FOAL HURST WOOD
LOCAL NATURE RESERVE

NEWSletter

Issue No 217 May 2024

BARRIE'S TREE!

Close to the north-east corner of the Flower Meadow at Foal Hurst Wood Nature Reserve there is a young oak tree about forty feet tall and similar spread. The tree is very well shaped except that some low branches on the south-west side have had to be pruned back recently because they encroached over the adjacent path.

Barrie Wright was a former Town Council Clerk and was the main force behind the purchase and development of Foal Hurst Wood as a nature reserve. The reserve was officially opened on 3rd May 1999. Barrie left Paddock Wood a while later to find new turf. The council wanted to give him an award for the work he had done to create the reserve but he requested they planted a tree for him, hence 'Barrie's Tree'. I could find no record of the tree planting except it would have probably been done during the winter of 2000/01. At the time of planting it was a small sapling about 6 feet tall, with its full life ahead of it, possibly as much as 700 years.

I first saw Barrie's Tree in 2004 when I started volunteering but since then I have watched it develop into the lovely specimen it is today. I am sorry to say I neglected to take a single photograph until 2007 when the tree was 15-18 feet tall. Even after that time, my recording of its development has been sketchy at best. Until April this year, of the 3000+ photos I have of the reserve, only five include this particular oak and none of them of the tree specifically! However, the spacing of the photos I have, does show steady growth (2009, 13, 16 & 20). I wish I had done more but at the time I never envisaged that I would be writing this newsletter!

The first thing that made me take note was the growth of several types of oak apple and gall that clustered all over the leaves and acorns in autumn from 2005 to about 2010. I have to admit that I only noticed them because of the time I've spent cutting and clearing the flower meadow in August each year. After 2010 the gall wasps either went elsewhere or were too high for me to spot them from the ground. Those I have seen in the past are listed below.

Neuroterus Quercusbaccarum creates small round scales on oak leaves.

Biorhiza Pallida has a unisexual generation that develops in galls on oak roots, but once hatched they create large red oak apple galls on the tree's buds. I have actually seen one of these this spring.

Andricus Kollari causes marble galls, brown spheres about 15mm across that were once used to make ink.

Cynips Quercusfolii also has two generations, the second of which lays eggs on the underside of oak leaves creating green cherry galls.

Not of the same classification, *Diplolepis Rosae* creates hairy gals in wild roses which I have seen on the wild roses of the Flower Meadow, but I have seen something similar on the oak although the hairs are not so fine, perhaps more like a small horse chestnut.

I am sure there are more varieties that I have missed because I didn't have my glasses with me, or they were where I didn't look.

Since the disappearance of the galls there have been other things of note. There are several lichens on the branches and moss and ivy have decided to climb the trunk.

As the tree has grown, the lower branches have not been able to keep up with the spread of the upper layers. Because the leaves of these lower levels receive so little light in the summer the tree has reduced their workload and the limbs are dying back. This is a normal process and eventually the branches will drop off of their own accord leaving a round scar on the trunk. In the meantime, they have become host to different fungi, Yellow Brain *Tremella mesenterica* be being notable this February (2024), one clump was 75mm across.

All trees, just like any living thing, have their problems. Barrie's Tree has a branch (possibly two branches, I haven't investigated the second one yet) on the north-east side of the tree that is splitting away from the trunk. There is a deep hole in the joint which has filled with water and dead leaves, and I think rot has set in. This seems to happen quite a lot with oak trees.

I have been monitoring the branch since February and unfortunately it is inevitable that the branch will eventually split away from the tree causing a deep scar on the trunk. If I had noticed the problem a few years ago the branch may have been saved, but now it has reached a point where work needs to be done soon, probably this year.

The course of action. I am normally one for waiting to see what happens but that is not the best route forward for Barrie's Tree

If the branch is left, the tree will shed the limb because the amount of wood holding the limb in place is not enough to support it as it grows longer. The increasing weight and greater spread will catch more wind causing the branch to snap off. I suspect the damage will be severe, leaving a deep scar at least three feet long and possibly down to the ground. Ultimately it won't kill the tree but the damage could shorten its life by letting in water, rot and disease.

There is a mature tree along Muddy Way that has shed a branch for the same reason and the split ripped a twenty-foot-long section of trunk away. The tree will recover but it has lost half its canopy and much of the protective bark that keeps out disease. The plan is to top the remainder of this tree and let it grow as a pollard, the first pollard in the reserve for a very long time.

However, if the trunk of Barrie's Tree is drilled to drain the cavity the rot will dry up and die but there will still be the problem of weight and spread and the effect of wind. There is a possibility that the branch could be bound to the healthy trunk but this would weaken the main trunk shortening the tree's life, not what we want at all.

The third option is to drill the branch to drain it and then a while later remove the branch at a point that will cause least damage but remove all of the weakness. The tree's shape will be altered in the same way but the break will be neat and less likely to attract disease, especially if it is dressed with wound-heal, a substance designed for pruned fruit trees. I believe there is a substance that can be used for filling the hole but I don't know how successful it is. The tree will eventually grow a new branch to fill the space created by the loss of the limb. Consequently, I have drilled the hole and I intend to start work removing the limb in September or after the tree has dropped its leaves.

It's a shame that the tree will lose its lovely shape but that's life, we all have our scars and it is just a matter of aesthetics. The tree will continue to live healthily and this will be an interesting point to note about the tree's history. Our joy comes from the fact the tree will continue to live and give pleasure to those who see it.

So next time you wander around the reserve, or even just stand at the gate and view the flower meadow, spare a thought for Barrie's Tree standing there watching over the reserve and its visitors, but itself being, very often, unnoticed and unrecorded.

Peter Prince