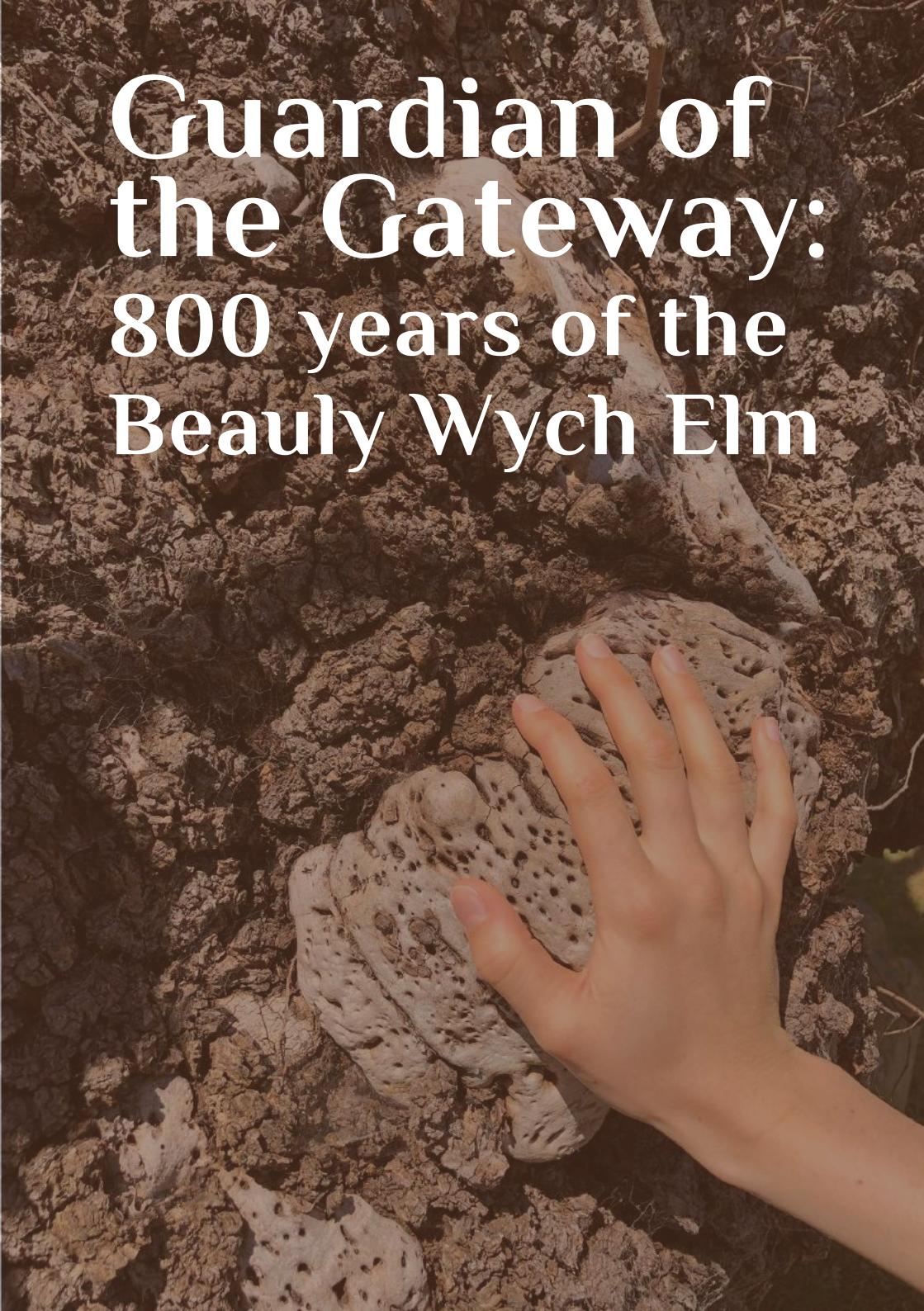


Guardian of the Gateway: 800 years of the Beaulieu Wych Elm





Isabel McLeish foreword

My mum first told me about the Beauly Wych Elm late in 2020 after reading an online article about it dying of Dutch elm disease. I couldn't believe that I hadn't heard of it before. For someone whose art practice often revolves around trees, I was shocked that such a striking 800 year old tree in the Highlands had passed me by.

Once I had finished my masters in Art and Social Practice in December of 2021, I started doing research about the Beauly Wych Elm and wanted to see if there were records and archival material. I was surprised that actually very little had been documented. Sarah Franklin, Historic Environment Scotland's landscape manager described the tree as "living archaeology" which totally captured my imagination. Historic Environment Scotland did create a digital 3D model from a laser scan of the tree, the first time this technique had been used on something other than a building!

In early 2022, whilst sketching and photographing the tree in the priory grounds, members of the community asked me what I was doing and then told me their personal connection and stories about the tree. It became clear that there was potential for a socially engaged project and I reached out to the artist-led collective Circus Artspace who then partnered with me to capture and celebrate the tree's story and life.

4

Dutch elm disease has been spreading throughout the UK since the 1960s and kills trees via a fungal infection carried by beetles. Wych elms are the only elm species regarded as native in the UK and we still have some healthy and disease-free populations of wych elms in the Highlands, particularly in the North and West. But as our climate warms, the beetles which prefer warmer temperatures, may be able to travel further and reach these healthy trees.

The project aimed to encourage dialogue about the implications of climate change, disease spread and ecological loss in the Highlands as well as celebrate our relationship with an ancient Scottish tree. We wanted to showcase the heritage and cultural value of the wych elm by bringing together the local community with artists, writers and partnership organisations to discover and share stories, memories, archive material and research about the wych elm. Over the summer, we gathered old stories and created new ones through an open call and a series of engagement events. We hosted a tree celebration event in the grounds of Beaulieu Priory to commemorate the tree's life and share its story.

In these pages you will find the collation and culmination of all of this research and work. I hope that the publication will inspire more wych elm enthusiasts. Thank you to all of you for your support, collaboration, creativity and stories. What a wonderful tree, and how lucky we are that our lives have intersected with it.

Isabel McLeish, November 2022

www.isabelmcleish.com



Research
resources
on Isabel's
website

CiRCUS ARTSPACE worked in partnership with Isabel McLeish to facilitate delivery and promotion of this project, and to source invaluable funding from the Year of Stories 2022 Community Fund, and a support grant from Historic Environment Scotland.

CiRCUS ARTSPACE is an artist-run organisation established in Inverness in 2019. We support emergent artists through our graduate programmes and are committed to building broader access to contemporary visual arts in the Scottish Highlands.

www.circus.scot





Isabel McLeish

1. *Touched* (above)
silver gelatine, selenium toned, fibre based print, 2022
2. photographic contact sheet (right) printed at
Inverness Darkroom, 2022





1/25 Isabel Meier



Isabel McLeish

3. *Guardian of the Gateway* (left)
wood engraving, 2022
4. *Wych Elm of Beaulieu Priory* (above)
etching, 2022

A blue-tinted photograph of a rocky coastline. In the foreground, several pieces of weathered driftwood are scattered across the dark, jagged rocks. The background shows a steep, rocky cliffside leading up to a clear blue sky. The overall scene is serene and natural.

Community Celebration



On the 24th September 2022 we hosted a tree celebration event at Beaulieu Priory to bring together the local community with artists, writers and partnership organisations to discover, celebrate and share their own stories and research about the Beaulieu Wych Elm. The celebration featured the first reading of a commissioned text from Highland writer Mandy Haggith as well as other invited tree health experts Phil Baarda (NatureScot) and Max Coleman (Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh).





Phil Baarda

A tree as a door

This particular tree is old. 800 years old. That's a pretty unimaginable span of time. 800 years ago, Beaulieu didn't have the name we know it by today. It was only after the priory was built that it began to be called *A' Mhanachain* [pronounced roughly 'a van-a-kahn] – the Gaelic means 'the place of the monks, the monastery'. The monks who came here, the Valliscaulians, originated in the *Val-de-Choux* in France (called *Vallis Caullium* in Latin) – 'the valley of the cabbages'. The writer side of me likes the notion of woolly-headed 'cabbage monks' liking it here enough to found a priory. This place was, in their Latin charter, a *bello loco* – a 'beautiful place', which in French is *beau lieu* (bow lee-oo). Mary Queen of Scots, in a possible apocryphal visit, is alleged to have remarked that Beaulieu was 'c'est un beau lieu' which might have created or at least popularised today's non-Gaelic name.

But, why here, and why 'beautiful'? It's a scenic sweet spot – it's a strategic vantage point on the river, on the slightly higher ground of the western bank, of a river that leads out to the mouth of the Firth, giving good trade links with the rest of Scotland and the continent. It's a focal point of the rivers and natural resources of Strathfarrar and Strathglass – with other straths – the Strathconon and Strathbran and Strathgarve coming out only slightly further north at Conon Bridge.

Good river and sea links were essential 800 years ago of course, as well as before and after. They were the chief way that people traded and travelled distances. Rivers' importance is shown in what they're called – and they often have the oldest names amongst all the place-names in the landscape. 'Glass' – as in Strathglass – is thought to be a Pictish name. It's a name that pre-dates Gaelic, meaning 'river or burn' – hence River Glass could be 'River river'.

And this beautiful spot here, the area around these rivers, is fertile – it's good productive agricultural land. There would be arable crops, bountiful grazing for sheep and cattle, extensive forests further inland. There'd be grain, timber, fish, wool, cloth, skins – perhaps vellum for writing – all beautiful commodities from this beautiful place.

The Valliscaulian order benefitted too, of course. It had to. The priory was a huge and expensive thing to build and to run. It needed quarries, lime for mortar, timber for scaffolding, boats and fuel. The Priory's lay people needed to be fed and housed – all relying on the area's natural resources – and the monks had significant influence over these extensive lands and what they could produce.

Just up the road from Beaulieu, to the west, near Kilmorack, there's a place – *Drumindorsair* [dreem-un-dor-ser] – Gaelic for the 'ridge of the doorkeeper or porter' – which was on Valliscaulian land. It's 4 kilometres away from the priory – a not-insignificant distance – at a strategic point in the Strathglass, showing the priory had a decent reach into the wider area, with a gate-keeping overview of what resources came down the Strath.

And the priory's wych elm, another doorkeeper-porter of sorts, saw it all. The tree could be the same one as on the original charter map of the priory of around 1230. It's shown as a boundary marker, specifying the extent of the formal priory grounds. It's very possibly the same tree because it's been managed in the past in a way that keeps it alive for a long time.

Looking at it, you can see a majority of branches coming from a roughly single point a few metres above head-height. This is known as pollarding, the tree being a pollard, from the word 'poll' meaning 'head' or, as a verb, 'to cut or trim or de-horn'.

Cont.

This tree management gives regrowth at this height, out of the reach of browsing animals. This gives particularly useful woody branches – which could be used for baskets, or fencing, or a thousand-and-one other things that pre-industrial societies used wood for. It was also sustainable: you could cut, and re-cut, the regrowth every few years without the tree being compromised. This kind of management created an almost perpetual supply of wood, the ongoing nurturing of which also prolonged the life of the tree. The tree keeps growing, its girth expands, and, co-incidentally, you've got a long-lived boundary marker.

In a time of no accurate maps or GPS, fixed marker points were pretty essential signifiers of land ownership. A river or stream as a boundary could change its course, a wooden post could rot, a boulder can be moved, but a tree can't be dug up and moved a few metres – without killing it.

Also co-incidentally, pollarding is good for wildlife – there are lots of hollows where dust and rainwater collects, allowing other trees and plants grow – like on this wych elm, if you look upward high enough. There's also a range of insects and invertebrates taking advantage of the range of new growth and the older wood. There are lots of knobbly burrs, caused by the tree reacting to insects – which causes more niches for wildlife to thrive. Incidentally too, burrs are very valuable to woodturners – giving interesting and non-regular grain.

Even though it is now dying back from Dutch elm disease, the tree remains a magnificent gatekeeper of the priory, giving an insight to the distant previous centuries. And as this tree dies, the baton is passed on into the future, and to a new gatekeeper. Looking across toward the priory, there's a living tree that has the potential to be like this elm. The sycamore, a suitably biblical tree, is already well established, and if it's nurtured like this elm, has the potential to be very long lived. Will that be here after 800 years? Who knows – we'll have to come back then.



Community drop-in story session with children's art activities by Sadie Stoddart at Beauty Library, 20th August 2022

“I remember holding hands with
my family around the tree in 2018.”

project participant, Beauty Library drop-in story session,
20th August 2022









Mandy Haggith

*Elm tree talk*¹

I am *leamhan*, Wych elm, *Ulmus glabra*,
orme, *iep*, *rüster*, (*vyas*), *jalava*.²
 My life spans many of yours³. I see
 deep into the earth and high into the sky.
 I do not move as you do, but please
 don't mistake my standing stillness
 as any kind of lack. I spread underground.⁴
 I dance with gales and storms,
 scatter my leaves⁵ and twigs and seeds.
 Sometimes I see humans value
 movement over growth,
 growth over rhythm,
 but rhythm is everything.
 I've been rocking to the pulse of sun and moon
 for centuries.⁶ Listen:

Tree time is not like your time.
 I have watched you for 800 sun-cycles⁷,
 concluded long ago that you are strange
 creatures of movement and desire.
 Still yourselves for a moment, please.
 Put down all your wishes and longings,
 all your cravings and dissatisfaction.
 Lighten yourself and breathe our gift:
 oxygen⁸, the one thing you can't do without
 but often seem to leave off your wishlist.
 But I'm not here to criticise, I don't want...
 well, I don't want anything⁹, least of all
 you feeling bad or not wanting to listen.
 So. Breathe. Settle. Tune into tree talk.

I wish for nothing, I do not know desire,
 no dreams or dreads,
 no hopes, no disappointments.
 I stand and the world is here
 in all its diverse, subtle
 and endlessly changing beauty.¹⁰
 I wish for nothing because I am full,
 from crown to root tip¹¹, with wonder.

I say I, because you expect a voice
 of singular identity, which seems to be
 how you perceive yourselves.¹²
 But I am really we.
 I am, we are, a community.
 Though you may see me as just a tree
 I am wasps and willowherbs,
 spiders and their silken threads,¹³
 netted midgies, mosses, lichens,
 an asylum-seeking cherry tree¹⁴
 brought by one of my many birds,
 a bounty of boring beetles¹⁵

and in the soil a riot of life
 I can't begin to tell you of
 for if I do I'll enter a fungal epic¹⁶
 that will keep you here
 until your leaves fall for the last time too.
 It is enough to say, they smell divine!¹⁷
 Breathe in their petrichor
 after a downpour of blessed rain,
 I swear you'll never feel the same.
 Good old-fashioned air,¹⁸
 it's better than prayer for getting you
 to a state of peace or even bliss.

I've often felt bliss –
 it is the sun's best present,
 that feeling of being drenched in sweetness.¹⁹
 Did I mention the birds?
 All those songs we've sung!
 That's one thing your monks²⁰ did really well,
 music billowing from that building²¹ over there,
 booming and brilliant
 or murmuring yet still melodious,
 heartfelt harmonies and tunes that filled
 my phloem²² and still flow within me.
 Keep on with your music²³, people,
 your crafts of making our wood into pipes,
 or fiddle and bow, cello or oboe –
 don't ever let that go! Please, you bring your gifts
 into the world and everyone on earth
 knows that's what you do.
 Paintings, sculptures, knitted wool,
 boats²⁴, those filigrees of silver, all your arts are fine,
 and for that we forgive you everything,
 and we all know there's plenty needs forgiving.

The CO₂ – I've done my best to, as you might say,
 'suck it up', but steady on.²⁵ That's all I'll say
 because I'm here to praise, to thank the earth
 for giving me this life, these lives, our lives.
 I'll not go on much longer.
 I just want to let you know I feel for you
 fumbling your ways into the future.²⁶
 Yes, I feel for you and feeling
 is where we're just the same.
 Touch²⁷ my sun-warmed wood
 with your skin and I touch you.
 Stroke me, hug me,
 and our pleasure is mutual.
 We become one.

Rootnotes

¹ I was commissioned by Circus Artspace to write a response to the elm tree in Beaulieu Priory grounds for a ceremony 'Guardian of the Gateway' on 24 September 2022. This is a great honour. I am a passionate tree-hugger and have a long-standing fascination with tree culture. I expected to write an essay of some sort, but instead found myself giving voice to the tree itself. I hope that it doesn't mind. These 'rootnotes' are from my own point of view.

² Scottish Gaelic, English, Latin (scientific), French, Dutch, German, Russian, Finnish.

³ How much trees must see!

⁴ Indeed this is elm's usual means of self-propagation.

⁵ 'When elm leaves are as big as a shilling,
plant your beans if to plant them
you're willing.
When elm leaves are as big as a penny,
plant your beans if you mean to
have any' (Anon).

⁶ Natural time is cyclical: tides and days and seasons go round and round. The nave (centre) of the oldest wheel found in Scotland, 3000 years old, was made of elm.

⁷ Isn't it exciting that we have historical records to show that the tree is this old? Planted in the early days of the priory in one of two rows of elms that used to grace the pathway towards the now ruined building, this tree has long outlived the human edifice for which it was the gateway. It is managed by Historic Environment Scotland and let's hope it continues to be looked after and allowed to die with dignity.

⁸ Trees, like all plants, thanks to the miraculous marvel of photosynthesis, breathe in carbon dioxide through little mouths in their leaves, called stomata, and breathe out oxygen. This is the reverse of what we do. If we're ever feeling disconnected to nature, we just need to breathe in and there we are - full of tree breath!

⁹ As this ancient tree becomes ever more frail, it speaks to me of the fragility of dementia, a strange blessing of which can be a lessening of the ability to cling onto desires. In the loss or change of the self that dementia brings, there comes, sometimes, an ability to live purely in the present moment. I speculate that a tree probably has that ability from the word go.

Rootnotes

¹⁰ Sight is the first sense we can use to appreciate the tree. Its form is skeletal now, its branches mere sticks on the barrel of its vast trunk. Yet still it commands its place, filling our view, looking magnificent. Half of it, perhaps more than half, all of its underground depth, is hidden. Even with our strongest sense we can only perceive a part of its totality.

¹¹ Elm leaves heal wounds, elm roots heal bones.

¹² Elm twigs are supposed to help to produce eloquence, and prevent idle gossip.

¹³ A passing cat appeared briefly in the poem, settled for a while in these rootnotes, then moved on..

¹⁴ It may be a Cotoneaster, though my contact at NatureScot couldn't confirm one way or the other. Until a botanist gets a ladder up there to find out, we won't know exactly what's growing on the tree. It's good to be uncertain. A bit of mystery is a fine thing.

¹⁵ Dutch elm disease, the fungal infection *Ophiostoma novo-ulmi* that is killing the tree, has been conveyed to it by elm bark beetles, *Scolytus scolytus*, which are slowly making their way north as the climate warms.

¹⁶ There is no way of overestimating the importance of fungi in this 'entangled life' that we all live, as Merlin Sheldrake so brilliantly explains in his book of this name. Elm is a symbol of death, the tree of elves, linked with Orpheus who set off down into the underworld to bring back Eurydice, so it's an ambiguous kind of death that is very much alive. Fungi know all about this.

¹⁷ The second of our senses with which we can appreciate the tree is scent. The tree's bark, on a warm afternoon, smells spicy, reminiscent of cinnamon.

¹⁸ Breathe! There we are. Connected again.

¹⁹ Taste is the next sense with which we can appreciate the tree. Traditionally, the inner bark of elm is used to create a soothing milk substitute, liquid sunshine, good for guts.

²⁰ Beaully, in Gaelic, is A' Mhanachainn, literally The Monks, after the Valliscaulian Order who made it their home, and who planted the elm.

²¹ The priory, built by the monks in 1230.

²² Trees are full of tubes. The phloem are those through which the sweet food made from the leaves (see note 8) flows to the rest of the plant. They also have xylem, which are tubes through which water, sucked up from the ground, flow upwards to irrigate all their thirsty bits.

²³ Sound is a great sense for appreciating trees. They are in constant dialogue with wind, of course, but it is always worth putting your ear to a trunk and listening to some quiet wisdom.

²⁴ In boat building, elm is used for the garboard strake, the first wale (not to be confused with the whales, who are down below) laid next to the keel.

²⁵ We're in a climate emergency. Who knows what our excess emissions will cause? Isn't the demise of this tree enough to make us pause?

²⁶ Is it OK to mention here that we need to dismantle capitalism? Is there any other way to make a just transition to net zero carbon emissions? Wish us luck, please, tree!

²⁷ Our final sense for appreciating the tree is the best one: touch. The tree has so many textures: dimpled, creviced and fissured, fluffy with webs, dusty from the work of the beetles and wasps inside, smooth as a well-turned doorknob. You can use your whole body to feel its strength and share in solidarity.



Audio
version
read by
Mandy
Haggith

**“My little one calls it his magic tree
and loves touching it to make his wish.”**

online comment





Max Coleman

Restoring Scotland's elms

The death of the Beaulieu Priory Elm is a wake-up call. This 800-year-old tree was killed in 2021 by the virulent form of Dutch elm disease that was accidentally introduced with imported logs in the late 1960s. Unfortunately, none of this comes as a surprise. In the past, little effort was made to avoid the potentially disastrous consequences of pests and pathogens travelling the world through trade.

What unfolded from this terrible oversight was the worst tree health epidemic that Britain has endured. It quickly became apparent that rapid disease spread and near total loss of mature elms was going to transform the British landscape. I was a child in London in the early 1970s and the sudden and dramatic death of elms in my local park is something I can remember. Looking back over the last 50 years, what I still find hard to comprehend is that we gave up on elm so rapidly. We stopped counting the losses, we stopped control measures and we almost stopped researching the problem.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, we can piece together a history of the demise of elm. But more importantly, we can appreciate the ecological value of the tree and imagine a future recovery. An estimated 60–100 million elms were lost across Britain. In lowland England, most were field elms—a species native to southern Europe and introduced to Britain by people in ancient times because it is such a useful tree. In northwestern Britain, elm is part of upland mixed woodlands and is represented by the native wych elm—a species that arrived by natural means around 9,000 years ago as plants and animals returned from continental Europe after the last ice age.

The Beaulieu Priory Elm was a wych elm, planted as part of an avenue. In the wild, the species is associated with limestone and other calcareous rocks that give rise to what are called



base-rich soils. Typical habitat for wych elm includes ravines and valley slopes in the upland fringe where the climate is cool and humid. The ash tree is associated with elm, as it shares these preferences, although it is more adaptable and common in the lowlands. Woodlands where these two species grow are known as ash-elm woods, or upland mixed ashwoods. They are a conservation priority in the UK because they support a particularly rich community of lichens growing on tree bark of both species.

The important role these trees play in woodland ecosystems leads ecologists to call them 'keystone' species. Like the mechanical support of a keystone in an arch, they have a vital support function in an interconnected web of life. Remove the keystone and the arch will fall. In the case of ash-elm woodland, if these two tree species are lost the lichens and other species that depend on them no longer have the conditions they require. Of course, we should conserve elm for its own sake, but with the emerging threats to ash from a fungal disease called ash dieback we also need to address the conservation of the species threatened by the demise of both trees.

Although elm became a forgotten tree, all is not lost. The story is still unfolding. The spread of disease is reliant on elm bark beetles transferring fungal spores from tree to tree as they feed. This creates a possible limit to the transmission of disease as elm bark beetles need temperatures above 22°C for effective dispersal and this is less frequent in the north. It may be the case that parts of northern and western Scotland are beyond the climatic limit of the beetle, although the obvious worry is that a warming climate may shift this balance. At present, some of Scotland's wych elm populations in the Highlands and Islands remain untouched by disease, something that is rare across the native range of the species.



The other encouraging sign is that in areas of epidemic disease not every elm is killed. Rare trees exist in places where the disease has been present for decades. These trees remain unaffected by repeated waves of infection, which suggests they may have some resistance to disease. Perhaps they can prevent infection in some way or have properties that make them unattractive to the beetles that carry disease. The detail of what attracts elm bark beetles needs further research, but if a tree does not look or smell right the beetles will not be drawn to it.

A vision of recovery for wych elm involves finding and propagating the long-term survivors. The trees of greatest interest are those that have endured the longest exposure to disease. For this reason, southern Scotland would be a good place to search as the disease has spread from the south. Crucially, propagation via cuttings would be necessary to preserve the genetic qualities of the selected trees.

Groups of elms, made up of several genetically different individuals, could then be planted in suitable safe sites. The hope is that they would have a better chance of surviving long-term and reaching maturity. Unlike a tree breeding programme, this approach places nature in the driving seat. The trees chosen in the first place are the result of natural selection. By bringing them together in their natural habitat we enable reproduction that could create even better combinations of genes. It is likely that different mechanisms underpin various types of resistance. By assisting the natural processes of breeding and selection the overall resilience of the population could be increased. Importantly, this nature-based solution does not require long-term funding.

That we have done almost nothing to secure the future of one of Scotland's native trees is highly regrettable. Hopefully, this situation is about to change. The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, in partnership with the University of the Highlands and Islands, is leading work to find and propagate surviving elms and build partnerships with the owners of suitable safe sites. Work with the Borders Forest Trust, who are restoring wildwood to over 3,000 ha in the Scottish Borders, has already begun.

Another important aspect of the work is conducting the first genetic analysis of wych elm across Scotland, to assess patterns of diversity and the impact of disease. This will guide conservation measures and help ensure that sustainable populations with sufficient genetic diversity are conserved. Genetics could also help to answer the intriguing question of elm survival. The first complete genome sequence for wych elm is in the pipeline, as part of the Darwin Tree of Life project to sequence the genomes of all British native species. This new information will increase our ability to identify genetic variants linked to disease-resistance.

Across Scotland many organisations are working to restore native wildwood to treeless glens degraded by deforestation and livestock grazing for millennia. Native woodland restoration has benefits for people and nature and can be part of the solution to the climate emergency. It feels like the time for elm recovery has finally arrived. We can provide a new beginning for wych elm by kick-starting natural processes. Elm is a critical component of native woodland and has deep cultural connections — we call it Scots elm, after all.

Surely, we should act...

Beaulieu Primary School

Primary 6 found poem and collages made after a site visit on the 1st September 2022

Old, gnarly, nobly, crispy
Warty old man
Standing guard
As tall as a bus

Dull, weary, creepy, spirits
Gateway to the underworld
As ancient as Yoda

Stubby, prickly, round, rough
Lumpy, delicate, historical
Fingers reaching up to the sky
As spiky as a hedgehog

Bumpy, delicate, fragile, weird,
extraordinary
Covered in cobwebs
Monster with cracked fingers

GNARLY

STUBBY

MOLD
DEAD

CREEPY

FRAGILE

OLD

ANCIENT

SLICKY



On 1st September 2022, we worked with Beaulieu Priory School's P6s. We started with the pupils taking field recordings through drawing, measurements and instant photographs. We then returned to the classroom where artist Sadie Stoddart led monoprinting, stenciling and collage workshops to encourage the children to creatively respond to the tree.











The background image shows a lush, green forest. In the foreground, a large, light-colored tree trunk leans diagonally across the frame. In the background, a large, textured rock formation, possibly a cave entrance or a natural rock overhang, is visible. The overall scene is filled with dense foliage and trees.

Community Stories & Imaginative Responses



Over the summer of 2022, we had an open call to encourage people from all over Scotland to submit their stories, both new and old, written or visual, in response to the Beaully Wych Elm.

Fiona Black*The Elm Tree*

Memories are etched in the bark
of the trunk at the gate.

Planted by monks dressed in silence.
Its blossoms, once seen by the beheaded Queen,
are long gone. Canker now creeps
down crumpled veins, through dangling tendrils.

Nearby a fox raises her head
scenting death on the afternoon breeze.

Villagers arrive and the elm stretches wide
like a mother. A boy shouts,
"It's a Whomping Willow poised to attack."
A woman spies the Green Man
in a gnarl on a branch.

Someone remembers new shoots
and lush leaves, tourists appear
in the carpark. "It's just like Chewbacca,"
says a middle-aged man going in for a hug
then snaps off a souvenir twig.

Tree surgeons come
shaking heads, looking glum
everyone says "it's not right,
monsters don't die."

The tree allows
the poking and prodding
the pressing of cheeks
the listening and joking to find a heartbeat.

The sun dips, the tree quivers,
stretching high up to heaven -
far and wide birds rise with a shriek,
people step back, some run down the street,
the elm seems to shift, then stops with a sigh,
to bask in the glory of eight hundred years.



Meg Pokrass

From Where I Had Not Fallen

You told me that your love was tough as the Elm, no matter how battered and ravaged, it would not disappear. How the raised roots in my hands were beautiful, pushing up through history, no matter what that history was. You reached down to pull me up from where I had not fallen.

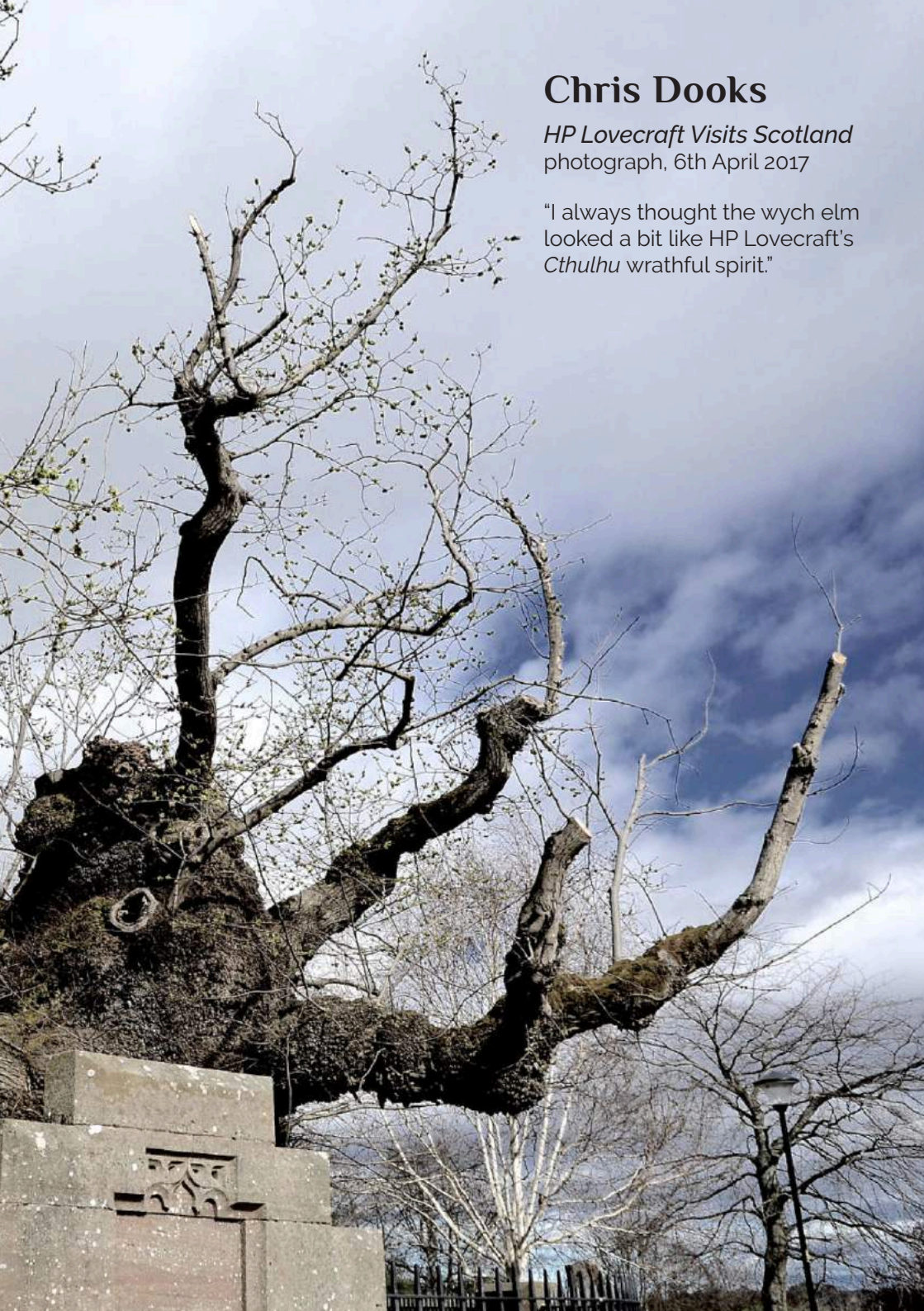
I told you that I was five percent alive, and that sometimes, I could feel the sycamore's helicopter seeds twirling nearby. You leaned against me, and it felt as if an old landmark might once have been young. Wrinkled and craggy, you kissed me that day with your almost human eyes.



Chris Dooks

HP Lovecraft Visits Scotland
photograph, 6th April 2017

"I always thought the wych elm looked a bit like HP Lovecraft's *Cthulhu* wrathful spirit."



Sherry Morris

The Cabbage Tree

Tatiana is in my kitchen, making *holubtsi*. She cradles each soft-boiled cabbage leaf, fills it with mince, then tenderly wraps and tucks the tasty treats tight. Watching her, inspiration strikes: *take her to the Beauty tree*. I tell her it's an important tree, an historical tree. I even call it beautiful, though that's not quite the right word.

'We go after we eat,' she says.

At the tree, Tatiana reads aloud from the information board. Her words are halting and heavy, but her English is improving. There's still lots of confusion and miscommunication though—she's reading the Sycamore tree section of the information board.

Also, we're here so *she* can see the famous wych elm, but I'm the one looking at the tree. It stands proud and purposeful, though gnarled and misshapen from age, pollarding and disease. Its remaining thick branches rise high, like a multi-armed ancient deity. Unquestionably wise from soaking up the sights and sounds of eight hundred plus years, I like to imagine it offers sage advice, answers questions—that it's a magical tree.

Tatiana finishes reading. I wonder what she sees as she stares up at the tree, this more-than-middle-aged woman who has made a harrowing journey from Kharkov to the Highlands alone—her husband and son obliged to stay behind. Maybe she only sees a coal-black dying thing blighting the skyline. Perhaps it was a mistake to bring her here, but I want her to like this tree.

'This is a cabbage tree,' I say.

Tatiana's brow wrinkles. 'Cabbage?' she says doubtfully.

'Yes,' I say. 'Like your *holubtsi*.' I launch into a simplified history, complete with charades, how twelfth century French monks established a priory in a Dijon valley where cabbages were grown. These Valliscaulian, or 'Cabbage Valley Monks', went on to establish the Beaulieu Priory. The wych elm is the last of a grand tree avenue that led from the Priory to the town square. The trees were here before the cabbage monks, but maybe they chose this spot because of the trees.

'See?' I say, arms wide in conclusion. 'A cabbage tree for cabbage people.'

Tatiana looks perplexed. My exuberant miming and convoluted cabbage connection between her, twelfth century French monks and the tree has caused considerable confusion. There is a long silence while she contemplates the elm.

'I like this tree,' she says at last. 'It is strong. Like Ukraine.' Her foot taps the ground. 'Good *korinnya* keep it to stand. For all the time. No matter what.'

I nod. Understand now why I brought her here. When I don't know what to do, feel helpless, I come to the tree. Take comfort in its deep-rooted resilience, strength and serenity.

Tatiana hasn't needed my far-fetched explanations. She's made her own, better, connection to the wych elm tree. Absorbed its spirit, its essence, its ability to soothe. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder, grip hands. For a magical milli-second moment its great arms lower. And we feel the benevolent hug of a tree.



Georgina Coburn

1. *Guardian* (above)
ink on paper, 20cm x 30cm, 2022
2. *Guardians Study* (right)
ink, pencil, charcoal, on paper, 19.5cm x 27cm, 2022



Charlotte Luke

Wych Elm

Listen.

Can you hear that?

It's in the old elm tree.

It's always at night. It scratches, like something live.

I think it's trying to get out.

But you mustn't tell anybody, because I don't know what it'll do when it gets out.

I don't think it'll be long.

Truth be told, I don't know quite what's in the old elm tree, but I find that I quite like talking to it. Whenever I hear it start to whisper at night, I wander down to the priory, where it sits in the dark. Bald and burnt, it always gives me a bit of a jump the way it looms up so pale and sudden while I'm creeping towards it. And its whispers scream so loudly when the village is quiet, as clear as a tawny owl in a silent wood.

Do you know what it's called? I bet you don't.

It's called a *wych elm*. How funny!

Because there is something witchy about it, the way it scratches and chatters to itself when nobody but me is around.

I fancy the voice is an old woman's, though I can't be sure.

They say the name has nothing to do with witches, but with that thing crawling and thumping around inside it, I wonder that the tree doesn't finally contort, sigh a broken shudder, shriek to the sky with the pain. That elm is no spring chicken, and the scratches are starting to show.

She is pockmarked and pustuled and ravaged and burnt, like we ALL are!

She tells me of history, of coffins. Of the old, forbidden knowledge.

And I tell her things, too. I tell her about the man, the rages, the hiding, and the need to get away. She listens, scratches in sympathy. I can't see her scars and she can't see mine, in the dark.

I try to tempt her out but she won't come, for now. If I keep creeping down there and wearing my hair long and whispering through her diseased bark, perhaps she will one day. Perhaps she will join her sisters again. Tattooed, down-and-out, the disease like art on her body.

Oh yes, this old elm still has a few tricks up her sleeve, alright!

She knows the power she still holds. But she will bide her time, and so will I.

Elm hateth man, and waiteth.

Pauline Krawehl

tree bark rubbings, 2022



Jennifer Marshall

photographs, 2019

"Documentation of the progress of the disease: leaves emerging from small branches near the base of the trunk, which on return this growth had all died off. The photos were for personal study as a bonsai hobbyist, and when I started I didn't know that Dutch elm disease had already got to the tree."



Fiona Mackenzie

A Prayer

The little bird with the scarlet head made his way very slowly to the top of the ancient elm tree. A broken wing had pretty much done for him, but he knew his last efforts were to be made in his own little pilgrimage to the top of the old Wych tree that guarded the Priory at Beaulieu.

The place was quiet now, the little square settling into dusk. The highland summer was magical and soft, in indigo tones where the little soul could still spy everything in quite some detail. The villagers were snuffing out candles, throwing aside gowns and breeches from the day's work, climbing into welcoming beds. Tiredness and godliness would surely give them happy dreams, and the shadows of the guardian tree, a blessing for them all. The insects, the birds, the people, and the animals who stopped beneath its outspread boughs, all receiving a communion not unlike that within the priory's sanctified walls. The tree had been there forever.

The bird's life seemed so fleeting in the calendar of time, a second in the expanse of the days, months, years, that lay in front of the great tree. But his life was precious, a vital flame in the sacred heart, a living creature, as relevant as the red headed queen who once rode through the town, and was said to have given it the poetic name - Beau Lieu, beautiful place - Beaulieu.

She had laughed and engaged so many hearts with her vivacious spirit. The tree had looked down and felt the future, the bloody scarlet mess of the severed head. The great trunk that had once been a windswept sapling, before the first record of its existence in twelfth century writings. It sensed in the misty ether, the vagaries of life and death. The 1960s

would mark its eventual fall. A plague of scuttling beetles, wee beasties feasting their way towards the beautiful canopy that held so much time, history and life within its very being. Its own Black Death would come.

The bird had lived for seven years, fed on insects from the elm leaves, battled stormy weather to feed young, and to last through bitter winters, gleaning seeds from the fields near the river. He had watched the famous poet and his beloved friend picnic beside the waters. The words of two poets not seeing the whole story of the monastic endeavour.

The goldfinch fluttered a bit higher, and rested in a small hollow where the woodpecker had fed her young that summer. The treecreeper was sleeping nearby, his tiny body barely distinguishable against the trunk. The moon was rising.

Moonlight once cast across the fine orchards that were tended by the first French monks at the priory. The ghostly blossom announcing a good harvest of apples, plums and cherries. The elm tree protecting the land, the elves under the roots smiling at the Christians toiling in the grounds, unaware of their presence and Otherworld power.

The feathered creature was desperate to reach the top, but he stopped again on the twisted branch where children would often sit. He said some prayers to the tree, the land, to the people also who saw him and his worth. The girl who saved him when he was very young, "come little one, kitty will not get you this time!" Once he had flown into the priory and sat on the head of the stone knight, following his parents to be fed within the hallowed grounds.

Cont.

He was tempted to sleep now but he needed to push on , nearly there. There were plentiful leaves on the branches rustling in summer breeze. The night air alive with bats dancing after the insects. It was near sunrise, a bit damp feeling now, the finch shuddered and gathered his good wing to his side and pressed on.

Hopping upwards the little bird reached his end goal. The summit of the gnarled, stolid welcoming tree. The view from the top showed his entire world. The benefactor with endless insect meals, and refuge from inclement weather. This was the place, this was the final prayer. The sun started to rise, the mists pulling away from the river, the fox is retiring quickly from the reed beds, the people are stretching on their mattresses.

They hear the notes from the top of the tree, sweet then faltering. Then silent. One life passes then the chorus from all those other birds who greet the day. The passage of time called out from the forever tree. The tree indelible in so many minds and always there in the unknown, not forgotten.



Mia Syme

gouache and acrylic on A4 paper, 2022

"I was really inspired by the mythology surrounding wych elms being a passage between the living and the underworld, and wanted to create a painting based on the idea of a personified wych elm as a representation of death."



Caroline Tollyfield

Witness

black and white photographic prints, 2022

"On 25 September 2022, the day after the *Guardian of the Gateway* celebration event, I returned to photograph the tree. It was a grey, windy morning. The autumn equinox was not long past and the balance of daylight and darkness had tipped towards the darker days of winter – this was the wych elm's clock. The tree's voice, as heard the day before in Mandy Haggith's reading of her powerful and moving poem *Elm tree talk*, was still audible in my head.



As the sky darkened and people walked by with half an eye on the changing weather, the wych elm's commanding presence still drew each one to pause and wonder at the ancient witness standing beside them. I lingered too, until the chill wind got to me, trying to take in the details of the tree's texture and shape and absorb something of its character. All the looking created moments in which it was hard to shake off the feeling that the tree was returning our collective gaze."





Carla Smith

mixed media and etching on fabric, 2022 (details above)

"The final work is on fabric, the malleability of this, iterates the transitional moment that the wych elm is in, and reflects the wych elm's mythology surrounding the passing between worlds. The background layer of the work is created using etching; made using leaves collected from an apple tree in the garden of my childhood home. The connection and stories that form around natural landmarks like trees are really interesting and deep rooted, because of this I wanted to tangle together my own personal understandings alongside the history of the Beauty Wych Elm."

Jack MacGregor

visit

eight million years in the future.

The topsoil had eroded from the centuries of carbon-mining. Spread across periods of deep time, the Visitors had plunged far into the dark oceans of the world's mantle. A Class-5 ball of melting chemical shrapnel like this could be expected to yield many riches to the Alcazar and its hungry imperial core.

Aizan had been summoned by order of the planet's executors to respond to a topographical object of interest [O.O.I.] located near the convex of a dry inland sea, what was once the mouth of some great ocean, now pressed flat by solar storms and washed with the dust of ten thousand alien summers. Aizan was assured that the exertion of their journey would be met with reward - for the executors claimed to have found something truly precious.

A child of the fertile bactel fields of Yengaz, Aizan knew little of the beings that once lived here.

Only what was said: a biped that roamed the Cosmic Aorta and settled the rings of Saturn. Aizan knew them as what was recorded: *homo-sapien, the peaceful ape*.

Their arrival was greeted by the Herald, proclaiming their nature as peaceful, their minds connecting at the moment of sight, binding them in unspeaking purpose as they both made long strides towards the scar upon the earth. The great excavators lay like fallen emperors against the hillside, shrouded in the sands blowing from the dry northern seafloor, between them lay the open pit.

Here. The Herald spoke from within Aizan's mind. *Can you sense the change?*

Aizan felt it at once. The maw teemed with particles, living and dead, but all parts foreign to them, concentrated on the

petrified chunk of carbon illuminated below. Whatever this organism once was, it had been pressed by tectonic motion into a single board of broken matter, stained white by the parasite inside it. Aizan asked:

What use is this dead thing to us?

It is precious, Aizan of Kalio. For what it was, for what it contains still. It is of the Anthropocenic Epoch. The Age of Many Voices.

Aizan knew the value of such things; extinct novelties sought for by the Academy, prehistoric relics prized by the Core. The image of molecules forms within their mind; a breakdown of this living thing that once found its roots here, and lived for a time in health.

It was sick. Yes. Then it expired.

The Herald twisted in place, clicking its neck.

We have isolated the genus of the host - and of the parasite. Once you have examined the organism you must return all objects to the Alcazar for study.

Aizan blinked.

It is so.

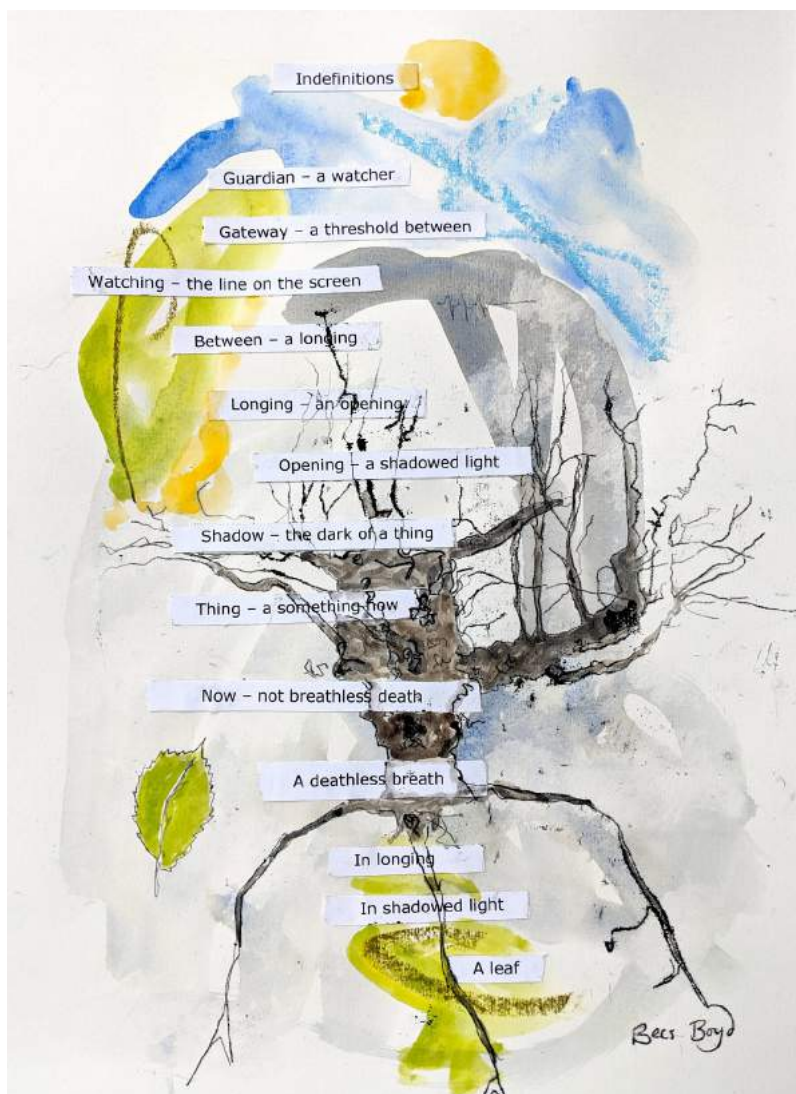
The Herald drifted away, greeting a soldier of the Saturnic Sikkim and disconnecting from Aizan's frontal lobe. They looked for a long time down at the tree. For that is the word they once used for it. *Tree*. Aizan tried to imagine such a thing; vertical and alive in a world now flattened and dead. Its body was sick, it gave the last of its life to the thing that killed it.

Aizan looked at the desert of the world and quietly hummed a single long note.

**“It looks like the whomping
willow from Harry Potter.”**

project participant, Beauty Library drop-in story
session, 20th August 2022





Bees Boyd

Indefinitions

monoprint, watercolour and text on paper, 2022



Neil Huggan

photographs taken at the Beaulieu Wych Elm
celebration event, 24 September 2022



An Unfolding Story





Postscript

We were saddened and shocked to hear that, at around nine in the morning on Thursday 5th January 2023, the historic Beauly Wych Elm fell. After an intensive period of freezing and thawing, the ancient and hollowed tree came down. We feel very grateful that this project was able to happen in 2022 and that we had the opportunity to explore and celebrate the tree and what it meant to local people. We feel so lucky to have helped gather stories, captured some of the intangible cultural heritage surrounding it and to have provided a wider national focus for the spread of Dutch elm disease in the Highlands.


Site visit after
larger tree
limbs were
removed for
safety, 17th
December 2022





Site visit on the day the Beauty Wych Elm fell, 5th January 2023





“The history that the tree has seen over the centuries flowed through its roots.”

online comment



Credits

Photography - inside front & back cover Polaroid photographs taken by Beaulieu Primary School's P6 on 1st September 2022; pages 5, 66, 74, 76-77 Isabel McLeish, 2022; pages 17, 40 Sadie Stoddart, 2022; pages 12-13, 18-33, 47 Richard Bracken for Circus Artspace, 2022; cover image, pages 10-11, 40-41, 44-45, 72-73, 75 Kirsten Body for Circus Artspace, 2022 - 2023.

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