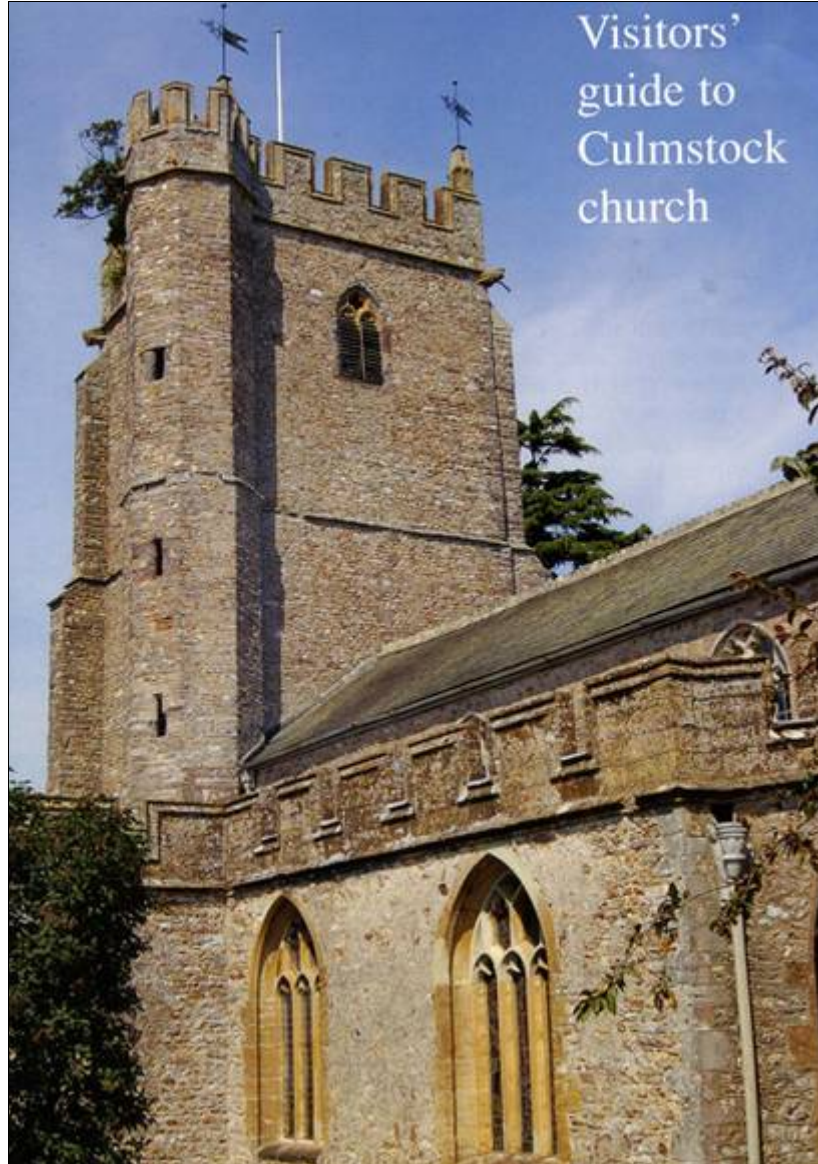


The Culmstock Yew

- P2/3 THE TAXUS ON THE TOWER by Margaret Bromwich
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2006 *Visitors' Guide to Culmstock Church* says of the Tower: "It is 68 feet high, including the parapets, and is thought to have been built in the 1300's. Three eroded gargoyles stretch outwards to take away rainwater. It had a spire which was dismantled by Samuel Baker in 1776, after which four weather-vane pinnacles were fixed at each corner. Culmstock is famed for its TOWER YEW TREE which certainly dates back to around 1750 and some people believe it dates from the building of the tower itself in medieval times."

THE TAXUS ON THE TOWER

by Margaret Bromwich

R.D.Blackmore, the famous novelist best known for *Lorna Doone*, lived in Culmstock from 1835-1841 and wrote in chapter 1 of 'Perlycross' -

".....for a time much longer than any human memory, a sturdy yew-tree had been standing on the topmost stringing-course, in a sheltering niche of the southern face....."

In White's *Devonshire Directory* of 1850 it says "a tower. . having a yew tree growing out of one of its sides" and again in 1857 "... the oldest inhabitant not being able to give any information respecting it, the conclusion therefore to arrive at is that it must be at least one hundred years old." So we've got back to 1750 at least.

Then there's the Raphael/Hulme case of inherited memory, when the total stranger Peter Hulme drew branches issuing from the top of the tower as it appeared in 'his' memory of 1613 onwards.

Fast-forward to 1926 when a directory says "a yew tree grows from the top of the church tower, and has been there between 400 and 500 years"; however this was drastically amended in 1939 when we get "a yew tree grows from the top of the church tower, and has been there about 150 years."

The Revd. Alexander Peter Turquand wrote a poem in July 1878 about Culmstock, praising the yew thus:

"From yon church tow'r a crown of yew
In mystic beauty grows,-
And none can tell how e'er it grew,
Or whence its verdure flows.
There, 'neath the topmost brink it thrives,
By secret channels fed,
Like saint of God, who strength derives
From Christ, the Church's Head."

In about 1900, an anonymous poem to the yew tree was published in a local newspaper. Called *A Culmstock Curiosity*, one of its 34-verses reads:

'The aged say no one can guess,
When it began to thrive;
The same in youth, no more nor less
Of the oldest man alive.'

* Read the full version on pp. 5/6



Well, I am going to have to guess, having read the following in a paper :-

“a yew tree had been tied to the top of Hampstead Town Hall on Haverstock Hill in north London to mark the completion of structural renovations. The medieval topping out ceremony, performed when the roof is about to be placed on a new building, is still practised by builders, it seems. The yew is said to displace any evil spirits before the roof is sealed.”

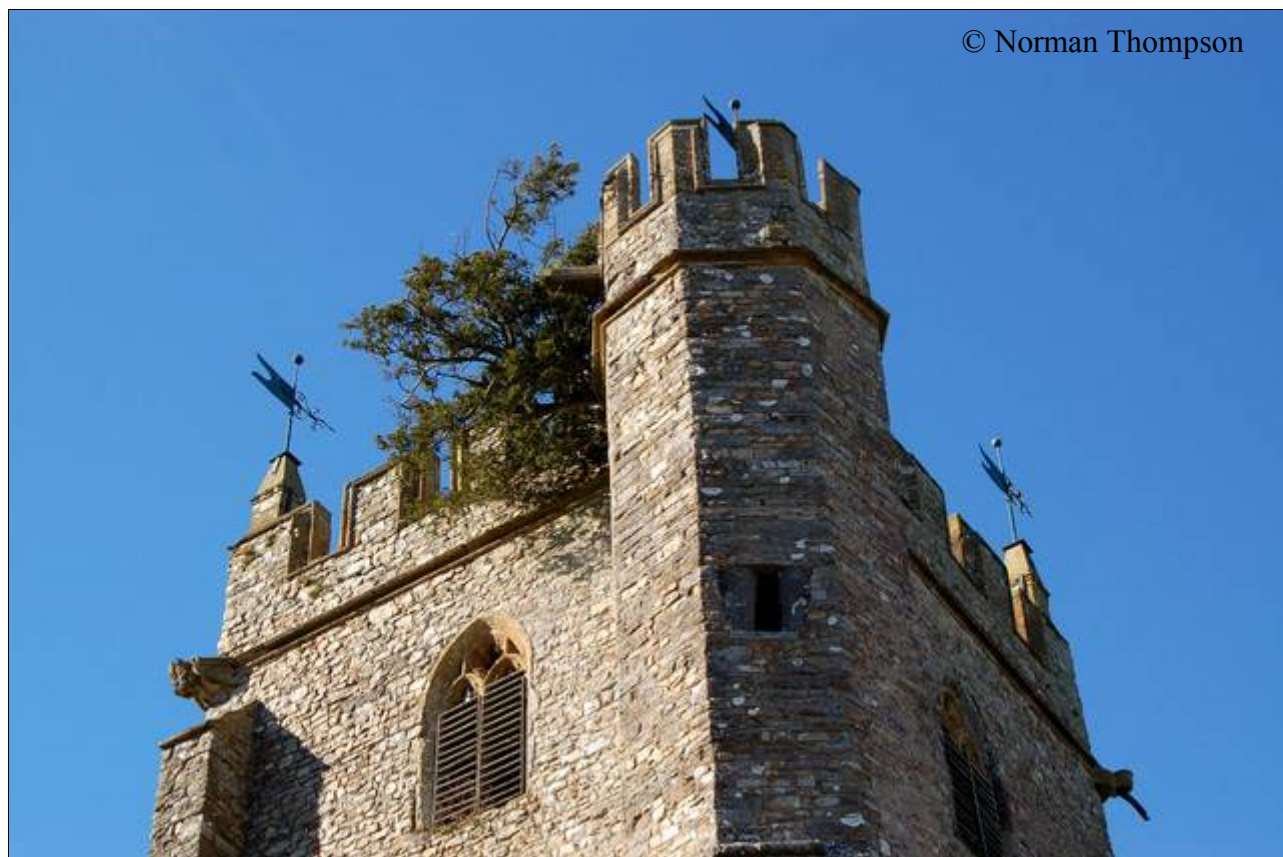
I suggest that our tower yew tree was planted there in perhaps the 1300s in a topping out ceremony, by the side, out the way of the spire. In ancient times the yew was considered the protective ‘lord of the home’ and in Ireland it was a sacred tree. Yew Sunday is the mediaeval name for Palm Sunday. Other churchtowers used to have yews, like Woodbury (Exmouth), Bicknoller, and Pitminster, but as far as I know we are now unique in having one.

What is also remarkable is that Frederick John Snell (1862-1935) thought it was dying in 1904 saying -

‘The tree is said to be “going back”, and we fear the impeachment is true. It shows undoubted signs of failure. Some of the upper branches have died and been removed, and those which remain appear to lack nourishment. In Temple’s boyhood (circa 1830) the boughs were strong enough to support a man, and a lad of fifteen, named Jones, is remembered as sitting out amongst the branches . . .’

As Captain Mainwaring would have said “STUPID BOY”, but it was more than stupid, for wretched Jones may have weakened those branches and caused them to die. This does indicate that through the centuries it has been trimmed to keep it getting out of hand. We have a remarkable inheritance here.

Margaret Bromwich



Additional information gathered by the Ancient Yew Group:

1892 *Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art, vol 24*

Notes and Queries 3rd S. vii. 364 The vicar (Rev.A.P.Turquand) of Culmstock informs the writer, that a yew tree is growing near the top of the south side of the church tower there, but shows signs of decay. Its age is uncertain, but an inhabitant, aged 87, informed him it was there in his grandfather's time. Seven or eight young seedlings have made their appearance in other parts of the tower...."

26th July 1972 Letter to Mr Royston Wells from Michael Hancock, Vicar of Culmstock

"The tree is still growing out of the top of the tower of All Saints' Church Culmstock. I have a note that the first mention of it was in 1850; but I cannot find the source of that statement. Recollections of very elderly people have been clear that their parents had always known the tree. It is a reasonable inference that it got there after the spire was taken down in 1776.

It is not likely that it was deliberately planted. I discount the statement in Arthur Mee's book on Devon that it was a votive offering to the Blessed Virgin by the pious men of Culmstock. I suggest that either a seed was carried by a bird or a seed was incorporated in mortar used in repairs.

The tree is about five feet in height and the trunk grows out of the masonry. It is in the angle between the stair turret, which is at the south east corner of the tower, and the south side. The roots extend sideways along the south and east sides — most of the way to the respective corners.

The tree is a common yew (*taxus baccata*). I understand that the yew flourishes in a high lime soil and will grow on a thin soil above a layer of flints. The tower is built of flint rubble masonry. It is safe to say that the mortar used for all the external pointing would be a lime and sand mixture.

The two commonest questions that I am asked about the tree are:

first of all, "doesn't your architect think that it should be removed because it is causing damage?" and secondly, "do the roots go all the way to the ground?" What the architect feels is that the tree is a very unusual and interesting feature which is not at present causing so much damage that it cannot be contained by repairs at intervals of some years. I do not think that a tree of such a size would have a root system extending downwards for a distance of some sixty to seventy feet."

24th May 1998 The story I was told at the time of my visit was that when the spire was removed (1776), four weather vanes were cemented onto the tower. Yew seeds were mixed into the mortar and a tree germinated and began to grow, producing by the 1830's an established tree of 18" girth. In hot summers water is taken up the tower to ensure that the tree does not dry out, helping to ensure its survival.—Tim Hills

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A CULMSTOCK CURIOSITY.

William Doble c1900: "The following verses were communicated to me with permission to publish by a Culmstock gentleman who has taken a kindly interest in my endeavours to bring the parish history to light."

I have prepared a little song
To occupy your leisure.
I'll promise it shall not be long,
And hope 'twill give you pleasure.

We have no huge historic stones,
Sad monuments of war,
On fields once strewn with human bones
And rich with human gore.

No ruins here of castle grey
By knightly Norman seen,
Where relics old deep buried lay
Beneath bright ivy green.

But yet we have a wondrous tree,
Such as the curious love,
Found not in land, nor in the sea,
Nor in the sky above.

You'll find it not in meadows green.
Nor by the bubbling rill,
With others in some hedgerow seen,
Nor reared by human skill.

Though not suspended from above,
Not rooted deep in earth,
Unsheltered, still it seems to love
The spot that gave it birth.

'Tis no enigma given to you,
To test your guessing power;
But as a sunbeam, clear 'tis true,
And seen at any hour.

Where, say you, is this wondrous tree,
Not reared by human power,
That's not in earth, or sky, or sea?
Up in our old Church tower.

That yew tree green, long has it been,
An optical attraction,
Here, nature oft unbending seen,
Permits a strange infraction.

That yew tree is a novel sight
As jackdaws on it perch,
Grown from the stones toward the light,
The south side of the Church.

When figs on thistles thick as sloes,
And grapes on thorns do flourish,
Then we might think that old grey stones
Would vegetation nourish.

What splendid crops our soil must yield
If stones produce a tree;
To own a house within a field
A Paradise must be.

A sight more strange cannot be seen,
Though you the country scour,
Than that queer nodding yew tree green
Upon the old Church tower.

"How came it there?" is often asked;
The answer is conjecture.
The same would be tho' were I asked
To give a lengthy lecture.

Some bird flew o'er, a seed let fall,
Which found a dusty bed
Within a crack of the old stone wall,
And a twig shot up its head.

Why boast so much of that you say,
A tree in such a bed,
Perhaps it grew but yesterday,
To-morrow may be dead.

Not so, my friend, not quite so fast,
This makes the novelty.
That many generations past
Have marvelled at that tree.

The aged say no one can guess
When it began to thrive;
The same in youth, no more nor less
Of the oldest man alive.

A Culmstock Curiosity contd.

As strangers gaze, they are amazed
To see it flourish there;
No mellow soil its roots sustain,
No watchful gardener's care.

How many sights below have been
Sights gay and mournful too,
Since it appeared, how many seen
Until now seen by you.

It seemed as fresh to the soldier gray
Returned a worn-out man,
As when on that eventful day
Away from home he ran.

By loyal crowds in festive glee,
As merry bells did ring,
Who kept King George's Jubilee,
And cried "Long live the King!"

When war was ended, peace declared
With grateful celebration,
When in the street the feast was shared
By all of every station.

By gladsome folk in best array,
Who heartily agree
To hail Victoria's crowning day,
And kept her Jubilee.

By happy tripping bridal trains,
Who heard the nuptial vow;
By mourners sad, with eyes tear-stained,
Who 'neath bereavement bow.

Trees have a voice and sometimes speak,
O lend a listening ear;
Attentive bend, with spirit meek,
Its message will be clear.

When death has cut home's dearest ties,
And life of joy is shorn,
As breezes through its branches sigh,
It seems with you to mourn.

When hurricanes around me sweep,
I bend before the storm;
And when 'tis past I upward leap
And grow with stronger form.

When round you storms are sweeping fast,
This counsel I would lend,
Submissive bow before the blast
And unresisting bend.

Then upward, homeward, heavenward ever
Let your affections lean;
Your strength be joy while earth's ties sever,
Draw from a source unseen.

Hark! tho' still green I heard it said
And heard it with dismay,
A branch or two, seemed stripped and dead,
Some sign of its decay.

O ancient, dark-green, nodding yew,
We would not part with thee.
May coming generations view
Our curiosity.

Ye wardens of the people true
All visitors instruct,
You mean to shield our ancient yew,
And will not have it pluck'd.

You, one and all, will join and say
Long distant be the hour
When it is said: "The yew is dead,
Died out from the old Church tower."

