guided tour and their reactions to the newly pruned area and especially the *Picea* were impressive. "A fantastic shape, superb" "Wow!" "beautiful" "immense" "breathtaking" "love it to bits" were just a few



Figure 6: Courtyard garden after pruning

Jake Hobson's Pruning Workshop...continued

of the comments which I overheard and noted down.

Delia Coburn, the Y&H J.G.S. coordinator, had somehow managed to choose a dry day with some sunshine in a week which had seen 100mm of rain fall on the garden in the three previous days and indeed a further 25mm fell on the following day. It was, however cool with a distinct chill in the air so a warm, hearty Yorkshire lunch of hot soup, crusty meat and potato pie, ham, Stilton pie followed by meringues and a wide assortment of cakes, all created by Marian, proved to be an essential and welcome break. During lunch, it was so good to see new and old members exchanging views and asking Jake various questions about pruning and equipment.

To offer variation, a large 15 year old *Acer palmatum* some 4m across and 3m high held our attention in the early afternoon. (fig 7) While it had been pruned over the years, it was rather heavy in appearance and needed urgent thinning—but how? Again, Jake carefully brought



Figure 7: *Acer palmatum* prior to pruning

the viewers into the decision making (fig 8), joining the group at frequent intervals to see how the process was progressing but then retreating into the *Acer* to discuss lengths of branches or those which needed removing. As before, pruning began at ground level and gradually worked upwards as comments came in from all angles: this *Acer* could be viewed from virtually 360 degrees. It was interesting to see those with pruning experience checking the side and rear views of the *Acer* as the work progressed. While pruning, Jake took the time to explain that conifers and *Acers* were best pruned in the Autumn as sap had almost ceased rising, bleeding would be minimal, and it was still possible to see the tree shape as leaves had not fallen. A constant stream of information on pruning and gardening in general proved to be so beneficial as he slowly created the new shape. (fig 9).

Fourteen years ago, an *Abies concolor* (Pacific Rim on the label) was planted close to the *Acers*. Reading an



Figure 8: Group discussing how to prune *Acer*

article, I had noted that the Japanese sometimes planted trees at an angle, so I decided to experiment with this one at 45 degrees. Over the years it has created a splendid shape (fig 10) but how to prune it was always a dilemma. Jake once again demonstrated how the tree whorls could be selected and pruned to create an interesting shape, at the same time cutting out much of the dead wood which had accumulated beneath and between the branches. (fig 11) We now have a very interesting specimen (fig 12) which brought spontaneous acclaim from the visiting USA group.

With tea time looming, Jake headed into the garage to demonstrate, over tea and cakes, how to prune immature and small conifers so giving an insight to members starting a new Japanese garden or those buying and planting new specimens. Finally, for those interested in equipment, members moved to the second garage to view a wide range of secateurs, tripod ladders,



Figure 9: *Acer palmatum* after pruning

other tools and Jake's book on pruning.

The pruning day was organised by the Y&H region in conjunction with the N.W. region and we were delighted to welcome Jean, Joe, Jill, Steve, and Graham together with Roger and Jackie Harris, members from the Midlands region. We hope that they all had a worthwhile experience. In case other areas might consider workshops on this scale, the following views received by letter, e-mail and telephone on subsequent days may be



Figure 10: *Abies concolor* prior to pruning

helpful.

"A real treat, thank you. Eyeing up the maples and sharpening the secateurs."

"People cannot believe I spent a day watching a man prune three trees."

"Cannot wait to get stuck into some pruning."

"Just to say how much I enjoyed the event, will definitely have a go at pruning the Japanese way."

"A most enjoyable day, very informative and made so



Figure 11: *Abies concolor* being pruned

welcome by all the J.G.S. members."

"I learnt so much in such a short time."

"A great day out and such fabulous food in the bargain."

"Wonderful to see the trees assume such superb new shapes, now I will have a go."

"Truly, a value for money day."

Finally, can we all thank Delia for organising yet another superb day and we look forward to the treats she is already planning for the Y&H J.G.S, in 2013 and 2014.



Figure 12: *Abies concolor* after pruning