

THE HARLINGTON YEW

N.B. This account is based on a chapter from "Harlington and Harmondsworth: A History and Guide" by Philip Sherwood. Tempus Publishing 2002.

The yew tree which stands to the south of the church porch in the churchyard is a very insignificant feature nowadays and it is difficult to believe that 250 years ago it looked anything like the illustration from 1770. Nevertheless there is every good reason for thinking that this illustration is a true representation of how the tree once appeared.

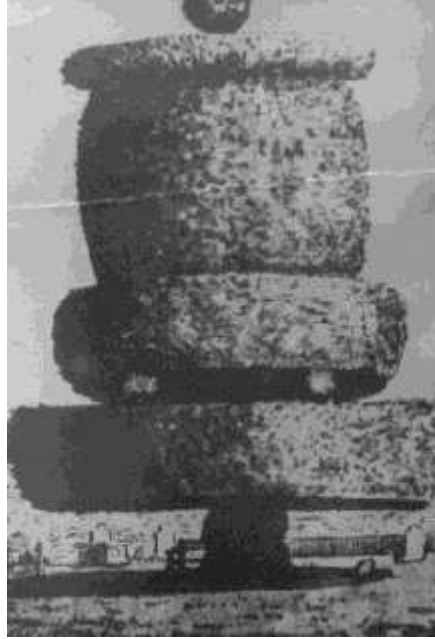


The engraving is often mentioned in descriptions of Harlington and most of them record that the engraving was published by John Saxy in 1729. However, a look at the bottom right hand corner shows, in fact, that it was published in 1770 by William Cottrel, who was the parish clerk. The doggerel rhyme was clearly written by John Saxy in 1729 and there can be no doubt that Saxy was responsible for cutting the tree in the shape depicted in the print, as towards the end of the rhyme he says "Be kind to John your tree who trims with easy rhymes but aching limbs".

Most accounts describe John Saxy as being the parish clerk but a check of the parish registers shows that this is not so. The earliest reference to him in the registers is an entry for the burial of "Henry son of John Saxy, labourer" on 14 September 1711. An entry in the burial register on 24th May 1720 records the burial of "Elizabeth daughter of John Saxy, Gardener" and later on 30th April 1722 the burial of "Elizabeth wife of John Saxy, Gardener". John himself was buried on 30th July 1741. Apart from these entries there is no other record of the Saxy family in any of the parish registers. The registers leave little doubt that Saxy was not the parish clerk because John Morton is described as being the clerk from 1724-1738 and before this the clerk was Moses Curtis. The confusion has probably arisen from the fact that the print was published by the parish clerk after the death of Saxy.

The manner in which the clerk describes the engraving as being “Revived by William Cottrel – Clerk 1770” suggests the possibility that after Saxy’s death in 1741, the cutting of the tree was discontinued and the practice revived by William Cottrel or some other person. Cottrel or Cotterell, as he usually spells his name in the registers, was parish clerk from 1757-1777. On his tombstone in the churchyard he is recorded as being a “Master Carpenter”, so he may well have had the necessary skill to cut the tree. Upon the death of William Cotterell his son, also named William, became parish clerk and remained so until he died on 30th September 1825. The fact that the tree ceased to be cut after 1825 suggests that he may have succeeded his father in being responsible for the clipping of the tree. A third William Cotterell was parish clerk from 1825-1847, but he seems to have no connexion with the tree.

The clipping of the tree is said to have been an annual event, which took place at the time of the Whitsun Fair. Whoever was responsible for clipping the tree in the early 1800s was not as expert as his predecessors, as the tree had by then assumed a more simple, but still exaggerated shape as can be seen in a drawing of the tree made in 1810.



As already mentioned the tree ceased to be cut in 1825 and a drawing of the tree made in the mid 19th Century shows that it had returned to its natural shape.



The tree suffered a major calamity in 1959 when it was severely damaged in a gale. As John Saxy's rhyme relates even in 1729 "within 'tis true she's not so sound but hollow from the top to ground". As a result of the damage most of the tree had to be cut away leaving only a forlorn stump no more than 12 feet high. However, since then it has made a remarkable recovery. It has suffered from subsequent high winds but, although only a shadow of its former self, it has a healthy appearance and is growing vigorously.

The bole of any yew tree presents the appearance not of a single trunk but several trunks that have coalesced and this appearance is very marked in the case of the Harlington Yew. This condition is due to the yew continually pushing out new shoots from the lower part of its bole, which take an upright direction and coalesce with the old wood. This explains the longevity of yew trees and why the Harlington Yew has been able to recover repeatedly from damage that would have killed most other species.

In 1990 a survey of ancient yew trees by the Conservation Foundation estimated that, using all the data it had to hand, the Harlington Yew could well be over 1000 years old.

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The Harlington Yew in 1999 © Tim Hills

This significant yew is today at greatest threat from the proposed "third runway" at Heathrow.

With thanks to Philip Sherwood who also provided the images of the Harlington Yew as it appeared in 1770, 1810 and 1840.