



Fig. 1 A field ash in West Stafford, Dorset.

Preface

ASH IS ONE OF THE COMMONEST TREES, from the mountains of South Wales to the glens of Scotland, the hedges of Ireland, and the railway banks of the English Midlands. Most ash trees are wildlife, like bluebells or badgers or birch trees; they look after themselves and cost nothing. Ash is under-appreciated: it has not the glamour of birch, the mystery of lime, the ruggedness of black poplar, the antiquity of yew, the magic of rowan, or the lore and legend of oak. It is a very recognisable tree that people are fond of in a quiet way, but not one that people are moved to write books about.

There are nearly as many ash trees in Britain as there are people – but what does such a statement mean? Like most statistics, it is hedged about with problems of definition (how big does a little ash tree have to get before it is counted?). The internet has plenty of official figures about ash, but not knowing exactly what they mean I shall not make much use of them.

Everyone knows what an ash tree looks like. There is only one British species. Ash comes into leaf late and loses its leaves early. In summer the compound leaves (with leaflets on either side of a midrib and one leaflet at the end) in opposite pairs are highly distinctive. In autumn the leaves fall

usually while still green, but may turn yellow; the bunches of flattened ash *keys*, each one enclosing a seed, then fall (see Fig. 5, page 15). In winter it is recognised by the thick curving twigs in opposite pairs, with fat dull-black buds. Ash bark is pale grey, but now increasingly covered with many-coloured lichens. The tree spreads widely where it has room: most old ashes have several trunks from a common base (Fig. 2). It can be a huge tree, second only to lime as the tallest of native trees. It is one of the few trees to have a distinctive sound – the clattering of the twigs of an ashwood in a gale is unforgettable.

I was asked to write this book as a response to the first noticing of ‘Ash Dieback’ disease in Britain in 2012. This was seized on by the Press as a man-made disaster and a scandal that should have been avoided. Ash is a successful tree that is more than capable of taking care of itself: yet people had been planting ash trees in their millions, and importing little ash trees by the million, and inevitably introducing this inconspicuous pathogen, which supposedly was on the way to killing every ash tree in Europe.

As I shall show, on present information it would be wrong to put all the blame for Ash Disease on the nursery trade. But the disease was not an isolated event: it brought to immediate public attention something that I have been rabbiting on about for years without anyone listening. The greatest threat to the world’s trees and forests is globalisation of plant diseases: the casual way in which plants and soil are shipped and flown around the globe in commercial quantities, inevitably bringing with them diseases to which the plants at their destination have no resistance. This has been subtracting



Fig. 2 Big ash stool in Buff Wood, Cambridgeshire. Multiple stems show it has been felled many times; the last time was in 1936.

Fig. 3 Ash hedge in Dorset, no longer maintained. The horizontal stems were *plashed* or *laid* in the past, after which their branches grew vertically.



tree after tree from the world's ecosystems: if it goes on for another hundred years how much will be left?

Oak and hazel, like ash, once looked after themselves and cost nothing, but they now have lost much of their power to grow from seed – oak perhaps from the introduction of the oak mildew fungus, hazel from the deliberate introduction of the grey squirrel. Before the latest round of Elm Disease, elms used to be in this category too. Ash is the commonest remaining self-maintained tree, followed by birch. Some trees should continue to be wildlife, retaining their independence from the human species: partly because people's enthusiasm for trees comes and goes on a shorter timescale than the lifespan of trees; but also because *Homo sapiens* has proved to be an increasingly unreliable guardian of the world's trees.

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Fig. 4 Giant woodland ash tree in Wytham Woods, Oxford, 2013.