

FEDERATION OF BRITISH BONSAI SOCIETIES

History from Its Origins to the Present Day

Bonsai were first formally introduced to western nations at the Paris Exhibition of 1889 and a fair number of collections were started in various countries including Great Britain. By the time of the First World War interest greatly subsided and with economic problems interest was slow to recover. After WW2 there was a gradual revival of interest in the art of Bonsai which, by the mid 1960's and into the 70's, saw a number of local bonsai societies being formed, mainly in the south east and London area, two in the Midlands and two in the North. These continued to grow until by the late 70's, when there was a growing interest in the possibility of forming a National Organisation of Societies capable of coordinating events and putting on National Exhibitions, and even at this early stage, there was discussion of the possibility of forming a National Collection similar to the Collection at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens in the USA.



The first seeds of the Federation were sown in 1981 at the first ever Bonsai Convention in the UK, held at the University of Keele in September of that year. The event was a private enterprise, conceived and executed by a handful of enthusiasts from the North Midlands, Harry Tomlinson being a prime mover. Prior to this date, the bonsai societies which existed within the United Kingdom had tended to evolve in isolation. Members knew a few familiar names but beyond that, had no real idea of the expertise, enthusiasm and excellence that existed within the country

The 1981 Convention attracted over 300 delegates and, while experiencing a few teething troubles, proved a marvellous occasion, as it brought such a large number of bonsai enthusiasts together. Contacts were established with a number of bonsai organisations from abroad, The Bonsai Society of Greater New York, The American Bonsai Society, The Australia National Bonsai Association, Tennessee Bonsai, and a number of clubs in Canada as well as the thriving organisation formed by Paul Lesniewicz in Germany. The seed of a Federation had indeed been sown and over subsequent months, a great deal of private discussion took place. This resulted in a series of meetings of interested parties from some dozen or so societies, taking place in a room above a public house, The Westminster Arms, near Victoria Station. The late Bill Horan, together with his wife Rene, were prime instigators of these meetings and he subsequently became the Federation's first General Secretary; we have much to thank him for. From these meetings, gradually a steering committee was formed and its members led by Kenneth Stafford-Jones put in many hours of work in drawing up the policies and constitution of the organisation. From this early initiative, the Federation came into being on Sunday, 18 April 1982 and by general agreement Peter Brown took the chair.

The first formal meeting was Sunday, 31 October 1982 at the Phoenix, Palace Street, London. The Founder societies were:

Group	Represented by
Bedford Bonsai Society	P Flint
Bonsai Kai & Croydon Bonsai Society	H Gardner
Bristol Bonsai Society	P Brown
British Bonsai Association	Rene Horan
East Midlands Bonsai Society	J Stenson
Kew Kai Bonsai Society	C Hall
Manchester Bonsai Society	B Davies
Middlesex Bonsai Society	Joan McCarthy
National Bonsai Society	J Southworth
Yorkshire Bonsai Association	G Sharpe
Scottish Bonsai Society	C Cousins

At the second Keele Convention of 1983, a decision was made to create a logo for the Federation; following a national competition, a choice was made of Scots pine designed by Dan Barton and selected to be the formal Federation logo. To bonsai enthusiasts, it has now become a familiar design, appearing on letterheads, publications and complement slips as well as being cast in silver in the form of brooches, pins, earrings and cuff-links. It has also been printed on sweat-shirts, T-shirts, aprons, as well as Japanese-style 'happy-coats', another dimension to the Federation sales.



At the time of the first AGM, (Sep 1983), Peter Brown was re-appointed as Chairman of the Federation. Various plans were set in motion, amongst them being the organisation of a visit to the UK of one of the world's leading bonsai masters outside Japan, John Yoshio Naka from California. During a two week tour in May 1984, he visited five venues, London, Bristol, Manchester, Nottingham and Edinburgh, giving demonstrations and workshops to amazed and enthusiastic audiences. Videos were made of these by a small TV company and were available to members from later that year.

Among the other enterprises of the Federation were the initial moves towards starting a National Bonsai Collection which was to have been established at the Royal Horticultural Societies gardens at Wisley. A fund raising campaign was launched under the guidance of Ann Wilkes and over £2,000 was quickly raised. Unfortunately, establishing a National Collection of Bonsai was fraught with problems, mainly those of security and maintenance. Eventually, after many years of work towards this objective,

the RHS withdrew leaving the Federation to seek another site. Hever Castle was explored as a possibility, but again, insurmountable problems arose and again after a number of years, this possible venue had to be dropped.



The Federation now, after almost ten years of trying, has succeeded in establishing this collection at the Botanical Gardens Birmingham. Considerable enthusiasm was shown by the Botanical Gardens, and the only obstacle on the horizon was the raising of the necessary £60,000 needed to construct and secure the bonsai garden. The Botanical Garden's trustees

provided just over half the funding and fund-raising enterprises within the Federation raised the remainder. Money will still be required to maintain and service the now established collection. Trees from leading collectors throughout the UK were then on display in the Japanese-style garden which opened to the public in late August 1992. Gradually over a long period the committee responsible were able to dispense with loaned trees and all the trees in the Collection have either been purchased, bequeathed or donated.

The Convention of 1985 at Nottingham University was the next major enterprise. By this time, member societies had come to accept the notion of bonsai conventions and a pattern had been established. The Nottingham Convention proved to be a first in having an associated National Exhibition of some of the best trees in the UK and also provided a platform for guest speakers from abroad. Bill Valavanis from the USA was guest speaker and demonstrator along with our own British experts. Society members also had the opportunity of participating in a major raffle organised over the preceding months and the draw was made at the Convention, providing an entertaining climax to the weekend.

It was during this period that the decision was made to have Conventions and National Exhibitions on alternate years; thus the next exhibition took place in 1986 in Bristol, hosted by the Bristol Bonsai Society. This now established a precedent whereby a member society would host the event on the Federation's behalf and with the full backing and support of the Federation's organisation and publicity machine, thus benefiting both the Society and the Federation financially as well as gaining new members for both.

The Federation left the university venues in 1987 for the more prestigious venue of the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham. The event was also host to the European Bonsai Association annual congress. As usual, FoBBS relied heavily on its well-respected team of British demonstrators –



Harry Tomlinson



Jim McCurrach

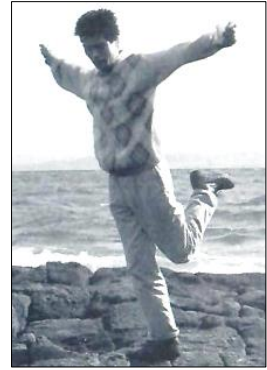


Peter Adams



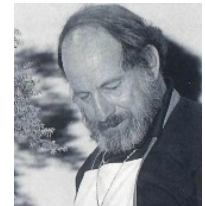
Dan Barton

For the first time in the UK Horst Krekeler from Germany and Pius Notter from Switzerland were introduced to the British bonsai scene together with a young Japanese man who was to become a leading and popular bonsai master was also introduced for the first time - his name, Hotsumi Terakawa. This event proved a success with delegates attending from both the UK and Europe. With the additional space available at this venue, a sizeable bonsai trade fair was established, giving opportunities for traders to sell every kind of bonsai paraphernalia. Because of the nature of the venue and its appeal to the general public, a National Exhibition was run in conjunction with the Convention, drawing in a large, interested public audience.



Hotsumi Terakawa

In 1989 a successful Convention was held at the University of Sussex, hosted by the Sussex Bonsai Group. Speakers from America and Japan were brought in for this event - Marian Borchers, Chase Rosade and Mitsuo Masui, together with our own British regulars.



In the October AGM following the Birmingham Convention in 1987, Peter Brown retired as Chairman, to be succeeded by Graham Gavin, the convention co-coordinator from Birmingham. Regrettably, Graham's term of office was short, as he died suddenly and prematurely after being taken ill at the National Exhibition held in Scarborough the following July. During the previous eight months the Federation had gone through a difficult period, functioning with a committee of only five members and no treasurer. However the situation was to improve in October 1988 with the election of a full committee, although a Chairman was not appointed at the AGM. The committee subsequently elected Harry Tomlinson to take the role of Acting Chairman for the year 1988-1989.

At the end of that year, 1989, Malcolm Hughes became the fourth chairman of FoBBS and in that capacity saw many changes take place. He ended his first term of office in October 1992 but remained closely connected with the Federation as its delegate to the European Bonsai Association (EBA) and as a member to the EBA Board and editor of its newsletter. In October 1993 following the resignation of Peter Brown from his position as Chairman of The Friends of the National Bonsai Collection, Malcolm was elected to succeed him. The following year Peter Brown also resigned as President of the European Bonsai Association in 1994 after 10 years in that position, Malcolm Hughes was elected President of EBA. In October 1992, Ken Norman, Coordinator of the Sussex Convention, became the next Chairman of the Federation and remained in that position until the end of his three year term of office in 1995, where, by unanimous support, he was re-elected for a further year. The 1996 Annual General Meeting saw another change of Chairman; on this occasion Martin Bradder was elected to fill that role.

During the years from 1983 to 1989, four Federation Guides were produced for the benefit of members and member societies. It was intended to provide much needed information and improve communication between societies. Unfortunately, it was not possible, due to cost, to produce sufficient copies for every member of every society to have a free copy and therefore they were not circulated and read as widely as had

been originally intended. Due to increased printing costs together with the production of the magazine 'Bonsai' which includes a Federation section, it was decided to discontinue the guide and instead provide an information pack for society secretaries, with slip-in fact-sheets, to include, lists of societies and society contacts, books and Federation Publications, details of speakers and demonstrators and other information concerning bonsai, all of which could be more easily updated than an annual guide. The first such package was issued in the spring of 1990. The principle of sending out regular newsletters to members started in 1986 and continued with 4 issues per year to the end of the year 2000. The Newsletters were then replaced with the arrival of electronic communication with information posted on the FoBBS Website.

Also in 1986 the Federation organised its first bonsai tour abroad with 40 members embarking on a coach trip to bonsai nurseries in Belgium, Germany and Holland. This set the trend for subsequent years. Holland saw a party return in 1987 to visit the growing areas as well as the bonsai nurseries while in 1988, an extended trip was made to Switzerland as guests of Pius Notter and to Heidelberg, Germany, for the European Bonsai Association Congress. October 1990 was the year that 78 people filled two coaches to visit the ever popular bonsai nurseries of Holland. Annual trips abroad have now become part of the bonsai scene in the U.K. Trips are now organised to European Bonsai Association Congresses each year; venues have included Bruges, Nantes, Lensburg, Zoetermeer, Luxembourg and Turin. A party visited Turin in 1990 to attend the European Bonsai Association Congress at which Masahiko Kimura (the Magical Technician) was the major demonstrator; 1993 saw some of the same enthusiasts in Luxembourg to see Kimura at work again. The European Bonsai Association (EBA) was first founded in 1980 with the Federation as one of the earliest member organisations with a voting representative. Peter Brown became its first President; he was also appointed a director of the World Bonsai Friendship Federation Committee with its altruistic aim of promoting world peace through bonsai. This dream, inspired by Saburo Kato, is one in which it is hoped will be followed by bonsai enthusiasts in years to come. In 1989 the First World Bonsai Convention was held in Japan and a tour organised by the Federation found a British delegation of 30 enjoying the experience as well as seeing a great deal of the culture and bonsai nurseries of that country, a unique 16 day experience. In 1990 parties of bonsai enthusiasts, organised by the Federation, went to Hawaii, Los Angeles and San Francisco to attend that years International Bonsai Congress. Travel further afield has taken enthusiasts in 1993 to the second World Convention in Florida; in fact bonsai was becoming a great way to see the world. The second trip to Japan was organised for 1994 with 22 enthusiasts being taken to see all the sights as well as a large number of the best private collections in the world.

It had now become policy that Bonsai Exhibitions take place, if not every year, then at least on alternate years with Conventions. Very successful exhibitions drawing in large numbers of the public have been held in venues around the country, including the Palace Hotel, Scarborough (1988), the Commonwealth Institute, London (1990) and the Queensway Hall, Dunstable in 1992. The first autumn bonsai exhibition was also held in 1992 at Southend. These events were hosted by the local bonsai societies but under the umbrella of the Federation. In 1993 Wales entered the Exhibition scene when Swansea Bonsai Society mounted a summer Exhibition at the Leisure Centre, Swansea.

The year 1991 was the pinnacle of FoBBS activities to date. Back in 1983 at the 2nd Keele Convention, Bill Horan was heard to remark - 'perhaps one day, we'll take over the NEC - did he ever really imagine FoBBS would reach such heights? In fact, FoBBS went one better in 1991 by hosting a truly International event at the newly opened International Convention Centre (ICC) in central Birmingham. That year FoBBS was host association to Bonsai Clubs International Annual Congress, a noteworthy occasion as the first event in which that organisation had ventured outside the United States.

Twenty-four societies mounted bonsai displays alongside the National Exhibition; sixty traders displayed and sold their wares in the brand new 3,000 square metre exhibition hall. Over 5,000 of the public joined the delegates to admire the quality of the exhibition. Seven hundred delegates from 23 countries had the opportunity to observe the skills of Peter Adams, Dan Barton, Craig Coussins, George Davis, Hideo Kato, Colin Lewis, Jim McCurrach, John Naka, Mike Street, Dan Robinson, Chase Rosade, Hotsumi Terakawa and Harry Tomlinson; they could also try their hands at workshops with Charlotte Dalampira, Suchin Ee, Bill Jordan and Hotsumi Terakawa. All of this took place in five of the ICC's magnificently appointed halls.

A civic reception was offered to overseas delegates prior to the opening ceremony; attending were the Japanese Ambassador to the Court of St. James, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, President of the World Bonsai Friendship Federation, Saburo Kato as well as officials from Bonsai Clubs International, the European Bonsai Association and FoBBS. Alongside the main bonsai Convention and Exhibition were held various entertainment's including English folk dancers, Scottish dancers, a Welsh choir, jazz band, a banquet and a Victorian evening. Tours were organised to places of interest in the Midlands as well as to bonsai collections and nurseries both in the UK and Europe.

Since its earliest beginnings over 15 years before, the Federation had made tremendous progress. From the first 15 founder member societies, there were by then 77. The Federation continues working to fulfil its aims of common objectives and fellowship, as stated in the original constitution and has now become a Company Limited by Guarantee.

Events were planned for several years ahead; it was very unfortunate that the Convention planned for Guernsey in 1993 had to be cancelled due to lack of support. It was an unusual venue that the committee at the time felt could have been good; unfortunately it did not work out that way and a decision to cancel had to be made before we got too deeply involved financially. In its place Swansea stepped forward upgrading their planned exhibition to a Convention.

During 1993, FoBBS ventured into a fresh area; they were invited to mount an exhibit at the National Exhibition at The Gardeners' World Live Exhibition. This was staged as a 35 foot stand in the Royal Horticultural Societies' enormously large marquee; it proved to be very successful and we were awarded a Large Gold Medal plus prize money of £300. The exhibition was mounted by the Midland Societies under the guidance of Ken Norman, who, with his Chelsea experience, was familiar with the requirements of the RHS. The outcome of winning was that we were then qualified to apply to exhibit at Chelsea. In 1995, they did just that, being allocated an island site in the main Marquee. It proved to a very interesting experience and we were to be awarded a Silver Medal at our first attempt.

In July 1994, Yorkshire Bonsai Association mounted a National Exhibition at Cliffe Castle, Keighley and this proved to be a highly successful and prestigious event

The next Convention staged was in 1995 by Humberside Bonsai Society at Hull University, a great success; there had not been a full Convention for a while and it was well supported

The 1996 Exhibition was staged very successfully by Thamesdown Bonsai Society in Swindon.

A very successful Convention in Bournemouth was hosted by the Wessex Club in 1997; well organised and supported.

A National Exhibition in Plymouth was seen in 1998.

In 1999 planning for Edinburgh, Scotland for a Convention was undertaken, hosted by the Scottish Bonsai Association and to be combined with the European Bonsai Association Congress. Unfortunately a serious error of judgement or maybe the belief that what seemingly reliable people tell you is the truth. Not so in this case. The apparent representative of the Scottish Bonsai Association appeared to have his finger on the pulse and was producing a seemingly well organised event, with a superb venue and of first class speakers. However Malcolm Hughes, President of the European Bonsai Association at that time had occasion to speak to the president of the SBA only to find the whole thing was a feature of this guy's imagination and was purely a fiction. A bitter experience that had cost little but hurt pride and a sense that we had been "taken in". Put down to experience a team hastily put things back on track and produced a first class event that took place at the Moat House Hotel, Stratford Upon Avon which had a large line up of International demonstrators and was very well attended by British and European delegates.

The year 2000 Exhibition was staged by a consortium of Clubs in South Wales at Margam Park, near Port Talbot in South Wales.

The next exhibition in 2001 was on track to be a well organised event to be staged in Manchester, Heaton Park. Robin Morgan liaised with FOBBS and the Chairman Christine Hartley took over the planning from Martin Bradder. After her taking on the role she rearranged the Committee, removing Kath Hughes from her role as Secretary, replacing her with Joy Williams. Despite Kath Hughes having sent a contract for the event to Robin Morgan this was not followed up by the new committee and no contract was signed. It was not until problems arose later relating to payment for items ordered that it was discovered that all monies received were being paid into Robin Morgan's private account. The event took place with a number of problems and a limited level of success. Subsequently it was discovered that bills were not being paid and Robin Morgan had disappeared, leaving his society with vast amounts of monies owing. A very difficult time was had for a longish period with members of the local club being the biggest losers. There is a lesson to be learned here, Constitutions are there for a reason; do not ignore them - it could cost you dearly. Christine Hartley resigned after the event and Reg Bolton took over as Chairman.

2003	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS
2004	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live National Exhibition Centre - FoBBS
2005	RHS Chelsea - Silver award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live National Exhibition Centre - FoBBS
2006	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live National Exhibition Centre – FoBBS
2007	
2008	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS “Bonsai For All” - Friends of the National Bonsai Collection
2009	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS “Best of British Bonsai” - FoBBS - private enterprise Malcolm & Kath Hughes
2010	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS
2011	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS “Best of British Bonsai” - private enterprise Malcolm & Kath Hughes Crawley, K2 Centre - Sussex Bonsai Group, supported by FoBBS
2012	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live National Exhibition Centre – FoBBS – silver gilt Newport, Tredegar Park - South Wales Bonsai Societies and FoBBS
2013	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live – “Best of British Bonsai” M & K Hughes with FoBBS Bonsai World Exhibition/Convention - Sussex Bonsai group with FoBBS
2014	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live, - South Staffs and Ambion
2015	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Bonsai World Exhibition - Sussex Bonsai group with FoBBS Gardeners World Live - Midland Group of Bonsai Societies Hyper Japan – FoBBS
2016	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live, - South Staffs and Ambion Hyper Japan – FoBBS
2017	RHS Chelsea - Gold award - FoBBS Gardeners World Live, - South Staffs Bonsai Society Hyper Japan – FoBBS

Chairmen of The Federation from its conception

Apr 1982 - Oct 1987	Peter Brown
Oct 1987 - Jul 1988	Graham Gavin
Nov 1988 - Mar 1989	Harry Tomlinson (acting)
Mar 1989 - Oct 1992	Malcolm Hughes
Oct 1992 - Nov 1997	Ken Norman
Nov 1997 - Jan 2001	Martin Bradder
Jan 2001 - Sep 2001	Christine Hartley
Sep 2002 - Jan 2010	Reg Bolton
Jan 2010 - present	Malcolm Hughes (2 nd term)