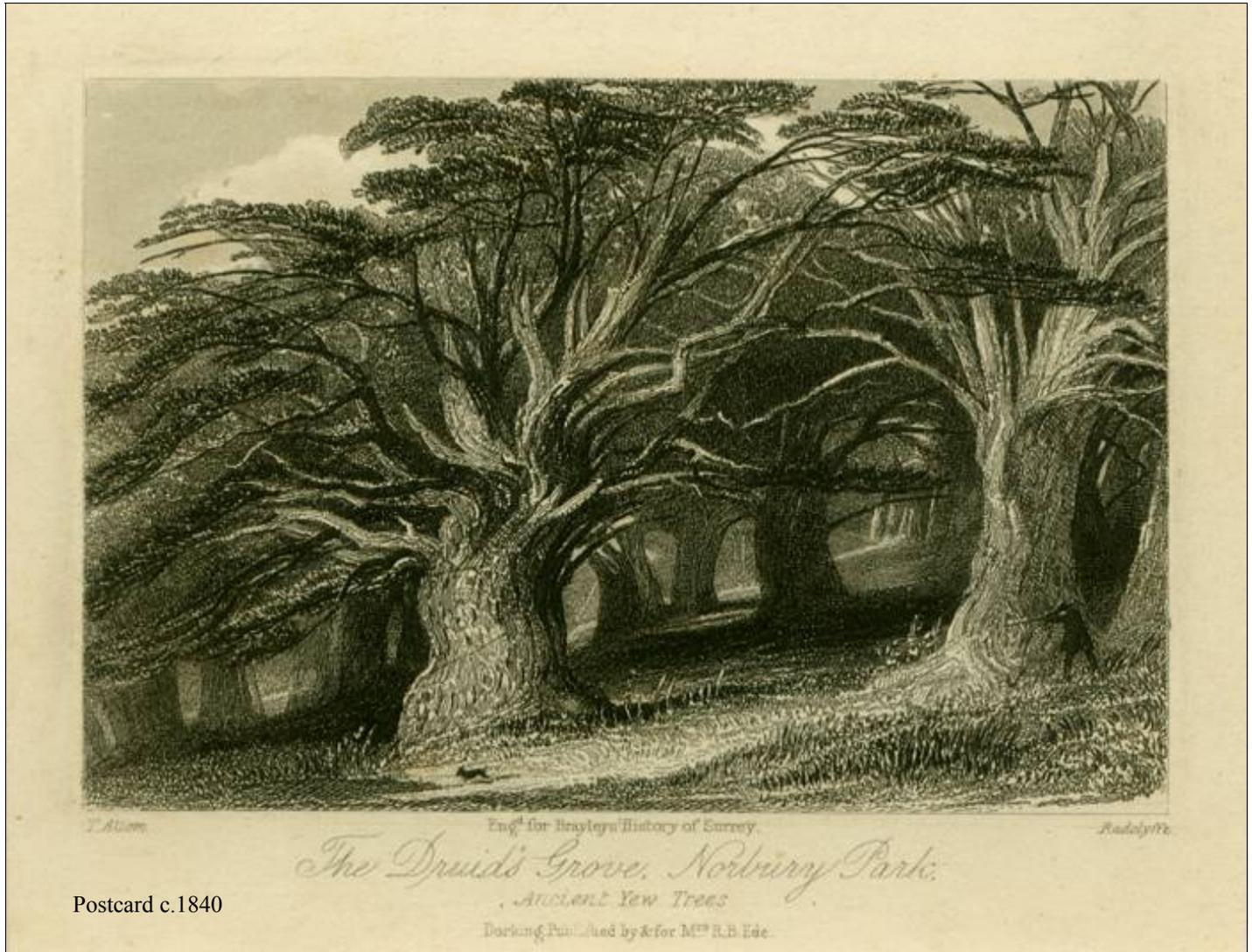


Druid's Grove: Heinz Herz, Wilfried Nebenführ

An account of Eibenfreunde's visit to Kingley Vale in August 2006.

Translation: Wim Peeters. Photographs: Christian Wolf

Who will not think of a place of secrets when he hears the name Druid's Grove, as a place where some of their secrets might have been declared? The following extract is from <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Druiden>



“The druids were probably a kind of cultural/spiritual elite in the society. Whether the description of Druids does exactly correspond with reality cannot be historically proven. The current information we have at our disposal comes from neo-celtic sources. Tradition has it that druids dress in white and cut mistletoe with golden sickles; as well as, according to Pliny, offering a bull for sacrifice. Mistletoe is seen by druids as a holy plant, and although it is a potent poison, it is probably more significant as a plant that lives and stays green in the winter, when other plants have died.

The most well known druidical figure in literature is surely Getafix from the French comics written by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo. His white dress, the golden sickle and the cutting of the mistletoe in oak trees is clearly based on the above mentioned historical sources.”

It is certain that if participants of this excursion has expected to find any sign of this mythical people, they sobered up when they realised that the meaning of Druid's Grove was fantasy and the name for this place was chosen randomly.

In the excursion guide is the following description taken from *The Sacred Yew* by Chetan and Brueton. “Perhaps the most famous yew grove in Britain is Druid’s Grove in Surrey. It consists of what appear to be the remains of an ancient avenue of yews, plus many scattered ones, growing in dense, mixed woodland, containing many box trees. The oldest trees here have long been considered ancient. The novelist George Meredith lived nearby from 1867, and he encouraged his visitors to visit the trees, telling them that ‘anyone walking under them should remember they were saplings when Jesus Christ came to earth’.”

In 1981 Allen Meredith, a namesake of the poet and also a writer, visited Druid’s Grove for the very first time. Since that time he has returned on many occasions to gather information about the place. He describes one of his visits:

“We came across twisted shattered fragments, the skeleton remains of ancient yews. In the main avenue we saw enormous yews, some upwards of 7,5 m girth. I found a particularly ancient yew, much of it a mere shell, with rotten decayed wood inside, but as so often with aged yews, fresh growth has occurred over many centuries. Of the most significant trees, five are over 6,7 m in girth and four over 6 m. For the trees to have reached this kind of size in such a crowded area must have taken many years. This is one of the few remaining woodlands which has trees that would date back to Roman times.”



Photo from Lowe’s 1896 *Yew Trees of Great Britain and Ireland*

“Measuring and cataloguing the trees is difficult. Many of them are surrounded by impenetrable undergrowth. Although the uprooted and decaying stumps of trees which may have been in that stage for centuries can be seen, there is also plenty of evidence of vigorous growth. The yew’s ability to regenerate itself by putting down an aerial root inside the hollow trunk is seen here.

The severe storms of 1987 and 1990 caused considerable damage in Druid's Grove. Many yews were uprooted, including one of the largest ones in the avenue, and others lost branches. Surrey County Council and the park rangers have fortunately decided to leave the fallen trees where they lie, wherever possible. It is likely that some will still regrow, while those which do not will join the other fallen yews which, lying prostrate and gathering moss, give life to other creatures and plants.”



Allen Meredith believes that some of the trees are over 2 000 years old and that the name is no coincidence. This trees certainly seem to form an avenue, which suggests purposeful planting rather than natural distribution.

“Druid’s Grove can be hard to find and is in parts almost impenetrable, but it has exerted a strong pull on visitors for a long time.”

We are guided by park ranger Graham Manning and by Tim Hills, our guide for this twelve day trip. The slope on which Druid’s Grove is situated, lies about 250 m above sea level and is exposed south to south-east. The area is part of private farm with a mansion at the hillside and an area of 1300 acres. In the area are three sites with open access for visitors, with information panels provided at the entrances.



Soil: limestone with flint

Main tree species:

Red beech, yew, ash, wild cherry, maple, on loamy soils oak and chestnut, walnut.

Undergrowth:

Lots of Box trees, dogwood, hazel, brambles, raspberries, hawthorn, holly, dog rose

Herbal flora:

Hart's tongue fern, dog's mercury, wood melick, moss, lady's fern

Damage by wild stock:

Deer damage by (1) running through the woods and breaking branches and treading on saplings (2) gnawing branches and leaves
rabbits and squirrels on broad-leaved trees, rabbits grazing yew trees. There are no hares

On the base of the slope grow medium old yew trees with a height of approximately 20 m. At locations with more light you can find a lot of natural renewing of the yew stand. The park rangers make efforts to destroy the saplings of broad leaves (ash, maple) as quickly as possible to provide enough open space for the yews. In the middle and the upper part we arrive at the big veteran trees. In the last decades maintenance was restricted to the clearing of the paths. During the 1987 and 1991 storms the yew stand did take a lot of damage. Many of these windthrown yew trees still continued growing and form new shoots from the lying stems. These strong veteran yews at Druid's Grove, which are fixed on a steep slope that consists mainly of chalk rock, show an age of 2000 – 3000 years. Because of the deep shade under the trees, only mosses, which can easily be rubbed off the rocky soil, do grow under the veteran yews. About the natural regeneration of the yew forest, we have noticed that the saplings easily germinate between the roots of red beech. Rainwater is directed downwards along the smooth bark towards the root crown. The archives that are kept in the mansion revealed the fact that a hundred years ago Druid's Grove contained less forest. There used to be more yew trees and fewer broad-leaved trees. In the past longbows for the army have been made out of yew wood ($\frac{1}{2}$ sapwood, $\frac{1}{2}$ heartwood). The bows acted like a natural spring and were pulled by hand. The wood of English yew was of poor quality so the wood of yews from other parts of Europe, particularly Spain and Portugal, was imported. In ancient times the frame of paintings was also made of yew wood.

The park rangers plans for the future management, maintenance and renewal of the yew stand includes the following:

- Making space for the yews by cutting shrubs and broad-leaved trees
- Fencing off parts where the yew is naturally regenerating at other parts of the Druid's Grove after cleaning away the undergrowth.

The park management hopes they can ensure the continuity of the yew stand.

