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### The Old Beech Tree Roost

A basic awareness of wildlife habitat can mean the difference between destruction and conservation . . .

Holmes, Mike

### **A basic awareness of wildlife habitat can mean the difference between destruction and conservation . . .**

By Mike Holmes

Woolbeding Estate lies in West Sussex County in England, and is owned by Britain's National Trust. A narrow country road called Hollist Lane runs through the land and has a number of fine old trees growing beside it. These trees are sometimes considered to be a danger to road users, and the Estate is responsible for them. The normal course is to cut them down.

The National Trust warden for the area is Matt Harley, and he carries this responsibility. Matt is interested in all forms of wildlife, including bats. Consequently, in August 1996, when a tall old beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) beside the road began shedding branches in a way that might endanger passers-by, he asked if I thought that it contained bats. He had arranged for it to be felled in a few days time. I was just setting off to the European Bat Conference in the Netherlands, so there was no time to carry out an evening check.

I had a quick look at the tree and could only agree that it was in a bad way and that some of its branches might easily fall on someone in the road. However, it had holes that showed every indication of bat use. I pointed this out to Matt and asked if the tree could possibly be made safe rather than felled. He agreed, and I headed off to my conference in Eindhoven.

Soon after I got back, Matt phoned me to say that the tree surgeon had cut the tree in exactly the way that I had suggested, keeping clear of possible bat sites, and it was now just a standing trunk without branches. Matt told me that as the tree surgeon had worked, "masses of bats" had emerged and flown safely away. There was also a small owl in one of the holes. Felling the tree would have certainly caused injury and possibly death to many of these animals.

The road is now safe and the tree provides a very important part of the natural environment: standing deadwood. The bats did not return, but they usually disperse in August anyway, and I am confident they will return in the summer of 1997. During the one evening check that I have done since the trimming, a pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) appeared, but I can't say whether it actually emerged from the tree. I shall monitor it.

This past March, I attended a forestry society conference on veteran trees as a representative for the Bat Conservation Trust. The importance of old trees to bats was clearly presented, and the interest in my bat exhibit was beyond all expectations. I had a continuous stream of visitors who asked sensible questions, and I believe many of them came away with a true understanding of how forestry operations can affect bats.

I've been on top of the world since witnessing this change of attitude. About the only thing that could make me happier now is to see the return of the bats to the old beech tree snag this summer.

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*Mike Holmes is the Honorary Woodlands Officer for the Bat Conservation Trust in England.*



Photo Credit: Mike Holmes

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