MARTIN DOBSON ASSOCIATES
ARBORICULTURAL CONSULTANCY

[redacted]

St Anne's Close Ltd,
St Anne's Close,
London, N6 6AR

Our reference: T41
22nd August 2023

Dear Grace,

Inspection of willow tree at St Anne's Close, London, N6 6AR

Instructions

1. I refer to your emailed instructions dated 16th August 2023 asking me to attend on site at St Anne's Close, London, N6 6AR and inspect a large willow tree, which had shed a branch in the early morning, at about 6am, on 15th August 2023, and report on its condition and recommend works that may be necessary to make the tree safe.

Introduction

2. I was previously instructed in April 2019 to carry out a safety inspection of all trees at St Anne's Close. The report of that inspection is dated 16th April 2019, and noted that the willow (T8 in the report) was a large tree with significant amenity value. However, due to the presence of weak or dead branches it was recommended that the tree should be crown reduced back to previous pruning points, and that it should be re-pollarded at intervals not exceeding 3 – 5 years, with a re-inspection within 3 years. The presence of at least one woodpecker nesting hole was noted, and it was suggested that this might signify internal decay, and a climbed inspection was recommended. As a result Kim Gifford was instructed by St Annes Close Ltd to carry out a Picus tomogram test. This was done on the trunk at a height of 3.8m, just below the woodpecker hole, on 21st October 2020, and the trunk at that height was regarded as being sound. Kim Gifford did not report any other obvious visual defects at that time.

3. In the early morning of 15th August 2023 a large branch, which had been growing in an easterly direction, failed and collapsed to the ground. You sent me photographs of the failure site, and of the collapsed branch, in an email on 16th August 2023 (Figure 1).

4. The photographs clearly identify that the branch had a significantly decayed core, and that was the principal reason for its failure. The timing of damage is consistent with a phenomenon known as 'summer branch drop' whereby branches fall, usually in early morning during summer, in still conditions. The physiological reasons for failure are not known, but frequently the failure is associated with wood decay, at or near the point of attachment. The likelihood is that the decay will extend into the remaining trunk and limbs, and therefore the remaining crown could pose a serious hazard, and risk of failure.

5. Comparing the photographs in Figure 1 with one taken during Kim Gifford's investigation shows that the branch below the failed one had broken since his inspection, and that its core had also been decayed (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Photographs of the willow tree failure point, and the fallen branch, taken on 16th August 2023. The red circle indicates a decayed branch stub (circled in red), which had supported a live branch in 2020.

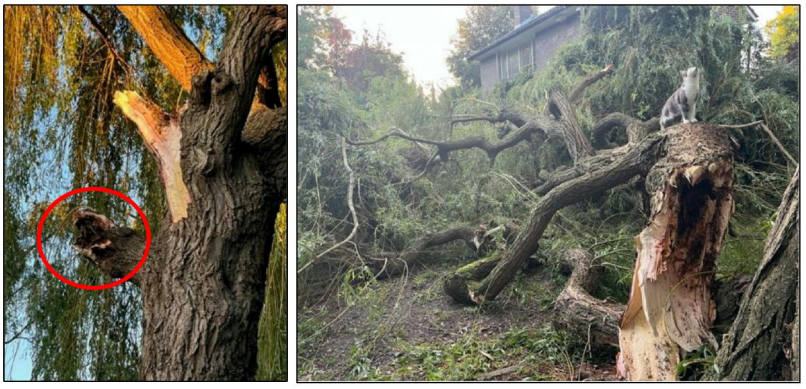


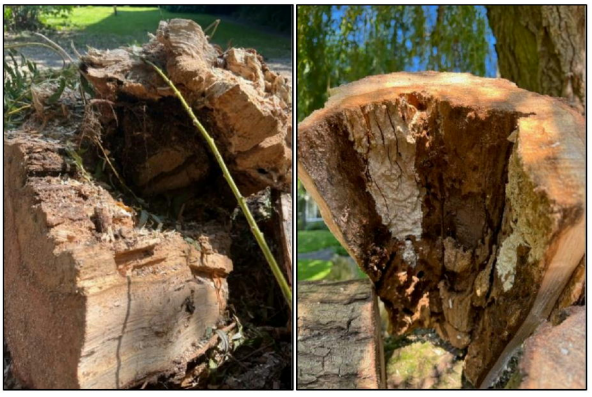
Figure 2. Photograph of willow tree taken on 21st October 2020 showing Picus sensors on the trunk at a height of about 3.8m, and a live branch circled in red, which failed at some time before the present branch collapse.

Site visit

6. I carried out an inspection of the willow tree on the morning of 19th August 2023. The tree stands at the north-eastern corner of a square of grass which forms the main communal garden area. The fallen branch came from the eastern side of the tree, and had been cut up, but the larger parts were still on site and had been piled near to the tree trunk. I did not measure the fallen branch, but at its point of attachment I estimated it had a diameter of about 350mm. The branch was very substantially decayed by fungal colonisation (I was not able to identify the casual fungus), resulting in up to about two-third of the radius of the branch being hollow (Figure 3). A ground-level visual examination of the wound site, which was at 5m above ground level,

confirmed that decay extended into the main trunk at the crown break (the point at which the trunk divides into the main structural limbs of the crown).

Figure 3. Photograph of internal decay within the fallen branch.



7. I measured the height of the willow using a Nikon laser as being 15.6m, and recorded its previous pollarding height as being 13m. The crown spread in the cardinal compass points was measured as N 7m, E 6m, S 7m and W 9m. The trunk diameter was about 900mm and I tapped it just above ground level to check for possible internal decay at the base, but heard no sounds indicative of such decay.

Opinion

8. The fact that a very large branch has failed due to fungal decay in calm conditions is of significant concern. The crown break is at a height of about 5m, and all the major branches emanate from the trunk at that height. My concern therefore, is that decay may have extended into the other large branches, which are connected to the failed one. I did not climb the tree, so I cannot be absolutely sure of the extent of decay, but the fact that two branches (on the eastern side) have failed within the space of about two years raises the likelihood that the remainder of the tree is not safe, and poses a hazard.

9. In my opinion the willow does not need to be felled, as the lower trunk itself is sound, but it does need the weight of branches bearing onto the decayed crown break point at 5m to be reduced significantly. Crown reduction back to the previous pollarding points at 13m will not be sufficient, and I consider that a major crown reduction is required to make the tree safe, in this high occupancy location.

10. In my view the crown needs to be reduced, sensitively, to retain as much of the form of the tree as possible, to a height of no more than 9m (i.e. a height reduction of about 6.6m) and a diameter crown spread of no more than 8m (i.e. a reduction of 3m in the northerly and southerly directions, a reduction of 2m to the east and 5m to the west).

11. Once the tree has been crown reduced it will need to be checked for safety on a regular basis, and I recommend after one year in the first instance, followed by two-yearly checks.

12. The willow is statutorily protected because it stands within the Dartmouth Park Conservation Area. Therefore notice will need to be provided to the council of your intention to carry out

work. As I consider the tree to pose an immediate risk I believe that it would be appropriate for your tree surgeon, Harrisons Tree Services, to issue a five-day notice of intended works.

Conclusions and recommendations

13. I have inspected the willow tree at St Anne's Close, and the fallen branch, and confirm that it failed due to massive internal decay. The timing of the collapse, early morning in summer, is consistent with 'summer branch drop'.

14. The decay that caused the branch to fail extends into the main crown break, and therefore the remaining limbs arising at a height of about 5m are also likely to be decayed. I was unable to assess the extent of decay from ground level, but I consider that the risk of further branch failure is high.

15. I recommend that the willow should be crown reduced to a height of no more than 9m and a diameter crown spread of no more than 8m.

16. The willow should be re-inspected one year after the crown reduction has taken place.

Yours sincerely

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Dr Martin Dobson
BSc (Hons) Biol, DPhil, FArborA, RCArborA, MEWI

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