



Briefing note on the felling of The Duke of Wellington Cedar by The National Trust at
Kingston Lacy House in December 2013

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"Conservation is defined as the careful management of change. It is about revealing and sharing the significance of places and ensuring that their special qualities are protected, enhanced, understood and enjoyed by present and future generations."

The National Trust
(www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356394365704/)

Summary

In the week leading up to Christmas 2013, The National Trust cut down one of Britain's most important heritage trees seemingly against the published advice of its independent expert and in contravention of its first published main conservation principle, defined on its website as:

"Integrating the conservation of natural and cultural heritage".

This briefing note has been prepared by Jeremy Barrell in response to technically incorrect and potentially misleading public statements made by The National Trust relating to the felling of the Duke of Wellington Cedar at Kingston Lacy House in December 2013. Its purpose is to publish factual, balanced and technically credible information to assist readers in developing a properly informed view on the validity of the justifications advanced by The National Trust for its actions.



Photo 1: The Duke of Wellington Cedar on 14th September 2013



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According to The National Trust press briefings, this tree and others of a similar species, status and age were felled for safety reasons following “*expert advice*” and “*exhaustive technical analysis*”. However, a more detailed review of the publicly available documents reveal this information to be one-sided, factually incorrect and potentially misleading. Through a series of carefully crafted briefings, The National Trust has created a clear impression that it has behaved responsibly, with no other course of action but to fell the tree, which the press and East Dorset District Council seem to have accepted at face value without any further investigation.

For the avoidance of doubt, I must stress that The National Trust has not acted illegally in any way; however, it has just felled one of Britain’s most valuable heritage trees that it had under its care without publicly demonstrating a reasonable level of due diligence.

My credentials to comment on this tree

In order to provide some balance to the position being actively promoted by The National Trust through its press briefings and a published video, I have prepared this briefing note as a response from an expert perspective. The credentials that enable me to do this with some weight are as follows:

- More than 35 years’ experience as a contractor, consultant and expert witness specialising in tree risk management (www.barrelltreecare.co.uk/people/jeremy-barrell.php).
- Prior knowledge of this tree because I personally climbed and worked on it in 1982/3 as the appointed tree contractor carrying out remedial works, just after the Kingston Lacy Estate was bequeathed to The National Trust in 1981.
- I saw the tree regularly with visiting tree experts from around the world, and most recently on 14th September 2013, with the Vice President of Arboriculture Australia, the main professional body for arborists in Australia.

I also need to stress that I am not anti-National Trust in any way, indeed, as an author, I actively support it wherever possible (www.barrelltreecare.co.uk/pdfs/BTC81-HW-Complete-191013.pdf). However, where serious errors of judgment occur that have national and irreversible implications, then I am morally and professionally obliged to speak out if I feel that such action may lead to improved decision-making in the future.

Background reference material

The tree was located within a designated Conservation Area (Pamphill) and specifically mentioned as of particular importance in the associated Supplementary Planning Guidance (http://www.dorsetforyou.com/media/pdf/d/s/SPG09_Pamphill_Conservation_Area.pdf):

“The Cedars of Lebanon of Kingston Lacy are of particular importance to the appearance and character of the Park. ...and there are several individual commemorative cedars, including one planted by the Duke of Wellington.”

In accordance with the Regulations, The National Trust notified East Dorset District Council of its intent to fell it in a Notification dated 15th October 2013. This was accompanied by a series of PiCUS® Sonic Tomograph investigation results prepared by BHA Trees Ltd



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(www.bhatrees.co.uk/) and a detailed report with work recommendations from Symbiosis Consulting (www.symbiosis.gb.com/) dated 26th July 2013. All these documents can be accessed from East Dorset District Council at www.eastdorsetdc.gov.uk. A subsequent report was issued by Symbiosis Consulting that the Council do not have. However, at the time of publishing this briefing note, despite two written requests from me to disclose it, The National Trust has declined to reveal its contents.

In advance of the felling, The National Trust briefed the press, which resulted in local and national coverage, some of which can be seen at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-25333752. Additionally, during the felling process, The National Trust published a video setting out its reasons for felling the trees (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_vKNXOGnql), but this has since been made private, and so cannot be publicly viewed. When I saw the trees being felled on TV, I issued a press release that resulted in an update to the local BBC coverage, including further comment from The National Trust (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-dorset-25356092). There was also national coverage in the Daily Mail that can be viewed at www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2523665/Tree-planted-Duke-Wellington-nearly-200-years-ago-cut-safety-concerns.html.

The National Trust's published position

All of this background reference material is available for anyone to access and form their own view on The National Trust's reasons for felling the tree, but I summarise a selection of quotes from its published justifications as follows:

- **The tree was unhealthy/dying and will only live another 5–6 years:** *"All 4 trees are showing signs of ill health and would only last another 5–6 years if kept."; "there was nothing more that could be done to extend the life of the tree, which was clearly dying."; "Sadly, our trees are not healthy."; "They are living ghosts."; "It has reached the end of its life."*
- **Cedars do not respond well to pruning or our winters:** *"they do not respond well to bad winters"; "The consultant recommended tree surgery works to all 4 which we are not keen on as cedars do not look good and don't respond to surgery works."*
- **The experts' advice was to fell the trees and there was no other management option:** *"After the tests on the Duke's tree showed extensive rot in most of the trunk, the advice from the experts was to fell it immediately for safety reasons."; "Expert advice was sought and exhaustive technical analysis was undertaken."; "They are landmarks in the garden and we want to do all we can to keep them but the only effective solution for trees this badly damaged by rot is to fell them..."*
- **The tree was unsafe, with severe and advanced decay:** *"the 'landmark' tree, and two others, had to be felled immediately for safety reasons."; "Some are 90% decayed."; "the 'landmark' tree had to be felled immediately after experts found there was only five per cent live wood left in the trunk."; "The trees were indeed in a state of advanced decay."; "Recent tests on the tree found the trunk to be extensively damaged by rot."*



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I stress that these are selected quotes and I invite readers to explore all the referenced published material to satisfy themselves that these are correct and in context.

What The National Trust didn't mention!

Taking each of the points bulleted above, here is some additional information that The National Trust did not include in its press briefings:

- **The tree was unhealthy/dying and will only live another 5–6 years:** The oldest surviving cedar of Lebanon in Britain is in Christ Church College, Oxford, and is about 367 years old (www.treecouncil.org.uk/community-action/green-monuments/ancient-trees). The Duke of Wellington Cedar was about 186 years old, and so certainly had the potential to live another 180 years, and possibly longer. I climbed and worked on every part of the tree in 1982/3 and it was in perfect health then, which was why the remedial works were undertaken, to reduce the risk of weather damage. I specifically checked the tree about three months before it was felled with another expert and we noted no obvious indications of poor health. The National Trust video *The Cedars of Kingston Lacy* shows video footage of all the trees from many angles, which is evidence for all to see that they all look magnificent, healthy and full of life. Most compelling of all, The National Trust's own independent expert (Symbiosis Consulting) stated:

"The tree appeared to be in good overall physiological condition for a specimen of its size and age."

- **Cedars do not respond well to pruning or our winters:** When I pruned these trees in the early 1980s, I removed the dead wood, lightly thinned them and reduced the length of all the longer branches by 2–4m to reduce the risks of damage from wind and snow. This proved very effective because all the trees survived the hurricanes in 1987 and 1990, and also the most recent severe storm since those winds on 28th October 2013 (recorded wind speeds of up to 99mph in the region). The shape and form of the cedars in the video and in the image above confirms that the species does respond positively to pruning; indeed, it is a common management practice to prune mature cedar trees in well-accessed areas in this way, as evidenced by The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew where regular pruning is carried out on its collection of mature cedars. Furthermore, I am not aware of any widely accepted body of professional opinion indicating that cedars respond poorly to our winters. My experience is that quite the contrary is true, as evidenced by the many trees still alive despite our winter weather!
- **The experts' advice was to fell the trees and there was no other management option:** It is correct that the original BHA report condemned the tree on the basis of the PiCUS® investigations, but that simplistic analysis was subsequently proved to be flawed through further internal investigation, as the later Symbiosis report identified:



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"My investigations indicate that the tree is not as extensively decayed as the tomogram implies and, given its landscape value and historical significance, would suggest that removing the tree at this stage may be premature."

Indeed, that report went on to advise that pruning was a feasible management option and described how that could be done.

- **The tree was unsafe, with severe and advanced decay:** The clear implication from The National Trust's press briefings and video is that the tree was unsafe and had to be immediately felled, which is simply not supported by the available information. The Symbiosis investigations clearly reported that the decay at the base of the Duke of Wellington Cedar was not as extensive as first thought, and that report went on to confirm:

"I manually exposed the root collar in several locations to assess the integrity of the base of the remainder of the trunk but this failed to reveal any basal cavities or further areas of exposed decay."

It is widely accepted by tree experts and intuitively correct that whole tree stability is strongly related to the condition of the roots, and the Symbiosis investigations did not discover any problems in that area. Indeed, images of the cut cross-section of the base of the trunk and my observations of it on site clearly show that a significant proportion of the outer shell of the trunk was sound. My estimate is that at least 50% of the trunk near ground level was unaffected by decay in any significant way. On closer examination, all the credible investigations and observations indicate that, although there was advanced decay in the centre of the trunk, a significant proportion of the outer trunk was sound. In that context, The National Trust statements implying that 90–95% was unsound, which made the tree unsafe, is misleading speculation, not supported by the evidence available from both before and after the felling.



Photo 2 (18/12/13): Stump cross-section showing an advanced column of central decay (darker colours) that has been compartmentalized, with limited breaches into the outer wood. Most importantly, there is a substantial outer width of lighter coloured sound heartwood and white sapwood beyond (mostly trimmed off in the felling process), which provides solid support for the tree. This confirms that the original Picus® results were wrong and, in the context of no discovered root decay, there was no defensible justification for felling this tree on the grounds of instability.

Why this tree loss matters

Heritage trees are individuals and groups that are valued by the wider community to the extent that they are considered special and worthy of conservation because of their direct living link to the past and their potential to create and maintain living connections with the future. The features that make such trees special can be grouped into three broad characteristics; visual, scientific and cultural (www.treeaz.com/tree_ah/).



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What made this tree unique was that it had all three of these heritage characteristics in abundance. At more than 20m in height and with a crown nearly as wide, supported on a trunk over 2.3m in diameter, it was an imposing visual feature enjoyed by thousands of people every year. As one of the oldest remaining living trees of the species in the UK, it was scientifically irreplaceable because of the scarcity of such mature individuals. Finally, it had immense cultural value, being planted by one of our greatest generals who went on to become British Prime Minister for two terms. This tree was one of the few remaining living links with that historical figure, a direct cultural connection that is now lost. This rare combination made it one of Britain's most important natural heritage assets. Similar to Kingston Lacy House, which is a Grade I Listed architectural asset, this tree was of exceptional interest, making it a Grade I Listed Green Monument on a comparable scale. The tree was unique and irreplaceable, which is why its loss should be a matter of national and international concern.

What we can do to prevent future losses of irreplaceable trees?

The National Trust is one of the largest landowners in Europe and the trusted guardian of Britain's most treasured historical assets. It is very keen to promote its green credentials and is, quite rightly, highly respected by the British people. However, it is also valid to challenge that perception when the decision-making behind the scenes does not match the expectations set out in the front window. From the available information, The National Trust seems to have embarked on a campaign of misinformation, without the balance and poise one would expect from such a prestigious institution. On a personal note, as a proud supporter of The National Trust, I expected better and I think that the trees it is entrusted to manage responsibly on behalf of the Nation deserve better.

There are some parallels here to the plight of endangered species around the world, but with one very important difference. As many successful conservation projects have proven, endangered species can be brought back from the edge of extinction, but that cannot be done for heritage trees. Each one is a unique individual and once it is gone, it cannot be replaced, so it is lost forever.

Of course, The Duke of Wellington Cedar is no longer standing and nothing can be done to change that, but there are other special trees like it around the world that are under threat in the same way. The opportunity to save this tree is now gone, but together we may be able to make those with responsibility for similar trees think very carefully before they fell the next one, and then another, and then another, until there really are none left.

The reality is that as an individual writing this briefing note, I am too small and unimportant to make any difference to the way that organizations like the National Trust behave; it can do more or less what it pleases whilst there is no dissent. However, if a sufficient body of public opinion can be mobilized, then at some point even the most stubborn have to stop and listen. Individuals can make a difference, but only if they act together and the support is strong.

Each of you can contribute to this effort in a way that is not overly confrontational or aggressive, but with the potential to create a body of collective opinion if enough people feel moved to act. In response to The National Trust video that was public, but now has restricted access, I visited Kingston Lacy House while the felling was under way and recorded my own video that can be seen at <http://youtu.be/BypBkilAHcl>. It is not perfect, and certainly nothing like as slick as The



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National Trust production, but I did it by myself in one take (apart from an interruption as a tree was felled!) and it was the best I could do under the circumstances. If you have time to view these videos, you will see that beneath the playing screen there is the thumbs-up icon to register if you 'like' it and a thumbs-down icon to register if you 'dislike' it. This is a mechanism for each of us individually to record our approval or disapproval for what we have seen. Please note that you will need to be appropriately logged in to vote.

I invite you to watch the videos (if you can still manage to access The National Trust video), form your own views and register what you think using the 'like' and 'dislike' buttons. If enough of us register our approval/disapproval through this voting mechanism, then it would send a very powerful message to The National Trust, but more importantly, to all owners of heritage trees, that they should think very carefully about the way they manage these unique and irreplaceable green assets.

It is extremely regrettable that this tree has been felled, but it is gone now and the focus needs to be redirected towards conserving those that we have left wherever they are in the world. Together, we may be able to make a difference and I invite you to register your view by voting on the videos.

Jeremy Barrell
8th January 2014



Photo 3 (18/12/13): The ignominious end for one of Britain's most important heritage trees; a wheelbarrow full of foliage, a bin of offcuts as trinkets and a request for the public to donate to the cause! Perhaps a time to reflect on what Henry Banks, the biggest ever benefactor to The National Trust, would have thought about such an end to this living link between him and his ancestors, who experienced and enjoyed its presence on a daily basis for more than 180 years as they grew up and lived in the family home.

Note: This briefing note has been prepared based on publicly available documents and in the context of requests for further clarification made in writing to The National Trust on 22nd December 2013 and 7th January 2014. It may be necessary to update this content if The National Trust releases the clarifications requested.