

# EIBENFREUNDE – Yew field trip to England - 10<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> August 2006

led by Tim Hills



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Eibenfreunde – Friends of the Yew – was founded in 1994 following the publication of *Die Eibe (The Yew)* by Dr. Thomas Scheeder. Membership has grown to more than 550.

As well as providing an outlet for world wide scientific research in its annual publication, *Der Eibenfreund*, the group organises site visits throughout the year. In addition a major excursion is planned annually for members to visit yew stands in countries as far afield as China and the West Caucasus Mountains. In 2006 it was England's turn to organise and host an extended field trip.

38 Eibenfreunde members from Germany, Switzerland and Austria were able to take part. Their number included botanists, foresters and dendrologists, several of whom have published papers about their yew research. We intend that some of this research should become available to a wider audience on our new Eibenfreunde web page.

Below is a brief introduction to the 2006 excursion. More information and photographs will become available in due course.

## WOODLAND SITES

Kingley Vale, Newland's Corner, Druid's Grove, Butser Hill and a private woodland in Wiltshire were visited.

At **Kingley Vale** we were accompanied by Richard Williamson, author of *Kingley Vale: The Great Yew Forest* and the assistant park ranger, James Giles. As the highest point of our guided tour we overlooked vast acreages of yew forest and were shown a memorial stone dedicated to the botanist Sir Arthur Tansley. In 1911 he stood here with his German colleague professor Drude, who is said to have remarked: "You did not tell me that you were going to show me the finest yew forest in Europe".

The two discussed that such important sites had no legal protection and years later Tansley was to found the British Ecological Society. He is often described as the father of the ecology and conservation movements in this country.

It seems fitting that such an important yew site should have been chosen to commemorate this event.

It is hoped that Eibenfreunde's visit almost 100 years later might have a similar impact and become the catalyst that leads at last to the proper protection of our old yews. It seems extraordinary that in Britain we do not celebrate our yew heritage, while our visitors who have studied yew populations all over the world have no doubt of the uniqueness of Britain's yews.

We owe a debt of gratitude to people like Richard Williamson, who at one time was instructed to fell a quarter of his 'Great Yew Forest' (about 7500 trees). His courage in saying no means that Drude's 'finest yew forest' survives intact. We cannot say the same about the ancient yews destroyed on land at the Alice Holt Forest in Hampshire.

Our guide at **Druid's Grove** was Graham Manning, Area Ranger for Surrey Wildlife Trust. He led us through young yews growing at the woodland edge to the great ancient specimens growing on the steep slopes either side of the path through the main grove. Graham also introduced to us Stephen Glasspool, Countryside Ranger for Brockham Lime Works. At this site thousands of yews were planted to replace the 200 year old specimens destroyed in the storms of 1987 and 1991. Stephen, who has a long contract to manage this site, also brought some yew bows for us to examine



Stephen Glasspool demonstrates modern yew bow © Christian Wolf

**Butser Hill** is now part of the Queen Elizabeth Country Park and owned by Hampshire County Council. Its status is recognised both in its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and as a National Nature Reserve. More recently it has been proposed by the Government as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which would recognise its importance from a European perspective.

Steve Peach's power point presentation outlining the site's history was followed by an opportunity to see at first hand the subtle changes in land use. It is good to know that the yews of Butser Hill are in safe hands.



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The management of **Newland's Corner** is shared. A part on land owned by the Duke of Northumberland is managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust. The remainder, owned by Guildford Borough Council, is managed by their own Parks and Countryside department. We were grateful that Bob Crompton from Surrey Wildlife Trust Countryside Services could join us and share his detailed knowledge of the site. His planned tour took us through regeneration and small yews, culminating at the largest yews in the grove. As this was our last day it provided a fitting climax to the whole trip.

### HILL FORT SITES

Two contrasting Hill Fort sites were visited. The privately owned **Merdon Castle** boasts several ancient yews growing both on the outer and the inner rings of the fortress. Adjacent to the hill fort was a plantation of yews that appeared to be about 200 years old, while on a slope close to the site entrance dozens of heavily browsed yews struggled to reach a height at which they might become viable.

**Danebury Hill**, in the care of Hampshire County Council, has fine open views across the surrounding countryside. Its Site of Special Scientific Interest designation does not include the yews, which grow mainly in a densely wooded area below the fortification. Those on open land close to the hill fort have had numerous low branches removed in an attempt to allow more light to reach the ground, supposedly encouraging grass to grow beneath the trees and prevent soil erosion. Since SSSI status means that Hampshire County Council have to "obtain consent from English Nature to carry out any task that is likely to damage the site", it must be assumed that English Nature are aware of this heavy handed tree management.

### CHURCHYARD SITES

No visit to England would be complete without visiting some of our immense churchyard specimens. The following were visited: **South Hayling, Warblington, West Tisted, Itchen Abbas, Breamore and Tandridge**. Our thanks to the following for greeting us so warmly and opening their churches: Richard Brand at Tandridge, John Bouldin at Itchen Abbas, Colin Bushby at South Hayling and Andrew Pearson at Warblington.



The Tandridge Yew © Christian Wolf

The Waverley Abbey site was visited to see the old yew growing on its ruined walls. This English Heritage site marks the first Cistercian settlement in Britain, founded in 1128. After the Abbey was suppressed by Henry VIII in 1536 it became a source of local building materials.

## YEW AVENUES

We visited two of England's celebrated yew avenues, both on private land. At **Chilton Candover** the two lines of yew 40 yards apart are thought to date from 1670 or earlier and stretch for almost a mile.



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We were also taken by Sue Marriott, the owner, to see a partially sunken Norman crypt, only discovered when the site, adjacent to the yew avenue, was excavated in 1927.

The second avenue is more correctly described as a line of yews. This site is part of the Duke of Northumberland's estate at **Albury** in Surrey. It is considered to have been planted by John Evelyn when he designed the gardens in the 1660s. 130 yews survive and there are 37 stumps. The future management of the trees is under consideration and the opinion of Eibenfreunde members will be passed to the estate management team.



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## ARBORETUM

A visit to the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens was intended to provide a break from the yew. However Wolfgang Bopp, the curator, had asked that we look at yews growing on the Garden's boundary with Ampfield Wood. Concensus of opinion was that the oldest here was likely to be well over 500 years, and the trees have therefore been added to our data base.

We were grateful to head gardener Fran Zaenglein for giving up her time to provide a guided tour – for once a translator was not necessary. She accepted, on behalf of the arboretum, a yew and a wild service tree, brought from Switzerland to maintain the Eibenfreunde tradition of planting a yew to commemorate their international visits.

A yew was also planted in the grounds of King Alfred's Campus at the University of Winchester.

Eibenfreunde member Thomas Kellner, who was responsible for bringing these tree gifts to England, has returned to Germany with 20 cuttings from ancient British yews. These cuttings were taken as part of the Conservation Foundation's *Yews for the Millennium* campaign, which has already distributed more than 8000 such trees to parishes throughout Britain. In about 5 years time when they are ready for planting out we can be sure that in a country where the yew is a protected species, the planting ceremonies will be well publicised and we can be sure the trees will be looked after with pride.

## CONFERENCE

A half day conference was addressed by AYG members Toby Hindson, Paul Greenwood and Fred Hageneder. It was also attended by AYG contributory members Russell Cleaver and Peter Andrews.

Toby Hindson had prepared 3 lectures: Alice Holt, Yew Dating Field Work Methodology and Yew Dating and Stages of Growth. Paul Greenwood spoke about the yews growing wild in Upland Britain. It is hoped that transcripts of these lectures will eventually be available on our web site. Fred Hageneder not only acted as interpreter throughout this 2½ hours but found sufficient stamina to conclude events with a lecture and slides of yews in Turkey and Sardinia, the latter being the proposed venue for Eibenfreunde's international visit in 2008.

## UNIVERSITY of WINCHESTER - King Alfred Campus

A special vote of thanks for the excellent facilities provided by this college. Their attention to detail, unfailing civility and willingness to alter plans at short notice contributed to making Eibenfreunde's 2006 Field Trip a richly rewarding and unforgettable experience.