

Merdon Castle

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An account of Eibenfreunde's visit to Merdon Castle in August 2006.

Translation: Wim Peeters

Photographs: Christian Wolf

The name has its origin in the Celtic fort (550 – 350 BC) that 800 - 1000 years later has been extended and improved. Archeological findings show that at this place a 'Hundred Court' was held. At such locations there are always huge yew trees to be found! Already at the start of our tour (typical English weather - sunny, cloudy, warm... that keeps on all the time) we were surprised by so many old yews, overgrown by ivy, on both sides of the path, among them *Thuja plicata*. Our path crossed a lot of old and new deer crossings, already the first clear indication of the richness of wildstock.

The fortress itself is partially with a "modern" high flintstone wall. The unknown owner did not know how they might exploit the site at the moment ... and it has been left untouched to nature. For us, 'Eibenfreunde' it is the first highlight of the "field trip week"! - old Norman ruins with very thick yews, surrounded with two high ring walls on pure chalk rock (with flint). The whole area, and especially the walls have a dense canopy of mighty veteran and ancient yew trees, but also with numerous of the thickest and oldest trees of many other species: beech, ash, field maple, oak, chestnut and respectable trees of buckthorn (*Rhamnus catharicus*) with parasitic mistletoe.

At the whole site were clear marks of frequent visits by man and animal: crossings of both wild stock and livestock; rusted barbed wire; damage by deer, droppings of roe deer, hare, rabbits.



Merdon castle as a post card in the year 1785

The 3 main topics of the vivid, partially controversial, discussions were:

1. What is the reason for for 3 ancient/veteran yew trees on a steep slope of bare chalk with stilt-like aerial roots?
Hypothesis of the reporter: Under the rooflike treecrown of the ancient yews, during many centuries until today, sheep have stood here, other animals have sought protection and rabbits have dug their holes. This way, the chalky soil was all the time being loosened and erosion by water followed. If this is not an acceptable explanation please prove that I am wrong and we can discuss it further.



2. Why is there (with the exception of a small area at the main entrance where we found an old, hardly knee-high, yearly cut bonsai-yew-stem) in the whole area, no natural rejuvenation, not from yew, nor from any other tree species? The answer is simple and undisputed:

For many centuries the natural rejuvenation of yew has been consumed as a delicacy by numerous cattle and wild stock. According to Eibenfreund Dr. Osthoff the water soluble "Taxin" – peculiar in young plants – is hardly poisonous (in contradiction with the very poisonous, in alcohol soluble, "Taxol").



The Eibenfreunde starting from left: Tim Hills, Jurgen Bösse, Clementine Osthoff, Ralf Lemke and Margrit Lemke under two beautiful yew trees.

3. How old are these ancient yews with a girth up to 7,5 m? Already in 1808 these yews has been described as very old. In 1915 John Peere William-Freeman considered a Norman origin for the inner walls and an older, saxon origin for the outer walls and estimated about 1050 years for the oldest yews. The girth of the biggest yews at the former fort entrance was mesured as 6,96 m at 1,3 m. Toby Hindson of the Acient Yew Group measured the tree in July 1997 again and came to a girth of 7,47 m. This means that, unless the tree is very old, the diameter increased by 17,2 cm in 82 years, which corresponds with an anual ring of ca. 1 mm. Supported by the counting of annual ring growth of other yew trees in the area, the age is calculated at 1750 years.

Robert Bevan-Jones (in *'The Ancient Yew*, Windgather Press, Bollington 2004, page 102-103) estimates this tree at about 1500 years of age, as he supposes that this is the location of a post-Roman early saint church planting.

The name Merdon Castle indicates that this was a Celtic stronghold that had been erected just before the Anglo Saxon invasion. Archaeological findings pointed out that the Anglo Saxons reused the fortress probably as an administrative center. The findings clearly demonstrate a christian settlement in Norman times.

Tim Hills visited Merdon Castle, and the biggest yew tree close to the gate, in 2005 for the first time. The tree does not appear to be hollow, and has nevertheless a thin needled crown, and the girth was measured at 7,39 meter, 8 cm less as Toby Hindson 8 years earlier. Tim measured a female tree with a girth of 4,6 meter at a height of 70 cm with multiple stems, with one central riser.

Vivid discussions and age estimates by the German and Swiss Eibenfreunde resulted in average values for age at 600 – 900 year, but as well as up to 2000 years!

Eibenfreund Huber Rössner finished the discussion: “Professor Hattemer once said: ‘Yew tree has lots and lots of pollen, that flies very very far’ ... so I say to you: ‘These yew trees are very, very old!’.”

The reporters synopsis of this interesting afternoon: **Merdon Castle** – probably one of the only places in the world ... where ancient yews are to be found so connected with ancient history.

The photos give an impression of the yews at Merdon Castle.



