

Jeff Reynolds

The Three Horse Chestnuts in All Saints Churchyard

There were three magnificent Horse Chestnut trees at the east end of All Saints Churchyard. They were probably planted by Rector Charles George Venables Vernon Harcourt who 'beautified' the village by planting trees in 1858.

The three chestnuts were about the size of the one that currently towers over the war memorial. The picture below, taken in 2001 from the church tower, gives some idea of what they were like in summer. The Railway Hotel is in the background.



To make some sense of this account it should be noted that I served three 4-year terms as a Churchwarden for Rothbury Church and was a member of Rothbury Parish Council from 2000 to 2018. As a Churchwarden at All Saints, I had some responsibility the churchyard trees. Several were subject to Tree Preservation Orders, including the chestnuts, and the churchyard, being in the centre of Rothbury, is in the Conservation Area, which also gives some protection to trees.

Any tree work to be done in a churchyard has to have planning permission from the Diocese of Newcastle and from the local authority.

As a new Churchwarden, information was offered by long serving members of the congregation, that the trees and all other growing things in the churchyard were the property of the Rector. It meant that if a tree was cut down, the wood belonged to the Rector, as did all grass cuttings. This position was firmly set out in a letter to Rothbury Parish Council (RPC) in 1951 from the then Rector, Canon G. H. Harris, even though maintenance of the closed churchyards had been the responsibility of RPC since it had been warmly welcomed by them at a meeting in November 1946.

The welfare of the three chestnuts was a concern for the Rothbury and District Amenity Society (RDAS) as noted in an article in their 1991 newsletter on 'The Churchyard Trees'. It said that a building firm called 'Interalia' had obtained planning permission for houses at *Deuchet Court, just behind the eastern churchyard wall. Permission was given on condition that there should be no interference with the churchyard trees next to the site. However, as soon as some of the houses were almost finished, the builders went back to the planning authority with a request for a drastic cutting back of the trees, to avoid the houses being too dark. Expert tree surgeons brought in by RDAS said none of the work was necessary. The request was refused and ADC put a Tree Preservation Order on each individual tree. The opinion of RDAS was that the houses were dark because there were very few windows on the east side, and the full length patio doors on the west side were only a few feet away from the high churchyard wall.

There must have been threat to one of the chestnuts in 2000 as a Senior Planner at Alnwick District Council wrote to a resident on 28 November saying '...the tree is in reasonable health and that felling of the tree would not be justified at this time. It is worth noting that even healthy trees can lose branches in inclement weather.'

A further complaint came from a resident of Deuchet Court in 2002 about falling branches during a storm. Advice was sought by the Church and some tree work carried out on the chestnuts.

The first complaint about the trees I was aware of was in June 2005 when a Deuchet Court resident approached Alnwick District Council (ADC) with a request to fell the chestnut nearest to his house. It was inspected by a Planning Officer and the resident was given the same reply as in the November 2000 letter, saying the action was not justified. This led me to write to the Planning Officer on behalf of the Church to ask for advice. She said that some work was needed, such as lifting branches away from footpaths and adjacent roofs and gardens. She recommended using a consultant registered with the Arboricultural Association (AA) and using a registered contractor to carry out any necessary work. This the Church did in 2007.

In 2008, a previously very active member of the congregation returned to Rothbury in his 80s and bought a house at Deuchet Court. He wanted to have the nearest chestnut felled to improve light to his property and was anxious about the possibility of falling branches. He contacted ADC with a proposal to have the work carried out. The recently appointed Vicar of the new Upper Coquetdale Parish fully supported the parishioner and wanted the tree down to give the residents a better quality of life. My view was less charitable, that the trees were a wonderful village amenity that belong to everyone. I had no great sympathy for someone who bought a house under a very large old tree and then complained that it was shady.

The Vicar talked to the ADC Tree Officer in March 2009 and was told that some pruning could go ahead but it was unlikely that permission to fell would be given. The Tree Officer suggested the Church should carry out a full survey of the churchyard trees and produce a management plan for several years ahead with some replanting. ADC was abolished in April 2009 and its duties taken over by Northumberland County Council (NCC). A consultant who was a member of the Arboricultural Association was asked by the church in March 2010 to inspect the churchyard trees and give advice. Action had been delayed by a heart attack in January 2010. My term as Churchwarden ended in April 2010 and also, I thought, any further responsibility for churchyard trees.

In the summer of 2010, much to the surprise of both RPC and the Church, information came to light about recent changes in legislation on trees in closed churchyards. It had been introduced in 2006 and was supposed to have been sent out to appropriate local authorities in 2007. It said that whatever church law previously set out, all trees in closed churchyards were entirely the responsibility of the local authority, which in the case of Rothbury Church was RPC. Following advice on what should be done, the Churchwardens made a formal request to RPC in April 2011 for responsibility for the churchyard trees be transferred to RPC. This was accepted at an RPC meeting in May 2011. One of my responsibilities as an RPC councillor was to oversee care of the village trees and that now also included the churchyard trees.

RPC had by then received, over a 10-month period, the opinions of two arboricultural consultants who had inspected the churchyard trees. The opinions were not always the same. To be sure that no tree would be cut down that could be saved, I asked Craggs Head Forester, Ian Fletcher, in October 2011, to look at each tree and give a final opinion. Sadly, he confirmed that the most southerly chestnut was in poor condition, partly caused by housebuilding activities, and should be felled. This was carried out on 16.3.12. The other two were to have crown work.



Felling the most southerly chestnut.

Just before the crown trim, around the third week in June 2012, a Deuchet Court householder pointed out a large section of rot that went 18" into the middle chestnut tree at a height of 8'. This was confirmed by an AA registered tree consultant on 12 July who said it was a danger to the public and to nearby property. An emergency request to fell the tree was made the same day to NCC and the Diocese.

The middle chestnut tree was felled on 20 July 2012.



Middle chestnut tree in all its splendour.

The most northerly of the three chestnuts and the only survivor was the subject of a tree consultant report in December 2014 that said that it had serious disease and weakness and needed to be felled. It was felled on 24 April 2015.

An afterthought for action is that trees with TPOs should be replaced with a suitable alternative within one growing season and this has not been done. In the churchyard they should be planted further west and away from the houses. In mitigation, from 2011 to 2017, RPC was seriously distracted from its work by a local nuisance complainant who has lived abroad for years but still sends long lists of complaints.



It is sad they are gone. They represented high summer in Rothbury. About 120 feet tall, covered in greenery and flowers, a promise of new life and summers to come. Nesting for birds, pollen and nectar for bees, caterpillars for blue tits, polished mahogany conkers for boys and girls. Luscious dark green hands and fingers of leaves giving shelter from the rain, all lit by great yellow and red candlesticks of flowers. It was impossible to guess that they once only grew in the Balkans and came to Britain in the late 1500s. It explains why they are hardly ever found in woodlands but are often on village greens.

A lost asset to the churchyard that should be replaced.

Jeff Reynolds
June, 2021.

**Should be 'Ducket Court' or the more refined 'Dovecote Court'. When one of the builders was asked why it had such a French looking name, he said they were not sure how to spell Ducket. It was originally church land called Dovecote Close.*