



Piper arm

Ashby Road

Mitchell's Spring Farm

Piper Wood

Oakley Wood

Fields

Shepshed Fields

Black Brook

48

56

99

Walking through a woodland you will often see [ash trees](#) with black blobs on them, usually on dead branches or on branches that have fallen off the tree. This has several names including coal fungus or cramp balls or **King Alfred's cakes**. These hard, semi-spherical black lumps are usually about 3-4 cm in diameter and are the fruiting bodies of a fungus, which decays the dead wood of the ash tree.



Legend has it that King Alfred, when in hiding from the Danes, once burnt some cakes by failing to take them out of the oven.



These fungal growths, which look as if they have been burned, are a reminder of his poor cooking and hence are nicknamed “King Alfred’s Cakes”, but their correct Latin name is *Daldinia concentrica*.



They grow in either a black form or a dark brown – perhaps the lighter colour shows that Alfred did remember to take out the cakes before they were totally incinerated!

The **black variety** can be very useful for lighting fires because the inner flesh, once dried out, can be easily lit from a “firesteel” (this is an “artificial flint” which creates a spark for starting fires, much used in bushcraft). A spark will ignite the flesh of the fungus and, although it burns slowly like a barbecue briquette, once it has been lit one can transfer the glowing part to a ball of tinder and get a flame started.



Ash

Often large trees, mature specimens may be 40-45 metres tall and up to 400 years old. Often late coming into leaf, and one of the first to lose leaves in autumn.

Leaf

The ash leaf is a **compound, pinnate** leaf. The central stem of the compound leaf bears 9 – 13 **leaflets** in pairs, with one at the tip. There are no stalks to the side leaflets. The leaflets are pointed and toothed, with hairs on the lower surface.

The leaves appear relatively late in Spring, and are amongst the first to be shed in Autumn.



Buds, Bark and Stem

They are black, **'sooty' or 'velvety'** in appearance – see the photos to the left (and also at the foot of the page).

The buds are sometimes compared to a *Bishop's Mitre* in shape.

The bark is silvery grey and, with age, may develop a network of criss-crossing ridges.



Flowers and Fruits

The flowers appear before the leaves and are borne in clusters near the tips of twigs – they are green and small, lacking petals.

They develop (when fertilised) into 'ash keys'. A key is a seed with a wing (for dispersal). The image shows the dried keys still hanging from a tree in the following Spring.

Ash trees are dioecious i.e. there are separate male and female trees, though hermaphrodites also occur.



Winter Twigs

