Raiders of the lost bark: the last crusade

James Douglas on the group fighting to save Britain's venerable yew trees - a heritage for the world

DAILY TELEGRAPH - Saturday 29th December 2007

A new history of the yew tree describes Britain as a veritable Noah's Ark of outstanding veterans. According to its author, Fred Hageneder, we have the highest density of them in Europe. Worldwide, the only comparable stands are those in Turkey and the Caucasus, which, unlike our own gloriously accessible giants, are largely concentrated within impenetrable mountain forests. "Britain," he says, "has a special responsibility to protect these trees because they effectively belong to the world's, not just our, heritage."

Tim Hills, co-ordinator of the Ancient Yew Group, which lobbies to raise the awareness of the trees' unique but fragile British heritage, supports Hageneder's view that it's time outstanding examples of the species received a special form of "Green Monument" designation.

Currently, Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) are rescindable if a tree is thought to be dead, dying or dangerous, a hopeless protective mechanism for an aged yew that, to the uninformed, can sometimes look just like that. In any case, they are seldom placed on churchyard trees, which is where around 80-85 per cent of Britain's oldest examples are to be found.

Yet yews are where nature and history coalesce most exactly. Our ancestors, marvelling at the miracle of a tree that could grow so old and keep its greenery all year, revered them and used them as meeting places. This naturally led to the building of churches at these important sites. Many surviving yews predate their associated churches, making the present loophole in heritage protection all the more deplorable.

Partly, this may be due to some negative traditions bound up with the tree. When I meet Hills, he is steaming over a recent episode of The Archers: "One character rang up the vet to report four dead cows. I immediately thought: 'Oh, here we go, more propaganda about deadly yews.' Yet every farmer I've met has long been aware of the dangers of the leaves to livestock.'"

This association of yews with death and poison is widely exaggerated. In fact, for many European mammals, they are a food source. Mixed woodlands containing them attract higher bird numbers than those without. The thrush family so thrives on the fleshy scarlet "fruits" (arils) that mistle thrushes fiercely assert territorial rights over them, thus preserving access to a personal, late-winter ration.

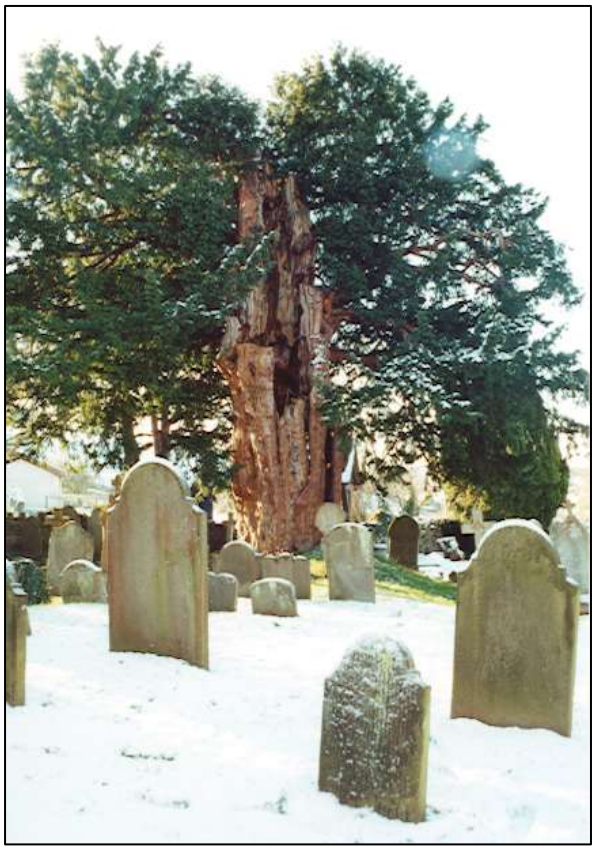
While dense, light-denying canopies deter vegetative growth beneath them, the notion that they poison the soil is nonsense, says Hills. "I've seen trees with cyclamen and orchids, as well as ivy and elder, growing within a few feet of the trunk."

The fact that some people find yews morbid and oppressive doubtless derives from their familiar location in churchyards. “All the gravestones around them are a reminder that one day it’s going to be you,” agrees Hills. But a less doomy twist would be to view them as symbols of rebirth or immortality.

The truth is that a yew is the oldest living organism any of us is ever likely to see. To illustrate the point, we drop in on the Portbury Yew, in the village churchyard of St Mary the Virgin, just outside Bristol. A man painting the lychgate confides his fears that the old tree “won’t last much longer, because it is completely hollowed out”.

But while the inner heartwood may indeed have rotted so thoroughly as to leave a damp, cavern-like inner chamber, it is actually very much alive and thriving. The canopy above is broad, thick and soaring. The knotted and gnarled bark, beneath its dry flakes, has beautiful flat, flowing, multi-coloured strips from shades of orange to grey. If Paul Gauguin ever turned his idiosyncratic art to painting a tree trunk, it would surely have looked something like this.

But most remarkable of all, about 10 feet up within the “cavern”, two fat, trunk-like shoots have burst out from the inner bark and, over countless decades, reached down to implant themselves in the soil. “As the remainder of the outer trunk rots away, these internal roots will grow up as trees themselves within the shell,” explains Hills. “Sometimes, with yews, we cannot be sure whether we are looking at the original tree, or one that started life within a decaying, older stem.”



All this makes the species the subject of endless conjecture about age. The oldest tree in Europe is said to be the Fortingall Yew in Scotland, considered between 3,000 and 5,000 years old. The Portbury Yew has a notice saying it is “thought to be” 2,000 years old. Tim, who is regularly called upon to pronounce on the subject, refuses to speculate. “Since its heartwood decays, it becomes impossible to give an accurate figure. All I usually say is that, with a girth of l6ft, you are probably looking at 500 years, and 700 to 1,000 years or more at 20ft.”

Many old specimens look messy, or “past their best”, and some are felled as a result. “Unfortunately,” says Hills, “the churches of England and Wales have no specific policy guidance on their treatment. Parochial church councils seldom have the expertise to look after them and too often the chosen option is to lop off naturally drooping branches, which may be centuries old themselves, or cut down the tree entirely.”

Even when, as at Portbury, a yew is clearly cared for, funds can be tight; and if it is a choice between repairing the roof or surgery on the old yew, it’s the latter that will lose out. Hills believes it is time central funding was made available for parishes to get advice and information from fully qualified tree surgeons. But in the meantime, he urges anyone concerned about a tree to contact the group before taking action. Otherwise they could be lopping off a branch of history.

+ Yew: A History by Fred Hageneder is published by Sutton (01453 883300) at £25.

+The Ancient Yew Group has recorded 440 yews with a girth above 20ft, and a further 470 whose girths are between 16ft and 2Oft.

+ While 750 of these are in churchyards, an increasing number of survivors are being discovered in the wider landscape.

+The group maintains a gazetteer of examples on its website. It is keen to hear from the public of any further examples, particularly those with trunks l4ft in circumference, or any with hollowed out interiors. See www.ancient-yew.org or email tim@ancient-yew.org