

The lost yew of Selborne

by Peter Norton

The parish church of St Mary's was founded in Saxon times and mentioned in the Domesday Book. The present church with its Norman tower and nave, largely dates from 1180.

Selborne was the parish of the Hampshire naturalist, Gilbert White (1720-1793) who in 1778 described the great yew in his book *'The natural history and antiquities of Selborne'*.

'In the churchyard of this village is a yew tree whose aspect bespeaks it to be of great age: it seems to have seen several centuries, and is probably coeval with the church, and therefore may be deemed an antiquity: the body is squat, short and thick, and measures twenty-three feet in girth, supporting an head of suitable extent to its bulk. This is a male tree, which in the spring sheds clouds of dust and fills the atmosphere with its farina.'



Photo - 1985

By the 1980's its girth had increased to around 26 feet, with branches reaching a height of about 60 feet.

On 25th January 1990 at about 3pm, in the great storm that swept across the south of England (named the Burn's Day Storm), the yew was brought crashing to the ground. It lay across the path, its branches amongst the gravestones, with the circular bench still around the massive trunk which had split and revealed its hollow centre.



Advice was sought from the Alice Holt Forest Research and it was considered that it would be well worth reinstating it, as yew will often re-grow.

The forestry tutor at Merrist Wood Agricultural College suggested that some of his students could carry out the reinstatement as a training exercise. Most of its branches were cut away to reduce the weight. These were later used to make various artefacts which can be found inside the church.

The ground was excavated beneath the tree to allow for the repositioning of the roots. During this process the bones of about 30 skeletons were unearthed. Seven of these were complete burials with the earliest dating back to around 1200 CE. They were reinterred in the churchyard.

On Tuesday 13th February 1990, watched by a large number of people, the tree was lifted by winch and crane and placed into the enlarged hole. Sadly the yew failed to flourish and by April 1992 experts agreed that it had died.



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Several clonal cuttings had been taken from the base of the tree by the students during the yew's reinstatement. This was a success and as a result, on the 28th November 1992, a two foot tall male sapling was planted opposite the porch. The photo below left, taken in 2012, shows that it continues to thrive.



In 2007 there was considerable excitement when it was noticed that a young yew was growing next to the old stump. Could this be the old tree regenerating from a section of living root material? A member of the Tree Advice Trust gave the following verdict: 'This appears to be about four years old and is very healthy. Careful examination confirmed that this does not have physical connections to any part of the 'parent' tree. It is a seedling with typically no tap root or other vertical underground growth. The roots emerge from the root collar and radiate outwards as might be expected of a seedling'. The yew, in spite of being reduced to a stump, was chosen to be one of the '50 Great British Trees' to celebrate the Queen's jubilee year.

