

# Death by Pollarding

by Toby Hindson

Pollarding" is a much misused term. Cutting the top off a tree and hoping it will grow back is not pollarding, whatever the man with the chain saw may tell you. Pollarding is a treatment that is given to young trees in order to make them grow with a short trunk and a bushy canopy so that they can be maintained by regular removal of "young growth". Unfortunately people still try to pollard ancient yews, and in doing so invariably kill them.

Here are two cautionary examples:

At Privett there is a beautiful but seldom used church which is an important walkers landmark due to its raised position and very high spire. Also there is the stump of a yew that is about eight feet high, and between 25 and 30 feet in girth, depending how far up the trunk you measure it. It has heaved a bit, and the stump leans a few degrees towards the church, which is perhaps 10 meters away. It's fairly clear what must have happened, the tree got shoved in a high wind, and started leaning. When this happened, those responsible, considering the fabric of the church and the safety of celebrants decided to have the top off the tree in no uncertain terms. All that remains is a huge bole covered with chainsaw cuts where large branches have been removed. There is not the slightest sign of life: the stump has lost its bark and is rotting. A less dramatic remedy would certainly have served, and this yew, once one of the 100 largest alive in the country, might easily have been saved.



Another example of the outcome of this treatment is found in Soberton churchyard. Here a great stump stands to the north of the church, 23 feet in girth, and 7 high, smothered in ivy. It had an enormous internal stem hard up against the east side of the trunk; this formation was itself six feet in girth and at least 400 years old. No one seems to know why the branches were cut off this tree, but the treatment clearly killed it.

Here then are two examples of death by so-called pollarding in yews both considerably over a thousand years of age. This is quite obviously a treatment that should never be carried out. Looking at it another way, I have never heard of an example of an ancient yew surviving total limb removal, and there is actually a perfectly well understood scientific reason (called the "mass to energy ratio") why this might be a fatal treatment for an ancient tree of any sort.

The Llanlleonfel yew – pollarded to destruction in 1999 – photo Tim Hills



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