

Thursday 13th January 2005

The fight is on in North Antrim to save one of the Province's most historically important group of trees from the chainsaw.

DUP MLA Mervyn Storey is leading the campaign to preserve the Bregagh Road beech trees near Stranocum, 27 of which the Roads Service plan to fell.

Known locally as 'the dark hedges' and reputedly haunted by a spectral 'grey lady', the trees, which form an arc over the road, are thought to be around 300-years-old and have become a much photographed natural monument in the Ballymoney borough.

Mr Mervyn Storey, who is putting together a rescue plan, said: "The trees were planted in the 1700s and a Preservation Order was placed on them last April by the Planning Service in the wake of a Roads Service report which concluded 27 would have to be felled.

"They have been a prominent feature in the local landscape, attracting many visitors each year, and must not be destroyed".

Mr Storey said he would also be fighting for the rights of landowners on whose property the trees are located.

"Unfortunately any associated cost for this work would have to be picked up by three farmers, leaving them with a combined bill of more than £40,000.

"While the farmers concerned are quite prepared to play their part in ensuring that all is done to protect this important natural asset they believe that such a hefty bill is totally out of the question.

One of the trio, David Morrison said: "We are not happy at all.

"Because they are preserved we are not allowed to touch the trees yet we are now expected to pay for this work. It's not right. "It would also be a terrible pity to see them destroyed. If this work goes ahead they'll look like nothing," he said.

Also concerned for the formation is the Woodland Trust which has called on the Roads Service to attain a second independent opinion on the need for felling.

Operations Director, Patrick Cregg said: "These trees are a natural monument, as significant as any cathedral.

"We want to ensure that before people start chopping down trees willy nilly there is no doubt that the work is necessary.

"We feel too that it is unfair to expect landowners to pay the bill for trees that are of historical and cultural significance. Government assistance should be given to farmers where trees are listed," he said.

A spokesman for the Roads Service, however, put responsibility for the work firmly at the doors of the landowners.

"The trees are their responsibility and it has been determined that 27 of them must come down for public safety."

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