

The Horse Chestnut Tree in St Stephen's churchyard

Over the past few years the Parochial Church Council (PCC) of St Stephen's Church in St Albans has been trying to save the very diseased and ancient Horse Chestnut tree which stands close to Watling Street in the corner of its churchyard.



The PCC has spent a considerable amount of time and money undertaking a series of surveys over the past ten years in an effort to save it. Five years ago the tree, on the advice of experts, was substantially reduced in size and then treated to try to combat over ten separate diseases that were present in the tree. Since then the tree has been regularly surveyed to check its health and safety.

After the most recent survey I'm afraid the news is not good. The tree is now deemed too unsafe and sick to save and needs to be removed. This is of course sad news for many of us both in the church and wider community. But all trees do have a limited lifespan and the church has a responsibility for the safety of the trees in its care.

We want to reassure the public that every effort is being made to limit the ecological impacts of the tree's removal. When the final safety report

was conducted, we arranged for an extensive ecological survey of the tree to enable to least possible damage ecologically for the species and habitats that live in the tree. Although no bats were found to be present the PCC decided to put up two bat boxes on other trees in the churchyard as mitigation. The removal will be as a 'soft fell' which means a staged, piece by piece removal allowing time for any living creatures to crawl away from the tree. Some of the felled wood will be kept in the churchyard to enhance the habitats and biodiversity of our grounds.

The Environment Group of St Stephen's church has developed a churchyard management plan to enhance the ecological and biodiverse elements within it, whilst also ensuring a well-maintained area for burials. Over the past year we have planted eight new trees as well as a new hedge along the SE border of the grounds. The PCC intend to plant another new tree in due course as a replacement of the horse chestnut tree.

The three-day felling of the tree is anticipated to take place in early March, before the bird nesting season and the new spring growth. There will be no impact on Watling Street whilst the work is taking place, and access to the church its halls and car park will still be possible.

Revd Becky Leach – February 2024