

St Martin's Church

East Woodhay, Hampshire
Diocese of Winchester

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Call the Fire Brigade?

Most people I am sure are aware of the old testament story of the Burning Bush (Exodus chapter 3), it came as something of a shock when standing outside St Martin's church on a bright sunny day in March last year with a light spring breeze blowing, looking across the churchyard and seeing clouds of smoke coming from a bush.

The bush, a golden yew, looked stunning in the warm sunlight and looked perfectly normal except for the large clouds of smoke wafting away from it. Standing about one and a half metres high the bush lies just to the right of the porch on the spot where another large yew tree stood, reputedly planted by Thomas Ken, a man who as well as being rector of St Martin's for two short years, was at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries a famous bishop and royal chaplain, not afraid of speaking his mind about Nell Gwynne, one of King Charles II's mistresses and renowned seller of oranges.



When that original tree died suddenly approximately thirty years ago, it was cut off just above ground level and the hollow trunk filled with soil. Each year it was beautifully planted with spring bulbs and summer annuals by Jim Webb, the verger, and his wife Doris. By the end of the 1980s the remains of the trunk had almost completely rotted away and it was decided that St Martin's School should replant the site with a golden yew (*Taxus baccata*) in memory of Mrs Ormerod, wife of the Rev. Ormerod, in recognition of all that she had done for the school over the years.

Yew is a beautiful wood to work with, with its own distinctive colour and smell. For thousands of years it has been valued for its strength and elasticity notably in the manufacture of bows such as the famous English longbows, examples of which were found in the wreck of the Mary Rose in Portsmouth Harbour when she was raised in 1982. Yew is also highly prized by furniture makers, so it was appropriate that some of the wood from Bishop Ken's yew was seasoned and made into the beautiful carved processional cross in the church and the handles of collection purses.

So, was the yew tree on fire or was there another explanation? Perhaps fortunately there was a churchyard working party in the churchyard at the time, first thoughts were, what is going on, as great clouds of smoke continued to drift away from the bush in the breeze. Was the ground on fire, were we seeing a real biblical burning bush? Slowly it began to dawn on us that the smoke increased as the force of the breeze picked up. Closer inspection revealed that what was actually happening was that the ideal weather conditions were encouraging the yew to release pollen dust into the air. Conscious that yew tree leaves are poisonous, and that the pollen probably was as well, we stood safely upwind and observed this phenomenon for a number of minutes.

This year standing in the churchyard at approximately the same time of year I was again fortunate to be able to observe the same phenomenon. So, if visiting St Martin's Church in spring, look out for the burning bush. More information is available in the brief history of the church on sale at the back of the church. Footnotes: - Doris Webb still very kindly tends the bed round the yew and plants it with flowers each year. - Various books have been written about Bishop - Thomas Ken who lived from 1637-1711, including an informative booklet produced by the Diocese of Bath and Wells when a year long celebration of his life took place in 1996.