

## Dealing with Diseased Ash Trees and Operator Safety

Ash Dieback disease or Chalara (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*) is killing a very high proportion of our ash trees. The situation is compounded as the disease weakens the trees natural immune system and allows the Honey fungus (*Armillaria mellea*) to attack. This results in many trees having a high proportion of deadwood in the crown and having no significant fibre strength at felling height. It is therefore essential that full consideration is given to planning any tree work operations to remove the risk of accident or injury to tree workers. The primary consideration must be whether the job can be done by other means, the best control measure must be to use mechanical access (MEWP) or long reach harvesting equipment where the operators are kept further away from the trees and far better protected. Where this is not possible it is more important than ever that the chainsaw operator is both competent and properly equipped.



Ash in decline – note healthier ash tree behind.

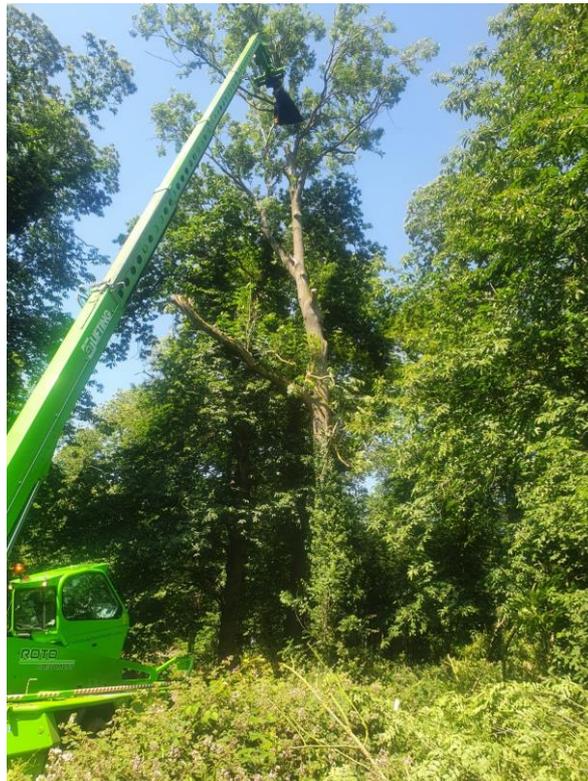
The increase in crown deadwood dramatically increases the risk of an operator being hit by falling branches and tops and this is most likely when the tree begins to fall or when wedges are being driven into the back of the tree, as the shock will vibrate through the stem and loose material will fall. Helmets and felling jackets will offer only limited protection from falling deadwood.



In dead or dying ash, particularly where Honey fungus is present this fibre length will be reduced dramatically and the risk of a tree breaking the hinge and falling in an uncontrolled manner is very high. It is very likely that when felling trees in a group which has suffered from an attack of honey fungus that neighbouring trees will be knocked or dragged down as consequence of felling the intended tree.

This again can put the operator at considerable risk in particular where trees with very weak root systems are reliant on the mutual support of the other trees in the group. Clearly whole trees falling from behind the operator are an unacceptable risk and in these situations every effort must be made to mechanise the felling operations.

Working with dead and dying ash in effect makes an already hazardous operation much more dangerous and it is essential that every effort is made to dismantle dead trees via long reach machinery equipped with shears or grapple saws or MEWP's and to fell them mechanically, keeping any climbing or chainsaw operations to an absolute minimum.



Long reach machine equipped with grapple saw.

Additionally, managers and main contractors must ensure that risk assessments and method statements are effectively communicated to all operators and that only the most competent and well-equipped operators are used on sites where dead ash is prevalent.