

The Stowe (Shropshire) Yew: An example of imagination and good practice

by Tim Hills

Stowe church, dedicated to St Michael and All Angels, was formerly 'mother church' to Knighton, a 'tourist town' situated at the mid point of Offa's Dyke path. Its churchyard is roughly oval in shape, usually an indication of an ancient burial ground pre-dating the medieval building. In a nearby field medieval house platforms provide additional evidence of a once thriving community.

I first visited in 1999, climbing steeply from the Welsh border towards the unmistakable dense green yew foliage standing out against the hillside, marking the hidden church site.



The Stowe Yew seen from the churchyard

The ancient yew forms part of the boundary wall between the raised churchyard and a drop of several feet to the field below. The owners of this land, Mr and Mrs George, gave me permission to examine and photograph the yew from this vantage point. From here it was possible to appreciate the size of the limb stretching outwards from close to the base of the tree.



The leaning limb began to crack during the summer of 2005 and over a period of a few days reached the ground. Under enormous pressure there has been some splitting of wood, but the limb remains firmly attached to the main trunk. The sheep took advantage of the new diet of yew but none were harmed before they could be taken to a safer grazing area. This created a dilemma for the owners, who were offered a range of opinions on what to do next. Destruction of the limb, itself probably 300+ years old, seemed unnecessary and further advice was sought. The Caring For God's Acre charity was contacted and Mrs George was referred to the Ancient Yew Group. The agreed solution was to leave the fallen section of tree, which presents no danger now that it reaches the ground. This would then be fenced off and the field once again used for grazing.



I returned in November 2005. The fence had been constructed, the sheep are safe and the fallen limb is now in a position to produce a yew grove. Its branches will grow along the ground until they find a suitable place in which to become embedded and put down roots. This is one of the yew's many methods of regeneration and in saving the split limb, Mr and Mrs George might be providing a botanical curiosity in centuries to come.

(Visit the Gazetteer page and click on Ormiston for an example of a yew which has regrown from embedded branches. No fewer than 22 yews form a circle around the parent tree.)

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