

GUIDENCE NOTE ON ASH TREES IN CHURCHYARDS LANCASHIRE. SEPTEMBER 2020

Ash Die Back is a disease affecting ash trees which has spread from central/eastern Europe over the last 15 years. The disease will kill the trees in 80% of the cases and within 10 years ash will be as infrequently seen as elm in the English Landscape.

So far there is no known treatment and no disease resistant common ash species have yet been identified. The disease is now endemic in the English Landscape and is into Wales and Scotland. The issue is now to determine when the dying trees present a danger risk and when and how they should be removed.

A drive from Preston travelling east along the A59 to Yorkshire will show you the extent of ash death along the roadsides. One might also contemplate what the roadsides will look like in 3 years' time and what trees will replace the dead ash.

It would be useful for Church Wardens to be able to identify ash trees and the disease at the early onset stage, the developing stage and the final stage so they can plan and budget work for the future.

The **early onset stage** is where the tree seems to have a full canopy but the leading stems seem to have no leaves coming off the top shoots. From a distance the tree seems to be spiky all over when seen against the sky. The leaves have died off and fallen to the ground carrying the fungi spores with them and ready to infect the tree again in the spring. This stage may last 2-5 years

When the **developing stage** is reached small upper canopy branches (10mm dia) will fall away and while the tree may continue to grow there will be patches of open space in the canopy giving the tree a moth-eaten appearance from the ground. The branch drop will appear on the ground and over a few years the diameter of the dropping timber will increase to 25mm or more. This stage may last 2-4 years. The tree will still be stable and removal may be easier than at the final stage



Moth eaten canopy



The **final stage** is when the tree is almost bare of leaves and starts to make sudden burst of fresh growth from branch unions and the main stem to try and create leaves to enable it to try and use sunlight. Larger branches may fail through decay and the timber quality will become brittle.

Finally no leaves appear and the tree will be dead but may not have the flex of a live tree and a tree surgeon will need to take care during a removal operation. To the left the tree arrowed is in the final stage. The tree to the right and foreground is at the early onset stage

Ash is a prolific seeder so around a mature trees there will be a host of small trees. Young green shots are the first to catch Ash Die back so the hosts of young trees dying and more evident than the mature trees which can also succumb to the disease. The Spores of the fungus travel on the air and may have come by lorry, car or even on the wind from the Continent. Your ash trees may get the infection from the spores of an adjacent tree or a gust of wind from afar. Often three young 12m high trees may die leaving one healthy tree close by which may or may not survive. Large 20m high trees are susceptible to the disease despite their age.

The only good news is that ash wood is rated as the best firewood available once it is dry. Ash Tree wood has a low moisture content in a healthy state and is burnable within a few months. The regulations that came in in March 2021 indicate that firewood being sold must have a **Moisture Content** of no more than 20%. Prosecutions may follow if wood is sold above 20% Moisture content

Since summer 2021 we have realised that the Tree work industry is under considerable pressure from the deluge of work and are struggling with the labour shortage caused by COVID infections. We can offer advice on how to recover some of the cost of felling and removing your stricken ash trees.

Finally removed trees should be replaced. A guide and hopefully helpful advice on replacement is on its way.

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