

This is an ancient site with an ancient yew and a 5th century inscribed stone standing close to the church porch. Visiting in 2005 I recorded its fragmented yew, a tree consisting of two living trunks and a dead hollow stump. The living sections appeared healthy, growing within a well maintained wall SE of the church. One section had hollows, in which portions of the original trunk could be seen, and a girth that encompassed all 3 pieces at the ground was 27' 1".

In 2006 I was informed that one of the two living fragments had fallen and as a result some people were calling for the felling of the rest of the tree. A site meeting was urgently arranged and the decision was taken to leave the fallen trunk in situ, since (1) it was very much alive and well connected to its root system (2) it was not interfering with any visited graves (3) it would be cheaper than getting it cut up and taken away (4) it was a living part of one of the oldest trees in Wales. Examples of trees where this has been the course of action are seen at Benington in Hertfordshire and at Cofton Hackett and Powick in Worcestershire. I was also asked to write an article for the local press, and it is reproduced below.

The Cenarth Yew - 2006

Wales has an abundance of ancient churchyard yews, particularly in the borderland counties of Powys and Monmouthshire. Of the 100 largest girthed yews so far recorded in Britain, no fewer than 40 grow in Wales – and the Cenarth Yew can be counted among these.

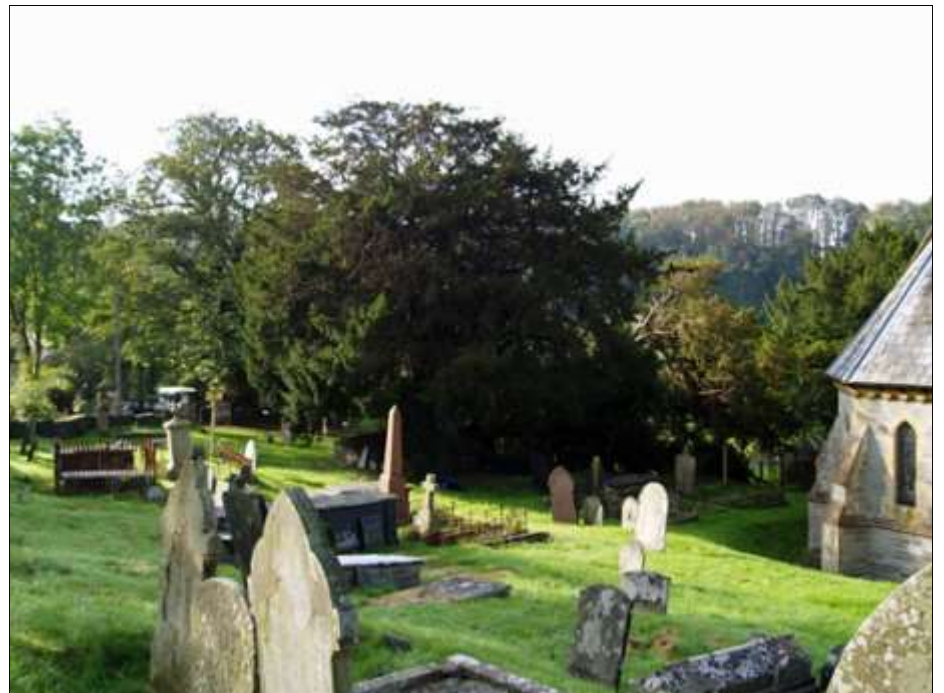
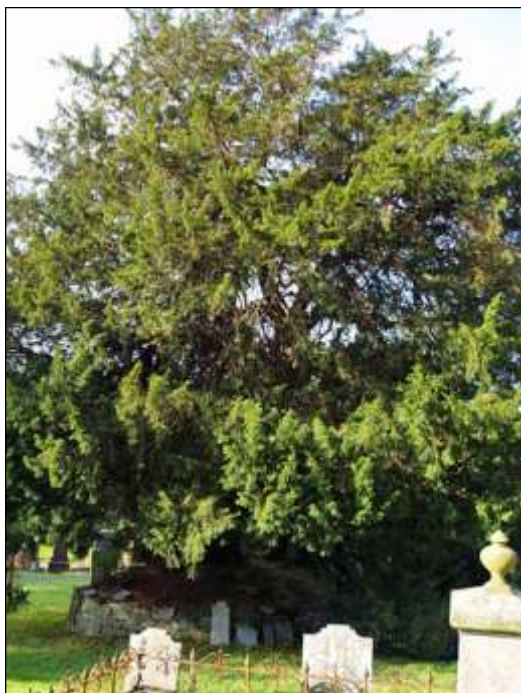
The Cenarth Yew has 'fragmented', a term used to describe a yew of which only a fragment (or several fragments) of the original tree remains. Such trees are some of our oldest specimens, often in the greatest need of protection because their unusual appearance can lead to misunderstanding about their state of health.

I was dismayed to discover in September 2006 that because one 'fragment' of the Cenarth Yew had leaned over and was now resting on the ground, the entire tree was threatened with felling. It is to the credit of all concerned that one of Wales's oldest trees has been saved.

Is it possible that the tree was planted by Saint Llawddog in the 6th century? Unfortunately its age will never be known, since like most ancient yews it is hollow and therefore there are no rings to count, or old wood to carbon date. We can be certain, however, that the Cenarth Yew has been growing for considerably more than 1000 years. The question we should really be asking is how long can it last? According to Alan Mitchell, who spent a life time learning and writing about trees, "there appears to be no theoretical end to this tree, no reason for it to die."

There is little doubt that the yew is indeed one of nature's marvels. When our ancestors settled in Wales after the last ice age, they would have been aware that the yew was the only large evergreen in the landscape and as such could be grown to mark settlements, routes, wells, springs and meeting places. Under its dense foliage they would have found a place where large numbers of people could gather and remain dry in all weathers, a meeting place to hold communal events, which must have included acts of celebration and thanksgiving. They would have known huge, gnarled specimens with hollow trunks and branches reaching the ground to anchor the tree. They would have observed how some of these branches took root and grew new trees. They would have seen life spring from parts of the tree that appeared to be dead and be aware of its seemingly indestructible nature. They would have been aware that this 'tree of life' was also a 'tree of death', poisonous in every part except for the fleshy aril (berry) surrounding the seed, though even the seed within the aril is poisonous. The Cenarth Yew incidentally is male and thus does not produce berries.

When the present work to make safe the surviving fragments has been completed the future of the Cenarth Yew, one of the oldest trees in Wales, should be assured.



The Cenarth Yew in July 2014

It was decided that leaving a section of tree lying on the ground was not compatible with the management needs of this churchyard. These last remains of the fallen fragment will soon be lost. Evidence that this leaning yew is a surviving fragment of a tree which once had a girth of 27' will rely on records such as this.

