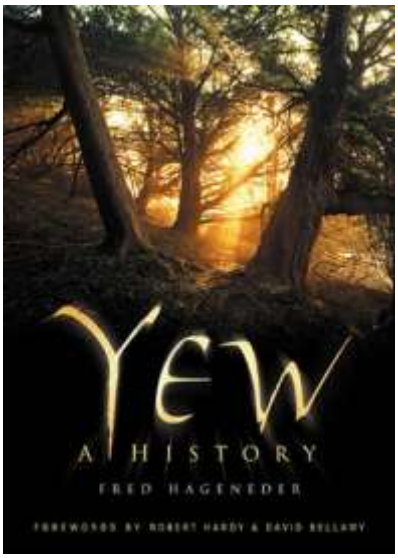
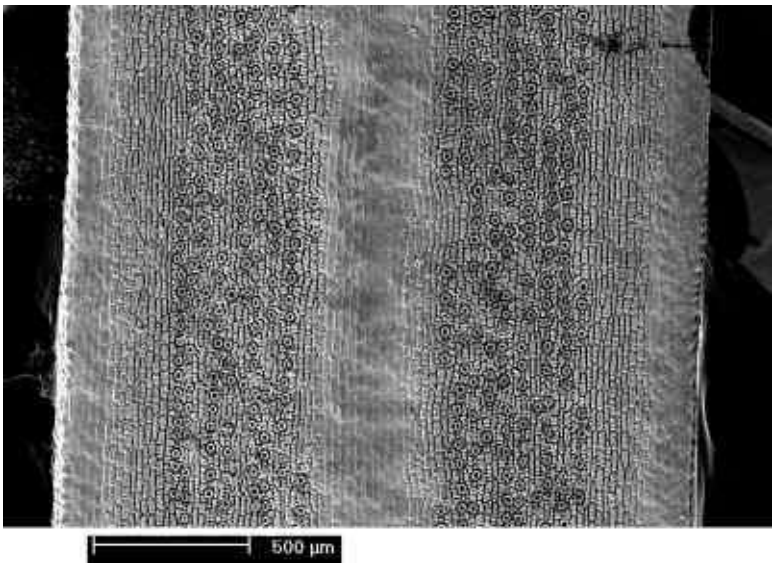
YEW – A HISTORY by Fred Hageneder



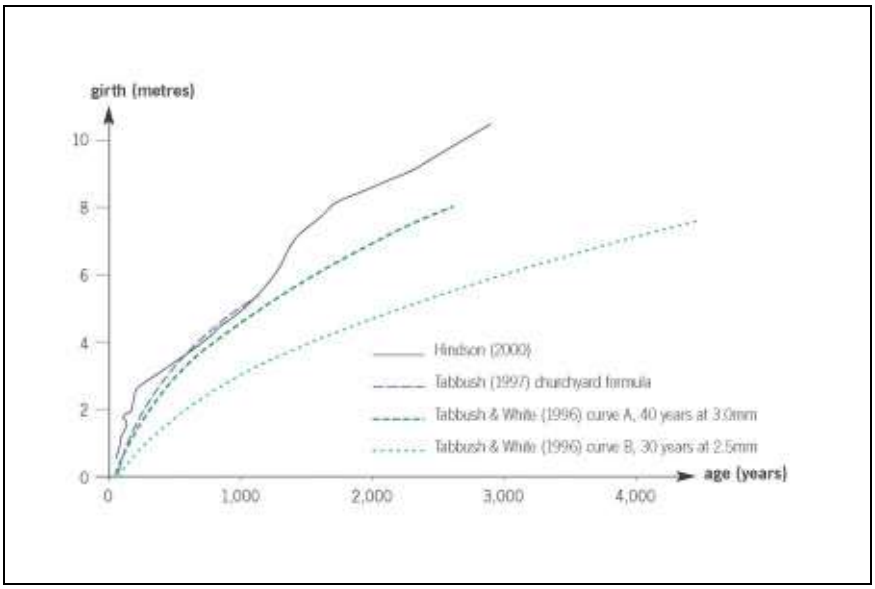
The first book to cover all aspects of botany as well as the cultural history and mythology of the Yew. This is the remarkable story of the oldest living things in Europe and their endangered future.

- The yew is one of the most versatile life forms on earth – botanically rich and intriguing
- In popular imagination the yew is a living link between our landscapes and those of the distant past
- The story of the yew has a rich cultural and historical background – it was the Tree of Life, the tree in the Garden of Eden and the original Christmas Tree
- The majority of the world's ancient yews are in the British Isles and 80-85% of these are in churchyards and so the church is the guardian and custodian of this ancient heritage
- Mature and ancient yews have virtually become extinct across Europe and Asia and rejuvenation in the forests faces serious ecological problems
- The isolation of an anti-cancer agent from the bark of the Pacific yew in 1966 has caused the systematic destruction of yew trees in North America and elsewhere, for example 90% of India's yews have been destroyed
- The mass destruction of yews overseas means that the UK is now a Noahs Ark for the conservation of ancient yews worldwide
- Fascinating historical stories – for example, the British obsession with using yew for the medieval long-bow caused the destruction of the yew across continental Europe because the wood was superior.
- Stunning full colour photography of impressive trees and locations
- Forewords by **Robert Hardy** & **David Bellamy**
- 50% of author royalties goes to the Ancient Yew Group

Macro shot of single female flower with clearly visible micropylar drops.



The bands of stomata on the lower surface of the yew leaf (c.2mm wide). Their number varies in different Taxus species.



The curves in this graph can be used as a very rough guide to how old a yew tree of a given girth might be, but it must be noted that it is ***not possible*** to measure a tree and discover its age in any formula. The information contained in this graph is statistical and applies only to populations, not individuals. Any individual yew can deviate enormously from the average age.

For centuries the yew – genus *Taxus* – has had a special significance for man through religion, folklore, medicine and warfare. In ancient times the yew played an important part in the rituals of many cultures including those of Japan, Phrygia, Greece, Ireland and Scandinavia. This evergreen tree, ingrained in pre-Christian mysteries of death and rebirth, still stands in churchyards of Britain as a powerful symbol of resurrection.

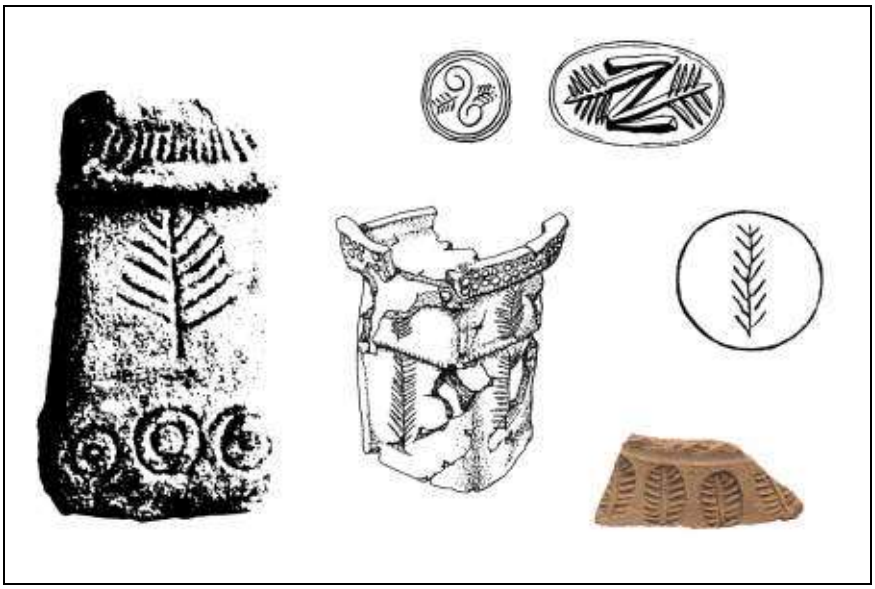
Yew was the wood chosen to make some of mankind's oldest artefacts – spears, bows and musical instruments. These include items like the prehistoric spear found near Clacton, the 4,000-year-old wooden pipes from Greystones, County Wicklow and, of course, the famous medieval English longbow. In modern medicine, too, yew has proved a boon. Since 1992 taxol/paclitaxel has helped revolutionise the treatment of certain types of cancer.

In botanical terms, yew is a mass of contradictions. It is a conifer which bears scarlet 'berries' with sweet juicy pulp instead of cones. It is highly poisonous in all its parts except the red fruit pulp, and yet both wild and domesticated animals feed upon it. It can live for thousands of years with the potential to renew itself. A new tree from an interior root can grow slowly within the hollow trunk of an ancient yew and centuries later 'take over' the older tree.

When it comes to habitat, the yew tree is nothing if not versatile. It can grow on different continents at a wide range of altitudes: from rainy Edinburgh to sultry Istanbul, from Canada to Mexico, Scandinavia to North Africa and Sumatra, Japan and the Himalayas.

The author puts the case for better conservation of this extraordinary life form and includes a worldwide gazetteer of yew stands and other useful information for those wishing to explore further the study of the yew.

Fred Hageneder is a recognised authority on ethnobotany. His books include: *The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbiosis and Inspiration, The Heritage of Trees: History, Culture and Symbolism* and *The Living Wisdom of Trees: Natural History, Folklore, Symbolism, Healing*. Fred is a founding member and the chairman of the Friends of the Trees, a registered charity concerned with nature conservation, and a member of the AYG (Ancient Yew Group).



Depictions of yew on ancient religious items from the Pyrenees (Celtic), Crete, Syria-Canaan, the Peloponnese (Hellenistic Greek) and Nineveh (Assyria, modern north Iraq). (From Hageneder 2007)

Mature yew at the first Knights Templar fortress in Europe: La Couvertoirade, Midi-Pyrenees, southern France. (photo Fred Hageneder)

REVIEWS

backcover of book

'This book is a work of art and a labour of love. The scholarly case that it presents is both exciting and sustainable.'
Professor Ronald Hutton, Department of History, University of Bristol

'Excellent link between the natural history and spiritual significance of yew through the centuries.'
Ladislav Paule, professor of forest genetics, Faculty of Forestry, Technical University, Zvolen, Slovakia

'A well-researched, broad and comprehensive, excellently illustrated and scientifically accurate monograph about one of the most fascinating tree geni of the world.'
Dr Arthur Brande, director of the Laboratory for Historical Ecology, Ecological Institute at the Technical University of Berlin

'Very well and comprehensively written.'
Dr Ulrich Pietzarka, curator, Tharandt Botanic Garden and Arboretum, Germany

Review by Mark Williams in Tree News: Spring/Summer 2007 edition

As its name suggests, this book is dedicated purely to one tree and it tackles the subject admirably. It is written by a founder member and current chairman of Friends of the Trees, but by profession Hageneder is an ethnobotanist. As a result he goes much further into the more obscure aspects of his subject than one might expect, probing into every aspect of their range, structure, reproduction, and longevity. He dwells lovingly on the tree's toxicity, for example, explaining that apart from the bright red aril – flesh – of the berries, every part is poisonous to man and most animals. Then there are detailed drawings and macro photographs of the leaf structure and an examination of the puzzling phenomenon of 'bleeding' yews.
This level of detail should not put off amateurs, however, for his love of the subject matter shines out of every page. The photographs are wonderful and endlessly fascinating, while the text bubbles along

effortlessly. As a result, while it makes a wonderful ‘dipping’ book, many people will devour it from cover-to-cover.

After the technical chapters, Hageneder explores the yew’s cultural and historical roles. The Tree of Life was, apparently, a yew – and as one of Britain’s three native conifers, it was the original Christmas tree until Prince Albert substituted the spruce.

Unfortunately this supremely long-lived tree has suffered badly at the hands of man. In 1966 its bark was discovered to contain powerful cancer-killing toxins and huge numbers were harvested, particularly in North America and India (the latter has lost 90% of its yews in little more than a generation). Before that, however, it was Britain’s mediaeval rulers’ insatiable desire for long bows that led to vast numbers being felled across Europe (Continental wood was regarded as superior to British). It is thus ironic that today while responsible for the absence of veteran trees across Europe, Britain has most of the world’s ancient yews, most of which (80 – 85%) are found in churchyards. And if one needed a final reason to but this wonderful tome, Hageneder is donating 50% of the royalties to the Ancient Yew Group.