

To visitors and residents alike – the two things everyone comments about is the magnificent medieval pond and the beautiful woodland setting of the village of Ansty. And indeed both are treasures to behold.

Various incumbents of the manor have endeavoured to look after the 13C pond with a good degree of success because it is still there and looks as pretty as ever! Today, the management of the pond has become an expensive and time consuming exercise which owner Charlie Morgan knows only too well.

But what of our woodlands – which are fiercely protected by conservation laws in the main part of the village? Well, if you look carefully around our parish all is not right and it is down to a number of reasons resulting in a perfect storm of attack on one of our most valued assets.

A survey of trees in the Parish of Ansty



Our beautiful deciduous woodland trees are facing a long list of threats – even in Ansty!

Back in 2007 Ansty resident Mr John Oldfield undertook a [detailed survey](#) (as part of a ‘village project book’) of all the most notable woodland copses and spinneys within the parish. It made for depressing reading back then. Since then things do appear to have gone from bad to worse.

What are the threats to our trees (mainly deciduous) and woodlands?

Climate change

Climate figures for the past decade alone have shown warmer temperatures; higher humidity with more intense rainfall spells. Our deciduous woodlands are now finding it difficult to adapt to such a rapidly changing scenario and it shows: in Ansty they are in a far worse state than they were in 2007.

Globalisation and Trade

Imported plant stock has weakened our own tree species countrywide by allowing new pests and diseases to arrive and threaten our trees and woods with all their associated species and ecosystems. Woods are vulnerable to large scale invasions by non-native plants. Recently Ash die back has become very prevalent in Ansty (and countrywide) attacking our already enfeebled woodland stock.

Population increase

For decades our aging population in England has been boosted by positive inward net migration but this inevitably leads in turn to a demand for more housing, industry and infrastructure which threatens woodlands and green spaces. Fortunately Ansty is not currently affected by this too badly – but even we have had recent examples where local development has had the potential to threaten our local woodland spaces.

Pollution and Human Activity

Often tying in with climate change, pollution is a major threat to trees and again their associated ecosystems. There is now too much atmospheric carbon dioxide - caused by the burning of oil and gas or fossil fuels. We all have a huge ‘carbon footprint’ by dint of driving, flying, heating, rampant consumerism fuelling global trade, building things and a myriad other forms of activities etc. Throw in emissions of nitrous oxides, nitrates from farm fertilisers and other industrial chemicals such as sulphides it all adds to a soup cocktail that threaten the very DNA of humans – let alone Woodlands and their ecosystems.

Woodlands everywhere are under threat from unabated ‘development’ (of any size) from the spread of new housing, industry and associated infrastructure to the increasing demand for recreational activities in the countryside.

Poor woodland protection

Firstly, in spite of countryside stewardship and woodland management grants that are available: it seems most landowners large and small up and down the country are reluctant to pursue any kind of forest/tree management and ignore obvious issues – even if just from a safety angle! Sustainable woodland management (whether it be a few garden trees/hedges or a large forest) is the only way forward. Only when all landowners decide to manage their woodlands appropriately today in a sustainable way will this ensure equal or greater benefits, to the productivity or health of any woodland for future generations. Just planting millions of trees to assuage our carbon footprint guilt won’t pass muster. They will all need careful management.

Secondly, when it comes to our Planning System, the main effect it has on the countryside is to ‘regulate’ the rate at which land changes from traditional countryside uses, mainly agriculture and forestry, to urban uses, such as housing, industry and infrastructure. Developments which are deemed necessary to sustain economic and social activity, whilst protecting the character of those areas in terms of landscape and natural and historic features are often passed by the authorities.

A misunderstanding of conservation

Conservation by definition means the careful preservation, usage, improvement and protection of human and natural resources. Essentially it means continuous, careful, high level maintenance. It doesn’t mean preserving something in aspic nor does it mean let nature take its course or do nothing at all.

Take a look at the following pictures taken recently from public locations throughout the parish. Things are clearly not right.



Former hedge line growing into trees on a steep bank above a narrow lane is not advisable



Once upon a time this hedge was regularly trimmed and laid by skilled country folk as traced by the pecked line



There are many examples in Ansty of trees rotting in damp conditions and breaking up



This willow has all but broken up. Another branch threatens to fall across the lane



Another example of a neglected former hedge line growing through telephone cables



Many small copes of deciduous trees in Ansty do indeed resemble rain forests



Another hollowed out trunk snapped in a gale last winter. Luckily it fell away from the roadside



This small tree has recently collapsed on to what was once the former village pound



A large tree festooned with ivy crashed down a steep bank off the High Street near St James' Church in December 2019



These overhanging tree branches on the High Street may look pretty in summer but they have the potential to cause serious issues



Just above the High Street on the same slope a cluster of trees have fallen



Everywhere you look trees have fallen or are about to fall



Here long whippy branches threaten telephone wires. No wonder BT OpenReach are so busy in Ansty!



Former coppices, long neglected, are suffering badly ...



...wherever you look the scene is the same and this sad state of affairs can be found all over the country



Few of our deciduous copses and woodlands look really healthy. There is little evidence of proper management



Whippy regenerated saplings have grown tall and sappy as they encroach on to the lane. Massive leaf fall year on year causes problems as the Council do not clear them as they did in the past.



A large clump of trees similar to the one you can see crashed on to the lane a year or two back



Top left: yet another tall, thin tree began to lean across a lane blocking access to some vehicles in December 2019; **Top centre:** Just above on the top of the bank plenty of branches are crashing down; **Top right:** Nowhere is free from the malaise: several trees have crashed down at various times on to the field below Gore Copse. **Centre left:** Almost all of the problems are to do with deciduous trees in the spinneys and copses or along hedge lines in Ansty. Coniferous trees planted in the 1960s have fared better probably because they are managed better as this picture taken in 12 Acre Copse on the left shows. It is a 'working forest' and logging activities take place regularly. There is hope though as the following pictures show. **Centre right and below left:** scrub clearance and removal of dead or out of line dangerous branches; **Below centre:** key saplings identified as *pleachers* are then cut and laid and staked where appropriate. All this work is done between October and March. **Below right:** In a year a mass of regrowth occurs. By allowing light in this soon thickens up from the base to form an attractive hedge. This regrowth is now ready for a cut. Eventually a 5 ft. (1'5m) is a good height for a hedge – slightly wider at the base and gently tapered in towards the top. All hedges are important for wildlife, environmental, heritage and scenic value. A well-managed hedge row is thick and leafy from the bottom up. A tall hedge will soon become spindly and gappy. All woodlands and hedges need adequate management. There may well be grants made available through [Countryside Stewardship](#), [Woodland Trust](#) and others.

All pictures taken 18/12/2019



What can be done to improve our woodland (mainly deciduous) stock?

We all understand the environmental and economic benefits of our trees and woodlands because they can:

- absorb dust and noise pollution and 'store' carbon dioxide whilst releasing oxygen
- provide a habitat for many species of wildlife
- form pleasing landscape features – as well as providing shelter for livestock, buildings and people
- provide sustainable business opportunities in terms of produce and livelihoods

We can only reap these benefits by careful tree and woodland management by:

- discarding the commonly held perception that woodlands and trees can look after themselves – they can't.
- accepting that owning any woodland is a big and important responsibility – they need maintaining carefully year on year.
- accepting that most of our broadleaved woodlands are in a poor state because for many decades they have been seen as non-economic to manage as a timber supply (it is cheaper to import). This has led to little incentive to retain and use proper woodland management skills (contrast this to the management of local conifer stands – where they are largely in better shape)
- accepting that strategies need to be adopted quickly to protect trees and woodlands in order to 're-balance' woodlands to a healthy state of composition thereby increasing resilience to pests and diseases and enhancing carbon storage against a backdrop of climate change. It will cost money!
- accepting that removal of decaying trees/branches (and there are a lot of them even in Ansty) along with thinning, pollarding, coppicing and replacement tree planting are all very necessary for safety in built up areas and will allow healthy trees to flourish in open woodlands.

Back in the late 1960s a certain [Robert Boote](#) (who died just recently) became the very first director general of the Nature Conservancy Council (morphing through several changes through the decades since into Natural England).

Fifty years ago Boote warned how 'pests, pollution and people' were the main threat to the British Countryside. Few listened back then; let us hope we are becoming more enlightened now – the threats are greater now than they have ever been – even in Ansty.