

**Forestry Commission and Kent County Council Kent Tree Health Information Day**

The Orchards Events Venue, East Malling, Maidstone, Kent ME19 6BJ 18<sup>th</sup> December 2012

The *Chalara* outbreak is one to which the UK is reacting with impressive effort. I appreciate that 20:20 hindsight is an irritating luxury and is of no use in the current circumstances, but whilst I am sure no one would disagree that we should have a "watching brief" on potential biosecurity threats to the UK, the notion is easier said than done. In the USA the New Pest Advisory Group have pressed since 2009 for a reportable/actionable *Chalara* policy to be established by the US Department of Agriculture through the Agricultural Research Service. Ash species' distribution in the US is mostly in the eastern half with some along the west coast and they too have biosecurity problems. In some ways the Americans have much stricter controls – I had my walking boots taken from my suitcase and cleaned by immigration officials because there was a very small amount of soil between just two treads on one boot. We don't seem to have this although I was heartened by Martin Ward's<sup>1</sup> presentation of likely improvements.

Leaving aside the effect of the fungus on UK Ash, the main concern is that we are reacting and pro-active measures in general terms of protecting our borders in respect of plant health are weak, although the government has set up a COBRA group to deal with *Chalara*. I note that the FC's Annual Report and Accounts year ending 31/3/12 (printed 28/6/12) under the heading "Some of the key outbreaks" does not mention *Chalara* – this is not an adverse criticism, just an observation. This is a non-party-political matter and with all the pressures upon our economy, the government's priority of plant health regrettably appears to have been if not a peripheral issue, then certainly one of low profile. We have to engage the politicians and in turn that means raising not just public awareness but action. All of us should lobby our constituency MPs, and don't be bashful, although predominantly it boils down to money, a tangible threat to our countryside as a facet of our heritage is a powerful factor. All bodies with memberships and contact with the general public should urge them to do likewise.

The total FC Great Britain/England budget for 2011-12 amounted to £51.7 million and the conservative estimate for local authority expenditure on trees is at least the same. Whereas when the term "urban forest" was first mooted its promoters were regarded with mild amusement, it is now very much mainstream. The Arboricultural Association is the overarching body for amenity trees, with its membership embracing those at all levels of involvement. We have enormous "coal face" knowledge and experience and communicate with the public every day at a personal level that is not so readily available to other bodies. I took shameless advantage of the platform to urge Simon Hodgson<sup>2</sup> to make the FC redouble its efforts to include arboriculture and the urban forest.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr Martin Ward, Head of UK Plant Health Service, FERA

<sup>2</sup> Mr Simon Hodgson, FC England's Chief Executive

I couldn't match the technical knowledge of the other speakers but I talked about the public, TPOs and answered some of the written questions asked in advance.

The fundamental dilemma for amenity tree professionals, (and here I think I am well-enough known for making no differentiation between the professionalism of contractors, tree officers, civil servants or consultants – we all work with trees, we just deal with them from different stances), is what do you do when the phone rings?

Those of us who deal with the public as clients will know that generally they tend to be remarkably ill-informed. They are exposed to the news media which often prefer stories to dispassionate explanations, and although sufficient information is available few take the trouble to read it. They react to sound-bites and from my experience in the absence of correct information they will always assume the worst.

Whatever general concerns people may have when it comes to their property the priorities are house value and safety. Many will also be worried that tree surgeons regard the *Chalara* problem as a licence to print money.

It doesn't matter what line of business one is in, the essence is (or should be) the client relationship – and this applies just as much to the local authority tree officer. There is no immediate danger presented by *Chalara* - there is no rush to fell trees on the basis of safety. If someone has a low discretionary income and a large afflicted Ash in their garden, *Chalara* is a real cause of anxiety. How can they afford to have it removed? The primary criterion is cost and they must not be panicked into using the itinerant contractor with just a mobile phone number. The Arboricultural Association publishes advice on the selection of suitable contractors and what to ask for. Reputable contractors won't mind in the slightest being asked for their credentials and proof of insurance.

There are three basic factors to put over:

- i) We don't know how long it takes for mature trees to decline.
- ii) There is very unlikely to be any structural weakness introduced in the short term.
- iii) If the tree owner is daunted by the expense of removing a tree (they don't always say, but the body language is usually obvious) then you could suggest that they start to make provision and call you in due course [here I refer to Joan Webber's<sup>3</sup> description of the fungus' life cycle). Tree officers should dispense exactly the same advice although perhaps stopping short of offering a quotation! Depending upon their Council's policy they may also be able to offer advice on suitable contractors.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Joan Webber, Principal Pathologist and Head of Tree Health Research Group, Forest Research

The most important service you can give to a member of the public is reassurance and to impart trust. Remove panic and replace it with a calm explanation that alleviates the person's anxiety about safety and expense as best you can. But don't forget that when you have finished talking and roar off into the sunset, they are left with the tree, and who can blame them for looking after their own interests first? We all know that second only to "the cheque is in the post", the most frequent comment we hear is "I like trees but ...".

Where a TPO or Conservation Area applies *Chalara* is no different to any other deleterious factor affecting trees. It will not on its own constitute an immediate danger and thus is not an exemption. I would like to think that LPAs will grant consent where appropriate. Please remember that if one had to distil the profession of arboriculture down to one word, that word is "**justification**". Make sure that you justify the terms of any application you might make, and for that matter provide a similarly comprehensive justification in the first instance to the tree's owner.

If a TPO application reaches an appeal then something has gone wrong. To the best of my knowledge *Chalara* has not featured as a material consideration of a TPO appeal as yet, but inspectors will give it no special dispensation. Any such appeals will be dealt with objectively and dispassionately as with any other appeal.

One advance question submitted relates to a woodland with a 30% population of Ash and covered by a "blanket" TPO. Whether an Area or Woodland category wasn't said but in practical terms it would not make much difference in respect of the consideration of removal, but certainly the consequences should be just as much a part of the proposal as the removal..

The temptation is to concentrate on the removal of Ash trees, but I would encourage those involved to put the problem into a longer-term perspective and think about the woodland, park, garden, or street in say, 20 years or more time. I referred to the cautionary advice of Peter Thurman<sup>4</sup> who uses the term "tree plonkers" about those who plant trees just because there is a space, rather than considering design, sustainability and posterity. Joan Webber referred to the forthcoming baseline provenance trials to assist with the identification of native plants.

In respect of that woodland question, given that I don't know any of the site circumstances my advice would be to call in a specialist and the FC's private woodland officers would be my first port of call. I did not say this because I didn't want to find that my tyres had been let down, but because they are impartial, well-informed, experienced, and free! Some local authority tree officers have the time to dispense advice, but many don't. Woodland owners will feel vulnerable and the best advice from their position is from an objective source.

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<sup>4</sup> Mr Peter Thurman, The Thurman Consultancy, Landscape Design and Arboricultural Consultancy

As well as the Arboricultural Association (a significant number of our members have professional expertise in woodland management), the RFS, Woodland Trust and ICF would also be able to provide free advice.

There are many contractors and consultants who provide *pro bono* advice services, but that is not the public perception and we must make sure that any enquiries made of us are answered without obligation in the first instance.

Another submitted question related to the possibility of financial help where someone is unable to afford the work or physically incapable of doing it themselves. Regrettably I know of no comfort in that regard, and in many ways one's personal circumstances do not actually relieve responsibilities. My suggestion would be to seek advice from the local authority who I suspect be unable to provide cash, but would be able to make connections with other bodies who might be able to offer support. Don't forget the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Biosecurity/sanitation action is the difficult one. For every contractor who diligently and conscientiously complies with the FC's advice, [I referred to the FC's credit card-sized information pamphlet] there will be many more who are either not aware of it or who ignore it. My advice is to work out the most cost-effective means of compliance and to do it, and furthermore don't be shy about promoting yourself in those terms, emphasising that there would be no additional cost to the client.

I fully understand that with wider indifference to sanitation the appetite to incur additional operational costs for your own business will be low, but that is actually no excuse. We have to earn our living and profitability is indispensable. However, if a tree owner is given your individual operation's biosecurity policy, presented in a manner that the client can check off, there is a commercial advantage. It would also be sensible to issue a concise printed information sheet under your business letterhead – either from the FC or devise your own (but do accredit sources).

Another advance question was about the subject of new and replacement planting. This will be driven by whether or not Ash species are chosen. Sometimes a change of species is actually the most pragmatic and sustainable option. As with the 1987 Storm, not every tree loss was a bad thing. If an Ash species is chosen, then I suggest that the latest research data on resistance are checked. The FC runs a very good website, and so does the Arboricultural Association at [trees.org.uk](http://trees.org.uk). Again, I would urge the avoidance of any "tree plonker" impulses.

In summary:

- i) be up to date with what is going on
- ii) emphasise with the general public's bewilderment and anxieties
- iii) be measured in your approach and try and remove any sense of panic
- iv) without profiteering use the situation to enhance your professionalism and reputation
- v) comply with biosecurity practice and use that to your commercial advantage
- vi) finally, you can be of immeasurable help by participating in the FC's Tree Alert System using the FC's webform , and I was particularly interested in Martin Ward's enthusiasm for citizen science

There can be no doubt that *Chalara* represents a potentially catastrophic impact upon the British countryside, but it serves just as importantly as a wake-up call to us all. The community of professionals in the UK who deals with trees is small in comparative terms. One of its problems is the various different groups tending to be insular, but surely this is the time when we should forget those differences.

I'm sure I speak for all who attended in offering our thanks to the Forestry Commission and Kent County Council Kent for their initiative in organising the day.

Jim Quaife