



THE ANCIENT YEW GROUP

News update – April 2007

Copy to the following:

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David Manning (Druid's Grove), Bob Crompton (Newland's Corner), Steve Peach (Butser Hill), Robert Underhill (Great Yews)

Eibenfreunde members: Thomas Scheeder, Thomas Sauer, Christian Wolf, Thomas Kellner

A resumé of most recent events:

The continuing loss of ancient specimens

One of the large yews at the remote Cefnlllys churchyard in Wales was deliberately burnt down last year. The resultant burnt out shell was leaning towards the church and so all remains were removed. At Keri (Ceri) it has been reported that the oldest yew was set alight. In this instance a large stump is left which at least has a chance to regrow. Each of these trees were 18ft + in girth.

Because of the Internet it is becoming easier to access the text from books published in the 19th and 20th centuries. Whenever village or churchyard are mentioned, if there is an old yew of note, it is likely to receive mention. This not only gives us an insight into the esteem in which these ancient specimens have been held in the past, it is also providing evidence that we have lost even larger numbers of old yews than we have realised. More than 30 new 'lost yew' sites have been added to the Gazetteer during the last 6 months.

A significant loss is of a yew grove at Cholderton in Wiltshire. Marked on old Ordnance Survey maps it was lost as a result of the Cholderton Estate selling off buildings and land to pay death duties. The new owners promptly felled the yew grove to make a pony paddock!!! Another smaller grove survives on a remote part of the estate – the oldest tree probably 500+. The present owner regards this as his private yew grove and would not consider selling the land, but it raises the question of how the protection of ancient yews on private land can be ensured.

Visitors to the web site

In October 2006 I reported the steady increase of numbers of visitors to the web site, usually following the publicity of a news item or TV programme. This continues with a further rise of 20%, while the number of pages looked at is up by 50%.

Old yews in Scotland

From the 1867 *Old and Remarkable Trees of Scotland* and Robert Hutchison's 1890 paper *On the Old and Remarkable Yew Trees in Scotland* I have been able to incorporate many new Scottish yew sites. In some instances it is not known whether the yew recorded still exists. I have however received a response from a gentleman whose family used to own Inchbrakie Castle and he assures me the yew continues to flourish.

I have also discovered that some of these old Scottish castle sites are ripe for development. It is to be hoped that the developers and new owners are aware that these historic yews are exceedingly rare. A Swiss couple have recently bought part of Lennox Castle – it raises the question of whose job is it to ensure that they understand the importance of their old yew?

Old Yews in France

In 2000 I spent a week visiting some of the finest yews in northern France. In every case it was obvious that these trees were highly regarded; there was none of the neglect so commonly seen at so many of our own yew sites. 20 French locations now have entries in the Gazetteer page – most with photographs.

Discovery of more 'significant' yews outside of churchyards

There have been some notable finds during the past months. Since privacy must be respected, there are now sites that appear in the Gazetteer as eg. Hampshire-private location 1.

It is more important than ever that the land owners concerned are aware of owning a part of history. At one site it was reported to me that the present owner's father had felled the largest of the yews because it was 'looking a mess'. Do we continue to allow this to happen? Is there anything we can do to stop it?

Along with Peter Andrews, I was taken to see old yews at Ashampstead Common. It was particularly interesting to compare a stump of woodland yew with 197 rings in a girth of only 6' 1" with churchyard yews that grew only a mile away in Yattendon churchyard - one with a girth of 5' 6" in 104 years and another 7' 8" in 118 years. The implication is that the woodland specimens growing in poor soil might be much older than we think.

Perhaps it is time for Defra, who I understand provide payment for looking after exceptional hedges, should allow farmers, with for instance ancient marker yews on their land, an allowance to ensure that these historic trees are no longer grubbed up.

I was invited to visit Hanchurch Yews – which must rate in the top 20 of special yew sites in England. No fewer than 23 old yews mark the boundary of the rectangular raised garden at this enigmatic site.

Historic postcards

It seems somewhat ironic that the best collection of old photos and postcards is held in Germany. Our thanks to Christian Wolf for allowing us to use them on the web site.

Production of CD/Book

I have just bought a better quality scanner so that my photographic collection is properly recorded. I am working on ways of presenting the vast amount of data I have collected over the last 10 years, so that there is a permanent record of our priceless yew heritage

Tree Officers

A day spent with a Tree Officer in Wales highlighted the difficulties of how to maintain old yews both in and outside of churchyards - when there is no money to be spent having the job done properly.

While we were looking at a fine non-churchyard specimen with a TPO – age about 300 - 400 years and in a prominent position in the village of Llandybie, the irate land owner arrived. He has been given permission to build a house on the plot but because of a TPO has to leave the tree in situ. This means building a smaller house and therefore making less profit. His attitude was ‘if its 400 years old, why are you making such a fuss, its had long enough’. There were signs that attempts had already been made to damage the tree – and were a bulldozer to stray off the main road it could be quickly uprooted.

I heard recently of a judge who fined a developer for removing protected trees. The sum he was fined was the same as the additional profit made because the trees were felled. Can anyone verify the truth of this story; surely it is what should happen in every case?

Tree officers are dealing with ever more absurd requests to fell yews (and probably other trees as well). My experience to date is that the more absurd requests, like pigeon droppings being trodden into nearby shops, are rightly being turned down.

Llangathen

This illegally felled yew saga continues. Documentation has been sent to the Carmarthenshire County Council solicitors to decide whether or not to prosecute the Church in Wales. I have no reason to believe this will happen - it is likely that the County Council has enough problems without antagonising the Church. However since this was a tree with protected status we are hoping that there will at least be a full apology from the vicar responsible for the felling as well as from the Church in Wales.

I have recently heard that all of the churches in this area have received the strictest instructions not to touch any of their yews without first informing the Tree Officer.

Eibenfreunde

Thomas Scheeder, the driving force behind Eibenfreunde, was very ill last year and a full account of Eibenfreunde’s 2006 visit to see the yews of Southern England is still eagerly awaited.

The pace of change

This continues unabated. The 800 sites originally in our Gazetteer has risen to over 1100, the number of location photos has increased from 85 to 300. A further 200 individual yews are recorded – the number now stands at 1300, and 730 of these (up from 450) have a photographic record.

Churchyard yews web page

This is a new web page. The first two articles, Fragmentation and Propped Yews, were originally written to (successfully) help save one of Wales's oldest yews at Cenarth.

In June articles on individual yews at Payhembury and Yattendon will be added. In the pipeline are articles on Fallen yews, Hollowing, the law as it relates to churchyard yews, the multiple yew sites of Wales, Statistical information.....

Chilterns Mapping

Take a look at http://www.chilternsaonb.org/caring/stwp_sites.asp

This is the best example of an interactive map I have come across. It would be wonderful if funding could be found to do something similar on a county by county basis.

Beltingham

Fred Hageneder, Paul Greenwood and myself met at Beltingham to attend a concert celebrating the yews in this churchyard – close to the village of Haltwhistle, the geographical centre of Britian. In music, prose and verse, including Fred playing his yew harp, this was a fitting climax to considerable work with partially sighted people from Newcastle. A book *Sacred Yew: The Ancient Roots of Beltingham* has been written by the Hexham Club for Visually Impaired People.

Fred's Book

Yew: A History has now been published. If this book does not prove to be the catalyst that alerts us to the unique yew heritage we have in Britain, then I fear nothing will, and we will continue to watch over the decline in numbers of these ancient trees. My own work will then become a mere record for future generations of what we once had.

A new web page “Yew Stands in Europe” presently contains information collected by Fred for his book. As new information is gathered this will be updated.

Taxus Conservation Project

A 4th year student at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh is writing a thesis which involves compiling a “strategy action plan for the implementation of a ‘conservation hedge’ comprised of *Taxus* species, with an emphasis on *Taxus baccata*. This is part of the International Conifer Conservation Programme coordinated from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

“It is projected that this hedge will contain plants grown from wild-collected seed of *Taxus* species within their natural ranges, and also plants grown from cuttings taken from a selection of Britain’s heritage Yews.”

He has asked for the involvement of the Ancient Yew Group.

Yew research

Various people have been involved in sending yew samples from British woodland and churchyard sites to Professor Paule of the Faculty of Forestry in Slovakia. He is attempting to trace the movement of yew across Europe since the last Ice Age. We were pleased that the owners of private woodlands realised the importance of this research and provided samples of foliage needed for the research.

A second project, led by Drs. David Neale in California, and Santiago Gonzales Martinez in Madrid, is looking at the ‘evolutionary distance between conifer species’. Dr. Berthold Heinze (Federal Research Centre for Forests, Natural Hazards and Landscape, Austria) is gathering specimens from across Europe for this project – and has asked me to provide seed samples for this project.