Churchyard Beech Tree

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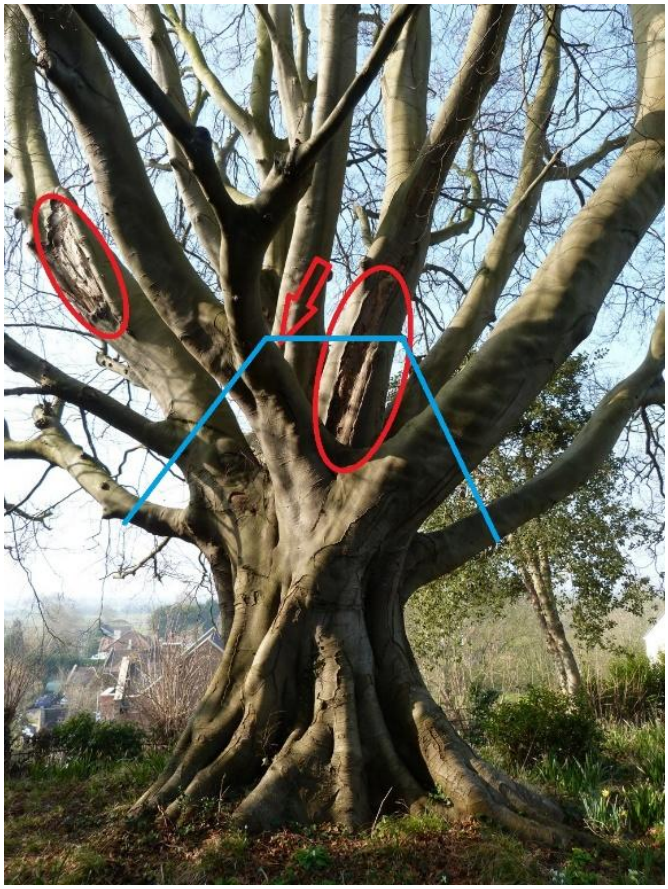
Our difficulties began with a request from our church architect to order a formal report on the beech tree. He pointed out that a number of buildings were at risk if there were to be significant shedding of a branch, or branches. Many of you may recall that a large branch fell in 2019 straddling the path to the lychgate. Acting on our architect's recommendation an Arborist was asked to provide a report on the tree's condition. Sadly, his report makes disturbing reading. Basically, the central heart of the tree is diseased with a fungal infection and will have to be removed.



This picture highlights the problem. The two **ovals** pick out two major branches that are diseased and will need to be removed. The **arrow** in the centre points to an area of fungal disease at the base of a number of branches. **Cutting out these three central branched sections will remove a substantial part of the tree**.

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The report offers two options after the central branches have been removed

Crown reduction - the remaining branches will be unbalanced and will need to be cut back **in order to reduce the weight that these branches bear**. After crown reduction the tree will bear leaves, but the canopy will obviously be reduced very significantly. Following this management the recommendation is that the tree should be pruned every 3 years to maintain its structure.
Skeletonization - the alternative to doing this is to **reduce the whole tree to a skeleton**. If this is done there is very little possibility that there will be any regrowth of branches that will bear leaves. The **blue lines** indicate the rough shape of the skeleton tree that will be left if we were to take that route.

After careful consideration we are aiming for crown reduction as our end point because we believe that local people will wish to retain as much of the tree as possible. However, this approach will depend on whether the remaining branches are healthy. If they are not, then skeletonization may become necessary.

We are very upset that this action needs to be taken but it is the Parish's responsibility to maintain safety in the churchyard. The Arborist pointed out that, if the beech tree were to be in the middle of a field, it would be left to shed its diseased branches as it ages. The sad fact is that our insurers will refuse to provide cover for the tree if we do not act urgently.

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WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT 1981

Before doing any work on our beech tree we had to seek advice from the Somerset Wildlife Trust. In view of the decay in the tree branches they pointed out that an ecologist's report would be needed. I had hoped that a single visit might be enough. But no, after the first visit, which only required a ladder and an endoscopy, I was told that a full inspection using a viewing platform would be needed.

As an aside here it's worth noting how commonplace the process of endoscopy has become. Flexible endoscopes were introduced to medicine in the late 60's and they revolutionised examination of the human intestines. Their use has spread and they can now be used in a whole range of applications including inspection of drains and examining natural cavities in trees. Fortunately, this inspection did not find nesting birds or hibernating bats. However, bats will emerge from hibernation in April and a fuller inspection will take place just before the tree work is done.