

Action plan for ash disease

Our ash trees have become increasingly afflicted with “Chalara” disease. Ash that have grown vigorously and gracefully until recently, now stand half bare with only bunches of healthy leaves regenerating from within their crowns. Worse, this is only the latest affliction suffered by native trees: many will have noticed the dead alders amongst the living on the banks of the Wye, and those who lived here in the 1970s will remember the wych elms dying in droves. Depressingly, we have partly brought this on ourselves in so far as both ash and elm disease were imported through our docks.

What to do? Clearly dead ash growing over footpaths and roads will have to be removed, but otherwise we should take stock. After all, we still have plenty of wych elms which are periodically beaten back by disease, then recover, and some trees have survived unscathed, hinting at some genetic immunity. Few of us will realise that our oaks were attacked in the early 20th century by the imported oak mildew that now prevents seedlings surviving in woods, but still allows them to grow in grass. In the long view, it is also worth remembering that disease has attacked elms at intervals since the Neolithic: eventually the disease abates and perhaps the tree develops greater immunity. It is rare for abundant native trees to be eliminated: the best example I know is the American chestnut, reduced by a fungal blight from magnificent oak-like trees to scattered, weedy shrubs – read *The Overstorey* by Richard Powers.

As for ash, I have for decades followed the fortunes of several hundred trees in a research reserve near the Biblins bridge*. Here, the disease was first detected in 2017 and it is still spreading rapidly. Last August, when we assessed each tree individually, we found that about 15% showed little or no sign of the disease, and some of these were growing next to heavily diseased trees. Analysis continues, but we can find no correlations between disease intensity and soil, size, vigour or proximity to diseased trees, which again hints that the untouched trees are immune.

Don't panic - that's the key to tackling the threat to one of Britain's favourite trees

Events may prove us wrong, but this is also the experience in mainland Europe, where the disease has been around for longer. A small proportion survive and fruit, and these will eventually allow ash to recover its previous position in the landscape – always assuming we haven't felled them “just in case”.

So, to quote Lance Corporal Jones, “don't panic”. Promptly remove obviously failing trees in potentially dangerous positions, but otherwise let's ride it out. Remember also that native trees not only battle against fungal diseases, but also have to withstand other pressures. Some are due purely to nature, which killed many great beech trees in the great 1976 drought and droves of smaller birch. Some are due to us, notably the constant damage done to beech, oak, maple and other trees by grey squirrels, which arrived here in 1943. And, if trees are failing to regenerate in our woods, that's usually due to fallow deer, which we conspicuously fail to control. Right now, the only tree that seems to be free of significant disease and resistant to squirrels is the small-leaved lime - common here but infrequent elsewhere – but that is especially palatable to deer.

GEORGE PETERKEN

* *Lady Park Wood, which has recently been the scene of a collaboration between research ecologists and professional artists. Artworks now on exhibit in Nelson Museum, Monmouth, and reproduced with an ecological commentary in Art Meets Ecology (Sansom, 2020).*

Watch a video of George Peterken talking about tree diseases affecting three native species. Go to our Facebook group @parishgrasslandsclimateaction and scroll down to one of the earliest posts.

Happy return to the Greenmeadow

It was with great pleasure that I received a call from St Briavels School before term started in September asking if I was still happy to allow Class 1 children to use the Greenmeadow for their Forest School activities. My answer of course was “yes, please” as over many years now it has proved a splendid use of this woody patch and I was fearful that this activity would be yet another victim of Covid 19.



So it was wonderful, after a break of six months, to hear the laughter and chat of the children as they played and explored, and to know they would soon be joined by those children attending Early Years, so that twice weekly there would be two sessions for the different groups who will have taken the short walk from the school (just 5 minutes even for the shortest legs).

low branches, a hillock, and a copse plus brambles, nettles and, sometimes glorious mud... so plenty to experience and enjoy

Over the many years that they have been coming, regardless of the seasons or weather conditions, the staff have said how important this activity is for the children. There is nothing to sit on other than logs and wooden pallets, but there are trees with

When, in high summer, those same children have the chance to visit Jean Green's flower meadows on the Common, arranged by the PGP, we see how confident and relaxed they are in her big space and I feel sure that their experience in the Greenmeadow has contributed to their enjoyment of those special days. which we hope to resume in 2021.

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NEWSLETTER

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Do you believe in fairies?

One of the most important ways to reduce our carbon footprint is to use our cars less. The amount of traffic in the lanes has increased noticeably in recent years. As well as contributing to climate change, this traffic makes it more dangerous to walk about and affects the air quality. For this speed awareness project we have teamed up with some lesser known members of our community. Together we are addressing the issue of fast and unsafe driving. We wish to make cycling, walking (and flying!) a more attractive prospect and offer all more safety and freedom to roam. Keep your eye on the road side verges between now and Christmas as more details emerge.



LIZ HART

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NATURE WATCH

What to spot now



Fieldfare



Meadow waxcap

At last, light at the end of the tunnel

It has been a very difficult year but as it draws to a close, with encouraging news about potential vaccines, we can begin to hope that 2021 will see a return to something resembling normality. Of course 2020 began on a very positive note, with the launch of Parish Grasslands Climate Action, our plan to tackle climate change at a local level. Our first event, the Bake Off at the Mackenzie Hall, drew in a whole new section of the community. However, no sooner had we got under way when the coronavirus struck and we were faced with the first lockdown.

The restrictions brought almost all activities to a halt. But some progress has been made, and some of that is recorded in these pages. During lockdown technology offered us a lifeline. In September we held the postponed AGM as an online Zoom meeting. Two new committee members were elected, Jackie Roby and Matt Dunwell, and we look forward to benefiting

from their knowledge and experience. We set up a Climate Action Facebook group and it is proving a useful forum for exchanging information. If you haven't joined already you can do so by going to www.facebook.com/groups/parishgrasslandsclimateaction

On December 10 we join forces with Dean Forest Beekeepers for an online talk by Brigit Strawbridge Howard, a naturalist, wildlife gardener and author. She campaigns to raise awareness of wild bees and her talk is entitled: *Bees: The importance of species diversity, and their different relationships with flowering plants.* It will take the form of a Zoom webinar and will last for about an hour, with time for questions. Members have been sent a link to register for the meeting. I hope you will be able to join us for the talk, and for a full resumption of activities before too long.

MIKE TOPP

Greener Miles Project gets moving with electric bikes

The Greener Miles Project is part of the Parish Grasslands Climate Action Transport Hub, and we've been looking at what electric-bikes have to offer on our local roads. The Covid lockdowns have focused many more people on travelling and exercising and there is a surge in sales of e-bikes. But what's wrong with the good old fashioned pushbike, especially when e-bikes can seem eye-wateringly expensive?

We have cut straight to the chase and are asking local people who already have e-bikes to tell us of their experiences and offer their thoughts on the realities of owning and riding e-bikes around our local lanes.

We are interviewing and filming local e-bike owners as they tackle the hill on Sandy Lane on their various machines. In addition, we are compiling case studies of local e-bike experiences. The videos and documents are being added to the Greener Miles website (www.sites.google.com/view/greenermilesproject) along with some general information and frequently asked questions about e-bikes.

As it grows, this should prove a useful resource for anyone interested in getting an e-bike. This is an on-going project, so if you have any e-bike experience, contributions are very welcome! E-bikes are often referred to as "game changers" and our experience



Sally Secrett sails up Sandy Lane, a gradient of almost 20% (one in five), on her electric bike

and feedback bears this out. Cycling has long been known to offer tremendous physical and mental health benefits and e-bikes open up and enhance the cycling experience across the board.

We've heard from a seasoned conventional touring bike rider who, along with non-seasoned partner, converted to e-bikes so that they now ride together regularly on long recreational trips with friends. We've also had an account of someone getting rid of their conventional bicycle, thinking they were unlikely to cycle again. Having bought an e-bike, they now often cycle to work.

From personal experience, I have covered hundreds of miles up and down the local hills with my two-year-old on board in a child seat. I've gained even more appreciation of the fantastic landscape we live in and it's also nice to be able to say hello to people as you go past! Apart from recreational use, the bike is now a regular means of transport for local trips to the shops, to see neighbours or doing the school run.

There are of course many things to consider before getting an e-bike, not least of which is cost. It is better to think in terms of value; how many more miles will you do on an e-bike than a conventional bike and how much will you value them? If you're interested, please do visit the Greener Miles Project website and take a look at the e-bike information – it might be the beginning of a great adventure!

MARK POND

Conscious consumerism and sustainable shopping

What exactly is conscious consumerism and sustainable shopping – and how can you do it? It's all about being mindful of what and where we buy things. Our culture has led to fairly mindless purchases for many of us: see something for sale, like it, buy it. But what if we stop to think about it a bit and question what we buy?

Why is that item such a bargain? How did that product get to be on the shelf in front of me? What's its history – are the materials recyclable when I've finished with it or will it bio-degrade? What were the working conditions and processes to make it? There are so many questions we could, should, ask. Finding the answers is not easy and it's hard to prioritise making time to find out when we all lead such busy lives.

We might well act differently if we asked these questions and started to be more aware, mindful and caring about the impact of our shopping habits on the people who produce the goods we buy (in some cases slave labour may be involved) and on the environment (the process and

packaging, the transport to get the goods to us, and whether it just adds to landfill or pollutes the ocean when we are done with it). Many of us have started to think about our purchases, but it's hard to make changes. Convenience and cost are often key barriers. I've been trying for some time and I still make easy convenient and affordable choices, but I am also beginning to make more sustainable and conscious choices. On my journey I've found there are ways to make it easier:

Start small – don't burden yourself with an unrealistic target. Just change one small item every so often and you'll soon find that your normal purchases start to look different. For me, it was my washing up liquid (an eco-friendlier brand), then our handwash (we now use bars of soap, so no more plastic bottles).

Buy from eco-shops – they will have already done the work for you. There are shops and online stores that operate from an environmentally friendly and sustainable ethos. This means they do all the hard work in sourcing

ethical products. They will have checked the processes, packaging and transport systems and many help producers to change their working processes through educating, supporting and paying more.

Buy local – buying local produce means lower food miles and therefore a lower impact on the environment, which helps to reduce our carbon footprint. It's heartening to see more and more shops are providing ethical and sustainable products increasing consumer choice.

Where to buy locally?

[The Brockweir and Hewelsfield Village shop](#) sells local produce as well as eco-friendly products and offers cleaning refills which helps us cut down on our plastic waste.

[The Pantry in St Briavels](#) also sells local produce and stocks eco-friendly products such as shampoo bars.

[Forest Friendly in Lydney](#) is an eco-shop and online store

offering delivery and orders by post. They sell all sorts including reusable sanitary wear, toys, soaps, sustainable stationery and gifts. www.forestfriendly.co.uk

[Wye Weight in Monmouth](#) offers local produce, food and cleaning refills and eco-friendly, waste free and plastic free alternatives. www.wyeweight.co.uk

[Monmouth Community Fridge](#) free surplus food from local businesses which would otherwise go to food waste. On Facebook search for [@MonmouthCommunityFridge](#)

This is just a small list: please do share with us on our Facebook page [@parishgrasslandsclimateaction](#) Sharing what we know raises awareness and keeps a topic alive.

One final thought: there is often the reality that these choices are more expensive (because they are more appropriately priced). I believe that the more people make ethical choices, the more demand there will be, and the more affordable things will become.

FIONA ROSKILLY-POND