



Guardian of the Gateway: don't give up on elms

Highland elms must be celebrated and protected in a warming world, argues Mandy Haggith.

I grew up close to an elm wood in Northumberland and have many childhood memories of playing among the magnificent elms and even more vivid memories of the arrival of Dutch elm disease, which killed them all. Looking back, it seemed to happen quickly. The canopy thinned. The trees began to disintegrate as limbs, bare all summer long, became brittle and snapped in winter gales. What had been a closed, green world became inhabited by ghosts.

The disease is spread by bark-boring beetles, notably *Scolytus scolytus*, the so-called large elm bark beetle, which is actually only about half a centimetre long, a shiny little creature with cherry-brown wing cases, a polished black thorax and furry head. In itself it is an innocent enough little borer and a big elm tree could survive its nibbles without too much difficulty, but its killer impact is as a carrier of a fungus, *Ophiostoma novo-ulmi*, which causes Dutch elm disease. The beetle's habit of boring through bark transmits the fungus into the sapwood of the trees, with devastating effect. Death is rapid and almost universal. Since it

arrived in the south of Britain in the late 1960s it has gradually moved north, wiping out an estimated 25 million elm trees. The disease is now globally widespread, killing elms across Eurasia and America.

Yet parts of the Highlands and Islands are still free of the blight because *Scolytus scolytus* does not like the cold. Only on a really warm summer day will it venture out of its woody burrow to seek an alternative tree to chew on. New generations that hatch out into overcrowded trunks will find their efforts to expand their territory thwarted by cool conditions. Our dreich, nippy climate has prevented not only patio dining, bikini-wearing on beaches and cultivation of more-than-once-in-a-blue-moon pears, it has also put off the otherwise inexorable movement of Dutch elm disease. We may have plenty of midges up north, but at least we don't have elm bark beetles. Or didn't.

The Beaully elm

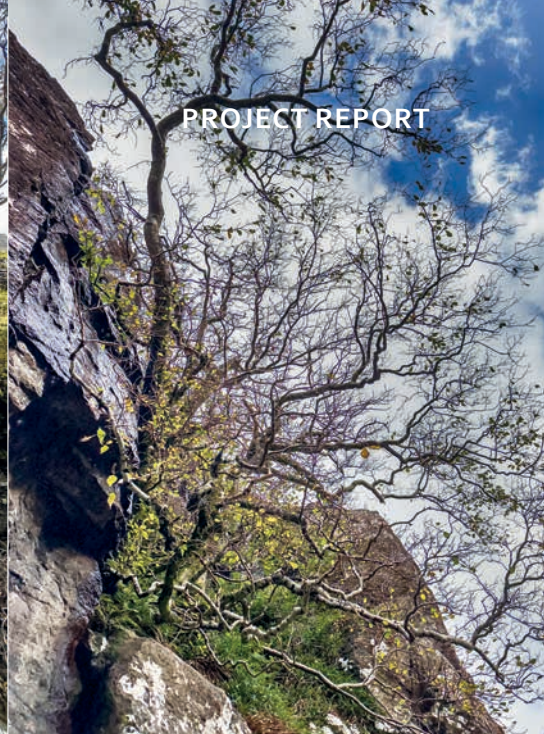
Beaully, near Inverness, has a central square flanked on the west side by an ancient priory and for centuries the priory gates were guarded by a monumental tree, Europe's oldest elm, planted in the 1200s when the

church was built. We know this from the monks' documents and subsequent plans, which show a clear double line of elm trees forming a shady avenue approaching the priory. The gateway tree was the last of these: a vast Ent-like tree, its trunk so broad it would need several tree huggers to stretch arms around it.

The Beaully elm stood as a symbol of survival, until in the 2020s it became clear that it was battling with infection and losing the fight. In spring 2022, it put out a few leaves but as these withered a plan was formed by a local artist, Isabel McLeish, to commemorate the life and wonder of this marvellous specimen. She and the arts organisation Circus Arts co-ordinated a community outpouring of feeling for the tree, with people of all ages writing and creating art to honour its passing. I was commissioned to write something, so I began a series of close encounters and intimate moments with the dying Ent.

When I began visiting it I expected to be writing a piece of mourning, an elegy. Instead I found myself writing a celebration, in the voice of the elm itself, giving vent to the wonder of the

One of Assynt's magnificent elms, at Inchnadamph. Photos: Chris Puddephatt.



discovery of this great being as not a single organism but a vibrant living community—from the epiphytic plants in its crown to the fungal hordes in its roots, from visiting birds to resident wasps, spiders and, of course, beetles. The tree seemed to have much to say about the interdependence of species and about the importance of engaging all our senses and cultural values in love for the rest of nature. The result is a poem for performance called ‘Elm Tree Talk’, with an accompanying set of ‘rootnotes’ for the version in the commemorative publication *Guardian of the Gateway: 800 years of the Beaully wych elm*.

Circus Arts’ activities culminated in September 2022 in a day of performances and participatory art with a milling crowd of local people sharing stories of what the elm meant to them. Just as the tree was a community of many species, it had linked our human community together, providing a tangible connection to our history through the power of its longevity. Its sheer age gave it profound value.

Elm culture

The lore about elm is as broad as its trunk and as deep as its roots. Most famously, elm is a tree associated with spirit realms and passages to the afterlife. It would have been a by-no-means arbitrary choice for monks in ancient times to line the walkway to their holiest place. The *Guardian of the Gateway* has watched many coffins carried under it on the

journey to a grave and whatever follows after. Many of those coffins may have been made of elms too—it is a favoured material for housing the dead.

As well as its associations with death, elm also has healing properties—its roots were used to knit bones, its leaves for dressing wounds, its sap drunk to ease gut problems. It has many practical uses and was valued for tool making. The earliest wheel found in Scotland, 3,000 years old, has an elmwood nave, or centre. Elmwood was used for the garboard strake, the lowest wale or plank of wood next to the keel strap of a wooden boat because of its waterproof properties. Fibres from the inner bark made ropes and it was used as animal fodder or starvation food. The first sign of its lop-sided leaves in spring was said to be the signal that grain crops could be safely planted. This is a tree deeply rooted not only in our land but in our culture. No wonder its loss from our woodlands, hedgerows and town centres has left us feeling bereft.

Here in Assynt, a hundred miles northwest of Beaully, old elms are still flourishing along with their assemblage of other associated species, many of which also live on ash, so are doubly threatened due to ash die-back. I live in a zone of hope.

Some of our elms are mighty specimens, teetering in craggy and inaccessible places and gracing our woods with their unique palette of green and gold. Thanks to funding from Scottish Forestry and John Muir Trust, our community woodland group, Culag Community Woodland Trust, is running a project to celebrate and protect them. Local people are

getting to know our elms while we still have them and, crucially, planting more. The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh is propagating trees that have survived the disease and distributing them to increase our woods’ genetic diversity and hopefully ensure all the other species that depend on elm have a future home. Some of these potentially resilient seedlings will be taking root in Assynt in early 2024 alongside many local provenance elms.

Elms are a symbol of the quandaries we face in addressing climate change: as the temperature contours shift northward every year, the beetles follow. We can slow the disease’s advance by avoiding transportation of elm firewood, watching for infection, limbing or felling promptly, burning, chipping or debarking infected logs and disinfecting fungus-infected chainsaws. There may be little we can do to stop the beetle’s progress north but even if that is inevitable we can still do a lot to ensure the continuing presence of elms at a landscape level.

As a key part of our rainforest, it is imperative that we do not give up on elm and the best chance we can give it and all its associated species, is to include it in new native woodland establishment and to encourage natural regeneration around existing seed sources. The story of the elm must not just be one of loss, of inexorable warming and spreading infection. Let’s make it a tree-tall tale of burgeoning hope rooted in resilience.

Mandy Haggith lives and writes on a coastal woodland in Assynt. She is currently writing a book, ‘The lost elms, due to be published by Wildfire in 2025.’

Top, left to right: Festooned with epiphytes and fungi, elms are a key rainforest species; Many of our elms are found on riverbanks; Elm tree on crag at Gleannan a’ Mhadaidh, one mile due south of Suilven summit. Photos: Chris Puddephatt.