

The “Decayed but Reviving Churchyard Yew” at Offwell, Devon  
Tim Hills



“A scath’d and leafless head” in 1808. A full crown in 2007.

At first glance the yews at Offwell appear no different from those found in so many of our parish churchyards. But this specimen has much to teach us about the nature of the yew, and for this we have to thank the Revd. J.G.C. Coplestone.

His father and grandfather had been vicars in Offwell from 1773 onwards, so he grew up knowing about the yew. Doubtless he would have listened to conversations about the tree and have been aware that throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was in a state of slow decline. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century its condition was thought to be terminal and a sapling was planted in 1808 to replace it. Coplestone was later to describe it as having at that time a ‘scath’d and leafless head’. In such a condition one might have expected it to be felled, and why it was spared is not known; perhaps a few shoots were sprouting from the base of the tree, perhaps they understood about the slow rate of decay of yew wood and knew that it was still structurally sound, or perhaps it was the cost of felling.

So the yew was left, with its health continuing to decline until 1825 when the Archdeacon ordered the churchyard to be tidied up. As part of this process the north side of the churchyard was lowered, and the soil removed was deposited around the tree. It was this ‘transfusion’ of new soil that was to trigger the yew’s regeneration.

Seven years later, in 1832, when a new vestry was to be built, Coplestone was alarmed that the roots of his resurrected tree might be damaged. He is reported to have personally overseen the work, and with his church temporarily out of use had time on his hands. He used it well, writing down his thoughts and observations in an unpublished poem, now held by the British Library. In this poem he writes about the many reasons yews were thought to grow in churchyards, including their use as a symbol of mourning and a substitute for the palm on Palm Sunday, but he is rightly dismissive of the notion that they were grown “within the sanctuary of the Prince of Peace” to provide war bows.



It is Coplestone's title for his poem, *'The Decayed but Reviving Churchyard Yew'*, that reveals what most exercised his thoughts; that a tree could appear to be dying, yet have the capability of springing back to life. He observed how every year between 1825 and 1832 it was producing "an ampler garb of green foliage" while the "tide of sap fresh flowing made thee twofold, young and old". His poem concludes with the following lines:

Yet thou giv'st hope  
Dear venerated tree, when pleas'd I doat  
Upon thy recent growth. I hail thee still  
An emblem, in thy scath'd and leafless head  
Of man's mortality; I hail thee more  
As pointing, in thy renovated boughs  
And new clad shell, to man's awaited change  
From vile to glorious. Thou wast shrunken, dead,  
But art alive again.

Coplestone considered the yew to be of similar age to the church tower, giving it an estimated planting date of c1300. There is no reason why this should not be so, though of course it cannot be proved. What we do know is that several feet of soil piled up against the tree in 1825 conceal the original base, which might be much larger in girth than today's 14ft measurement.

As for the yew planted as its replacement in 1808, the specimen growing NE of the church, with a girth of 8' 9" at 1', would seem the most likely candidate.

Coplestone has provided vital evidence of the astonishing recuperative powers of the yew. He would, I am sure, be delighted to know that almost 200 years later his observations are proving to be of such importance for those trying to protect old and ancient yews.



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A fuller account of the Offwell Yew is to be found in *The Sacred Yew* by Chetan and Brueton – now out of print. It has not been possible to reproduce the whole poem due to the substantial cost of obtaining permission from the British Library.