



## TREES IN THE CHURCHYARD

Do children still  
play conkers, as  
they have done for  
generations?

Or is it an urban myth that because of health and safety concerns it's been banned and children can only play if they wear gloves and goggles? It's a very British pastime; eccentric. I remember attending an international conference in Surrey one October and all the foreign delegates looked on totally perplexed as we started attaching string to the conkers in the venue grounds. 'And you hold your conker still, while I bash it with mine as hard as I can ....'. The world conker championships (yes, really) take place every year at Ashton, nr Oundle, in Northamptonshire and have done for many years. Catastrophe happened in 1998 when a German won the event.

But actually Horse Chestnut is not a native British tree. Its natural range is confined to just a small mountainous area in the Balkans. From there they have been introduced to the rest of Europe and North America where they grow very well. They reached the British Isles around 1616. Not being native of the Palestine region there are no biblical references. I can also find no mention of Horse Chestnut having any religious significance, although a famous symbolic tree was one in the centre of Amsterdam which was mentioned in Anne Frank's diary. The tree survived until 2010. A sapling grown from one of its conkers was planted in the 9/11 Memorial Park in New York.

We all recognise Horse Chestnut and there are three mature trees along the boundary of the church yard with the Vicarage. The large leaves are palmate – which means they spread out like the fingers of a hand. The trees are big already but could eventually reach 30 metres (100 feet) high.

Horse Chestnut has distinctive characteristics throughout the year. It has large sticky buds in winter; the resin which is produced is a protection against insect attack. In spring the crown is covered in white flowers which resemble candles. (The red flowered chestnuts which can be seen on Goldington Green are a hybrid between Horse Chestnut and the American Red Buckeye – a tip, if you are playing conkers avoid these as they are inferior).

And in the autumn of course the iconic conkers. The name 'Horse' chestnut comes from the fact that the conkers were fed by the Turks to ailing horses, though normally all animals refuse to touch them. In World War 1 the public were asked to collect up conkers for the war effort. They are a source of starch and were used to make acetone used in the production of cordite. It didn't prove to be very efficient however and the idea was dropped after a few months.

In recent years there have been a few serious pests and diseases affecting Horse Chestnut which has resulted in premature death. Of most concern is Bleeding Canker which is an aggressive bacterial infection affecting the stem and branches. There is also a so called leaf miner moth, a very small brown moth which lays its eggs in the leaves. As the larvae develop they eat their way through the leaves and cause the premature browning of leaves which makes it look like autumn has come early in July or August. A major infestation can result in all the leaves being affected. It will not kill the tree but will severely weaken it. This year there has been a mild infestation of the leaf miner moth affecting our trees. The long spell of dry weather has proved to provide favourable conditions for the moth.

The timber is not very good for anything. It splits easily, rots quickly and is not very durable. Nor does it burn well. It has survived in our urban areas because it makes a majestic mature tree and was widely planted by the Victorians. Large trees can be seen in Bedford and in most towns and cities. It has gone out of fashion however, mainly because of the pests and diseases, and is rarely planted these days. Although large Horse Chestnuts in our urban areas may have had their day there is somewhere they are in great demand; surprisingly for a large tree they are a favourite to bonsai.

Colin Last