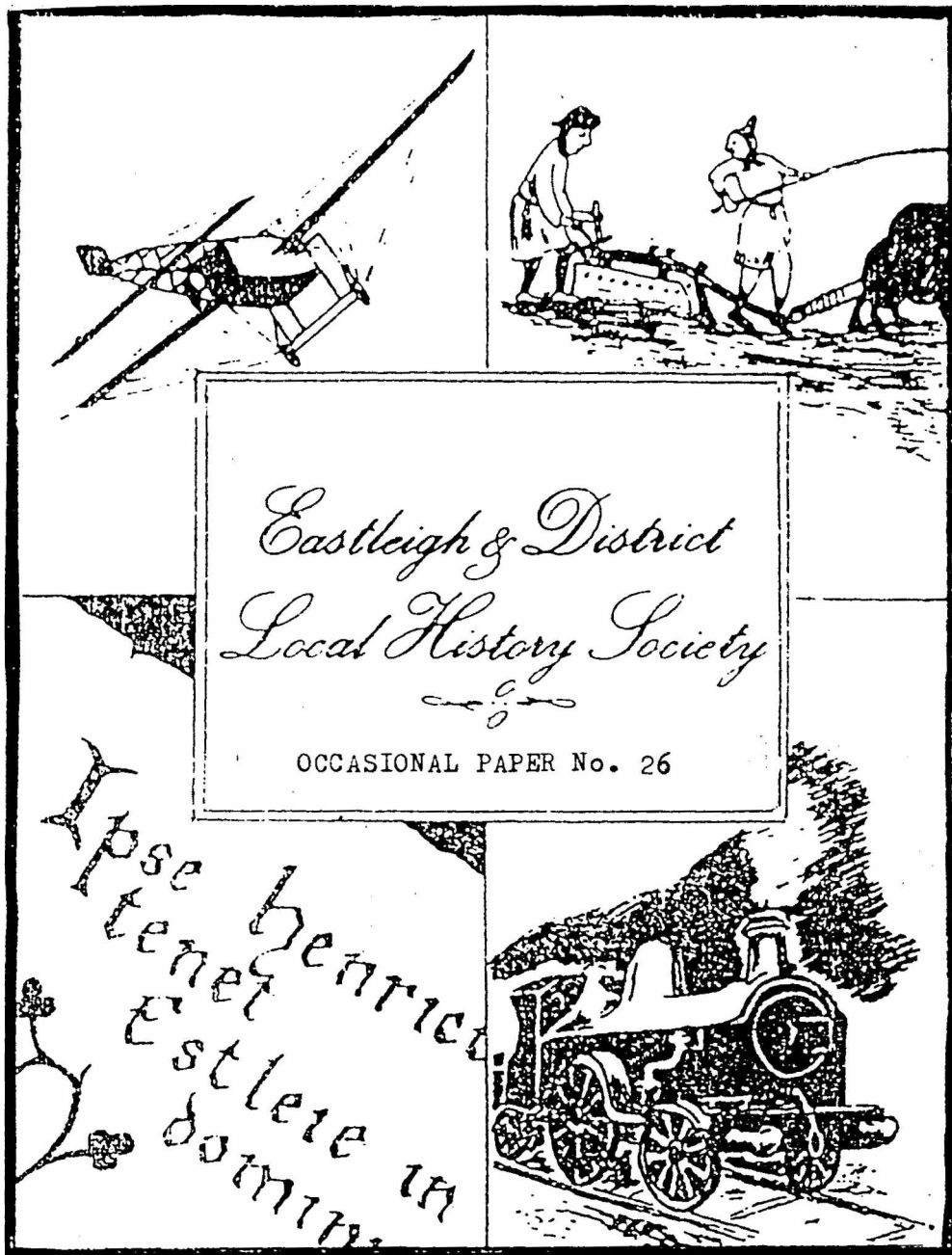


Richard StBarbe Baker-the Man of the Trees.



*Eastleigh & District
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MAN OF THE TREES - PREFACE

Richard St. Barbe Baker was born in a house called The Firs in West End, now in the Borough of Eastleigh. He grew up to become an authority on arboriculture and was renowned throughout the world for his lifelong interest in the preservation and management of forests. His family had roots in Hampshire over a long period and to quote from one of his many books, My Life, My Trees, "*The Bakers, who came from Normandy, frequently inter-married with the St. Barbés, who came from Brittany. Generations of St. Barbés lived at Broadlands, Romsey, until it was sold to Lord Palmerston.*"

Richard St. Barbe Baker's great grandfather was rector of Botley and there is a family tomb outside the west end of Botley church. His parents were buried in the cemetery at West End. His father broke away from the Church of England, being drawn to the evangelical movement of the last century, and built a Mission Hall in the garden of The Firs, which is still in use.

Richard St. Barbe Baker trained at Cambridge University and became Assistant Conservator of the Forests of Kenya. While there he obtained the support of Chief Josiah Njonjo and they jointly founded in 1922 The Men of the Trees. From then on, he travelled thousands of miles all over the world lecturing and giving advice on silviculture. It is said that he carried a pocketful of acorns which he planted in suitable places as he travelled, including the Sahara Desert. He also carried a sharp knife to cut the stems of ivy which he regarded as a tree strangler. In the 1950s, he travelled through Hampshire and Surrey, mounted on a white horse and following the route of Cobbett's Rural Rides.

When he left England for New Zealand to marry his second wife, he persuaded Kruschev to provide him with a free flight via Russia and Malaysia. He made a point of taking the longest route on his journeys so as to visit the maximum number of places. He was an expert in persuasion, having been instrumental in saving the Californian Redwoods and, nearer home, in obtaining from the Town Clerk of Southampton a promise that two new trees would be planted for each one that was felled. He received an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws of Saskatchewan University and was appointed O.B.E. in 1962.

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MAN OF THE TREES

The door bell rang and I opened my front door to find a tall grey haired erect man standing on the doorstep. He was holding a small canvas travelling bag and carried a thin bed roll under his arm. "Hullo, dear boy. Did you get my card?" I mumbled something about trouble with the post and invited him into the house.

Richard St. Barbe Baker was returning to his birthplace in West End after being away from Britain for two years. He had left the country to get married in New Zealand at the age of sixty eight and to settle down in the Mount Cook area, where his wife ran a large sheep station with her two brothers. Before leaving the country in 1959, he had sold his house to me, but this was no ordinary sale of property, for during the next twenty five years "St. Barbe" was to return regularly to lodge his memories, ideas and plans with us in his family home.

The pages which follow present reminiscences of those encounters rather than biographical details, in an attempt to provide a more domestic picture of a man who had a considerable influence on environmental concerns world wide. For the reader who wishes to obtain greater insights into his life's work, he wrote a number of books of which My Life - My Trees, Dance of the Trees, and Africa Drums, are probably the best known. Of course, in describing his restless life style, one is also commenting on his questing spirit of endeavour to conserve the world's forests and to reclaim its deserts.

My garden bears witness to a few remnants of the environment which influenced Richard's childhood. There is a small collection of dwarf conifers left from the days when the garden was a nursery. Established by his father at the turn of the century, it produced trees and shrubs on a small scale until the 1950s. Some of the "dwarf" conifers have grown to unmanageable proportions over the years and the laurel cuttings planted on Richard's instructions to mark the boundaries before the property was sold, have led to many hours of earnest endeavour with hedge trimmers, but there are some trees of special significance in the garden. A mop acacia planted in 1950 to commemorate the Coronation is labelled with a neat plaque "planted by Richard St. Barbe Baker". An ageing medlar sits centrally in the garden supported by a conveniently placed yew. A large fir stands dangerously near to one corner of the house, providing ample shade for the conservatory which contains a seventy year old grape vine.

The garden trees and rooms in the house often provided triggers for St. Barbe's prodigious memory during his return visits to 'The Firs'. He liked to recall stories from his childhood and youth. Walking to Evensong on Sunday evenings in North Stoneham church followed afternoons spent reading the Scriptures with the rest of the Baker family, a regular discipline led by his father John and his mother Lottie. His father built a small chapel next to the house after a disagreement with the Vicar of West End parish at the turn of the century. Regular services are still held in it, but at the time it provided a non-denominational setting for adults and children. The Sunday school was a thriving concern for many years. Richard recalled with relish the time when his father had invited General Booth of the Salvation Army to preach in the chapel. The six year old boy was allowed to stay up late after the service and listen to the conversation between his father and the great man. Their voices droned on and Richard eventually fell off his stool, asleep after trying to concentrate on the exchange.

This early upbringing clearly was instrumental in helping Richard to learn the skills of story telling. He was able to speak in a way which captured the listener's attention instantly. His voice was well modulated, but he often seemed breathless with excitement to reach the next point to be made. He spoke in short sentences which frequently included great detail about the people to whom he referred and about the places he had visited. But he was more than a raconteur. He spoke with a zeal for his life's mission which was compelling and convincing, so although his return visits to his former home aroused nostalgic memories, his messages were usually focussed on the issue or project with which he was currently engaged. Conversation on these occasions was very one sided. One listened, sometimes with astonishment at the cool cheek of the man, as he recounted events from a recently completed journey or conference. There was, for instance, his plan to form the United States of the Sahara - the 'USS'. "Do you realise that the Sahara is expanding southwards every day the length of a man's shadow at dusk? Something must be done to stop this erosion of the earth's resources for oxygen regeneration." Richard's plan was to visit every head of state whose territory included or bordered the Sahara in order to persuade him to join with other states to use their joint influences to stop the scourge. He paced up and down in my living room graphically describing how he had gained an audience with every head of state, apart from the Congo region which was in the midst of a civil war during the early sixties. He had persuaded each to sign a specially prepared book specifying an interest in joining forces with neighbouring states to take on this mammoth task. The then King of Libya lent him his personal aircraft to survey the desert. President Nasser was extremely interested and supportive. Leaders in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were influenced by Richard's earlier work in tree planting experiments which successfully demonstrated the feasibility of desert regeneration.

All of these meetings were arranged without any formal letters of introduction or support from the British Government. It was a lone entrepreneurial mission.

Occasionally one interjected with a question and the flow of words would swing briefly to sweep up the point before moving majestically on. The 'USS' scheme seemed quite mind blowing, but I asked the question, "How could resources be found in these countries to carry out such a huge operation?" "Quite simple, we use the personnel and equipment currently employed in the armed forces of the USSR and the USA. They would be productively engaged in a world saving venture instead of preparing for its eventual destruction." He estimated that about fifteen million service men and women would do the job effectively in ten years. His direct single minded approach to the question of survival for the earth and its living populations took no account of the devious complexities of politics and struggles for power. The recent history of the Sahara region speaks for itself in terms of human misery and short sightedness. Richard's vision is even more of a challenge today than it was in the 1960s.

Such was the impetus of his ideas in conversations it was easy to forget mundane activities like preparing and eating meals when Richard was with us. Visionaries are not easy to live with. They raise disturbing or elevating issues with an urgency that seems to require instant attention at the expense of household tasks. In fact, meal times with Richard required little sophistication. He was a vegan and he travelled with a small stock of pulses, wholemeal bread, honey and dried fruit. He tolerated our flesh eating habits with little comment, except to invite us to try some honey in tea or a special bran mixture as a main course. He was very fond of vegetables grown in the garden and would recall stories of Harry the beloved gardener employed by his father at The Firs for sixty two years. Recalling his links with West End seemed to be Richard's way of maintaining a secure location in a life which otherwise was restless and constantly engaged in travelling for the promotion of silviculture and forestry.

Richard needed little sleep. He would retire to bed at ten o'clock and would be preparing for the next day at four in the morning. He usually wrote for three hours before breakfast and after a small meal of cereal, he would make arrangements for his day's appointments, and then be on his way. His journeys from New Zealand were often to Africa and the United States as well as to Europe. He was a member of the Baha'i Faith and before the Iranian revolution he was engrossed in a massive tree planting plan around a projected new religious centre on a mountainside in Iran.

So his travels during the latter years of his life were concerned with world conventions connected with the 'Men of the Trees' society, conferences and speaking engagements as well as meeting members of the Faith and other friends. He established a firm association with members of the Findhorn Foundation in Morayshire, for instance, where his insights and influence form a part of the teaching there. He responded to a request from the Conservation Committee of California to help stem off a threat to the redwood groves, which he had saved from extinction in 1938 and were now in the path of a projected eight lane highway.

Such heavy demands on his energy and vitality eventually took their toll. His last visit to The Firs in 1981 was on a warm June afternoon. Children of friends were playing in the garden; Richard immediately engaged their attention by talking about their hopes and aspirations. He insisted on photographs being taken of them with him by the medlar tree. His face was much thinner and the overcoat, which he wore in spite of the temperature, hung loosely around his shoulders. Two years previously he had had a sudden illness during which he thought that he was certain to die.

Typically, he gave all his immediate possessions to the patient in the next bed. He was indeed near to death but he recovered, to face the embarrassment of asking for the return of his clothes. The illness had had a great effect on his appearance, but not on his spirit, for he left us saying that he had plans to visit Canada and lecture during the following year.

Richard indeed kept his promise to visit Canada but the evening before giving his lecture in Saskatchewan he said that he felt very tired and went to bed early. He died peacefully in his sleep at the age of 92.

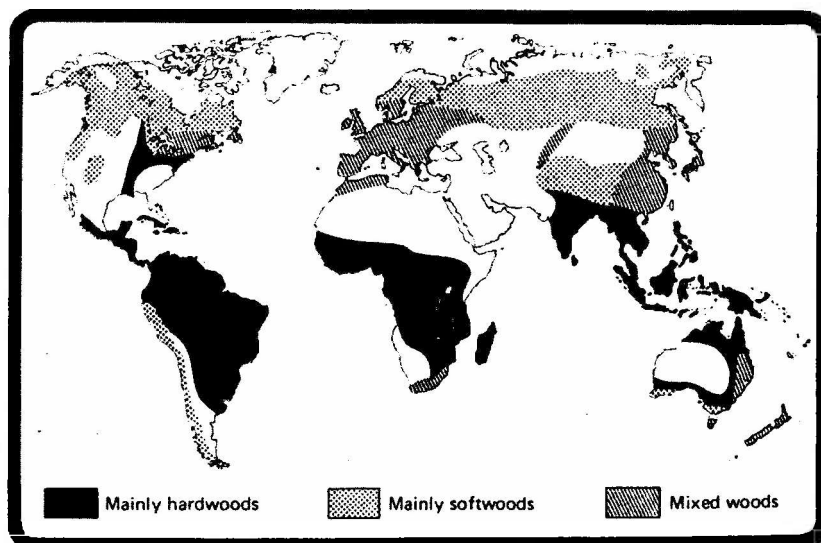
There is a well in the garden of The Firs. Sunk in 1880, it provided water for the Baker household for fifty years. Richard claimed that its clear water was the source of long life. His mother lived until she was ninety-nine. During the year of his death, I cleared the laurel thicket surrounding the well and built a simple stone and timber structure in its place. The water is still accessible and clear and it provides us with a reminder of the life enriching ideas and actions of the man of the trees who once drank from it.

GEOFFREY POULTON
July, 1987

A group of trees was planted in the Recreation Ground at Hatch Grange, West End, as a memorial and there is a Commemoration Plaque in the Parish Centre.



The Founder of the Men of the Trees, Dr. Richard St Barbe Baker, O.B.E.



World map of forests.



The Founder of the Men of the Trees, Dr. Richard St Barbe Baker, O.B.E.



The Co-Founder of the Men of the Trees, Kenya, Ex Senior Chief Josiah Njonjo

