

La Haye de Routot - A cause for celebration

The small Normandy village of La Haye de Routot has good reason to be noticed. For not only is it custodian of these two ancient yews of world renown, it is also



known for an annual ceremony whose origin is lost in the mists of time. This is the Feu St Clair, a pagan-origin bonfire held on 16th July, in which a ritualised wooden structure, which takes a day to build, is ceremonially burnt. At the top of the 15m high structure is a floral cross, which is meant to survive the conflagration unscathed. If it burns it is said to bring bad fortune in the coming year. St Clair is thought to have been a Welsh monk who, after arriving in this village, was beheaded for his beliefs, and according to legend carried his head with him as he continued to preach. His statue is found in the church.



No one knows the true origin of the ceremony but it seems to have become well established as long ago as the 15th century. A film taken in the 1950s can be seen at <http://www.lahayederoutot.com/le-feu-de-saint-clair/>

I am told that little has changed since then, except that the venue has moved further along the road to avoid the risk of damaging the yews, which over the years have grown closer to the churchyard boundary.



In September 2014 **Les amis des ifs - Friends of the yews** - was formed. It was in response to an attempt that had been made to destroy one of Routot's ancient yews using poison. The newly formed association gathered the opinions of several 'experts' in discussing the future health of their tree following the poisoning attempt. The



consensus of opinion was 'wait and see', which is sound advice for any ancient yew in need of recovery time following any sort of trauma. While almost a third of the tree's branches appear to be dead, there is strong growth on the remainder of the tree and the hope that it will live on is well founded.

What this misadventure succeeded in doing was to turn the public's eye towards the trees, so that they realised just how few ancient churchyard yews still exist in France and therefore how precious they are. The Ancient Yew Group has documented only 26 such trees.

Les Amis des ifs spreads the word that such trees are our natural heritage and it tries to interest everyone - especially children - in their unique value.

On 6th December 2014 they held a St Nicolas celebration, in which guests were invited inside this yew church (with its wooden roof, it looks like a wine barrel inside) to hear fables about St Nicolas and about yews, and to share mulled wine, hot chocolate and spicy Christmas biscuits. They wrote a wish for the future on a ribbon, then carried a candle (inside a protective jar) outside to encircle the trees with light. Their wishes were hung on the protective ropes surrounding the trees, with hopes that the 'Wish Tree' would work its magic. The intention was to create activities in keeping with the mystic history of the trees. The free event was a moment for families to come together in a simple celebration.

Les amis des ifs, set up to look after and be a voice for these trees, obtains its funding from subscriptions to their association (3 euros per person, 5 euros for a couple), from donations and more recently from sales of a T shirt (a modest 5 euros) with the image of the yews on it.



April 6th 2015 was Easter Monday, and an Easter egg hunt was carried out in the churchyard close to the yews. Guests were invited to bring spring flowers to decorate around the trees, and children drew pictures of them. Drinks, Easter biscuits and cakes were served.



Some days later a class of 8 year olds from a local school visited as part of work to create an historical fresque of the 1500 year life of the yews. It became apparent that some children, who live only 5 minutes away, had never seen, or been made aware of the trees. It is a sad indictment of our times that we are unable to publish photos of the children as they succeed in squeezing an entire class into the tree chapel.



This same tree was recently selected as tree of the year for Haute Normandie. Les amis des ifs entered the tree into the competition, in which people all over France had an opportunity to vote for their favourite tree. The competition was sponsored by the magazine Terre Sauvage, the National Forestry Office, A.R.B.R.E.S. and others. <http://www.arbredelannee.com/>

Whether the yews here are 1500 years old or a mere 1000 as suggested by the sign photographed in 2000, these are extraordinarily old trees.

It was put to me by Les amis des ifs that if a chateau not even a quarter of the age of the trees is included in UNESCO's world heritage sites, then why couldn't the same be done with ancient yews - perhaps all yews over, say, 500 yrs old. Janice Gregory says "I've been looking at the criteria to fulfil in order to be declared a world heritage site and I feel we fit the mark. No doubt it would a long, laborious procedure, but **someone has to care**".

In Germany that responsibility of caring is carried by Eibenfreunde, in Spain it is the Iberian Association of Yew and Yew Woods (Asociación de Amigos del Tejo y las Tejedas), and in Britain the Ancient Yew Group. If this La Haye de Routot based group could galvanise the formation of a similar movement in France, it would surely add weight to those already lobbying for Green Monument status for old yew trees that is the equal of that which already exists for buildings and archaeological sites.



La Haye de Routot has an excellent facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/LaHayeDeRoutot?fref=nf>