

Rising from the ashes

Lisa Schneidau explores a mythological response to ash dieback

During 2019, many of us across the UK have been looking anxiously at ash trees, thinking, “This year it will really start to show.” Ash is always the last tree to come into leaf, but this spring there were many bare twigs that will not produce leaves again. The march of ash dieback is upon us. All around us, ash trees are dying quietly.

Ash dieback is a fungal disease that attacks the common ash tree, *Fraxinus excelsior*. It is caused by the fungus *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, which originally came from Eastern Asia and has spread throughout Europe, decimating ash populations. The spores of *H. fraxineus* can be carried on the wind, although its spread has been accelerated by trade in ash trees. The fungus can kill young trees quickly, and it weakens older ash trees over a period of years until other pathogens finish them off.

Recent studies suggest that we could lose over 95% of our ash trees from the UK in the next 10 years. On a practical level, ash dieback will bring significant challenges and costs for land managers. The health and safety implications of unsafe trees in public areas are huge, with an estimated £30 million per year needed to deal with them in Devon alone.

But figures like this cannot reflect the full impact of such huge ecological change on our society. The looming reality of ash dieback brings the prospect of a different degree of loss to our countryside, one that it is impossible to control: it brings a deep grief.

Ash is Britain’s third most common tree, so familiar that we are used to taking it for granted, like a family member who has always been there for us. It is a core constituent of our broadleaved woodlands, our hedgerows and our timber supply. The ash tree has been fundamental to British life for millennia.

Ash is considered a feminine tree in British folklore, counterpart to the masculine oak, and it brings us protection and healing. Young children would be given ash sap to drink; sick children were passed through a cleft in an ash tree to cure them. Strong ash wood was used for many purposes, from spears and bows in battle to cartwheels, tool handles, wooden bowls and furniture. The yule log was originally made of an

