

Ash dieback hits Beech Recreation Ground



In the last edition of *Beech News*, Stella Charman shared her knowledge of the growing problem of ash dieback. She eloquently described the signs and symptoms of this horrible disease. At the time of her writing, there was no sign of attack on her three beloved ash trees.

So it was a bit of a shock at the end of July when I noticed that the Great Ash tree near the Wellhouse Road entrance to the Rec did not look as it should. The crown was thin, and on closer inspection the branches were blackened and leafless. It was no longer the healthy ash tree that I have admired over many years. It was clear that ash dieback had arrived because there were the tell-tale dead leaves and blackened branches. It was just the same as when I saw it last year along St Cuthbert's Way in the Scottish Borders and described so well in Stella's article. Along the Way it was everywhere, but strangely some trees were affected more than others.

After I got over my initial shock, I ventured apprehensively into the little wooded copse we have on the Rec. And,

yes, sadly the ash there were affected as well. There were quite a few sick trees amongst the sycamore, hazel, holly and yew; mostly tall and slender with their crowns high up in the canopy. But there they were, the tell-tale blackened and dying branches.

I then checked the large ash tree at the eastern end of the Rec, and then the one at the top boundary of the village green. Both, thankfully, are in pretty good shape. Phew!

Preservation versus safety

As a member of the Village Hall management committee, which is responsible for the Rec, I knew we had to do something. So a reread of Stella's article and some Internet research was the first step. As a bit of an environmentalist, I knew that on one hand we needed to preserve the trees as long as possible, but on the other hand we must ensure public safety. There is even a law called the Occupiers Liability Act 1984. That rang particular alarm bells. Dead branches and limbs can fall unexpectedly, and potentially a whole tree could fall. What if a tree fell into a neighbouring property?

So I asked a local tree surgeon to take a look. He was helpful and very clear. The longer the diseased trees remain standing, the harder it is to manage them. Once the disease takes hold on a tree, tree surgeons can't climb it and even clear felling is difficult. Cherry pickers (those extraordinary platforms that look like they'll fall over at any moment) are required. I realised this disease had us over a bit of a barrel.

Ian Gibson, who knows a lot about these things, also had a good look and confirmed that it had sadly been only a matter of time before the disease arrived in Beech. He is also carefully measuring out the copse—useful for planning what to do.



I took the news back to the management committee, who suggested that we need to ask the villagers for their views about how we should address this problem. After all, the trees are beautiful and much-loved, and ash trees have been part of the countryside for thousands of years. But this has to be counterbalanced with the safety of walkers, adjacent houses and anyone else who uses the area. We have identified four options to deal with this.

Four options

Option 1: Watchful monitoring. Close off the copse for public safety.

Advantage: Allows the trees to live for as long as possible, perhaps a number of years.

Disadvantage: Trees will become increasingly dangerous and it is very difficult to stop people wandering close by. Adjacent properties could be at risk.

Option 2: Seek advice and do the minimum work of removing dead branches and carrying out regular checks.

Advantage: Will keep the trees going for a period—possibly two to three years.

Disadvantage: This is a high-cost option and trees will still become increasingly dangerous.

Option 3: Divide the copse into sections—say, four quadrants. Remove trees in each quadrant in turn. Replant and improve the area in stages.

Advantage: Costs and workload would be spread over two or more years.

Disadvantage: Due to the compact nature of the copse, work in one quadrant would inevitably spill over to

others. It would take longer to complete a replanting scheme. Overall costs are likely to be higher due to repeated tree surgeon visits. The condition of the remaining trees will deteriorate over time, making the work more difficult.

Option 4: Remove all the trees in a single operation. Leave stumps up to 5 metres high, which will be ideal habitat for many insects and provide food for woodpeckers, tree creepers and so on.

Advantage: A decisive decision which will make replanting easier and allow the copse to recover more quickly. In the long run, this will be the cheapest option.

Disadvantage: The area will look barren and messy for a year or two while new trees are planted and understory vegetation becomes established.

As the ash trees at the eastern end of the Rec are looking pretty good just now, we feel comfortable to leave a decision on them for a later date.

An opportunity for renewal?

Amongst all this gloom, there does seem to be an opportunity. The copse is currently underused by villagers, partly because it contains relatively little of interest, is quite dark and is swamped with bramble and nettle. If and when the trees come down, could we replant with diverse native trees and encourage wildlife? At the same time, we could make the area interesting for walkers and families with children to explore a little bit of traditional native woodland.

Trees such as oak, silver birch and wild cherry spring to mind, with hazel, wild honeysuckle, native juniper and others in the understory. English bluebells, wild garlic, wood anemones, primroses and so on could provide a carpet of spring wild flowers. For those who love the woods and countryside, and I know there are many in Beech, this could be really exciting.

So the Hall Management Committee faces some big decisions. **We need people's views and ideas. If you have thoughts about the way forward, please let me know by the end of September so the committee can take your views into account in making decisions.** You can email me on nick.sorby@icloud.com, and if you would like a chat that would be great as well.

Nick Sorby