

## Challenging Times Amongst The Beauty



By Patrick Letschka, Woodland Manager, and Steve Davies, Secretary,  
New England Wood Trust

Just to the east of Cuckfield's recreational ground and down a steep grassy field lies New England Wood. This beautiful broad-leaved nature reserve, with its windy pathways and small streams, was purchased by Cuckfield residents in 1980 - which is why on Monday mornings a dedicated group of volunteers gather together to maintain the paths, repair bridges, clear open spaces called glades, an important habitat for butterflies and moths, and coppice other areas to generate new woodland growth in order to protect the woods.

Currently, the wood is facing its biggest challenge since the Great Storm of 1987. Most of the ash trees have been attacked by a fungal pathogen called *Hymenoscyphus Fraxineus*, more commonly known as ash dieback, which originated in Asia and was first identified on ash trees in the UK in 2012. Ash dieback affects the resistance of the tree to fight off other diseases, which severely weakens the branches, trunk and roots. In New England Wood, we are only removing ash trees that show significant signs of disease and present a significant risk to the main paths within the woods, starting with those paths which are more frequently used. The standing ash trees which will fall naturally away from paths, will be left to provide a habitat for wildlife, as will the felled timber.

A similar approach has been adopted by The Royal Botanical Gardens Kew in The Loder Wood Nature Reserve in their Wakehurst Estate near Ardingly. It was featured on BBC Radio 4 Today before Christmas and also on BBC South East Today. Staff explained that the only alternative to selective felling was to permanently close Loder Wood to the public.

The Forestry Commission report research that suggests that some ash trees (between 1% and 5%) will have a genetic tolerance to the fungus. So, those trees which are not currently exhibiting symptoms of ash dieback in New England Wood will not be felled but will be monitored on an annual basis.



Although the visual impact of the felling around some of the paths is significant and quite disturbing, the volunteers are working hard to clear the debris. Once the felling of dead or dying trees around each path is complete, we will have a wonderful opportunity to replant areas and allow the natural regrowth of native trees to occur. This will provide an opportunity to reshape the woods for the next 100 years and the trust is very keen to involve the community in Cuckfield in seed collecting and planting events.

The felling of small trees is being carried out by trained volunteers, but professional tree surgeons are being employed to work on the larger trees. A felling license issued by the Forestry Commission is in place. Grants and donations are currently being sought to fund the costs associated with this work and replanting.

Currently the wood continues to remain open to visitors but please do not attempt to access any paths which have been blocked off or any animal tracks as they will lead to areas where large dead branches and trunks could fall at any time. Very soon the amazing display of bluebells will carpet the woodland floor to enjoy.

If you would like to hear an update on New England Wood, ask questions and chat to the trustees please join us at the Annual Public Meeting at 8:15 pm on Tuesday 25th April in the Council Chamber at The Queen's Hall in Cuckfield.

Footnote : If you wish to support New England Wood Trust in this work, please make a donation at [cuckfieldwoodlanders.com](http://cuckfieldwoodlanders.com).