

Britain's Veteran Churchyard Yews

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One of Britain's famous veteran churchyard yews fell victim to one of the many severe gales of the extended winter of 1961-62. It stood in the churchyard at Duffield, near Derby. Boisterous winds so severely damaged it that it had to be felled. This ancient tree is reputed to have been planted in commemoration of the Battle of Crecy where the English long-bow archers played a memorable role, turning the tide to an ever-memorable victory.

It was with yew wood, of course, that the long-bows of England were made. Of late years cabinet makers have been scouring the country for yews, which with the exception of the oaks, are the most typical of all British trees.

A demand for furniture made of yew wood which has a beautiful grain, has revealed a serious shortage of this tree, once so common in Britain, but which (of any size), is now rarely found outside village churchyards. The tree is so slow growing that a specimen whose trunk is only six inches through may be over a century old.

Even small ones have been bought up, and the probability is that before long there will be even fewer yews to adorn the countryside. Fortunately there will survive those veterans of nearly incredible age—some among them reputed to have been standing since the days of the Druids—in churchyards up and down the land.

"A post of yew will outlast a post of iron", so runs the old country saying and none who have stood and gazed at the sombre majesty of some gnarled yew in a village churchyard, would feel inclined to deny the truth of the legends which are told of its ancient lineage.

One of the oldest yews in the world stands in Fortinghall churchyard, near Kenmore, at the extremity of Loch Tay. It is supposed to be the most ancient tree in Britain. Pennant the naturalist (Dr. Johnson said of him, "He observes more things than any one else does") and traveller, stated its girth was 56 ft., and the Swiss botanist, De Candolle, writing in the early part of the last century, pronounced it to be the "oldest authentic specimen of vegetation in Europe", and estimated its age at from 25 to 30 centuries.

This veteran has, not surprisingly, got even beyond the stage of mere hollowness, and most of the outside shell has disappeared, only two portions of it at about opposite sides of the tree, remaining. These are now so far apart as to look like separate trees with strange flattened trunks, the inner portions of which have no bark. These remains are growing comparatively vigorously, and as the tree is now scheduled as a national monument, and is surrounded by a stone wall it may well survive for further centuries.

Another ancient tree was much loved by Gilbert White, the curate-naturalist of Selborne. It still stands in the churchyard of

the Hampshire village where he was born, lived, and died. With a girth of 27 ft., few can equal it in vigorous health and spread of branch and it is one of the tallest of all yews. Although there is no direct evidence as to its exact age, it was mentioned in Saxon records of at least a thousand years ago.



Fig. 1—1,000-year-old Yew at Selborne, England.

Beautiful Fountains Abbey, Yorkshire, was commenced during the early years of the twelfth century but there still stands a veteran yew which is reputed to have given the monks shelter during the building. Further south, the magnificent yew at Harlington, Middlesex churchyard, was for centuries one of the great trees of England. It began life at least a thousand years ago. At five feet from the ground the trunk was between 24 ft. and 25 ft. in circumference. The main tree fell in 1959 and it took the men of the church council nine months to saw it up, but a substantial stump remains about 20 ft. high. This has taken on a new lease of life and is growing vigorously.

There is another notable yew in Woxford Churchyard, Warwickshire, not least in its appearance. The branches have an exceptionally wide spread and, being horizontal, and supported by wooden props,

it gives the appearance of a roof, under which worshippers walk to the church door. It is hundreds of years old; indeed, ten centuries is no exceptional age for a yew. One such veteran, in Gresford churchyard, North Wales, has a girth of 30 ft. and is still growing vigorously. One of its huge boughs spreads over the path and dozens of tombstones as well.

The old yew in Eastham churchyard Cheshire, was often visited by the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, during the time he was American consul at Liverpool. It was also the goal of many nature rambles led by the famous churchman novelist, Charles Kingsley, when he was canon of Chester Cathedral. He founded the Natural History Society in Chester. The exact age of the tree is a matter of conjecture but it is probably between 1,500 and 2,000 years. In passing it may be said that the people of Darley, Derbyshire, claim that the yew in their churchyard are at least 2,000 years old.



Fig. 2—Eastham Yew, Cheshire, 1,500-2,000 years old.

Reverting to the Eastham yew, when in 1152 the abbot and monks of St. Werburgh received the Manor of Eastham at the hands of Earl Randall of Chester, the villagers of Eastham entreated the new owner "to have a care of ye olde yew". The tree still flourishes, and when in 1898 the Royal Archaeological Society visited the village they considered that the yew had been planted originally against the east end of the timber-framed wattle and daub chapel, which was in being before the Norman Conquest.

"This great undertaking excited such universal and such natural interest that it may be worth while to place on record some few facts in connection with the removal . . . Sceptics and doubters

are so numerous that in few years' time, many may be found who will doubt that such a tree was ever moved in the memory of man". That paragraph found its way into the parish magazine of St. Andrew's, Buckland-in-Dover, in March 1880, and it refers to a 1,000-year-old yew with a remarkable history.

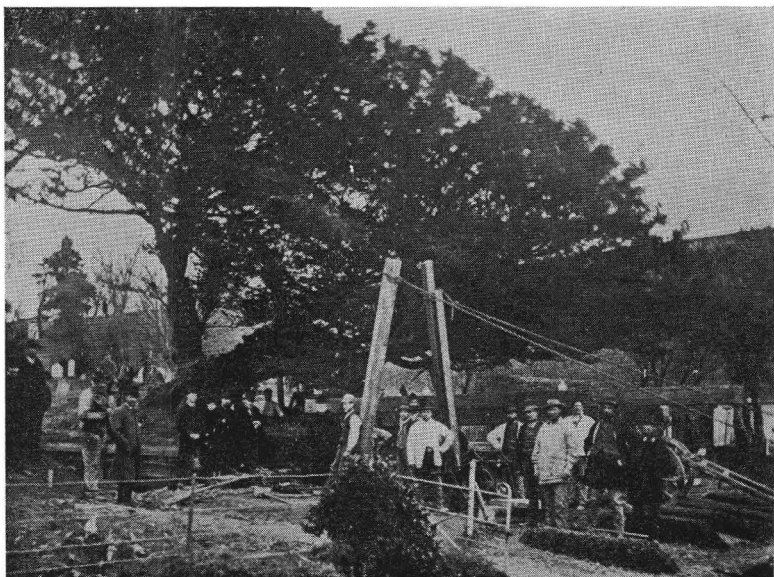


Fig. 3—Transplanting famous Buckland-in-Dover Yew, 1880.

The tree originally stood 62 ft. to the east of where it stands to-day and the purpose of moving it was to extend the nave of the church and so increase the seating capacity. No doubt the sceptics referred to were convinced that such an extensive operation would bring about the tree's decease. It is still in a flourishing condition and shows vigorous signs of new life each spring.

The account of 1880 continues: "The operation commenced on the 24th February when a trench was dug on all four sides, four feet wide and five feet deep, leaving a large block of earth 18 ft. by 16 ft. broad and a long cutting was formed from the old position to the new one". Much work with huge planks of timber, chains, six-inch rollers and windlasses took place before the whole mass of the tree estimated at 55 tons, began to move. It arrived within a yard of its destination at dusk on the 4th March.

That eminent student of British scenery, Dr. Vaughan Cornish, published a book on "The Churchyard Yew and Immortality." He says that the tree was not, despite popular tradition, planted to

supply material for bows. It is true that in the reign of Edward I yews were ordered to be planted in churchyards but this was to protect the building. Hence in the south of England they are usually found on the south-west side, from whence blew the prevalent winds.

It is also stated that the trees were planted because yew leaves were much used for the services of Palm Sunday and other occasions, and because of this the trees gained a sacred character. There is also a lot to be said for the theory that because of its ever-greenness and long life, the yew was selected as an emblem of immortality.

Sir Thomas Browne the physician and metaphysical writer, touched upon this when discussing ancient burial customs, saying: "Whether the planting of Yews in churchyards holds not its original from ancient Funeral Rites, or as an emblem of Resurrection from its perpetual verdure, may also admit conjecture".

One of the reasons why the yew was long regarded as a symbol of immortality is that it was one of the few evergreen trees in Britain. Dr. Vaughan Cornish's thesis is that, before the conversion of southern Britain to Christianity, yews were sacred trees. The Christian missionaries, although the veneration of trees was forbidden by the Church did not destroy the yews, but adopted them as sacred symbols.

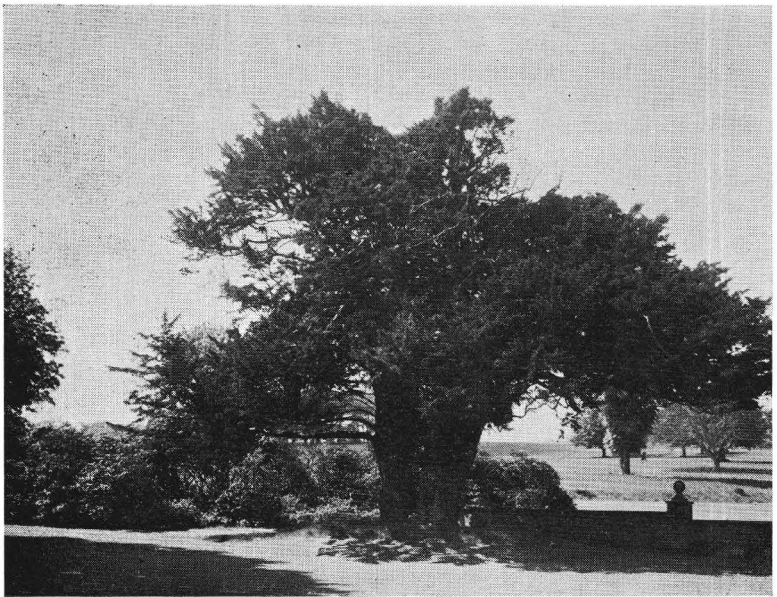


Fig. 4—Noted "twin" Yews at Cromer Hall, Norfolk, England.

Usually, he tells us, at least two yews were planted in a churchyard, one beside the path from the funeral gateway to the principal door of the church; the other by a path leading to a subsidiary door. Where there were no graves—as in a cathedral close—no yews were planted. That the yew was planted for symbolic reasons in some churchyards in Normandy seems to have been due to the close association of that Duchy with Britain.

Dr. Cornish notes that the established positions of yews in relation to the church doorways are the same in both countries; and in Ireland he remarked that churchyard yews are most frequent in the eastern part which was under the direct rule of Henry II, and also in the isolated area in the west round Galway, where there were many Norman, Saxon, and Welsh settlers.