

Carving out a piece of history as Highways England sets benchmark with community artworks

Thanks to the talents of a local woodcarver, residents will soon be able to enjoy the tree once again and it will continue to play a part in the community for many decades to come.

Despite extensive investigations and hi-tech testing by Highways England, it was not possible to retain the tree near the A45/A6 Chowns Mill roundabout in Northamptonshire.

The much-needed improvements, which will improve traffic flow and make journeys more reliable, would leave the tree – known locally as Three Oaks – unstable and at risk of falling down.

The Chowns Mill project team turned to woodcarver Carrie Yuen to help transform the three trunks and some of the branches from the tree into works of art.

She is crafting the wood into three stunning benches, covered in woodland creatures, which will be installed at Castle Fields to complement a Timber Trim Trail created by Higham Ferrers Town Council.

The council recently received approval from Historic England to install the trail at Castle Fields and has been given funding support from East Northamptonshire Council.

Some of the woodland creatures are emerging as the benches are created

In addition, some of the smaller pieces of wood will be turned into nature items such as owls and mushrooms. These will be used to help raise money for the Mayor's charities and help out the local community.

Highways England Project Manager, Dean Holloway, said:

We were very disappointed that despite our best efforts we were not able to safely keep the tree and carry out these important improvements.

But knowing how the residents felt we were determined to put the wood to good use and we are very grateful to Carrie for her incredible artistry that has created these wonderful benches for everyone to enjoy.

Some of the branches have also been donated to Stanwick Lakes to

create some natural habitat for the wildlife so the legacy of the Three Oaks will continue.

Taking shape, a dragonfly sculpted into one of the benches

Woodcarver Carrie, who is based at nearby Knuston, said:

I am glad to have the opportunity to give this much-loved tree a second life.

There are three themes to the design of the benches all connected to the Three Oaks. We have the animals that lived around it such as the fox, badger, rabbit, squirrel, owl, mole and mouse. A second bench will feature creatures that fly around the oak branches such as butterflies, moth, dragonfly and bat. A third bench depicts the bugs of the oak habitat such as the caterpillar, spider, beetle, ladybird, worm and millipede.

Each trunk will take around four weeks to transform into the benches and Carrie hopes to have all three completed by the end of the summer.

Local resident Justina Bryan, who had led the campaign to save the tree, went to see the carving work in progress. She said:

It is important that we keep this piece of history for the community. It was a mature oak and known by generations of people. Certainly the older generation remember the Three Oaks a landmark when they walked to the station.

Everyone tried so hard to keep the tree but sadly we couldn't save it. This is the next best thing as we can still keep it in the community.

Carrie shares some of her design ideas with local resident Justina Bryan

The Mayor, Councillor Tina Reavey, said:

The carved benches will be a wonderful addition to Castle Fields. Using the timber from the Three Oaks in this way provides not only beautifully crafted benches but a unique legacy that can be shared by all.

I am very grateful that some of the smaller carved items are being donated to help raise funds for my chosen local charities. It was a

real shame the Three Oaks could not be saved but it is fitting that the timber will enable me to support local ventures and groups within the town.

Contractor Ground Control, appointed by Highways England to carry out environmental and landscaping works for the Chowns Mill scheme, have met the costs of transportation, woodcarving and delivery of the benches.

Construction manager, Jeremy Willis, said:

Caring for our environment has always been the underlying principle of Ground Control and so we are always happy to support projects that go towards offsetting the necessary works and supporting local communities. It was important for us that anything we did was delivered locally and Carrie was therefore our first choice to bring this timber to life. We are so pleased with the end results and hope that the local communities enjoy the pieces for many years.

Mayor Councillor Tina Reavey is given a sneak peek at one of the benches

At Chowns Mill roundabout the A45 is crossed by the A6 and provides access into Higham Ferrers and Rushden. The junction is being redesigned as a half hamburger layout with a new link road connecting the A6 South and A5028 with the existing roundabout. All approaches will be widened to provide extra lanes and capacity.

The new road layout was set to fall within 1.5m of the Three Oaks and the road lowered, to a construction depth of 2m from the existing ground level.

Arboricultural specialists concluded that all of the roots encountered in testing would need to be removed which would impact on the tree's overall health, potentially leading to tree mortality. Meanwhile severing major roots would make it less stable and a safety hazard.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.