



In the serene churchyard of St. Cuthbert's, Beltingham, Northumberland, stand three notable yew trees. The church itself however is both very beautiful and unique, being the finest example of the 15th century Perpendicular style in the county. It was reported in the *Hexham Courant* (Sat., 25th October, 1884) that the famous Catholic Bishop of London, Nicolas Ridley, martyred in 1555, may have been baptised here as he was born only a few miles away (although another village called Dilston also make a strong claim to this distinction) but is specifically commemorated in Beltingham church by a 16th century marble stone near the vestry door asking parishioners to pray for his soul.

However, the article also mentions another reason why the place is important by the comment;

"The churchyard is remarkable for the presence of a yew tree of venerable age and still bearing foliage".

This male yew stands to the north of the church and is of particular significance and which the Parish Guide states is;

".....at least 900 years old according to reliable records. It is still vigorous, although hollow and clamped with an iron band".

In actual fact there are two iron bands as shown in the image below:



The ancient yew to the north of the church at Beltingham  
photo © Paul Greenwood/Yew-Trees

Parish Records also state that a respected antiquarian society reported to the Church Restoration Committee (after a visit in May 1883), that the main fabric of the building was of 15th cent. origin, but with older parts dating to *circa* 1260. Given this conclusion then the church was seemingly built in the shadow of a yew already there - if the yew indeed has an origin at least 900 years ago. Certainly it has all the visual characteristics of a particularly ancient and *regenerating* yew tree. What is also of telling significance in the report is the phrase:

“It is not outside the bounds of possibility that Cuthbert preached at this spot. Another indication of the antiquity of the site is the *three* (author’s italics) yews in the churchyard, evidently many centuries in age, the one on the north side being at least 900 years old according to reliable records”.

The other two, a male and female pairing, stand to the south and south west of the church and are believed to be much younger than the other. However a 19th century opinion that these trees are ‘many centuries’ old (rather than a few) could well mean an estimate of 400-500 years old then and with the possibility of being older. In any event the three yews at Beltingham are clearly very significant yew.

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Given that these are comments from over a century ago, it indicates an estimated age for the yew to the north of the church as before 950. Intriguingly, any earlier Christian building here in the Saxon era (*circa* 450 - 950) is by ‘repute’ only according to the Parish Guide and significantly the antiquarian report makes no mention of one either. Recent investigations by Libby Scott and assisted by Pam Grant (author of the Tynedale Tree Alphabet, Crafrite, Haltwhistle - featuring yew) and carried out with the assistance of local archaeological experts and historians have confirmed that no investigation at Beltingham has ever found any trace of a church fabric earlier than the present stone one. The best that can be said is that if there was any earlier building here of, then it would probably have been made with a wooden framework; but even then is apparently none of the usual evidence, such as post holes. So we must conclude for the time being that there was no Saxon church here at all.

What does exist on site from the 7th century (*circa* 680), and noted in the antiquarian society’s report, is the remaining shaft of a Saxon cross, similar in design to the famous example found at Ruthwell, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland. As there are no indications that this cross may have been brought from elsewhere and re-erected, it clearly shows that Beltingham was recognised as a sacred site in that era. Furthermore the actual shaft has the remains of two Roman altars built into its base acting as plinths, which perhaps would date this as a sacred site in the 2nd century when the Romans arrived. Interestingly pre Christian Roman religion was Pagan and particularly venerated the yew at the midwinter festival of Saturnalia (which became Christmas) involving worship of the goddess Hecate. It seems quite plain therefore that Romano - British and Saxon society actually inherited a sacred place because, even before the arrival of the Romans, there is evidence to support why Beltingham was a centre for what can best be termed native British or ‘Druid’ activity.



The remains of a 7th cent. Saxon cross to the east of the church with the yew to the north.  
Photo © Paul Greenwood/Yew-Trees. All Rights Reserved

This was alluded to as long ago as 1840 in The Rev John Hodgson's Northumberland - Newcastle Antiquarian Society, Part 2 Volume III, p 335, when he wrote :

"Could it be proved that in British days, there was a druidical grove here, the name might be derived from "bael tins" which in Irish, means fire of the sun, or the month of May in which large fires were made in honour of the sun's return from the vernal solstice to regenerate the earth?".

It is worth mentioning that the Rev. Hodgson was Vicar of Hartburn, (near Morpeth, Northumberland) where a notable yew thought to be ancient was recorded by John Lowe in his book *Yew - Trees of Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1897. Hartburn was also the Knights' Templar headquarters for the whole of the North of England and was a place of pilgrimage in the Medieval and Middle Ages era, as some sacred pools exist nearby at Longwitten with a tradition of curing diseases of the eye. Northumbrian tradition also records the well known folk tale that in the Middle Ages Guy, Earl of Warwick, 'slew a dragon' there. As more is found out about the locations of ancient yews it is being discovered that a surprising number of churchyard sites associated with such myths and legends contain ancient yew. Therefore the Rev Hodgson may have been well aware of an ancient yew at Hartburn perhaps also occupying a spot of pre Christian sanctity.

His speculation is therefore quite understandable and reasonably considers a pre Roman era connection (i.e. before the latter 1st century) which does suggest a reason why the site would be 'sacred' then; i.e. in the sense of a place where the passage of the seasons and weather patterns were acutely observed (especially via astronomy) - and thus a 'temple' or otherwise cultural focus of learning. Hence, for example, crucial calendrical periods for planting and harvest could be calculated, checked and signalled to the rest of the surrounding society by the use of signal fires first kindled here at precise moments of solar significance in the sky. The use of this process as a long distance information transmitter is a tradition as old as modern humanity itself, and was recently used for celebration purposes in the Royal Golden Jubilee of 2003. Of course the possession of such scientific knowledge made Druids in their day as much 'magicians' within their society as the scientific 'magicians' of our 21st century society are today; whether involved in nuclear physics, space exploration technology, or computer generated virtual imaging in the cinema; where the latter's visual achievements are often described as being 'magical'.

It is an increasingly well-known fact today that 'Druid groves' were remarkable centres of scientific learning, justice, tribal administration, artistic expression in prose and music, and therefore focuses of spiritual teaching and inspiration. For a considerable period up to the 11th century many north western European royal and aristocratic families such as the Frankish Carolingians sent their children to be educated at the 'university' of Slane, near modern Dublin in Ireland. Throughout the Dark Ages era history records Ireland as a beacon of light and learning in the West. In particular, Irish and British Druid influenced society had, over the course of millennia of study, gleaned quite outstanding levels of insight and knowledge into natural sciences; for example of solar, planetary and stellar cycles and rhythms. Any henge or similar stone monuments surviving today are testaments to this by the modern recognition of the ancient functions they carried out with astonishing levels of accuracy, e.g. in the prediction of eclipses and tracking those traditional harbingers of ill luck and pestilence, comets. The heliocentric principle of this solar system where everything orbits the sun was therefore known in ancient Britain (and, in fact, all over the planet) at least 1500 years before Copernicus reintroduced it to Western Europe. It is well recorded that some of the greatest minds of ancient Greece such as Pythagoras were often in discussion with 'sages' from Britain and that both later classical Greek and Roman commentators and historians up until the first centuries of this era and later, credited Druids (or the "white robed philosophers") with the actual 'invention' of philosophy.

It is often quoted nowadays that the Fortingall Yew, Tayside, Scotland (see *Gazetteer* for details) is over 2000 years old and, despite a lack of empirical scientific evidence so far, may be as much as 5000 - 6000 years old, due to its huge size of over 50 ft (15 m approx.) girth. In addition to these claims for a great age, however, it has another significance in that it stands in a place considered to be 'at the centre' of Scotland. Whilst this may not be exactly the case today given Scotland's modern north-south boundaries, there are correlations between Fortingall and the centre of the east-west margins of the country which are both bordered by sea. This claim was mentioned in *The Sacred Yew* (Chetan and Brueton, Penguin Arkana, 1994) and as recently as 2003 in *Heritage Trees of Scotland* (Rodger, Stokes and Ogilvie, Tree Council). Examination of the geography of Scotland certainly bears this out.

Buchan Ness on the North Sea coast of north eastern Scotland, (just south of Peterhead) and the Ardnamurchan peninsula (north of the isle of Mull) on the western Atlantic seaboard, are the limits of the Scottish mainland; and Fortingall stands very close to the mid point. Furthermore, an east - west axis through Fortingall itself shows it to be at the centre of the mainland south of the Great Glen, the great geological fault running north east from Fort William to Inverness, containing Loch Ness. The lands north and west of the fault are actually parts of islands which drifted eastwards across the Atlantic from modern Nova Scotia in Canada about 500 million years ago, and collided with the lands now to the south and east. This south eastern area however is itself bordered to the east by the North Sea between Arbroath and Montrose, and to the west between Appin and Duror upon Loch Linnhe, which is a sea loch to the south of Fort William which connects it to the Sound of Mull and beyond to the Atlantic Ocean..

Hence the mainland of Scotland's east-west land margins, and also Fortingall's specific east-west axis, do indeed mark a 'centre' of Scotland existing in this locality. Further traditional evidence perhaps is that Fortingall stands at the foot of Schiehallion, the most sacred mountain of the Pictish people. Throughout human cultures world-wide either natural mounds, hills or mountains, (or man made replicas such as pyramids and stepped temples) occupy the sacred centres of territories. The mountain's name is said to mean the "fairy hill of the Caledonians", i.e. the people of the great northern wildwood of Celyddon, who ruled mainland Scotland (known as Alba - the 'white land') until its unification with the south western regions of Irish- Scottic Dalriada (modern Argyll and Lorne) under King Kenneth mac Alpin in the 9th century.

Significantly the east - west axis of Fortingall is the direction of the passage of the sun in the sky and therefore it is easy to see that the centre of such an axis within a tribal territory, or greater confederation of society with a central figure such as a High King or Queen, would be important to Druids at least from a solar scientific perspective, and probably also a place of royal investiture. Moreover, and recorded as still occurring into Victorian times, was the use of the Fortingall Yew for kindling sacred fires at summer's end; the ancient festival of Samhain . This is better known in the Christian Gregorian calendar as Halloween and All Souls (from October 31st to November 2nd) and the sacred yew-fire was the basis of purification and fertility rituals by the use of faggots being taken from it into the surrounding fields.

Fortingall is a place of ancient sanctity indeed, traceable to the Neolithic era and featuring a wealth of archaeological evidence especially via the feature on site known as the "Mound of the Dead". This is also a salutary example of yew being planted long ago on the sacred mounds which are a proven feature at many prehistoric burial sites, many of which in turn became enclosed as churchyards, Fortingall itself being proof. It also has a claim to possessing certainly the oldest tree, never mind yew, in Britain and can also claim to possess the oldest tree in Europe. But what has this all got to do with Beltingham? And the answer is - maybe everything.

Only in recent years has the 'magic' of satellite mapping technology revealed that the nearest town to the exact geographical centre of the U.K. mainland is Haltwhistle, a few miles west of Beltingham. However Beltingham is the mother parish of the area, and so within the very parish at the centre of all Britain stands a yew tree thought to be at least 900 years old, and another pair who are certainly "many" (some sources say "several") centuries old - and may therefore perhaps even be ancient yew themselves. It is beyond the scope of this article at present to explore the full picture being revealed concerning the three notable yews at Beltingham, as further investigations are scheduled to be carried out during 2006. including seeking permission for dendrological and DNA analysis. Therefore this will be covered in an expansion of this article at a future date.



The bizarre appearance of the yew to the south of the church. The cause of this damage is not known but despite appearances this hollow yew is healthy.



The yew to the south west of the church. Different again in appearance with a cluster of epicormic growth, cause unknown.

A link with Fortingall and Beltingham is therefore very apparent - the yew acting as an axis mundi and around which 'all life revolves' in that the yew acts as a 'centre' for the culture around it. After enclosure of these sacred sites on which churches were later to be built, it is a common description of rural village life for centuries afterwards that it 'centred' or 'revolved' (as so many still do) around the Christian calendar celebrating what were ancient Pagan seasonal festivals such as May Day, the ancient festival of Beltane or Beltain and the first day of summer. Unless Beltingham can be absolutely proven to be named after a Saxon or Romano-British person (or whoever) rather than Beltane, there is clear evidence to suggest that in being at a proven geographical 'centre' - and also standing on a mound above the North Tyne - that the site was utilised for a seasonal fire festival as was Fortingall, and also perhaps to specifically calculate and announce summer's beginning to the surrounding countryside. But what else is there at Beltingham which would support why it would be important in the British Druid era as a fixed seasonal observational centre? Why would one have to be there, and not elsewhere? And to answer this is perhaps the most astonishing piece of evidence supporting Beltingham as an exceptionally important place during those far off times. And why today it should perhaps receive greater recognition.

Upon planet Earth it is only at the latitudes of 55 degrees North or South of the equator that a solar phenomenon can be observed called the 'Square Solar Year'. This means that if someone is stood facing south (or in any cardinal direction) then the points of the midwinter and midsummer sunrises and sunsets form a perfect square within the circle of the surrounding horizon. Beltingham stands at the southern limit of this latitude and, by also being at the centre of mainland Britain, then it shows firm evidence to suggest why the location would have been of inestimable interest to the solar science of the Druids and hence supports the Rev. Hodgson's postulation. It is only the latest 21st century science, some century and a half later after his comment which has inadvertently given some credence to his musing, and which suggests that those who came after any possible Druid presence at the sacred place of Beltingham continued to hold the place in high esteem. Furthermore, that the Saxons inherited an ancient British place name and did not change the sound of it but simply added their own suffix; the 'ham', the 'place' of Beltane. But there is perhaps more to the connection with Beltane; and it is that the ancient British terms bile/ bhile and tann also mean a 'sacred tree' and 'red' respectively. As the above image shows, the well known yew at Beltingham is also a noticeably red tree. So there is even more to suggest the tantalising idea that the Rev. Hodgson's insight was right - and that the main yew at Beltingham may well indeed be considerably older than 900 years.

As seen at the beginning of this article it is thought that St. Cuthbert may have preached here in the middle of the Saxon era 1300 years ago. What he could not have done was preached in a church (as archaeology - or rather a lack of it - seems to confirm) because Cuthbert was a Celtic Christian schooled in the original Columban tradition based on the Hebridean island of Iona in Scotland. This model followed the Druid principle of worship in the open air and therefore often utilised yew for practical reasons of shade and shelter necessary for preaching and as a private, personal retreat for times of deep contemplation and meditation. St. Columba himself did so under the Great Yew of Bernera in the 6th century (see Articles page - St. Columba's Yew, Bernera for details), as have many multi denominational Christian preachers since; such as Wishart, Fox, and Knox as late as the 16th and 17th centuries. The question is, therefore, was there a yew on site of sufficient size for Cuthbert's purposes? If there was, then how old was it in his day? Before that period there is the archaeological evidence in the cross shaft to suggest that the site was indeed perhaps utilised for Pagan Roman worship. The crucial factor here is that Pagan Roman religion was also essentially Sun centred as Emperor Constantine himself, who codified Roman Catholic Christianity in the 4th century, was a worshipper of the Sol Invictus cult, which means "The Unconquerable Sun".

Hence when the Romans arrived at Beltingham they could have found something of immense spiritual and religious importance to their very own Pagan religious culture. Therefore they are most likely to have been assimilated into the inherent sanctity of the place because of precisely where it is, and seemingly a location where the arrival of summer could be calculated with exact precision; and furthermore like nowhere else south of the Tyne valley on the UK mainland, or north of the southern shores Clyde and Forth; which is where the latitude of 55 degrees North ends. Was it therefore announced to the rest of the land with a fire signal? Something the Romans had themselves long mastered for military rather than sacred purposes, and so the Druid fire festival tradition would not have been some strange practice to them. Then when the Romans withdrew, the period of Saxon or Romano-British influence which followed would have the knowledge that throughout the earlier centuries Beltingham was really special, a unique - perhaps vital - place.

As it seems that the Saxons did not build a church, they did erect a cross based on a Sun Wheel design. Hence the themes of fire and the sun are found throughout Beltingham's history, as at Fortingall, and long before any Christian church was erected on site. Perhaps this is what attracted Cuthbert because he was of a Christian persuasion which inherited much of the original Druid tradition developed in Ireland, which itself was influenced by Egyptian and Middle Eastern traditions such as the Egyptian style interlace patterns from the 7th century 'Book of Durrow' and on the stone of the North Cross at Ahenny, Co. Tipperary. And that ancient wisdom tradition was centred not only upon the sun, but so far as trees go, it was centred upon the yew. Therefore, do the two go hand in hand at Beltingham? Was a yew planted here by Druids, or their equivalent? Or were yew found naturally growing upon a mound at such a coincidental location?

It was also not only in life that Cuthbert is associated with Beltingham because long after his death and burial on Lindisfarne his body was disinterred in the wake of Viking raids. The story of its journey to eventual enshrinement at Durham cathedral in north east England (built on a steep mound above the river Wear) at what has become a world famous sacred site, is well documented elsewhere. However, upon that long journey it rested for some years at Beltingham, therefore implying that Beltingham was a sacred sanctuary of sorts. A trusted site? Perhaps particularly 'protected by God' for some reason? But at the time it seems there was no building to offer any sanctuary. So what could have? Is it too much to speculate that the yew might have provided sanctuary of some sort?

Certainly, as The Sacred Yew cites (amongst many other records confirming the phenomenon) there are many instances of hollow yews being used for hiding all manner of unwanted rubbish, but also other things more precious; including people not only hiding in yew, but holy people and hermits using them as homes - even itinerant families actually living in them. But a yew does not have to be hollow to provide shelter, as a yew canopy can provide it to the extent "equivalent to a thatched roof" as mentioned in the historical records relating the establishment of Fountains Abbey by Cistercian monks in the 12th century. They used a grove of yew as home (and presumably chapel) throughout any seasons the 'remote and uncouth wilderness' could throw at them, and survived to found one of Britain's most magnificent monastic sites.

Many biographies of Cuthbert affirm that he was famous in his day for living his life in extreme circumstances of self induced deprivation and mortification and thereby seeking to be as close to Nature, and thus God's Creation, as possible. Some of his measures included fasting to the point of serious starvation and standing in the icy waters of the North Sea up to his neck for hours whilst singing and chanting psalms with a broad smile upon his face. Therefore if there was an extant yew at Beltingham in his day (and a tree perhaps already 700 years old if its origin is in the pre Roman period) at least then if he visited he could well have found it an ideal temporary home - but also perhaps a personal oratory as well, as Columba did under the yew on Bernera.

However there is no historical evidence revealed by published research so far which specifically records a date for this particular yew other than that in the Parish Records. Hence it is a matter of conjecture as to how old prior to 950 it may be, (if it is) and whether indeed it ever met Cuthbert or any of his Saxon, Romano- British or Druid era spiritual predecessors. Dating the tree at around 1300 years and planted as a tribute in the Saxon era to Cuthbert in life (or perhaps as a memorial to his body being there) is another feasible and quite reasonable option to consider. Although the appearance of the tree itself suggests that it could be very ancient indeed its relatively small girth would probably preclude it from living up to the claim in the Parish Guide which states "It is said that the yews are probably the oldest in the country" (author's emphasis) i.e. the oldest in England. But once having conquered what was already Saxon Northumbria and then the Britons of Cumbria and Strathclyde by the 10th century, to the Angles (who give their name to England via Angle-land) Beltingham could have maintained a long upheld reputation with them as a sacred centre of solar worship. That is if it was an ancient British site concerning Beltane - and therefore an extant sacred/scientific and spiritual centre in the new 'Angle-land' stretching north from the Humber and Trent to the Clyde and Forth isthmus. So it may have been a geographically approximate, or even simply symbolic, 'centre' in this regard in the genesis of a greater territory of which, following expansion, the geographical centre has no longer remained in what have now become the extreme northern margins of later Saxon England and the southern borders of modern Scotland.

Leaving aside the debate whether or not the yew is 'the' oldest in England, it is surely fair to say that it could be one of the oldest so far identified. If it has an age of 2000 years plus and was indeed a Druid grove, then it definitely would be. However given Beltingham's history, and the other two equally significant yew (in that they occupy the same sacred enclosure) then it must at least be one of the most essential yew sites in the U.K., and clearly deserving special consideration, preservation and protection based on the evidence so far.

Dendrological analysis has been considered upon the main yew but would probably prove to be fruitless as the tree is obviously within a period of substantial regeneration. The trunk has fully hollowed long ago and is a mixture of ancient decaying heartwood and sapwood in the interior but the whole outer shell is being wrapped in fresh flows of sapwood and bark. Eventually the aperture into the hollow will disappear and the yew will look solid again, with no idea to the naked eye of the future that what is there is a completely regenerated trunk. The vitality of this regeneration can be seen by the amount the yew has gradually overgrown the iron bands since they were fitted approximately 50 years ago or so.

In the summer of 2005 concerned local cherishers of this yew, led by Libby Scott and including Pam Grant and others, contacted the Conservation Foundation wondering whether or not the new growth beginning to subsume the iron bands, and thus being absorbed into the fabric of the tree, was a cause for worry. Furthermore whether any remedial tree surgery or other treatment would be necessary to improve the situation as the lower band is at its limit of compass. This in itself was a worry due to potential costs being met by the Parish Council, and whether or not insurance premiums were also a factor affecting health and safety at the site.

After the Conservation Foundation swiftly referred the matter for further consultation, the consensus of opinion given to those concerned was that the yew will come to, and cause, no harm by being left entirely alone; as yew are proven to absorb all manner of debris and detritus into their trunks as they grow including stones, rocks and many man-made iron implements. They show, in almost all instances, that over time they cause no harm to the vigour of the yew concerned, as flower and aril yields to be seen on these trees year after year can testify. As the decay of iron takes centuries it is at an ideal pace for the yew to match as the forged metal reverts into the natural ore of iron oxide, meaning that any potential voids left by the iron are continually being filled by the yew at the rate they happen.



Fig 6 (left) shows the yew growth around the upper band and how attempts have been made to prevent the bands chafing the bark. Fig 7 (right) shows bark and wood beginning to over grow the lower band.

Full consideration and examination of the options available meant that those concerned were relieved to be able to choose to leave the yew alone; not merely to save money; but that it was the best decision for them to take based on knowledgeable opinion. More to the point it was in the best interests of this particular one of their three beloved yew trees in Beltingham's churchyard. A truly ancient sacred place it would appear, whatever the ages of the yews there today.

As to whether an exact age for the most famous yew at Beltingham will ever be successfully determined, without a document turning up or scientific advancements in dating yew tree wood, then it may remain forever unknown. But even if that is the case there is no doubt that a yew considered by reliable records to be over 900 years old is a priceless treasure; not only in the botanical sense, but also taking into account Beltingham's known history as well as the possibilities outlined in the evidence presented above. It is certainly a site of considerable potential for further research which might reveal more about some of what appear to be certainly amongst the most notable and sacred yews in England and probably within the whole of the UK. These three yews, with continued care and respect, could still be standing for the next millennium of human generations to marvel at...but most of all, hopefully, for them to cherish too; and to the same extent as they are now by the people who have, and do, respect their presence as being intrinsic to the extraordinarily special place which Beltingham is.

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