

ASH

By Jay Griffiths

Yesterday, out in the hills, a buzzard flew low overhead as it often does, and settled in the branches of one particular tree, as I had seen it do countless times. That morning, though, I looked with more care: it was an ash. The tree’s branches, upswept at the ends, were a visual rhyme with the flight feathers of the bird. The bird chose its perch well, for it was a look-out point on a hillside over the valley. The buzzard was watching me, hopping around and tilting its head down under the branch to keep an eye on me. And I, in turn, began to look deeply at the tree.

The ash is the gladness of the woods. Lithe and lovely, pliant in lightness, it is a cascade of grace. Its wood is light – ash blond – in colour, and its branches weigh lightly on the air. Its airy, light canopy gives light for woodland flowers to grow: snowdrops, wood anemones, ramsons and bluebells. It seems a tree of hospitality.

Versatility is its nature, last to leaf up, first to drop its leaves, a quick changer from winter to spring and from summer to autumn, swiftly moving the story of the seasons forward. The ash in autumn has a fling with the wind and ash keys helicopter in the air. It is a tree with wings at its heels.

Ash is the wood of travel. The wheelwright, wainwright, cartwright, wagonwright, ploughwright, harrow-hewer, oar-carver, barrow-bodger, axle-grinder, walking stick-wangler, aircraft-crafter and bus-builder all blessed ash for its strength and flexibility. Lorries, wooden aircraft, and timber-framed cars such as the Ford Woody and Morris Traveller all used ash. It is the wood of wheelings and dealings. To me, the ash has a scent of the trickster about it.

The Welsh god Gwyddion, associated with the ash, is magician and trickster. Ash, like the trickster, is associated with the threshold and was sometimes used in doorways for ritual reasons. Ash is the second most common tree species in the names of the early hundreds or wapentakes and often the ash was a landmark at a crossroads, the trickster site.

The story of Odin, trickster, shapeshifter, warrior and poet, is the most telling legend of the ash. Odin, in the beautiful enigma of myth, sacrificed ‘myself to myself’ in a nine-day passion, in order to find hidden knowledge. His raven-messengers were ‘thought’ and ‘memory’, and he hung himself on the World Ash, Yggdrasil in voluntary anguish, to discover the secret of the runes by drinking mead from the well where the Ash was rooted. ‘From a word to a word I was led to a word,’ says the Poetic Edda. To gain his insight, he sacrificed the sight of one eye. One eyed but twice sighted: it exemplifies the relation of sight and insight, of beholding and seeing.

Yggdrasil had three roots: the one in water, the second in air and the third in the otherworld. Its roots were watered by three fates, Past, Present and Future.

In its branches lived four deer and as I write this, with an ash twig in my left hand, I am struck by how the buds of its twigs are like tiny, delicate velvet deer-hooves. The tree is the Axis Mundi, the spine of the world, for it extends from roots in the underworld to its branches in the heavens, a linking thing, a conduit between worlds, between times, between minds. The ash was used both as literal transport and symbolic communication.

In Norse myth, the gods held council under the canopy of the ash: a squirrel ran up and down the tree, carrying messages. Associated with both the secret and the spoken, the lost and found, the hidden and revealed, ash is a messenger tree, and its resin (or mead or ambrosia, or Odin’s wine) was said to facilitate communication between gods and humans.

Odin is a wild god. God of war and wisdom, shamanism and poetry, his name comes from the word wōd. Wōd is a word and a half, a word on fire. It means ‘frenzy’ and the furore of poetry or the fury of war. Odin, inspired poet and fierce warrior, who carried a spear of ash, personifies the word. The first spark is wet in Proto Indo European, which means to ‘inspire, spiritually arouse’. It took flame, running through Latin (vates) meaning a ‘seer or poet’ and then Old English crackled it into ‘melody’ and ‘song’. It set alight a series of need-fires in the human mind, connecting ideas of frantic, mad, furious, with words for mind and soul, and also words for music and song and the singer.

Rudyard Kipling linked the trickster Puck to the ash: ‘I came into England with Oak, Ash and Thorn.’ When the trickster, messenger-god, is evoked, it is worth attending the message, reading the runes. Literally. The Scandinavian runic alphabet (the futhark) had a name for each rune, each character, and many were names of trees. When the futhark arrived in England, other characters were added, specifically the runes for oak, ash and thorn. Puck snuck in with the runes.

In John Evelyn’s seventeenth century book on British trees, *Sylva*, he comments that the ash tree ‘serves the Scholar, who made use of the inner Bark to write on, before the invention of paper.’ Literacy is power. The Old English rŭn means mystery or secrecy, connecting script with magic. (Kipling’s Puck bids the children eat leaves of Oak, Ash and Thorn so they keep secret what he tells them.) In an interplay of sight and insight, the visible knowledge of a character carved in bark yielded invisible wisdom beyond the literal and obvious: the insight of symbol and metaphor. ‘Grammar’ originally meant ‘learning, incantation and spells’, before it thinned its meaning to the carcass of the word left today.

The word ‘tree’ is related to ‘tryst’ and ‘betroth’. An old ash tree on Torberry Hill in Hampshire is known as a trysting tree, and I once saw an ash betrothed to an oak, on the path to Aber Falls above Abergwyngregyn between Bangor and Conwy. The roots of the ash embrace the trunk of the oak and the branches of the oak hug the ash back, leaning on each other in inseparable tryst.

Trees stand for something the mind needs: something to rely on, something physically and metaphysically trustworthy, and the word ‘trust’ is also related to the word ‘tree’. And so is the word ‘true’: a tree-truth rooted, authentic and real. Mythologist Mircea Eliade comments that the ash was ‘symbol of life, of inexhaustible fertility, of absolute reality.’

David Nash, whose own name is ash-rooted, from Middle English ‘atten ash’, meaning ‘at the ash’ created his *Ash Dome* of twenty two ash saplings in 1977, a living sculpture, now dying. When he began the project, he expected it to outlive him.

To endure is a property of trees, both actually and linguistically as ‘endure’ is also linked to the word ‘tree.’ Envisioned to be true to the material and true to the roots of both word and wood, now, as a result of ash dieback, it is a ruined rhyme.

Tree pests and diseases are spread around the world by mass commercial transactions in the live plant trade, introducing disease to trees which have no previous experience of them, and therefore no resistance. Privileging profit over plant health in countless collective choices means sacrificing the natural world for the short term artifice of commerce. In almost-silenced reproach to the mechanical and unreal malice of the profit motive, the absolute reality of tree and truth stand rooted in something deeper; the felt world, feelingful, sensed, sensing and sensitive. The writer Mike Parker tells me of the Welsh idiom ‘dod yn ôl at fy nghoed’ – literally I ‘return to my trees’ or figuratively ‘come to my senses’, or ‘fall into balance’. To stand under that absolute truth of trees.

A particular ash tree was the site of Wordsworth’s ‘tranquil visions’ of ‘bright appearances’ which he described in *The Prelude*. It is thought that he referred to this exact same tree in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, writing ‘But there’s a Tree, of many, one’ which speaks ‘of something that is gone’ asking ‘Where is it now, the glory and the dream?’ It spoke of endings and he listened. He both saw and beheld with the double vision which William Blake possessed, both the ‘outward eye’ and the ‘inward eye’ with which he beheld the inner life of nature.

Many cultures have a version of the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ but scientists today are discovering that trees have memory and, effectively, mind. Their roots are aware of stimuli and can send electrical signals which alter the behaviour of the root tip. Trees communicate

with others, giving off warning gases to neighbouring trees when there are foragers about. Tree roots emit ultrasonic crackling and other seedlings’ roots turn their tips towards these messages. Thirsty, they cry at ultrasonic levels. Trees care for injured companion trees, giving them sugars in a kind of tree hospitality.

John Clare writes of the ash’s hospitality to humans, describing a hollow ash in which ten people could shelter from the rain, and how an ash was where a gypsy chose to make his bed: a hospitality echoed by Edward Thomas, telling how a grove of ash trees ‘welcomed me.’ The ash was John Constable’s favourite tree, and he loved one in particular. When it died, he noticed it with especial care and grieved its death. A parish notice forbidding ‘all vagrants and beggars’ had been nailed to its trunk and almost immediately it began to wither and within a year had to be cut down to a stump. ‘The tree seemed to have felt the disgrace,’ said the painter. For a tree of surpassing grace, noted by poets for its hospitality, the graceless inhospitality of the parish notice cut to the quick and, said Constable, ‘she died of a broken heart.’

We notice things more when they are ending. Frame anything with death or departure and it will focus our attention. All the last things are etched more keenly: the last words of a dying person, a swansong, a last look, last book, last kiss, last work, the last notes of music, the threshold moment of disappearance.

‘The eye should learn to listen before it looks,’ said the photographer Robert Frank, and with poignant timing a recording of an ash tree’s interior song has been made, just as its death is foretold. In a piece entitled *‘Heartwood’*, Adrian Newton made a recording of interior sounds generated by an individual tree, and ultrasound detectors were used to make its voice audible. It crackles, and then echoes, it snaps and creaks, a gyre of knocking, then a wash of waves, the sound of water rushing over pebbles, then that of a violin bow played across a branch; it is intensely moving to hear the voice of this tree.

If you could hear the stretching torsion of thought itself, twisting, questioning, wondering, waiting, cogitating, it would sound (to my ears) just like this. And endings give a different dimension to the quality of our attending: hushed, ultra-aware, attending to its dying cadence, its final, falling song.



Ash to Ash Ackroyd & Harvey

Credits

Artists

Ackroyd & Harvey

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Nick Taylor

**Curator and
Project Manager**
Madeleine Hodge

Excavation
Vic Harmer
Kristian Harpley

Kent Downs Director
Nick Johannsen

Essay
Jay Griffiths

Site Supervisor
Tim Owen

Photography
Manuel Vason

Country Park Rangers
Louis Grover
Helen Page
Paul Sidders

Film Makers
Buckle Up Films
Mats Kokvik
Hannah Ava Dahl

Graphic Design
Bullet Creative
Kathy Barber
Gorm Ashurst

**London Contemporary
Voices**
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Sian O’Gorman
Marit Røkeberg
Adelaïde Pratoussy
Jeremy Franklin
Sam Bysh

Tree Extraction
Matthew Whitehead
Gavin Coles

Structural Engineers
Price & Myers
Tim Lucas
Joanna Hedley-Smith

Speakers
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**Steel Fabrication and
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Peter Stansfield
Laura Thomas
Sarah Wren

Arrows
Now Strike Archery
Tom Mareschall
Adam Jenkins

Artworkers
Mitchell Bloomfield
Richard Cramp
Ben Godber
Henry Knapp

About

The Ash Project

The ash tree is the most common tree in the Kent Downs. When ash dieback was first discovered in England, the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty was one of the first areas to notice the rapid spread of the disease. Ash dieback is widely accepted to be untreatable and could result in the demise of 90-98% of ash trees over the next decade. The scale of the ecological impact caused by the disease is as yet unmeasured.

The Ash Project tracks the important cultural relationship we have shared with the ash tree, offering a response to this devastating loss, we ask how we might trace this disappearance, celebrating our ash trees before it is too late. The project centres on a major new commission, *Ash to Ash* by internationally recognised artists Ackroyd & Harvey which is now sited in White Horse Wood Country Park.

www.theashproject.org.uk

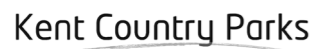
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