



Viewpoint

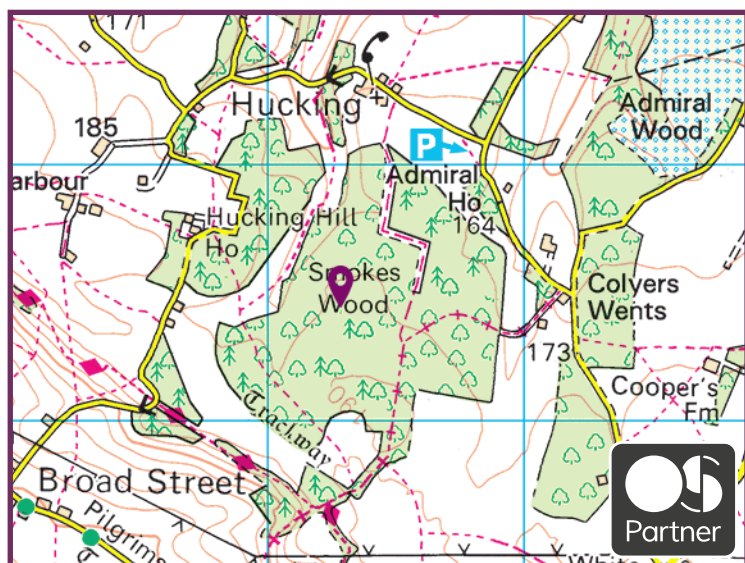
Ash to ashes



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location:

Hucking Estate, near Maidstone, Kent ME17 1QT

Grid reference:

TQ 84300 57500

Getting there:

The nearest railway station is Hollingbourne, about a 35 minute walk away. By car, exit the M20 at junction 8 and follow signs to Lenham and Leeds Castle. At the second roundabout take road to Hollingbourne. Go through the village and at the top of the hill turn left following signposts to Hucking.

Ash trees have long been a permanent fixture of our landscapes. We find them in parks and fields, woods and hedgerows, even urban streets.

We use their wood for making furniture while their leaves feed a variety of animals. Each tree supports a wealth of wildlife including wood mice, birds, bats, lichens, fungi and beetles.

Though ash trees are intrinsic to our daily lives, most people would be hard pressed to identify one. And over the next decade it's predicted that up to 98% of our ash trees will disappear.

What is the future for Britain's ash trees and why does it matter?



There are over 150 million ash trees in Britain and they are the most populous tree in the Kent Downs AONB.

From practical and ecological perspectives, ash trees play important roles: they help with flood defences; contribute to air quality and provide a habitat, food and life support for almost 1,000 wildlife species.

Ash trees are also important to our cultural heritage. The significance is reflected in numerous English place names including Ashford (Kent), Ashby de la Zouch (Leicestershire), Askrigg (North Yorkshire), Knotty Ash (Merseyside) and the Ashdown Forest (East Sussex) - where A.A. Milne set the Winnie the Pooh stories.

In folklore, ash trees were thought to ward off evil spirits and have healing properties. Stories of sick children being passed through a cleft in the tree to cure them are recorded as far as the turn of the twentieth century.

For the Vikings, the ash was Yggdrasil, the World Tree. It lay at the heart of their mythology and beliefs. The roots were said to reach down into the underworld, while the trunk reached up to heaven and the boughs spread out over the earth. A deer fed on its leaves and from its antlers flowed all the world's great rivers.

More recently, the war poet Edward Thomas celebrated them in poems including *The Ash Grove* and naturalist Roger Deakin eulogised the ash in his book *Wildwood*. The artist John Constable painted his favourite ash on Hampstead Heath while David Hockney's recent canvases of the Yorkshire Wolds show a landscape populated with ash trees.

Yet due to the spread of a disease known as ash dieback, most of these trees will soon disappear from our landscapes and our lives. First recognised in Britain in 2012 from a batch of infected trees sent from the Netherlands, the disease has spread through spores carried on the wind and transported logs and leaves.

The devastating rate of ash tree decline is caused by a fungus. In summer it attacks the leaves and produces spores. These are spread around the tree by wind and rain, causing more infections. The fungus attacks the crown (top) of the tree, which loses leaves, then eventually stops budding and dies.

At the moment, the scale of the ecological impact is unknown. So while the ash is part of our past and present, is it part of our future? If you have memories of ash trees, want to help with tree planting programmes or to find out more, visit the Ash Project at www.theashproject.org.uk.



This viewpoint is one of 12 created in partnership with Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to celebrate their 50 year anniversary in 2018.

Find out more about the Kent Downs AONB by visiting www.kentdowns.org.uk