# Recording ash dieback in the Bathscape

May 2026

Tree cover plays a significant role in the Bathscape, with the World Heritage Site Management Plan highlighting woodland as ‘important and iconic to the setting of Bath’. It lists “Trees, tree belts and woodlands predominantly on the skyline, lining the compact and sustainable form of the city contained within a hollow of the hills” amongst the elements relating to the attributes of Outstanding Universal Value that underpins the World Heritage Site inscription.

In 2012 the tree disease ash dieback was first recorded in the United Kingdom. Originating in eastern Asia it had been spreading steadily across Europe since 1992 through the wind-borne spores of the fungus *Hymenocyphus fraxineus*. It is thought to have likely crossed the channel from Europe into the UK on imported saplings.

Spores of the fungus can travel tens of miles on the wind, sticking to the leaves of the ash trees on which they land and from there spreading further into the wood. As the fungus grows within the tree it blocks its water transport system which weakens the tree and over time can kill it. The visible effects of the disease include blackening and wilting of leaves during the summer, dieback of shoots and leaves, and diamond-shaped lesions where branches meet the trunk.

Each autumn as the leaves fall they carry some of the fungus down to the woodland floor where it overwinters, often on the leaf stalks. In the summer it then produces small white fruiting bodies which grow to release further spores to be carried on the wind to other trees.

Fruiting bodies of *Hymenocyphus fraxineus* on ash leaf stem, Bath (Rob Randall)

The disease was first recorded locally in 2015 and by the time the Bathscape Landscape Partnership scheme started in 2018 signs were increasingly found in ash trees around the Bath area.

Once established there is no effective response to reduce the spread of the disease nor its effect on the trees. For woodland owners the key consideration became public safety where footpaths ran though woodland sites, or where trees lined roadsides or were within parks. As the disease took hold and trees risked becoming unstable, the felling of trees and closing of some woodland paths became more common. Nationally the advice was to retain infected ash trees where they did not represent a risk to the public in the hope that some trees would show a greater resistance to the disease and through their increased rates of survival would lead in time to a more genetically resistant stock. A 2018 analysis of woodland studies across various European countries found the highest recorded loss of ash to the disease to be around 70%, that being in a Latvian woodland where the disease had been present for 15 years.

Although Bathscape didn't have specific targets relating to ash dieback, its woodland advisory work increasingly responded to concerns from local woodland owners, and it was involved in several tree planting initiatives including works to replace areas of felled ash with other native tree species. Staff, volunteers and student placements were asked to catalogue the effects of the disease through photography. Their photographs form the basis of this document, chronicling the disease in the Bath area from 2020 to 2026.

The first trees to be visibly affected by the disease were saplings and younger trees. The weakening of the tree left them susceptible to other damage, such as from common fungi like honey fungus, often resulting in death.

L-R Odd Down Park and Ride May 2020 and ash woodland south of South Stoke June 2020 Ash sapling Monkton Combe suffering from dieback June 2021

In 2020 The Woodland Trust gave a stark summary on its website of the likely consequences: ‘Ash dieback will kill around 80% of ash trees across the UK. At a cost of billions, the effects will be staggering. It will change the landscape forever and threaten many species which rely on ash.’ This was echoed by the Cotswolds Conservation Board who predict ‘we are very likely to lose over 90% of ash trees in woodland, and around 70% of those outside woods, including big veteran trees and ancient pollards.’

*Graphis scripta* – Common Script Lichen growing on ash, Browns Folly (Molly Evans 2022)

The winters of 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 saw pre-emptive tree felling works alongside public rights of way by landowners concerned for public safety. Sprayed dots and crosses on younger ash trees became a more common sight, highlighting the individual trees to be felled, with signage announcing closures for felling.

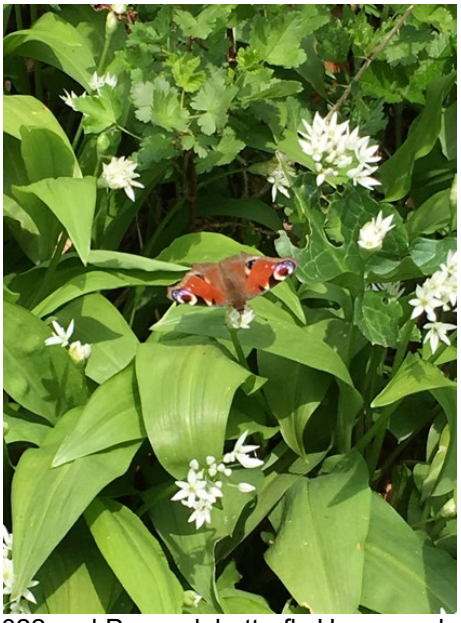

L-R Horsecombe Vale pathside ash trees marked for felling November 2020, felled November 2021 and signage for felling January 2022


L-R Felling notices – Linear Park December 2022, Browns Folly August 2023 and tree marked for felling Carrs Wood December 2022

Some felling of ash plantations took place while the timber still had economic value for fear that the damage to the wood caused by the effects of the disease would reduce its value.

Felled plantation south of South Stoke November 2021

Felling in woodlands intially opened up the canopy and wildflowers and butterflies benefitted from the additional light.



L-R Bath Asparagus Tucking Mill May 2022 and Peacock butterfly Horsecombe Vale April 2022

However, in the absence of ride management, where bramble was present it began to spread and dominate



L-R Horsecombe Vale 27th February 2022 left and 2nd March 2025 right

Steadily the regrowth of understorey trees like hazel meant denser woodland began to re-emerge




L-R Horsecombe Vale April 2022, July 2023, August 2025

In Horsecombe Vale where the land ownership changed and pathside ash trees hadn't been pre-emptively felled, they started to fall naturally while remaining ash trees began to increasingly show the effects of ash dieback.



L-R Horsecombe Vale August 2025

By 2024 it was more common to see larger trees outside of woodlands affected by the disease or having the crowns reduced to lessen the risk of damage from falling, though trees posing no danger were typically retained untouched. Garden ash trees, particularly within falling distance of properties or roads similarly began to commonly see crown reductions.

L-R Sectional crown reductions by properties alongside Summer Lane, Combe Down October 2021, December 2022 and August 2025

At the time of writing (May 2026) the full effect on the landscape has still not been felt and the incremental nature of the loss of ash trees makes changes less easily discernible. In our woodlands although ash is often a major component, solid stands of ash are generally restricted to small areas and so the effect from distance is of patches of grey bare trees within still green woodland stands. The trees fringing the skyline (which form a significant component of the Bath landscape as seen from the city) are generally several trees deep and so although ash dieback has created flecks of grey, the line is still generally unbroken.

With ash commonly dominating in secondary woodland we can perhaps expect the beneficiaries of the increased light to be bramble and sycamore, with the latter being a poor substitute for ash in terms of the number of wildlife species supported. The most immediate visual impacts currently are probably the hedgerow and in-field trees, which, as was the case with the Dutch Elm disease outbreak of the 1960s and 70s will likely leave lasting gaps in the appearance of our countryside and the loss of individually impressive trees. However, while many ash trees are already struggling or lost others still show few if any traces of suffering from the disease.

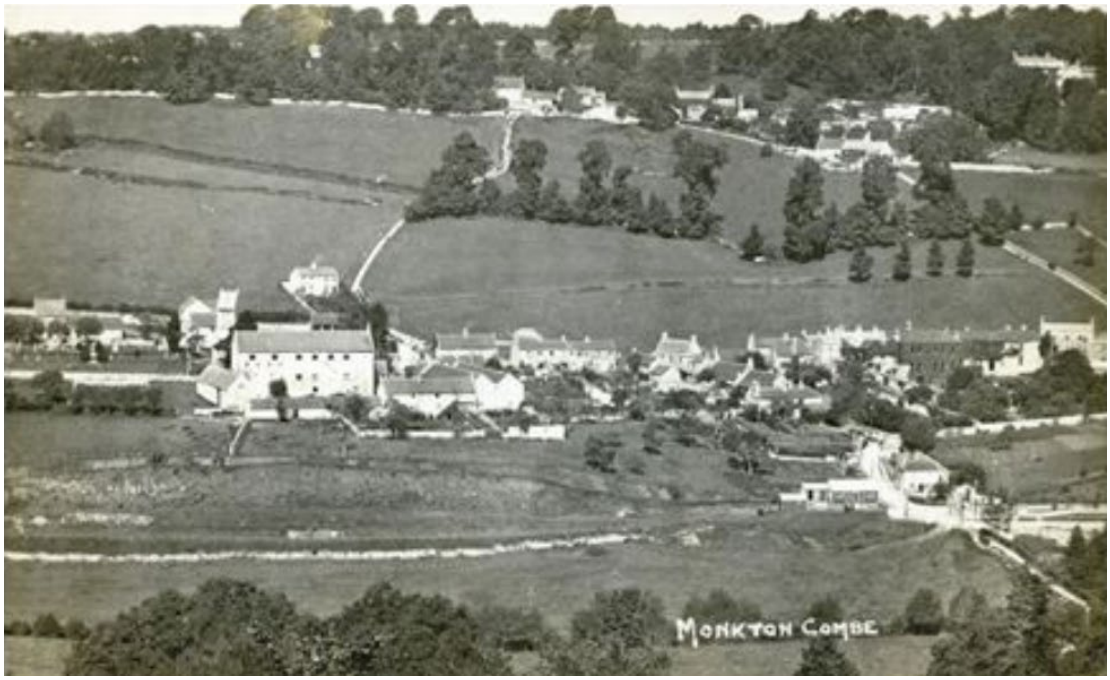
L-R South of South Stoke healthy in May 2020, crown reduced October 2024, slight regrowth May 2026

L-R Corston in-field tree September 2019 and May 2026

L-R East side of Twerton Roundhill October 2024 and May 2026 showing little change

L-R Monkton Combe School playing fields June 2024 (Jacqueline Burrows) and showing increasing effects May 2026

This isn't the first tree disease to cut a swathe through our landscape, and nor is it likely to be the last. The current ash dieback epidemic has echoes of Dutch Elm disease which struck in waves in the 20th century, most decisively in the 1970s. In January 1902, the vice-president of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club, described the Elm as "the chief feature in our landscape", recording its nickname as "the Somersetshire weed". Over 90% of British Elms died in the late 1960s and 1970s, with national estimates of loss reaching 25 million trees. The effect on the treed landscape of that epidemic can be noted from old photographs where the characteristic domed or cylindrical shape of English Elm gives an indication of how plentiful they once were particularly as hedgerow trees.

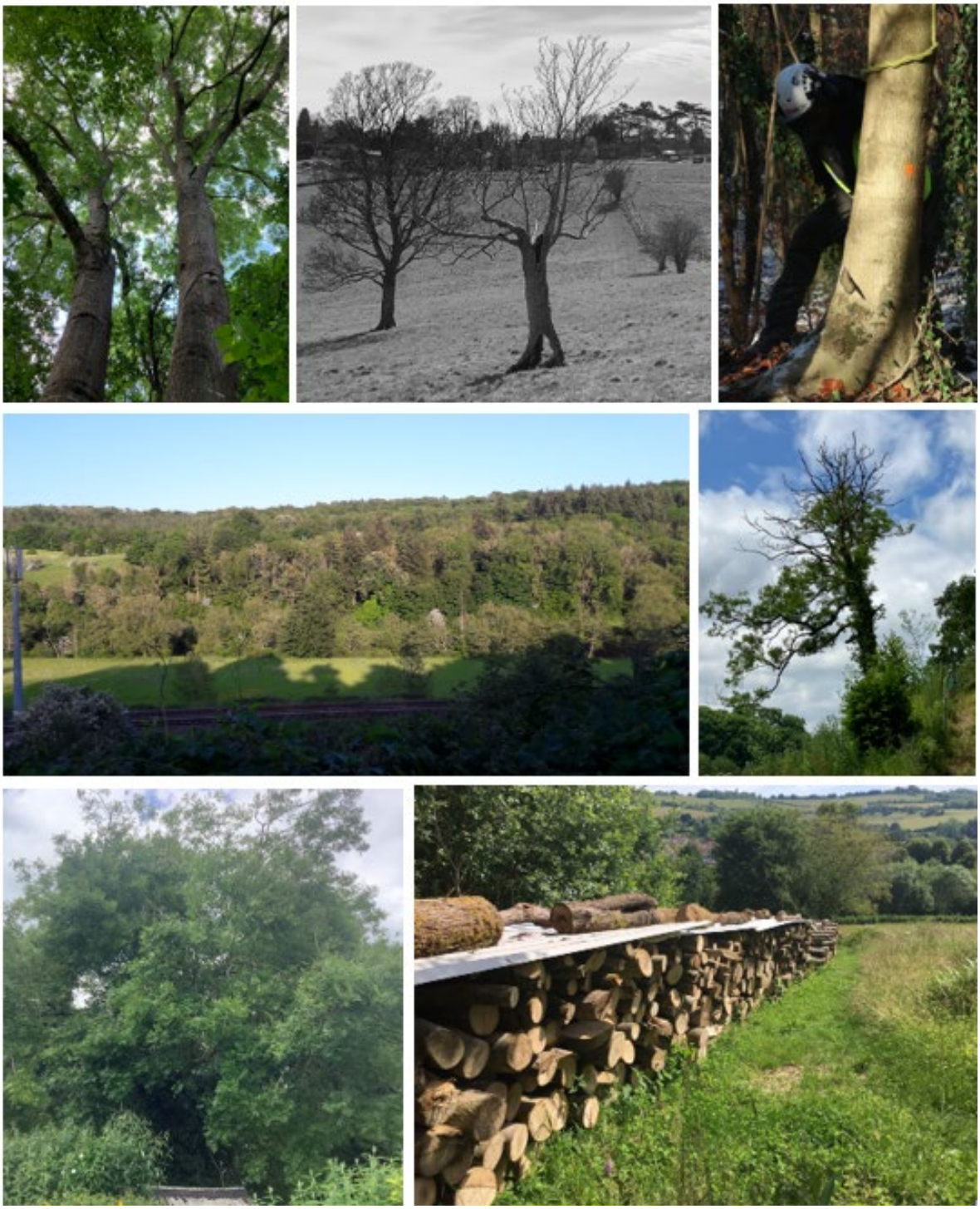



View of Monkton Combe c 1928 by George Dafnis (Bath in Time) with distinctive line of elm trees in the middle ground

It is worth keeping in mind that our landscape is in a constant state of flux and while there may be little we can do to save our individual ash trees we can continue to manage the landscape positively in their absence. Our woodland ecosystems are often richest where there are young, medium-aged and older trees, and as gaps appear in the canopy where older ash die, young seedlings of other species will benefit either through natural regeneration or planting.

Dan Merrett, Bathscape Project Manager

Anthology of ash tree photographs 2017 to 2026




Photographs by Ruby Barber, Lucy Bartlett, Jacqueline Burrows, Molly Evans, Dan Merrett, Mark Minkley, Rob Randall, Brenda Sharp, Hugh Williamson

BATHSCAPE LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP

Made possible with Heritage Fund