PENALLT "The Old Church" Diocese of Monmouth SO5219610727

The old church stands in a remote location, 600 ft above the river Wye. It is considered from indirect evidence that a parish church existed on this site prior to the Norman Conquest. Its hill top location also suggests that it might have been a site of pre-Christian worship.

When J.Daryll Evans measured the yew in 1987 he recorded a circumference of 730 cm (24') at 90cm. In 2006 I recorded 22' 9'' at the ground, noting that about 8' of this to be dead wood (below right), with new growth beginning to flow over some of these old sapwood surfaces.

An extract from the 2009 PENALLT REVISITED by VF Kilmer tells us how close this yew came to being destroyed three quarters of a century ago:

There may be many other churchyard yews as old as this, but there cannot be many which have survived a fire, as ours did. The vicar in 1940, Rev.J.le H.du Heaume, recorded in his Parish Guide that 'it had a narrow escape on July 6th, 1939, when it was discovered to be on fire and, but for the speedy intervention of the Vicar and Miss Amphlett, the People's Warden, who immediately summoned the Fire Brigade, it would have been burned to the ground and in all possibility, taken the Church nearby with it. But with the firemen's help, the raging fire in the hollow trunk was extinguished'.

Kilmer's article, entitled HOW OLD IS THAT YEW TREE? went on to make a case for this yew having an extraordinary age:

'The tree in question is the yew to the east of Old Church, described by the vicar in 1940 as having a girth of 23 feet and deemed by some "to be more than a thousand years old." The verger Jim Saunders and I measured our yew again not long ago and found its girth to be about 25 feet (300 inches), that is, a growth of 24 inches in 60 years, or two-fifths of an inch a year per annum. If it has always grown at this rate, our yew is 750 years old.

But we recall seeing a letter in a country magazine pointing out that most yews grow at about half an inch a year for about 400 years and then gradually drop back to an average of only one inch every ten years. The writer added, somewhat gratuitously, that without a record of growth from the start and details of its location "it is very difficult to estimate the age of a large yew".

However, it is equally difficult to resist using these figures on our girth of 300 inches; thus 200 inches at half an inch a year gives us 400 years and the remaining 100 inches at one inch per ten years gives us another 1000 years. This handsome figure of 1400 years more than justifies popular belief in 1940. It might in fact be an underestimate for in 1994 new calculations carried the figure to 1700 years.'

In three paragraphs the yew has been given ages between 750 and 1700 years! The tree certainly falls into the Ancient Yew Group classification as an Ancient specimen, for which a likely minimum age of 800 years is given - indeed it could well be a century or two older. But stretching that to an age of 1700 years based on "one inch per ten years" should have been resisted. I having been recording and measuring yews for 18 years and am beginning to visit trees a second time. The fascinating store of measurements I am collecting would suggest an inch of growth in 2 to 5 years is far more likely.