

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

## *Man of the Trees*

The life story of the world's leading forester

An early member of the Bahá'í Faith

reconstructed from the former website [manofthetrees.org](http://manofthetrees.org) created by Paul Mantle

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

Richard St. Barbe Baker, (1889-1982), was the world's greatest forester. He was responsible for the planting of more trees than anyone else in history. He also was among the first ecologists to draw public attention to the global dimensions of deforestation and desert encroachment.



Richard St. Barbe Baker

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

In Kenya, in 1922, with the help of 3,000 Kikuyu warriors, he launched the Men of the Trees, which became an international movement that advanced tree planting and conservation in 108 countries. He conceived and helped lead the efforts that saved the California coastal redwoods. He traveled the world as an advocate for trees and to share his plan for reclaiming the Sahara Desert through tree planting. He was responsible for the planting of more trees than any other person in history. He died at age 92 while on a global tour to promote environmental awareness.

The young Richard St.Barbe Baker

# Young Richard St. Barbe Baker

Richard St. Barbe Baker was born on 9 October 1889 in the south of Hampshire, England, in a country home on a sunny hill.

At the entrance of his garden, the four-year-old boy had pushed two willow twigs into the ground. Now, a month later, they had sprouted leaves.



The Firs, childhood home of Richard St.Barbe Baker

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

At the age of five, he went exploring in a deep forest of pines and ferns. He later described this experience:

"...I seemed to have entered the fairyland of my dreams... I had entered the temple of the woods. I sank to the ground in a state of ecstasy; everything was intensely vivid... The overpowering beauty of it all entered my very being ...my heart brimmed over with a sense of unspeakable thankfulness which has followed me through the years..."

In the countryside of England where he grew up, woods and hedgerows have grown between the fields for hundreds of years. Here his father, who was also a minister, had a tree nursery. While Richard was still a young boy he helped grow thousands of seedlings and learned how to graft pear and apple trees.



# Richard St. Barbe Baker

In 1909, while still in his teens, Richard crossed the ocean to homestead in Canada. In Saskatchewan, he made friends of the local Cree Indians and learned their stories and nature survival skills. He also studied the ways of the beavers that built their dams near his tent camp.

To continue his schooling, he enrolled as one of the first hundred students in the new University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. To help support himself he wrote articles for the local newspaper.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

He worked in a lumber camp and was disturbed to see trees being cut in a wasteful way. It was then that he decided to one day become a forester.

He was also a “bronco-buster,” a tamer of wild horses. He was challenged to ride a black mustang that was considered too wild to tame. Richard rode him twenty-five miles the same day and had the horse given to him.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

During his rides across the Canadian prairie he saw that soil was being blown away from the farms. As much as an inch of soil a year was being lost.

He wanted to do something to help. He knew trees were the answer. Trees would break the blasts of the prairie winds, help hold the rainfall, shade and mulch the soil, and draw up water from deep in the ground.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

He went to work at the university's tree farm to determine which kinds of trees would be the best for the job. He imagined a future when the prairies of Canada would be protected by shelter belts of millions of trees.

Between 1916 and 1963 the Forest Nursery Station of Saskatoon distributed 147 million trees. In less than thirty years, approximately sixteen hundred miles of field shelter belts were planted on the Canadian prairies.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

After three and a half years in Canada, Richard returned to England and entered Cambridge University.

He was a twenty-four-year-old divinity student there when World War I started in the summer of 1914. Richard joined the British army and served as a cavalry trainer in Ireland and then as an artillery officer and a sniper at the front lines in France.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

During the war his thigh was broken in an accident with the horse he was riding. Later in the war he was wounded so badly that he was almost given up for dead. After recovering from these injuries, he was in charge of transporting horses – eighteen thousand of them in fifty-eight trips – across the English Channel to France. Twice his boats were sunk by underwater mines.

A third serious injury occurred later on land from an aerial bombing near the battlefield. As a result of this he was released from duty in the war with the rank of Captain.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

Gradually he was nursed back to health. He was then able to return to Cambridge University. However, to pay for his education, he dreamt of the design for what became the first modern caravans or travel trailers. He used plywood and thirty-six airplane undercarriages from the war to build them. With the profit from his invention he was able to pay his way through Cambridge and earn a degree in forestry.

invention of  
caravan/  
house trailer





# Richard St. Barbe Baker in 1920s Africa



Highland Village in Kenya 1920s

# Richard St. Barbe Baker in Africa

He was then hired as a forester by the British Colonial Office and traveled to an outpost in the country of Kenya in eastern Africa.

In the highlands of Kenya, he saw that the soil was eroding away and the land turning into desert where the trees had been destroyed. He consulted with the chiefs and elders of the Kikuyu people and then shared an idea. The tribes always held a dance when they began something important – Richard called for a “Dance of the Trees.”

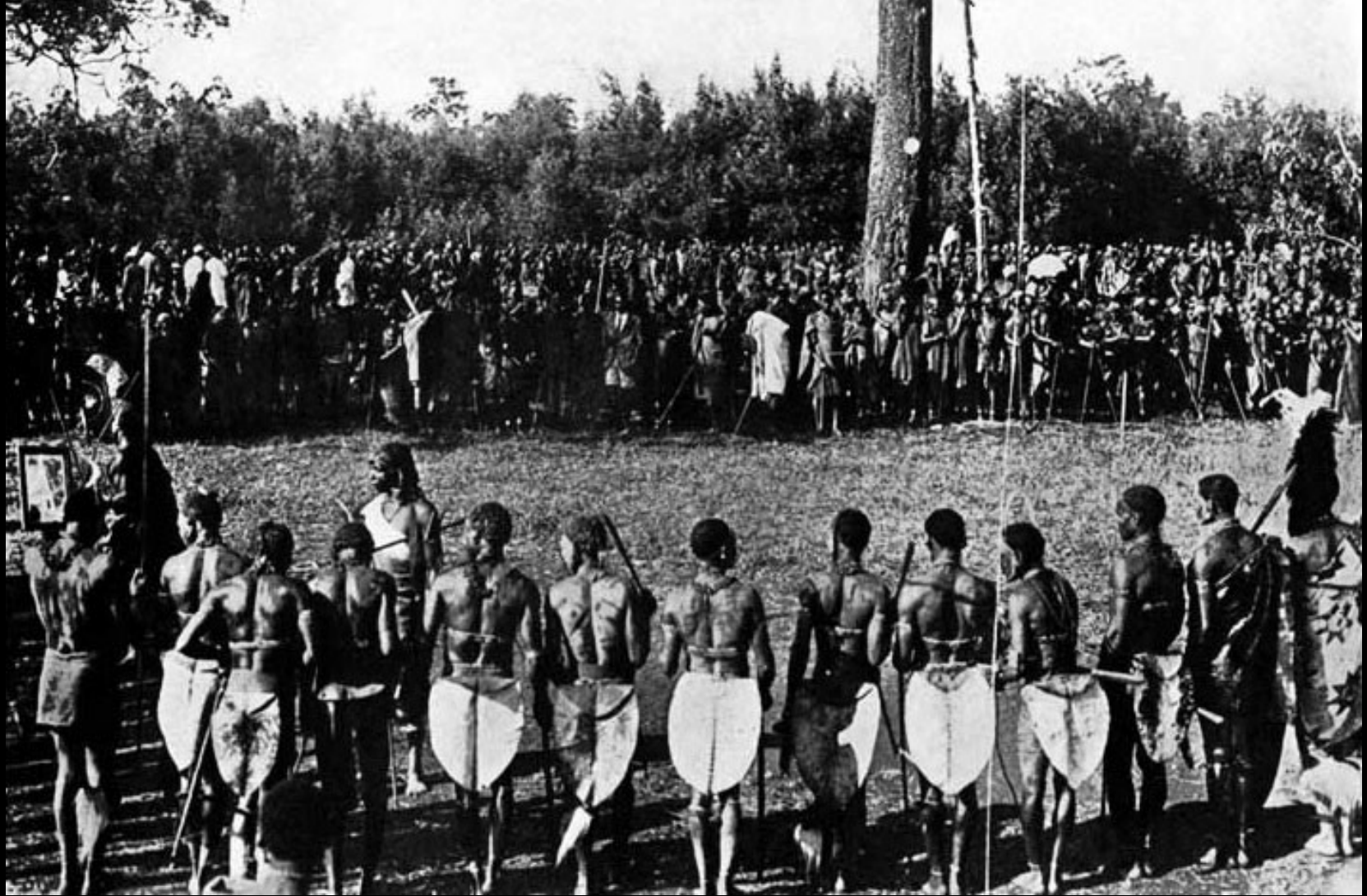


Kikuyu warriors approaching camp

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

Into the clearing they streamed from between two hills: over three thousand warriors in full regalia, bearing spears and shields.

They formed into a circle before a giant tree. In accord with their beliefs, the tree had been spared to catch the spirits of all the other trees that had been destroyed in the area.



First Dance of the Trees

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

The date was 22 July 1922. From the circle St. Barbe spoke through an interpreter. He told the armed warriors that to the Masai people, (their traditional enemies), they were known as the "Forest Destroyers." He said that this was true: they had been forest destroyers. He called upon the warriors to now instead become "Men of the Trees" – sworn protectors and planters of trees. By doing this they would benefit their way of life, and improve the future of their people. This was part of the first Dance of the Trees.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker in Africa

Of the over three thousand Kikuyu warriors who took part, he helped select fifty warriors to protect the trees that would be grown to heal the land. This was the beginning of the Men of the Trees.





Five of the first fifty Watu wa Miti (Men of the Trees)

# Richard St. Barbe Baker in Africa

As the work unfolded, nine thousand tribesmen joined in planting and tending the trees. In a special ceremony, the leaders of the people made him a member of the Kiama, the council of elders. He is the only white man ever to be honored in this way.



Youngsters seeking initiation in Kenya 1920s

# Richard St. Barbe Baker in Africa

He left Kenya for three months to take part in tree planting in Tanganyika. He returned to discover that a Colonial official had destroyed eighty thousand seedling trees that the Kikuyu workers – volunteer Men of the Trees – had raised by hand, to make a tennis court. However, with the help of Chief Josiah Njonjo, who had been his interpreter at the first Dance of the Trees, he called for a new beginning. As a result, the warriors in the region grew over nine million new trees that year.



Tree nursery 1920s

# Richard St. Barbe Baker in Africa

Once, when a Colonial official tried to strike a Kikuyu farmer, Richard risked his career by stepping in between the two and taking the hard blow on his own shoulder. Richard's African friends never forgot this act of courage. Some of the Europeans didn't agree with Richard's views and disliked him. They said he was "too involved with primitive people". He had an abiding love and respect for the indigenous people of Africa and his belief in the importance of trees was also unshakeable.



Richard St. Barbe Baker

# Richard St. Barbe Baker

Richard knew that the loss of forest cover was a worldwide problem. He returned to England and began the Men of the Trees there too. He submitted newspaper articles and spoke on the radio and at many gatherings to inform the public of the crucial role trees held in the ecosystem. The Men of the Trees grew to advance tree conservation in one hundred and eight countries.



# Richard St. Barbe Baker, a Bahá'í

While in England in 1924, Richard encountered the Bahá'í Faith, a religion he joined and served for the rest of his life. Its main teaching is the oneness of humankind. His views about the important role that spiritual beliefs must play in giving an underlying motivation to conservation efforts were ground-breaking. As a member of the Bahá'í Faith, he drew extensively on the Faith's teachings about the oneness of humanity and, accordingly, brought a distinctive global-mindedness and unifying spirit to virtually every project he undertook.

# Richard St. Barbe Baker in Africa

He returned to Africa, to the country of Nigeria, and worked and traveled several years there to help conserve the forests. He was the first European to learn the languages, customs, beliefs and stories of some of the different tribes whose territories he lived in and studied.



St. Barbe planting trees between corn and squash

# Indigenous Peoples

St. Barbe proved himself a friend and champion of indigenous people around the world. He interceded on their behalf through the media, through governmental channels, through his writings, and, most of all, through personal interactions. He shared in their special relationship to nature.



Richard St. Barbe Baker meets old friends

# Man of the Trees in Palestine, America, the Sahara

# Palestine

In 1929, Sir John Chancellor, High Commissioner of Palestine in the Middle East, requested that Richard come to that troubled region to establish a tree-planting program in the desert. (Palestine later became the country of Israel.) Some people there have a history of religious and ethnic conflict. In spite of this, Richard was able to bring a cross-section of leaders from the religious and civic communities together under the name “Men of the Trees.” As a result, forty-two tree nurseries were rapidly established.

# Palestine

On the outskirts of Jerusalem, he oversaw the revival – which he had helped instigate – of the Feast of the Trees, with four thousand schoolchildren taking part in tree planting before sixteen thousand onlookers.



# Palestine

The Bahá'í World Centre is in Haifa, where Shoghi Effendi, then Head of the Bahá'í Faith, lived. He so appreciated the work of Richard St. Barbe Baker that he became the first Life Member of Men of the Trees, and continued to encourage his work.

# America

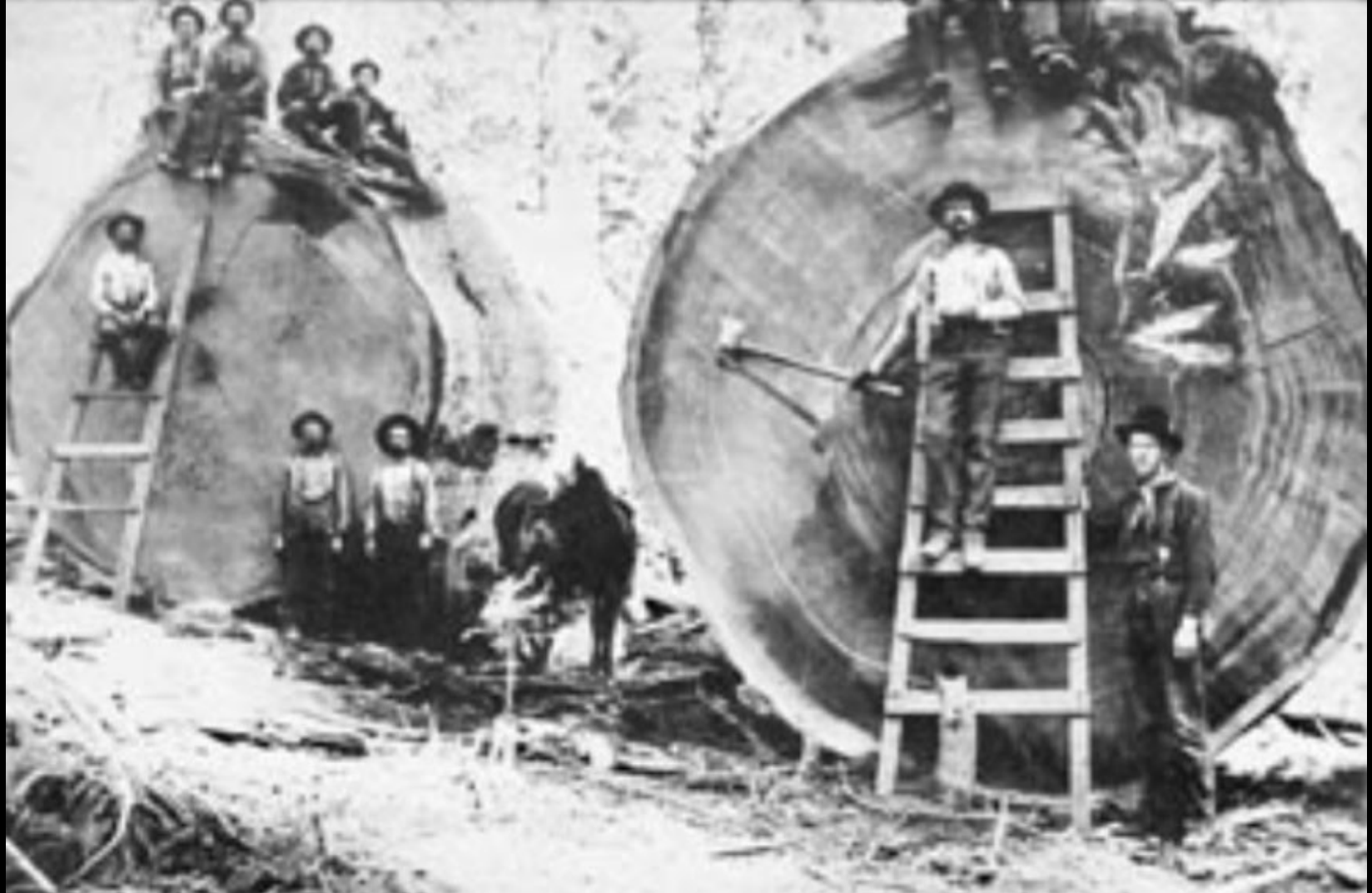
Next he went on a lecture tour of the United States of America. He arrived in New York with less than five dollars in his pocket. However, a publisher heard him talking about his experiences in Africa and asked if he would write a book. He paid Richard five hundred dollars in advance. While traveling, he wrote *Men of the Trees – In the Mahogany Forests of Kenya and Nigeria*, which included forty-eight of his photographs.

# America

Lowell Thomas, a famous radio personality, wrote the introduction to Richard's book and became a friend. To help publicize the importance of trees, Lowell Thomas interviewed Richard on his radio show, World News, and gave Richard the name "Man of the Trees." He featured reports of Richard's travels and campaigns in his broadcasts.

# America

Richard went to California and gazed upon the magnificent redwood trees on the Pacific coast – some of the biggest trees in the world, many of them thousands of years old. He was shocked to learn that plans were in place to cut down most of the groves to make forms for concrete to construct the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.



Logged redwoods of California

# America

For eight consecutive years he returned to California, working to save the giant redwood trees. The American people responded by contributing millions of dollars. Finally, in 1939, a State Park of twelve thousand acres was created to protect the redwoods. Five thousand acres of National Park was added later.

# America

Richard was a friend and advisor to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Governor of New York. Shortly after Roosevelt was elected President of the United States, he implemented and expanded Richard's plan for planting millions of trees across the country. During the 1930's, six million young men found employment in the Civilian Conservation Corps.

President Roosevelt to  
Richard St.Barbe Baker



In my friend Richard St. Barbe Baker  
from his fellow "men of the 1930s"  
Franklin D. Roosevelt



# England

Upon his return to England, he focused on the protection of the California coastal redwoods. He launched the Save the Redwoods Fund in England, through the radio and newspapers, and by addressing groups of people of all ages wherever he could.

During World War II, Richard worked to prevent the deforestation of England and Ireland and to insure that trees cut down for the war effort were replanted. After the war, he founded the Forestry Association of Great Britain.

# England

The writer and playwright, George Bernard Shaw, was among the famous figures who enrolled as a member of Men of the Trees. Richard wrote wishing him: “The health of the pines, the strength of an oak, and the endurance of a redwood tree.” This is an apt description of the vigor that Richard himself applied to his forestry work.



Richard St. Barbe Baker

# World Forestry Charter Gatherings

St. Barbe organized World Forestry Charter Gatherings in London starting in 1945. The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith sent a message of support to each of the twelve Gatherings.

DESIRE TO EXPRESS TO HIS MAJESTY THE KING OR HIS MAJESTY'S REPRESENTATIVE AS WELL AS TO ASSEMBLED GUESTS MY HOPE WORK OF MEN OF TREES SO IMPORTANT FOR PROTECTION PHYSICAL WORLD AND HERITAGE FUTURE GENERATIONS MAY BE RICHLY BLESSED AND AT SAME TIME CONSTITUTE YET ANOTHER FORCE WORKING FOR PEACE AND BROTHERHOOD IN THIS SORELY TRIED DIVIDED WORLD. – Shoghi Effendi, Cable dated 23 May 1951 to New Earth Luncheon, London.

# Sahara Desert

In 1952, with several major universities, he led an expedition that traveled nine thousand miles through the Sahara Desert. Despite the dangers of desert travel, he made the trip in a second-hand vehicle left over from World War II. He formed a second Sahara University Expedition in 1964, and covered twenty-five thousand miles around and in the Sahara. He gathered scientific data and compiled evidence that parts of the Sahara had once been covered with forests.



Richard St. Barbe Baker, Nairobi 1953

# Sahara Desert

Richard wrote two books about these expeditions, *Sahara Challenge* and *Sahara Conquest*. Some movies were also made during the trips.

These gained publicity for his idea to stop the Sahara from spreading and drying up more land. He believed that the desert could be reclaimed by growing millions of trees around and in it.

Richard St. Barbe Baker

World Citizen



# A world citizen

Back and forth across the world Richard flew, from country to country, to advance the cause of forests. He lived in England and later New Zealand, but visited many other countries. He considered the whole world one homeland and himself a world citizen. Everywhere he shared the message: “You can gauge a nation’s wealth, its real wealth, by its tree cover.” He said, “The health and the economic security of the human race depend on how well the forests of the world are managed.”



Richard St. Barbe Baker

# England

His love for trees was often combined with his lifelong love for horses. In England, he went on a twenty-day horseback trip on a horse called “The Ghost,” and talked to children in seventy-two schools about the importance of trees.



Richard St. Barbe Baker on "The Ghost"

Richard St. Barbe Baker  
explaining tree to children



# New Zealand

When he was 74 years old he rode twelve hundred miles, on a dark bay horse named Rajah, from New Zealand's northernmost kauri tree to its southernmost kauri tree. Throughout the trip he lectured on the Sahara Reclamation Program. On this horseback trip he also visited approximately ninety-two thousand New Zealand school children, and spoke to them about their tree heritage.

New Zealand  
Kauri tree in its prime

(see man at base on left)





Richard St. Barbe Baker with children



# America

In 1963, he learned that some of the California coastal redwoods were to be leveled for a new six-lane highway. Three days later he was in the United States. He met with Morris Udall, the Secretary of the Interior in Washington, D.C., and convinced him to present to Congress an alternate route for the highway. Richard wrote: “The struggle to save the redwoods still goes on; it seems that each generation will have to fight to maintain their redwood heritage.”

# Kenya

On a return trip to Kenya in 1966, he organized the planting of ten thousand trees in ten minutes with the help of ten thousand young people. Three days later, six thousand trees were planted in about six minutes.



Richard St. Barbe Baker returning to Kenya



Richard St. Barbe Baker, old friends reunited

Richard St. Barbe Baker  
in Kenya



# Awards

Richard was awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II in 1978 and the Prince of Wales became the Patron of the Men of the Trees in 1979.

Some of the most active members of the Men of the Trees have been women. In many places the name “Men of the Trees” has been changed to “International Tree Foundation.”

# Children

He was the Man of the Trees, an earth healer, a visionary who saw a future of international cooperation:

"I have the dream of the whole earth made green again, an earth healed and made whole through the efforts of children: children of all nations planting trees to express their special understanding of the earth as their home, children of all races holding hands, circling the earth, expressing and celebrating their special understanding of all children as their brothers and sisters."



Richard St. Barbe Baker with children in China



Richard St.Barbe  
Baker with child



# His passing in Canada

Richard never retired; instead he traveled and taught. While on a visit to Canada at the age of 92 – a few days after planting a tree – he closed his eyes and died peacefully. He is buried in a Saskatoon cemetery near two large spruce trees.

# Universal House of Justice

PASSING DISTINGUISHED DEDICATED SERVANT HUMANITY  
RICHARD ST BARBE BAKER LOSS TO ENTIRE WORLD AND  
TO BAHAI COMMUNITY AN OUTSTANDING SERVANT  
SPOKESMAN FAITH. HIS DEVOTION BELOVED GUARDIAN  
NEVER CEASING EFFORTS BEST INTERESTS MANKIND  
MERITORIOUS EXAMPLE. ASSURE FAMILY FRIENDS  
PRAYERS SACRED THRESHOLD BOUNTIFOLD REWARD  
PROGRESS SOUL ABHA KINGDOM.

Universal House of Justice

10 June 1982

Richard St.Barbe  
Baker with young tree

