

The Payhembury Yew

By Robin Stanes

The yew tree in Payhembury churchyard is now believed to be one of the oldest in the country, older than the present church and perhaps older than any preceding building there may have been on the little hill on which the church stands. It is probable that there was some sort of Christian chapel there, or perhaps just a preaching cross, from the seventh century (A.D. 500-600), when the West Saxons converted to Christianity. This means that the yew is maybe 1200-1300 years old at the least. Those who know about yew trees say this is quite likely.



The Payhembury Yew © Robin Stanes

Most village churchyards can boast a yew tree. It is not very clear why this is so. Yew trees are poisonous to livestock and eating their foliage will kill cattle and horse and sheep, so they are and were a risk. The attraction, probably, was that they were evergreen and that they were the only evergreen to suit a churchyard. We are accustomed to evergreen pines and firs and laurels, but none of those are native to this country; they were seventeenth or eighteenth century imports from abroad. The only native evergreens in the Middle Ages, when the church was built, were the yew and the holly and Scots pine. The Scots pine is native to Scotland and not native here, the holly tree does not grow into a large sheltering tree good for a churchyard, and so the yew was the obvious tree.

It has other 'virtues'. Village people would be careful to keep their unwelcome cattle out of a churchyard with yews in it, as the yew is poisonous to livestock. Cattle strayed commonly in the past, particularly from common land, and were rounded up and impounded in the village pound. Payhembury had its pound of course still surviving by name at Pound Cottage. Forty years ago Slade Barton cows used to stray down the village street from Slade yard after milking, until the cowman, Mr Vittles, could shoo them onto a field; and there would have been other herds of cattle in the village in the past.

The yew has the virtue of being immortal in a curious way. After fifteen hundred years perhaps the main trunk collapses, but the tree does not die. Instead it sprouts from the rim of the tree near the ground and sends up shoots, and these will grow to a great age. This is what happened to the Payhembury yew. It now consists of four large sprouted branches with a mound in the middle where the old trunk collapsed. These branches must at some time have been selected to grow, as there would have been many more such sprouts originally. Some believe that the original tree was struck by lightning and split into four.

Some say yews provided necessary bow staves for village people to practise their archery regularly, as they were at one time bound to do by law. But those who know say that bow staves for the English long bow were commonly imported from Spain. It was their perpetual greenness and their ability to regrow, a sign of perpetual life and resurrection, that distinguished the yew and was appropriate in the churchyard. They gave good shelter to the church from the wind and the rain, summer and winter.

The Payhembury yew has a girth, in 2005, at soil level, of *circa* 35ft, but it is now four trunks not one. It seems likely these trunks were deliberately chosen out of the mass of growth that would have sprouted out of the bottom of the tree, when the old trunk collapsed. Someone must have thought 'let's have four trunks' and cut out the rest. When did this happen? When did the old trunk collapse finally? The four stems are odd; botanists say that two carry male flowers and one carries female flowers, and one is uncertain! This does not apparently prove that there were once separate trees; that is how yews are apparently.

The four separate trunks are in girth at ground level 11', 13' 1", 8' 10" and 12' 9" respectively, perhaps not all the same age therefore, or with different advantages of light and exposure. The tree does not stand alone. There is another yew close by of some age, 12'7" in girth, and recently yet another has been planted, a seedling from the well known ancient Tandridge tree. Long may they grow! They will outlive me and all who read this, and their children and their childrens' children for many generations doubtless!

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