

An Elm Survey of Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons- a summary of findings, thoughts and ideas for the future.

Introduction-

Commencing on the 30/09/25, I made a determined effort to cover as much ground on the Commons as possible, and ascertain the status of Elm populations throughout the area. We were already aware of some of the more typical Elm scrub that existed, particularly the *Ulmus minor* on Rusthall Common, but questions remained around how extensive these populations were, and which species may be present elsewhere. In the course of the survey, new areas of Elm were discovered, including some very unusual trees, and using Google Maps, I logged my results to build a picture of the *Ulmus* situation throughout the Commons. Starting with Rusthall Common, I detail my findings for each below.

Rusthall Common-

My approach with Rusthall Common was to begin surveying areas that I have rarely visited, and had very little knowledge as to whether Elm existed there or not. The first new area of *Ulmus minor* (most probably English) was found at the rear of the properties on Colbran Way. There are a number of typical scrubby trees in this area, in the typical DED (Dutch Elm Disease) cycle with a mixture of dead, dying and new growth trees existing in this area. There has been recent clearance here, and it could certainly be a candidate area for a resistant tree or two in the future, and perhaps the removal of clearly infected trees. Additionally, on the edge of this area is a young *Ulmus glabra* (Wych Elm- southern variety), which was a nice find and has some good size to it already.

On Langton road, directly opposite to the private access road leading to Colbran Way, there are some sizable examples of the Southern Wych Elm, which may or may not be afflicted by DED as it is difficult to tell at this time of year with leaves dropping for the season. They will be one to keep an eye on, as they are the outlying members of a very interesting population of the species in this part of the Common, bordered by Langton road to the north, and Tea Garden Lane to the southeast. There are a number of individuals in this area, including two excellent, fairly mature specimens bordering a dry pond in the central part of this area. Wych elm is still susceptible to the disease, but it can persist for longer than their *Ulmus minor* counterparts, particularly if nearby sources of infection



A Couple of Excellent Southern Wych Elms near Langton Road.

are dealt with. There is another particularly nice specimen of Southern Wych Elm close to the Beacon, leaning over Tea Garden Lane. Towards the junction of Tea Garden lane and Langton road, there is a more typical section of scrubby *Ulmus minor* in the typical DED cycle. This section of the Common would be a prime candidate for resistant planting as well as management to attempt to suppress the spread of DED to the remainder of the Wych elms in this area.

A thorough search of Happy Valley failed to produce any Elm, which was expected due to the thicker nature of the woodland here, and the sandstone geology, however there could be odd examples of the Wych Elm dotted in this valley based on those located nearby.



Typical English Elm scrub bordering Langton Road, near Tea Garden Lane.

Perhaps the most interesting and largest area of Elm on Rusthall Common is located on the footpath between St Paul's church and Toad Rock, sandwiched between Langton and Rusthall roads. I had thought previously that this was typical English elm (*Ulmus minor* 'atania') scrub, but a follow up visit with the head of the Elm Research group, Howard Gregory, on the 02/10/25 proved otherwise. He suggested that the trees in this area are predominantly true *Ulmus minor*-Field Elm, a much more unusual variety, and the remnants of a Field Elm woodland. This also explains in part how the large tree central to this area managed to attain such a size, prior to contracting DED this year, and Howard is hopeful that the tree will persist for a few years yet. His recommendation for this area was to focus on removing the clearly dead or dying trees and continuing with the removal of sycamore and other species which are choking the Elms in this section. With management that prioritises the Elms, allowing the suckers to grow and companion planting with resistant trees, over time it may be possible to recreate a snippet of Elm woodland, which of course is a real rarity in recent times. The hope is that we may have some time to prop up the White-Letter Hairstreaks that have been using the large field elm for so long. A site visit before the trees completely lose their leaves might be worthwhile in determining which could be removed this winter.

Tunbridge Wells Common-

On the 01/10/25, I started surveying Tunbridge Wells Common, which in general I am far less familiar with. Parking at Fir Tree road, I started by mapping the extensive *Ulmus minor* (English) scrub that borders the A264 to the north of the car park. There are quite a few



English Elm Scrub- looking towards the Cricket Pavillion.

trees in this area, all within the typical DED cycle with many near their peak size at the moment. There is probably enough scrub in this area to sustain White-letter hairstreaks- if they have adapted to this type of habitat as they have elsewhere in Kent. This would seem to be another logical area for some resistant planting, and perhaps some DED control when practical.

The next area of Elm I encountered was along the verges of Hungershall Park road, most of it being rather limited in quantity and size. However, along the western portion of the road, not far from the entrance to the residential section, there is an interesting mixture of both Southern Wych Elm, and *Ulmus minor* (English) , with a couple of trees that looked like possible hybrids. They are currently being choked out by yew and sycamore amongst other trees, and giving these a bit of space to grow would be worthwhile in my opinion. This area might not be as well suited as others to resistant planting, but the scrub could be encouraged and space made around the possible hybrid trees, and any spare resistant trees (or from future plantings) might work here.



Semi-mature *Ulmus Minor* (English/Field?)
at the Upper Pantiles Car Park

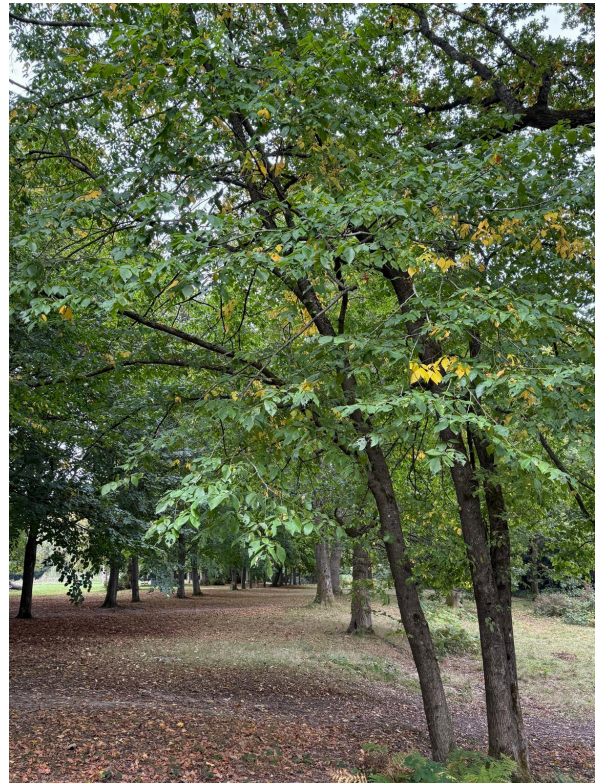
I found a new area of quite extensive *Ulmus minor* bordering the southern side of the Upper Pantiles car park, and making up much of the woodland understory up until the edge of Eridge road. The most interesting trees are on the edge of the car park, and they are a bit larger than you'd typically expect before the DED cycle catches up with them. They're large enough for WLH, and will be worth checking next year, and I also wonder now if they might be true *Ulmus minor*, such as those found on Rusthall common. They were a nice find, particularly as they represented a new area that I was unaware of previously. There are some trees nearby that could do with removing to try and limit the DED spread if practical.

Although I surveyed extensively around as much of the Common as I could, including the far reaches beyond Gibraltar cottage, I started to think that I may have found all the Elm I could for one day. However, I did leave one area, Victoria Grove, until last- and I'm glad I did! My thought process was that with this being an area of formal planting, with extensive Elm avenues in the past, there may just be something of interest in this area. Initially, I thought that it would be a likely spot for 1980s plantings of the very first disease resistant elms which were distributed nationally after the destruction of DED. I was delighted to find that my hunch was at least somewhat vindicated, with at least five unusual looking Elms on the edge of Victoria Grove. The age looked about right for my theory with these fairly mature trees looking like they could have been from that time period, but I struggled to identify them. Fortunately, my meeting with Howard Gregory coincided with this discovery, and he was keen to help with their identification. Initially, he was stumped as well, but with the help of the Elm Research group, we now know that at least two of the trees, if not all, are of a very old and now rare variety known as *Ulmus*

'Belgica'. This is surprising, but an excellent discovery, and these trees will be some of the most unusual and rare on the Commons, and could well have a population of WLH.. These will be the historic survivors of the Elm avenue that used to exist here and our new theory is that when DED first hit the area, all trees regardless of their condition were felled, and these have grown up from the stumps that were left behind. Equally, it could be something to do with clearance after the 1987 Great Storm, but in any case it seems very likely that these are historic survivors with significant heritage and conservation potential.



Ulmus 'Belgica', Victoria Grove.



Ulmus 'Belgica', Victoria Grove, note the position in the historic avenue visible here.

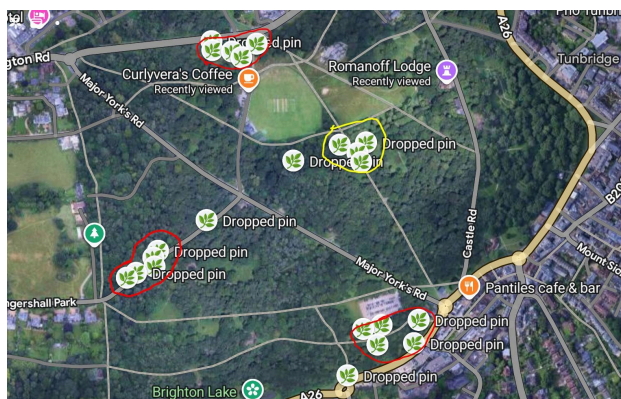
The question is with these Ulmus 'Belgica', are they resistant trees or simply lucky? It is very hard to tell but 'Belgica' is normally very susceptible to DED, and these trees are certainly large enough to contract the disease under ordinary circumstances. However, as the Field Elm at Rusthall common has proven, these trees can suddenly fail to DED despite surviving for decades previously unaffected. I remain hopeful though, and there are certainly strategies available which could give these trees a fighting chance to survive for years to come. I discuss some of these below.

Strategies and thinking ahead-

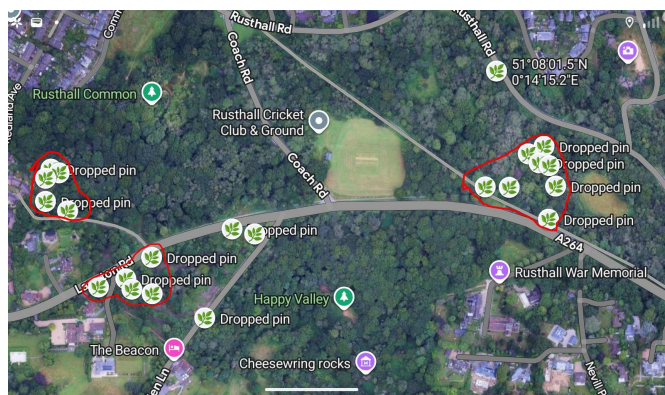
Looking at some of the takeaways from this survey, I'd say the main one is that there are indeed distinct areas where Elm grows on both Commons, as opposed to being present throughout the

area. On Rusthall common there are three areas, one mainly comprising English elm, another Southern Wych Elm, and the largest section containing Field Elm. These last two areas are the most interesting and I'd say should have the most attention going forward.

Equally, there are four distinct areas on Tunbridge Wells common, three of these primarily being made up of English Elm, with the most interesting area being made up of *Ulmus* 'Belgica'. I've included a couple of maps below highlighting these groups on both Commons.



Tunbridge Wells Common- key Elm areas circled in red, with yellow showing the *Ulmus* 'Belgica' area.



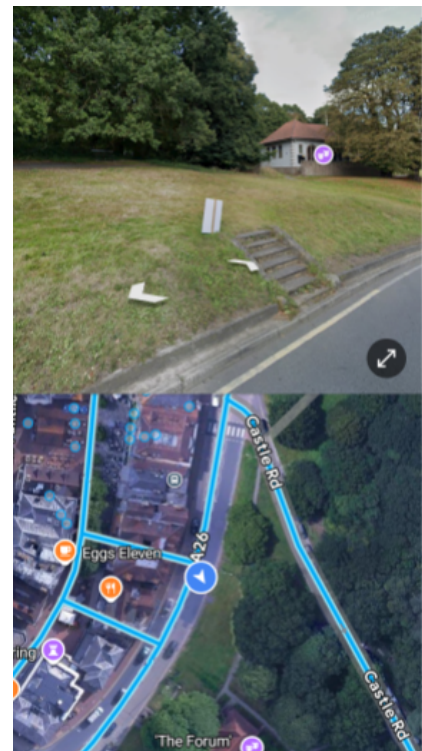
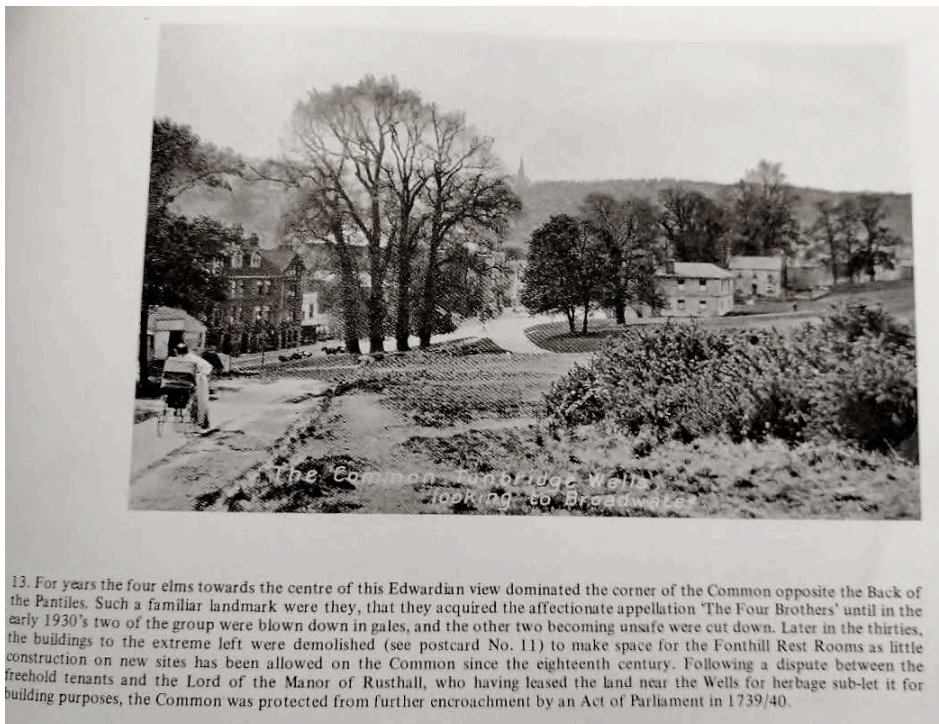
Rusthall Common- key Elm areas circled red.

Of course, these areas make logical places to focus the efforts of disease resistant planting, but as discussed above, they could also be areas where Elm is prioritised as a species with clearance of problem species such as Sycamore to encourage Elm growth. Additionally, I suggest that a general policy, whenever possible, of clearing dead or clearly dying trees, with the wood being burnt or chipped, would be beneficial. It would probably be a bit of a futile task attempting to eradicate the disease from the Commons entirely, but it certainly wouldn't do any harm removing obvious points of infection, particularly as trees of significance have been identified.

As mentioned, I believe the most significant finds from this survey are the historic *Ulmus* 'Belgica' growing within Victoria Grove. This area certainly deserves some special attention, and the immediate thought that sprung to mind was clearance of the downy birch and holly which are swamping the canopy of these trees currently. They are mostly growing in the shade of veteran oaks, which of course limits the potential to really free up the canopy, but there is room for improvement. Of course the reason the sunlight is important is for encouraging WLH activity as well as other species, but the heritage aspects are also of significance. There is a real opportunity here to tie the historic importance of these trees as a part of the original avenue, with the modern strategy you are implementing of returning Elm to the landscape through DRE plantings, and the conservation value they provide. There is room on the footpath to recreate the Elm avenue in some form so that one side contains the historic trees, with new trees being planted opposite, and you could play around with ideas following this sort of theme.

In terms of attempting to safeguard these *Ulmus 'Belgica'* for the future, there are a few strategies that could be implemented. The first would be to eliminate the nearest sources of DED infection, particularly the dying trees just outside the yellow circle on the map above. The second would be to keep a close eye on them in season from now on, and to immediately prune out any potential signs of DED infection, with eventual ringbarking to prevent spread through the roots if any tree ever becomes completely lost. Of course, if these trees were deemed to be worth the expense, it is possible to inoculate them each year from DED using DutchTrig, but I am unsure how much this would cost, and whether it would align with the budgets available. I was told by someone in Brighton that it costs something around £50 to inoculate an individual tree in their road, but that will be on a mass scale in their area, and I really don't know how reflective that would be to the situation on the Common. It may be that their heritage and conservation value allows you to access funding from elsewhere specifically for their upkeep, and that might be a route to explore. In any case, there is time to consider the options available here, and we don't need to worry about any immediate risk of DED until May onwards next year.

An additional project that could be considered might be recreating the famous 'Four Brothers' to the edge of the Common near the Forum. These four Elms were a well known landmark of the town, and featured in a lot of artwork and photography from the period. Again, this would be a great way to link the history of the Commons with modern conservation, and I could see this being a well received idea in a prominent position. Although 'any' Elm might do for this recreation, I would like to suggest that 'Ademuz' might be the best fit in these circumstances. I've included an image below with information on the trees, and a streetview image of the location today.



The location of the 'Four Brothers' as seen today.

There are quite a few avenues and potential projects to explore going forward, and I am of course happy to help advise on these. A site visit with Dan to identify definite trees to be felled this winter could be worthwhile in the near term, and I will be keeping a close eye on some of the trees found during the course of this survey going forward. Of course feel free to ask me for specific details on anything mentioned here, and I have a lot more photos available to share.



Another view of the Ulmus 'Belgica', Victoria Grove.



An early 1900s image showing Ulmus 'Belgica' on the outside row of the avenue at Victoria Grove, in a similar location to where they still survive today.