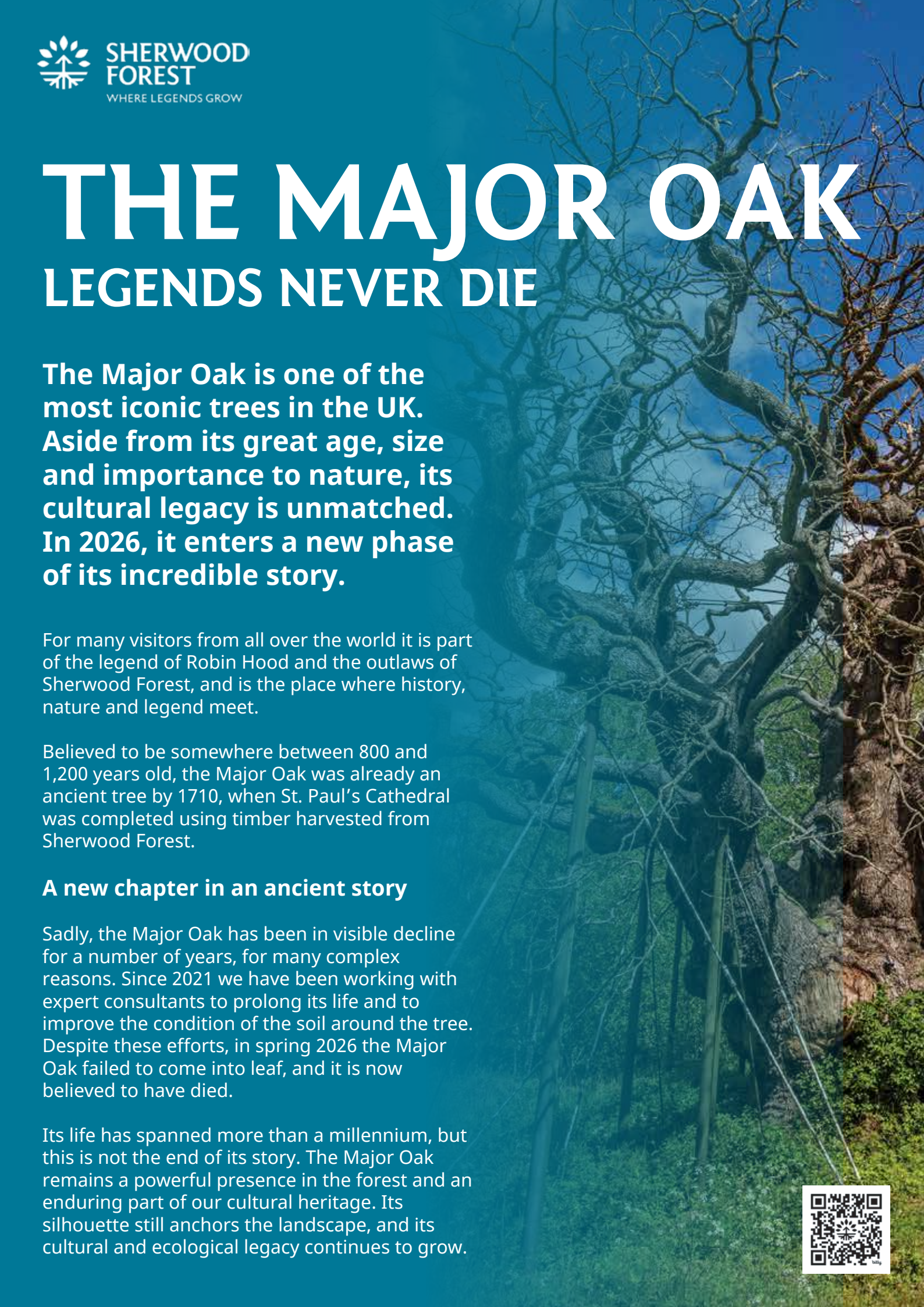
SHERWOOD FOREST
WHERE LEGENDS GROW

THE MAJOR OAK

LEGENDS NEVER DIE



The Major Oak is one of the most iconic trees in the UK. Aside from its great age, size and importance to nature, its cultural legacy is unmatched. In 2026, it enters a new phase of its incredible story.

For many visitors from all over the world it is part of the legend of Robin Hood and the outlaws of Sherwood Forest, and is the place where history, nature and legend meet.

Believed to be somewhere between 800 and 1,200 years old, the Major Oak was already an ancient tree by 1710, when St. Paul's Cathedral was completed using timber harvested from Sherwood Forest.

A new chapter in an ancient story

Sadly, the Major Oak has been in visible decline for a number of years, for many complex reasons. Since 2021 we have been working with expert consultants to prolong its life and to improve the condition of the soil around the tree. Despite these efforts, in spring 2026 the Major Oak failed to come into leaf, and it is now believed to have died.

Its life has spanned more than a millennium, but this is not the end of its story. The Major Oak remains a powerful presence in the forest and an enduring part of our cultural heritage. Its silhouette still anchors the landscape, and its cultural and ecological legacy continues to grow.

Why has it died now?

The reason for its decline is complicated and not the result of just one thing.

This tree has a long and complex history. Huge amounts of human activity around the tree for more than 200 years, including more than 100 years of well-intentioned structural intervention are thought to be major contributors. Other factors such as climate change, which has seen record periods of drought over the last five years along with some of the mildest, wettest winters, have added significant stress to the Major Oak, and other trees across the forest. It is a combination of many complex issues that have compounded the challenges it would naturally be facing at its great age.

For a tree that has overseen more than a dozen human lifetimes, we can't be certain of the pace of decline, especially if we have only been looking at visible cues above ground. It's only in the last fraction of its vast life that we have seen the large loss of foliage; but we are understanding more than ever how that was only a tiny piece of the picture of its overall health.

As science and further research reveals more, we know that whatever the reason, the devastating loss of this amazing tree won't be in vain.

Major Hayman Rooke's sketch - considered to be the Major Oak

19th Century visitors to the Oak. *Photo Credit North East Midlands Photographic Records*

Every ancient oak matters

As well as the obvious cultural and symbolic importance of the Major Oak to the county of Nottinghamshire, it was, until recently, one of only a few hundred living Ancient Oak trees remaining in the Sherwood Forest Landscape.

Every one of these green monuments matters because they provide a rare and vital habitat for hundreds of species, many of which are under great threat. It is so important that we slow the loss of living ancient and veteran trees to keep a sustained decaying wood resource and reduce the threat of disruption to the entire ecosystem.

Once an ancient tree dies, the decaying wood habitat it provides for those species becomes finite. If left unaided, our oldest oaks will die out before the next generation reaches the 'Ancient' phase of its life (typically thought to be around 400-600 years old for an oak tree).

If more people understand the importance and value of veteran and heritage trees, such as the Major Oak, the Sycamore Gap tree and the Whitewebbs Oak, among others, more protections and policies can be put in place to safeguard them and reduce the risk of losing them altogether.

Lemonade stand for visitors to Sherwood Forest. *Photo Credit Unknown*

Twister. *Photo Credit Andy Horsfall*

Supporting the tree in the past

The Major Oak has been recognised as a significant tree for centuries, gaining its present name from Major Hayman Rooke, who first documented the oaks of Sherwood in the late 1700s. For more than 100 years, and due to its enduring popularity, the Major Oak has been the subject of many well-intentioned attempts to keep its emblematic and exceptional form.

Psudoscorpian. *Photo Credit Alex Hyde*

Historic photos show some of the iron rods and braces still visible in the crown of the tree were installed by at least 1904. This bracing, along with wooden props, aimed to take the weight of its huge spreading limbs and prevent it splitting apart. The aerial bracing has been added to over the decades. So too were the wooden supports, which were replaced by metal poles in the early 2000s. By this point, it was already far too late to remove the embedded metalwork without damaging the tree.

Painting the fibreglass shields. *Photo Credit NCC*

Over 120 years ago, lead sheets were fitted to the tree to prevent water getting into wounds on the trunk and branches, attempting to slow the decay process at a time when any rot was considered bad. The lead was replaced in time by fibreglass sheeting, which you can still see today. These techniques were once standard arboricultural practice but are now no longer used. Other outdated methods used on the Major Oak in the past include filling basal holes with concrete and painting wounds with toxic materials such as fire-retardant paint and sealants. Other less visible methods used in the last 20 years include mulching around the base of the tree and various types of branch pruning.

Installing the metal props. *Photo Credit NCC*

All of these human interventions were designed to prolong the life of the tree; but where they may have been used successfully elsewhere, we now understand they have in fact created added challenges to the Major Oak's survival. If nothing else, the techniques used to keep this tree alive have taught the world an enormous amount about veteran tree management.

Aerial view of the Major Oak enclosure

Soil compaction

For decades, it's been clear that soil compaction has badly affected the Major Oak. Millions of visitors walking up to and around the tree compressed the naturally sandy soil until it became almost as hard as concrete. This made it difficult for water, nutrients and oxygen to reach the roots, and for healthy soil life to survive.

The fence added in the 1970s stopped further damage, but the harm already done remained hidden. Just before the RSPB took on the site in 2018, Nottinghamshire County Council commissioned a root radar survey. It suggested the tree still had an extensive root system reaching out to 40m from the trunk.

Major Oak Root under microscope. *Photo Credit SoilBioLab*

To understand the true condition of the roots and soil, and ground truth these findings, the RSPB began detailed investigations in 2021, developing our approach with leading soil health specialists and long standing arboricultural experts.

New subterranean tests revealed a much more urgent picture. The soil around the tree was heavily compacted and lacking life, and the root system was far smaller and more restricted than previous surveys theorised. In areas where healthy feeder roots should have been abundant, there were almost none, with very low levels of the elements, fungi and microorganisms that trees depend on.

Root restoration work. *Photo Credit Laura Turner*

This combination of poor soil and a debilitated root system has been a huge factor in the prolonged and largely hidden decline of the Major Oak.

Recent work

Surveying from a MEWP. *Photo Credit Rob James*

Following initial investigative work, we developed plans with experts, and with agreement from Natural England, carried out work to improve the condition of the soil around the tree's roots. Physical work began in earnest in 2023, following over a year of intense planning as the world resumed a normal rhythm after the global pandemic.

Various methods used widely in arboriculture were discussed between the consulting team dedicated to reversing the fortunes of the tree. Due to the complex and vulnerable context surrounding the Major Oak, plans had to very carefully consider the risks of any activity which aimed to aerate and feed the soils around the tree. Data collected throughout the work shaped our approach, and both the work to restore health to the soils and the data collection will continue.

Bee Orchids around the Major Oak. *Photo Credit Chloe Ryder*

On expert advice, we've also been allowing grasses and other plants around the tree to grow wild, through the seasons, to complete their entire life cycle. By giving them the chance to flower and go to seed, instead of mowing the area short like the amenity green opposite the enclosure, their root systems have been able to develop and naturally break up the soil, as well adding a much-needed boost to biodiversity and ecological complexity. The increased variety of plant species beneath the tree's branches, including wildflowers such as Bee orchids, attracts a range of insects, including bees, butterflies and grasshoppers – much more reminiscent of the natural forest floor.

Major Oak during WW2. *Photo Credit B.Anthony Stewart*

This pioneering work has helped restore the health and biodiversity of the woodland floor surrounding the Major Oak, although for the tree itself, we now know this came too late.

The knowledge we have gained from this work is invaluable. We now have a far deeper scientific understanding of why the Major Oak declined, and we're continuing to study the relationship between ancient trees and the soils that sustain them. These lessons will help us, and our partners, champion better protection and management for ancient and veteran trees across the UK and beyond.

Dendrometer device. *Photo Credit Andy Hirons*

The legacy of the Major Oak

The Major Oak may have reached the end of its life, but its iconic silhouette will still shape the landscape for many years, and its legacy will endure for centuries to come.

We'll keep monitoring the tree to ensure it stays safe and stable, slowing the gradual loss of its precious decaying wood habitat — the very reason Sherwood Forest is protected by law. When the tree eventually collapses, it will complete its natural lifecycle, returning nutrients to the soil and helping new life flourish. This is the ancient rhythm of the forest and an important part of the Major Oak's next chapter.

A soil station in. *Photo Credit Mark Powell*

Sherwood Forest is home to one of the largest collections of ancient and veteran oaks in Western Europe. These remarkable trees are full of

micro-habitats that countless woodland species rely on. It's why we say "dead wood is dead good" — even in death, a tree is bursting with life.

The Major Oak will continue to be celebrated for its iconic aesthetic, and ecological and cultural identity, with a symbolic and unbreakable connection to the legend of Robin Hood and the county of Nottinghamshire.

Although this marks the end of the Major Oak's life as a living tree, its story is far from over. Acorns and cuttings from the tree have been grown into saplings, and plans for the future are being explored with our partners, the Woodland Trust, Sherwood Forest Trust and others. There are Major Oak saplings planted in locations right around the world and we will be working with people to ensure that its offspring will grow and generate their own acorns – and legends - for centuries to come.

This will include work to understand and enhance the current distribution of ancient and veteran trees – including Major Oak saplings - and how we can connect them across the region and beyond, making sure the right tree is in the right place to endure for generations.

People have played a complex role in the Major Oak's life—both contributing to its decline and championing its protection. The RSPB remains committed to honouring its legacy and ensuring that the lessons learned from its story shape a better future for ancient trees everywhere.

Visitors at the Major Oak. *Photo Credit Rob James*

Major Oak Sapling. *Photo Credit Ben Andrew*

Scan for more on our webiste

The legend lives on

The Major Oak will stay standing as a focal point of the forest for visitors; its natural history forever intertwined with the stories of Robin Hood. The tales we tell will continue to inspire people for generations. As long as the stories live, the legend lives.

The Major Oak may no longer be alive, but it remains at the heart of Sherwood—an enduring symbol of resilience, wonder, and the deep bond between people and the natural world.

RSPB

Sherwood Forest is cared for and protected by the RSPB

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is the Major Oak alive?

No. In recent years, the Major Oak has been in visible decline, due to many complex reasons, including its great age. That's why we've been working with leading soil and tree health specialists and partners across the UK and Europe to understand the science behind its condition, and the best way to manage this ancient tree.

Despite our best efforts to keep the tree alive, the Major Oak has failed to come into leaf this year, indicating that it has finally come to the end of its remarkable life. The results from all of the surveys and monitoring that we have carried out give us almost complete certainty that the tree is no longer able to sustain living branches. We are deeply saddened by this news but have been taking steps to prepare for the next chapter in the legend as the Major Oak enters the next phase of its own story.

Could you have done more to save it?

One key threat to the tree's long-term health has been the effect of compaction caused by more than a century of visitors walking up to the tree and compressing the sandy soil and restricting the availability of water, oxygen and nutrients to the roots.

The well-intentioned interventions to preserve and stabilise its magnificent form added further complications to its natural functions, denying it the ability to reorganise its branches and creating complex routes for water and nutrients to travel to the branch tips.

The Major Oak has witnessed two world wars and countless military operations, some which occurred directly beneath its branches. Historic photos show the Major Oak in the foreground of a WW2 encampment, the infrastructure of which lays beneath the forest floor still today. The installation of the fence around the tree significantly reduced the number of people walking up to it since the mid-1970s, but the damage had already been done, and right at the later end of its impressive lifespan.

The urgency needed to reverse the consequences of its popularity remained hidden for decades.

Since becoming custodians of the tree in 2018, we have done everything we can to help prolong its life. In 2023, after intensive surveying and scientific study, the RSPB began the root restoration initiative, working with some of the UK's leading tree and soil health specialists on an innovative and pioneering programme of activity to help conserve the Major Oak.

It involved carefully decompacting the soil around sections of root system each year and carrying out testing of the soil and root health, to indicate the impact of the work. Periodic analysis of the leaves was also conducted to assess how well the tree was functioning and turning food into growing energy. This included repeated testing of the leaves' chemical composition to see how soil contents affectied leaf growth and to monitor indicative effects of our work.

Several years of soil surveys and analysis has shown that there has been a worrying absence of biological activity and poor levels of chemicals (such as Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium) within the soils around the tree, which was mirrored in the downward trend of mineral content inthe analysis of the leaves . Native micro fauna and fungal networks are essential for its health, because the roots need to properly interact with the soil, even if the soil has optimum nutrient levels.

From the testing done on site, this is estimated to have been the case for many, many years.

The recent surveys and tests, conducted with the leading experts in this field, have given us the best information to act. But despite our best efforts, and although the soils are showing signs of improvement, the Major Oak has failed to come into leaf this year indicating efforts have come too late.

How can you be certain it is dead?

Typically, the Major Oak comes into leaf in spring, usually from late May, although in later years and depending on the weather, as late as June. The ever-declining crown coverage of the last few years have been very visible cues that there is severe dysfunction occurring within the tree, and this year there have been no live buds recorded and no indication of any imminent leaf burst.

We have also been monitoring its growing activity using the dendrometer devices that are attached to the tree at various points. These high-tech gadgets measure growth of living cells as they take on and lose water, with readings down to a tenth of a millimetre. We last saw significant growth and shrinkage readings in the growing season of 2024, with only murmurs of activity by comparison in 2025. This was matched with visibly decreased leaf coverage, which unfortunately continued to be challenged by the scorching summer through June and July.

The soil stations provide information about what is happening below ground and the dendrometers attached to the tree indicate what is happening inside the tree – something never applied to ancient tree management before. What we began to investigate in 2025 was the Major Oaks response to manual watering compared to rainfall events. This knowledge could open up possibilities for understanding how to help other veteran trees, particularly when the risk of facing drought stress seems more likely due to climate change.

Our work with specialists to explore and analyse the situation beneath the tree showed very few signs of life, both the root network itself, and how it interacted with the soil. For a tree of this size and complexity, we can make educated assumptions that there simply isn't enough healthy root system to feed its crown, and there aren't enough leaves in the crown to generate the energy it needs to live.

As with any natural science, there are always unknowns and unpredictability. For example, we may see flushes of leaves following its death, but this is likely to be the last vestiges of stored energy transforming into a surge of growth – perhaps even for several years. In reality, the tree has likely been disconnected from a functioning life support system for some time.

While Veteran tree physiology knowledge has increased hugely over the last few decades, we are still learning. And in the case of the Major Oak, there is no other tree like it.

It's over 1000 years old – surely it was time to die?

Typically, oaks live for several centuries, due to factors such as environmental conditions or physical limits that stop allowing it to grow in the same way. It is a special milestone for the Major Oak to reach over 1000 years old.

Tree time is different to human time; we cannot apply the same logic or biological principles. Simply put, trees are endlessly renewing. They have living cells that change and adapt with time, ensuring their genetic makeup finds a way to survive. We can see this in some of the other ancient and veteran oaks, which have re-engineered themselves for survival. Shedding heavy upper limbs and growing a lower, squatter crown; a lowered limb connecting to the soil and taking root; hollowing out and shape shifting for its surroundings.

The reasons behind its sharp decrease in health in recent decades are many and complex – they cannot be looked at individually so we cannot simply say that its spectacular old age was the reason for its end.

The Major Oak has been in a bad way for ages. Why are you just telling us now that it's dead?

Despite being in visible decline for a number of years, up until 2026 the Major Oak still produced leaves, indicating that it was alive in some form. Soil and root analysis by our expert partners since 2021 confirmed that there were very few living roots, and the ones that have been tested are in very poor condition. While we still continued to find living roots, there was always a glimmer of hope.

This year, the tree has failed to come into leaf, giving us the unfortunate certainty that the Major Oak has reached the end of its life. The root system is too broken, and it can no longer sustain itself.

The tree has been alive over 1000 years. Why has it declined so much since the RSPB has been the custodian?

The reasons it's had a sharp decrease in health in recent decades are many and complex – none of which can be looked at individually.

By the time we became custodians of the Major Oak, a lot of the damage was already done. The team dedicated to caring for Sherwood Forest did everything they could to try and prolong the life of this ancient tree and are devastated to lose it in their lifetime.

In the last 10% of its lifetime the Major Oak has witnessed two world wars, the industrial revolution, several iterations of Robin Hood, arson attempts, multiple artificial interventions and the pressure of millions of visitor footsteps.

The RSPB has been responsible for the Major Oak for less than 1% of its lifetime, in which it has also faced some of the hottest temperatures on record, with record numbers of diseases and pathogens affecting the UKs woodlands.

The RSPB hasn't acted independently; we work with a huge range of experts, some of whom have been involved with the work at Sherwood Forest long before us. Leading soil and tree health specialists and partners across the UK and Europe have helped us, and others, to understand the science behind its condition, and developed with us the best opportunities to help the Major Oak. With hope, our joined learning and campaigning will help increase protections for other ancient and heritage trees.

Will the Major Oak be cut down now it's dead?

No. For now, we do not have any plans to reduce it in any way. The profile of the Major Oak is legendary. It will remain a natural monument and continue to be periodically assessed to ensure it remains stable and as intact as possible as it decays, as with all of our incredible Ancient Oaks.

We are privileged to be custodians of the Sherwood Forest Major Oak, and this ancient tree will continue to provide a vital decaying wood habitat for wildlife and a place where people can connect to nature and heritage.

Now that it's dead, does it pose any risks to the public?

The Major Oak stands behind a fenced enclosure which will remain as the tree will continue to be a focal point of the forest. Assessments of the Major Oak will continue, and any work needed for safety reasons will consider the ecological impacts - the approach we take in all our work.

Will you ever remove the chains and props now the tree is dead?

In short, not until it is deemed to be unsafe or hindering the natural process for wildlife it supports. The continual assessments from our team of experts will help inform those decisions, and together with experts and with agreement from Natural England, we will evaluate options for the best action to take.

How will you protect the tree from damage?

The fence around the Major Oak will remain, as will all the surfaced paths, defining where visitors are allowed. We still expect the tree to draw visitors to the heart of Sherwood Forest, and have to trust that they will treat this natural wonder with the respect it deserves.

As with all infrastructure in a protected site, we need to give additional consideration for improvements and maintenance to the fences, paths, benches and more.

The Major Oak and its surrounds will continue to be monitored in many ways, and any changes will consider the security and sensitivity of the tree and its neighbours.

Is all the time and money you've spent keeping the Major Oak alive a wasted effort?

Absolutely not. We are grateful for the knowledge that caring for the Major Oak has provided. It's not referred to as 'a living museum' for nothing. Even in the next phase of its' story, it teems with life, and learning.

We are pleased that the research we have conducted along with our partners will benefit other incredible ancient trees not just here in Sherwood, but elsewhere in the UK and across the world.

We will continue to periodically assess it to ensure it remains as stable and as intact as possible as it decays. Keeping our Ancient Oaks alive and intact for as long as possible in the face of ever-increasing challenges remains a core focus for our work here.

Despite being at the end of its own life, the Major Oak will continue to provide a vital decaying wood habitat for other special Sherwood species. We will keep working to improve the soil surrounding the Major Oak, reconnecting it to the forest habitat for its final stage of existence.

What other trees in Sherwood will you use these management techniques on?

There is no tree like the Major Oak and the work carried out to help it has shaped the way we care for trees. The new applications of technology and methods of data capture have unlocked potential new projects that explore tailored tree management. In a time of climate crisis and biodiversity emergency, this offers new ways to safeguard the future of our Ancient Oaks and other heritage trees across the globe.

Each of the nearly 400 Ancient Oaks at Sherwood Forest has a planned programme of work, done specifically to ensure they remain living and stable for as long as possible. The activity for each tree is based on a long-standing set of data recorded from health assessments carried out every 18 months. Using this information and the lessons learned from the work to the Major Oak, we can explore new ways to understand and help the trees, along with the abundance of wildlife they support, so they can thrive for centuries more.

We are only just beginning to understand how this can be applied and are excited at the ideas and possibilities being dreamt up.

Will you tidy the Major Oak enclosure again now it's dead?

The vegetation is purposefully left wild for wildlife; it is restoring complexity and full life cycles in a place where they have been absent for many years. Although it may look unkempt compared to the amenity space across from the Major Oak, the opposite is true.

It is with care and dedication that we are leaving natural process to take place, on guidance from ecological experts. And the results from tests and surveys within the fenced area are showing that it is working; the remediated soils are able to hold water, are richer in nutrients and contain active microbiology.

What about saplings or cuttings? Can you plant a new one?

Major Oak acorns have been harvested for many years in the past, and saplings and young Major Oaks are growing in other locations across our region and beyond. We are continuing to work with our partners, such as the Woodland Trust, with plans being drawn up for a better, more connected landscape including ancient trees.

The genetics of ancient trees is only beginning to be explored, but what we do know is that to endure and adapt for centuries they must be biologically special. And those genes are worth protecting.

As with all our work, we will be guided by science, ensuring that the right tree is in the right place to create a sustainable network of current and future ancients. We'll be developing this large piece of work in the coming years, and we look forward to working with people from all over the world to continue the legend of the Major Oak and Sherwood Forest.

What if is surprises us and comes back into leaf - what will you do?

Experts guiding the work agree that the evidence all indicates that any leaf burst is highly unlikely. This is based on their collective expertise in tree and soil biology. If it does come into leaf, it is likely tapping into the last pockets of stored energy deep within its cells, rather than a miracle resurrection.

This is because of the combination of weak and dysfunctional roots struggling to supply the oxygen, water and nutrients it needs to grow, and the gnarled and convoluted pathways those vital ingredients would have to travel due to the many wounds from nature, and its chains and metal work.

Regardless of the biological activity visible in the tree, we will be monitoring and assessing it with the same care and detail as when it was full of life and then be led by the science to decide what action to take. And for now, that means restoring life and function to the soils beneath it for any tree to thrive.

What if nobody had ever intervened?

Nobody can say for sure; it could have taken the same route as some of our other Ancient Oaks and eventually restructured itself to a more sustainable stumpy form. Or it could have collapsed from the great weight of its massive limbs, or been battered by extreme weather events, or just stopped living and crumbled away. We just don't know, and there's little else we can do now except wonder 'what if...?'

I've got a Major Oak photo and/or story - would you like me to share it, if so how?

We would love to hear from you! We are always keen to collect stories and photos to help build the legacy of the Major Oak and better understand how this magnificent tree and landscape has connected with people over the years. Please get in touch with us to share your stories by emailing sherwoodforest@rspb.org.uk with the subject header 'Major Oak Legacy'. Thank you for being part of the Major Oak's legacy.

I've got a Major Oak sapling, would you like to know or do you want it?

If you have a Major Oak sapling, please do get in touch. While we're not currently able to take responsibility for housing saplings on our site, we'd still love to record their existence as part of the tree's wider story.

Please include:

A photo of your sapling

Its location (including What3Words, if possible)

Any history about how it came into your care (if known) such as dates, names and background information.

Please get in touch with us by emailing sherwoodforest@rspb.org.uk with the subject header 'Major Oak Legacy'. Thank you for being part of the Major Oak's legacy.

Are you putting up any of this information at the site of the Major Oak?

Following the sad accountment of the Major Oak's death we will be carefully looking at all onsite information to get it up to date, including the information boards at the Major Oak.

Whilst we update our assets, please use our website for more information or have a conversation with the team responsible for the work here on site.