

Report Holt Parish Council

Condition of Horse Chestnuts

Village Green Holt

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Garden and Estate Services Consultancy.

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Thank you for inviting me on the morning of Friday 24th May 2019 to advise and comment on the health of three mature Horse Chestnuts on the village green.

The Hilliers Manual of Trees and Shrubs: HG Hillier 1972, describes *Aesculus hippocastanum* “Common Horse Chestnut”. Possibly the most beautiful of large flowering trees hardy in the British Isles. Exceptionally attractive when covered with its stout “candles” of white flowers in May. Providing the familiar “conkers” of children’s games in autumn. Native of the wild region between Greece and Albania. Introduced into Western Europe in 1576 and into the British Isles in the 17th century.

On the 24th May accompanied by a councillor from Holt PC I was able to carry out from the ground using binoculars, a visual inspection of the group of Horse Chestnuts immediately adjacent to the B3107. It was a warm clear morning and visibility was good.

Even without binoculars it was obvious to the practised trained eye that all three trees were showing signs of stress exhibiting desiccated leaves and flower spikes through the crowns (aerial/heads). There was also a considerable amount of leaf litter and debris on the ground around and inside the “drip line” of the trees. One would not expect this amount of leaf fall/ leaf litter on healthy mature trees at this time of the year unless there was sustained soil drought.

This inspection confirmed to me that all three trees were infected with horse chestnut bleeding canker (*HCBC 23th May 2019*).

I was able to refer to two detailed and comprehensive Tree Safety Reports submitted earlier to Holt Parish Council by experienced professional arborists (ground and aerial inspections including graphics) which identify the individual (tagged) trees.

These reports covered itemised specifications of work on the individual trees but also made reference to the dynamic relationship between the three trees as a group i.e. possible disease cross infection, aesthetics, environmental stresses, short- and longer-term predictions.

On reflection and strong in the knowledge that from my experience in the industry that trees (often emotive subjects) and tree matters can evoke strong feelings and reactions from people. I would highlight the following points to guide officers of the parish council in their discussions and deliberations.

- Wiltshire Council's Planning and Environmental Departments must be consulted and be in agreement before any works can be carried out.
- All three horse chestnut trees may be deemed or perceived by some as unhealthy, dying or potentially dangerous. The professional arborist reports both highlight possible dangers posed by these trees to the public.
- All three trees show evidence of surgery/pruning in the past, two of the trees have been braced in an effort to protect the crowns from splitting or subsiding.
- There is no chemical (spray) treatment currently registered or approved for use in the UK to cure or arrest the development of bleeding canker caused by this disease. (*Disease management Forestry Commission notes*)
- No internal decay scanning equipment was employed to assess the condition of the heart and sapwood of the trees but it is probably reasonable to expect at least some deterioration given the age of the subjects and the fact that there are several obvious holes and snags that suggest that areas of the bark has been breached in the past.
- There may be a call from some people that the trees should be "made safe", perhaps heavily pollarded and left as monoliths and dead wood habitats for wildlife. If these trees were situated in a parkland setting this might well be an option. Is this a practical an option for a small village green area?
- Before any major work is carried on any of the three horse chestnuts in question the trees should be checked to ensure that birds nests and bat roosts are not damaged or compromised. This may well require another specific(wildlife) aerial survey.

- Both of the reports by the professional arborists identify Tree No: 0315 as possibly responding favourably in the longer term to (pollarding/heavy reduction) pruning. Both professional arborists also refer to possible negative response to stresses caused by pruning.
- The remaining two trees 0314/0316 are deemed as dangerous and should be clear felled as soon as practicable (see note above re-wildlife aerial survey).
- If trees are dismantled/clear felled then the stumps should be ground out prior to replanting.
- The choice of trees for replacement trees pose several questions; species of tree, native/non-native, size of tree e.g. extra heavy standard, number of trees, planting, protecting after care and establishment.
- Condition of other local horse chestnut should be assessed and owners advised of their responsibilities.
- Finally, many people may ask pertinent questions as to how and why this disease (HCBC) has struck this particular group of previously healthy mature trees. HCBC has been on the arboricultural radar for at least the last two decades and seems to be linked to (triggered by) environmental stress/changing weather patterns/episodes including; drought, hot weather, compaction and drainage issues, weakening of the affected plant by other pest and disease conditions such as leaf-mining moth and leaf blotch fungus.

Conclusion

On reflection my advice to Holt Parish Council would be to clear fell the three affected trees and replant with suitable British Native trees, perhaps selected with a fastigate (columnar) growth pattern.