

A poem written in 1856 is reproduced in full on the next page. It describes 'a venerable yew' with a 'rifted rind and gnarled trunk'. The site was visited by Barry Saich in 2009 to see whether this tree still existed.

He discovered a female tree that he thought would now have a bole in excess of twenty feet, but is 'sadly only a shadow of what it should be. Many years ago this tree would have had the typical Yew characteristics of a double even treble or more trunks, but possibly due to storm damage, one or more of these were felled at ground level. This/these trunks have been left to lie on the ground, but fortunately vertical growth of more than several years has taken place, interspersed with elder saplings and excessive ivy growth, which extends to the crown, and lack of general pruning maintenance to the sideshoots of the tree itself. The tree is at the west end of the churchyard. Girth of its standing trunk is 320cm or 10ft 6in at ground level on the high side'.



EDWARD CAPERN "The Bideford Post"
Postman-Poet 1819 - 1894

Thrown out of employment in September 1849, in consequence of an alteration in the post, he was re-appointed on 27th December, 1851 as Messenger between Bideford and Westleigh, and subsequently transferred to the walk between Bideford and Buckland Brewer. Having become the father of two children, Charles and Milly, Edward and his wife were in poor circumstances, but little did they know that their lot was to improve. For seven days a week Edward would set out from Bideford Bridge, armed with bell and posthorn. He would walk 13 miles to Auckland Brewer, though later he was provided with a pony and trap. The bell would be rung to warn the cottagers of his approach and the horn blown so that the valley dwellers would prepare their mail for collection.

There arose in Capern a desire to compose poetry and his contributions to a local journal drew the attention of Mr. F. Rock, a stationer of Wallbrook, who in 1856 secured subscribers for him to launch a first book of poetry. It is interesting to note some of the names of those who subscribed. These included the Duke of Wellington, Lord Viscount Palmerston (Prime Minister), Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley and Rowland Hill.

First Edition of one thousand copies showed a profit of L150 for Edward and his family, So successful was the first book of poems that a second and third edition followed.

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O! Tell me, tell me, venerable tree,
Thou with the rifted rind and gnarled trunk,
How cam'st thou in that solemn place to be,
Hooded and grave as a religious monk ?

What were the emotions of the tender soul
Who took thee, when a sapling, from thy bed,
And made thee by that little grassy knoll
A constant resident among the dead ?

Stand'st thou a monument of silent grief,
A sad memento of some mother's love,
Who mourned an " innocent," and found relief
By planting thee in this sepulchral grove ?

Art thou a token of some rustic maid,
Who bade thee all th' unuttered secret tell,
How that she lived to be by man betrayed,
And died, alas ! because she loved too well ?

I ask again, O! patriarchal yew,
Why wert thou stationed in those holy ways :
Was it to symbol forth affection true,
Or mourn the falsehood of departed days ?

Methinks strange accents rustling from thy boughs,
In hollow murmurs float upon the breeze ! —
" I'm here to chronicle death's holiest vows,
And reign, the monarch of all graveyard trees.

" If thou art curious to unveil the past,
And scan the actors on a former stage,
To sound that deep, sublimely grand and vast,
And learn the secrets of a bygone age :

" Ask not the maid that chanteth in the choir,
Ask not the lad that whistles o'er the lea ;
But ask the sage and centenarian sire,
What is the history of the old yew tree.

" In ancient garb, they'll tell you, whilst they brush
My side, when passing to yon sacred fane,
From boys they've heard the linnet and the thrush
Pipe from my boughs, and wake the silent lane.

" They'll point to where whole generations lie,
Who revelled once beneath my friendly shade ;
And tell thee when those lofty elm trees by
Were set there by the rude old sexton's spade.

" They'll tell, perhaps, when bloody fields were won,
They carved the date upon my shrivelled face ;
And how, when Grenville first beheld his son,
They scooped the record in the self-same place.

"Perhaps the tale of legendary lore,
How owls and ravens shrieked upon the wing ;
Stories as strange as e'er were heard of yore,
Told when the winter fires were flickering.

" Or they may whisper how, when passing bell
Was tolled in silence, with the saddest tones,
Beneath my shade the earth would heave and swell,
And sounds were heard as if from hollow bones.

" But when they come to touch upon my date,
They'll shake their heads and say, ' That old yew-tree
Hath long been famous for its solemn state ;
As for its age, 'tis wrapped in mystery.'

" Come, stranger, come a little nearer now,
And look intently on my twisted veins ;
This was the marble on a peasant's brow,
That was the tissue of a noble's brains.

" Those buds of beauty breaking every spring,
Atoms sublimed are of mortal dust,
And those strange sounds you now hear echoing,
Are they not spirit-voices of the just ?

" Come nearer still, and learn this lovely truth :
I'm here, upon this consecrated sod,
To preach my homilies to age and youth,
And bid them bend like me before their God.

" Mine office 'tis to watch o'er those that sleep,
To mourn in truth and shame the mocking knave ;
To weep o'er those who have no friends to weep,
And chaunt a requiem o'er each silent grave."

The voice now ceased, the traveller went his way,
For evening shadows deepened in the sky ;
And now, when mingling with the grave and gay,
The tree and tomb are present to his eye.

EDWARD CAPERN