

The Churchyard yews of Gwent

2nd edition published in memory of **John Daryll Evans**, the original author

It is 19 years since the publication of the 1st edition of *The Churchyard Yews of Gwent*. At the time of writing, its author, the Reverend J.Daryll Evans was both the Priest-in-Charge of the parishes of Llanfihangel Pontymoel and Mamhilad, and a Senior Lecturer at the South Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education, Cardiff.

His book is the first (and so far the only) comprehensive record of the churchyard yews to be found within a single county. No fewer than 174 churches were visited to gather the information contained in this unique written record of the yews of Gwent (formerly known as Monmouthshire).

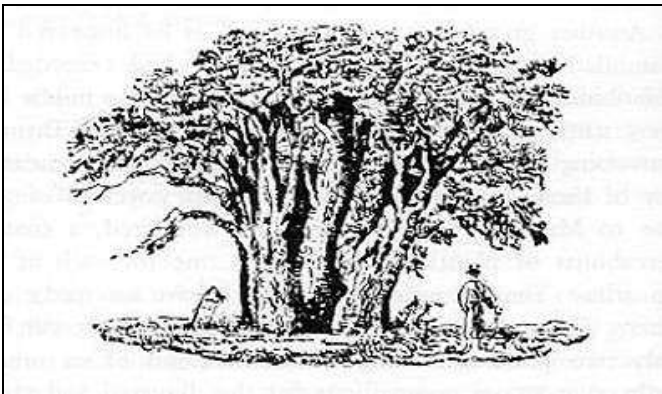
The yews described in Daryll's book have lived for centuries and in some cases for millennia. With the capacity to double or treble their present ages, we know that there are hundreds of living yews with the potential to still be alive in the year 2500 and even 3000. This comprehensive record of our oldest yews as they appear today will provide invaluable evidence to the researcher of the future, just as we value the information provided by books and articles written about individual yews in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Ancient Yew Group would like to see a similar written record available for every county, particularly those counties like Gwent that contain a significant number of ancient yews.

APPENDIX 4 The Mamhilad Yew is taken from this 2nd edition of *The Churchyard Yews of Gwent*
The book is available for £10 plus £2 postage and packing from Christina Evans, 6 Sluvad Road, New Inn, Pontypool, Torfaen, NP4 0SX

Loudon's illustration of the Mamhilad yew – 1833

The Mamhilad yew in 1998 © Tim Hills



APPENDIX 4 The Mamhilad Yew

In the famous Elegy, Gray wrote of “that yew-tree's shade, where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap”. He had in mind a single large tree, set within a churchyard. The oldest yew at Mamhilad is a fine example.

A number of observers have measured it. The first on record was Archdeacon William Coxe, on his “Historical Tour of Monmouthshire” (Coxe 1802). Then, in 1844, a monumental work on British trees made reference to the tree (Loudon 1844). Some half a century later, the Rector of Mamhilad, the Reverend Christopher Cook, took the circumference (Lowe 1897). He was followed by the botanist H.A.Hyde in 1929 (Hyde 1961). And the eminent dendrologist Alan Mitchell (1972) included the Mamhilad yew as his only Welsh representative in a list of thirty-two specimens of exceptional girth. The various values obtained over the years are given in the Table below.

None of the measurements should be accepted as precise. Yew bark flakes away; pieces become detached between one observation and the next so that a later reading can be smaller than anticipated or even less than an earlier one. Numerous little shoots arising from the trunk can complicate the task of where to place the tape. More seriously in the case of the Mamhilad yew, there is no longer a single bole. The original

has quite disintegrated. There are now no less than seven secondary stems. Much above ground level the circumference has to be taken around the whole group of them.

Measurements of the Girth of the Mamhilad Yew			
Circumference	At a height above ground level of:	Date	Observer
25ft.	Not recorded	1799	Archdeacon William Coxe
29ft. 4in.	2ft. 6in.	1838	J.C.Loudon (or a correspondent)
30ft. 9in.	Nil	1895	The Reverend C. Cook
29ft. 10in.	3ft.		
31ft.	4ft.	1929	H. A. Hyde
31ft.	6in.	1970	A. F. Mitchell
38ft. 3in.	Nil	1987	J. D. Evans
35ft. 3in.	3ft. 3in. (1 metre)		

Nonetheless, the dimensions of the common base from which the seven trunks arise indicate a very great age. Alan Mitchell, lately retired from the Forestry Commission, is a leading authority on the ages of yews. In his view a trunk 30 feet in circumference is likely to be between two and three thousand years old. Larger specimens, such as those at Tandridge in Surrey and Ulcombe in Kent could be as much as 4,000 years old (Mitchell 1986). Had the Mamhilad yew retained its first bole, the girth would be well over thirty feet. The tree is the only one in Gwent of this size and therefore unique to our county, in that it could have been standing in pre-Christian times.

The yew is very likely to have featured in pagan Celtic religion. There are three reasons. The first of them concerns the place of trees in primitive cultures. Sir James Frazer, in his major work *The Golden Bough*, traced many magical and religious practices involving trees, from various parts of the world (Frazer 1890). A great tree was always an impressive sight. Not only did it tower above other forms of life; but it may have also appeared immortal by comparison with the human span of years. And an evergreen would have seemed even less subject to change, independent almost of the succeeding seasons.

Small wonder, then, that our Celtic forbears regarded trees (and other natural features, such as rivers and mountains) as sacred. Now the yew was not the dominant species in the forest that covered so much of the land. That distinction belonged to the oak. Pliny, Julius Caesar, and other classical authors have described the importance of that tree in druidic ritual. But that the yew also had its place is shown by the evidence of Celtic names. One tribe, for example, was the Eburones. This incorporates the name of the yew, ebur, an element which may also be detected in place names such as Eburacum (York) and Eburodunum (Yverdon), as Hastings (1912) has shown. Irish mythological names include MacIbar, son of yew (Powell 1958). And Toulson (1987) says that “on the wood of yew trees the druids are thought to have inscribed powerful words in the linear Ogham script”.

The yew was thus a significant tree, massive and unchanging. Undoubtedly it came to take on a symbolic role as well. The Celts believed in immortality. Death was “merely a pause...a bridge between one life and another” (Green 1986). The yew was a sign of this mystical continuity of life. Initially worshipped where it happened to be found, the tree was later planted on sacred sites some of which were taken over for churches. The present distribution of churchyard yews can thus provide a second category of evidence.

Under natural conditions yew tend to occur on relatively alkaline soil. The reason is not necessarily that such a substratum is particularly beneficial, but that they can tolerate it better than other species. They are less effective competitors, being crowded out of better conditions by others. In present-day churchyards there is no such struggle for existence – there yews are seen to thrive on soil of all types.

In Gwent, the alkaline soil lies over limestone. The map produced by the Geological survey of Great Britain (1957) shows three areas of rock. The yews on the limestone cliffs around Tintern form part of a natural wood over one of these – a wide band in southeast Gwent.

Now if churchyard yews are the remnants of a natural distribution, they should predominate on limestone. Risca, Magor, Itton, Mathern, Llanbadoc and Llanddewi Fach would be expected to have more and bigger specimens. But parishes such as Llantilio Pertholey, Llanwenarth, Goytre and Machen – all away from the influence of limestone – have equally fine trees.

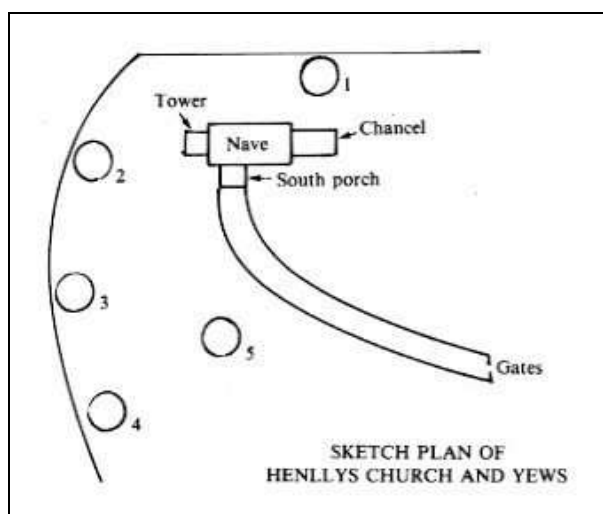
Mamhilad too is uninfluenced by limestone. The oldest yew in the churchyard has probably been planted where it now stands, on the crown of a low hill. If the tree's age is as great as it appears, then its planting took place in pre-Christian times.

I come now to the third type of evidence for the likely use of this tree in pagan religion. It is the evidence of position. An individual tree within a churchyard, and away from the boundary seems to be there for one of three reasons. They are; natural dispersal, to provide shelter, and to serve a symbolic function.

Yews are spread by birds. The berry-like fruit is eaten, the enclosed seed being later expelled in the droppings. It seems likely that a period of frost is needed before germination can start. Most of our churchyard yews have not originated in this way; they are too well sited. Younger trees nearby have probably arrived by natural means. In Mamhilad, for example yews in the grounds of the Star Inn (opposite the church), in local hedgerows, and near private dwellings such as Brynderwen and Mamhilad House, could well have spread from the grove in the churchyard. But the old churchyard yews are often significantly positioned.

In a number of cases a large yew is to be found either midway along the path to the church entrance, or adjacent to a churchyard gateway. Its purpose is clearly to offer protection from the elements, particularly to pallbearers at funerals. A good example occurs at St. Peter's church, Henllys, above Cwmbran. There are five yews in the churchyard. Four are on the boundary. The fifth, which is the largest, stands adjacent to the path which approaches the church from the east, curving around to meet the south porch.

A similar pattern is found at the attractive little church of Llanfihangel Pontymoel, near Pontypool. Here too the path leads from the east to the south porch. Again the largest yew is midway along the path and to its southern side (thus giving shelter from the prevailing winds, which are from the south). Other churches with a single large yew next to a path include Llanddewi Rhydderch, Llanddewi Skirrid, Penyclawdd and Llanarth. Skenfrith and Llanfapley have each a fine yew near a churchyard entrance.



Sketch plan of Henllys church and yews © Christina Evans

Mamhilad's yew does not fit this group. It is too close to the church to have been planted with the intention of providing shelter. By the time one gets to the tree it is only a few more paces to the refuge of the south porch. It looks as though the church appeared after the yew, rather than vice versa.

The third explanation of solitary yews in churchyards is that they were planted there with a symbolic purpose. Writing in the 15th century, William Caxton refers to a custom already ancient: "For the eucheson (reason) that we have none Olyve that bereth grene leef, algate therefore we take Ewe instead of palm and olyve, and beren about in processyon, and so is thys day called Palm Sondag." (Caxton, quoted by Lowe 1897). Shakespeare mentions another practice in "Twelfth Night":

My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O prepare it,
My part of death, no one so true
did share it.

The churchyard yew had come to have a significance in Christian ritual. Trees were undoubtedly planted because of their association with Christ, and in particular with the Resurrection.

But the origins of that symbolism lay in pre-Christian times, and the Mamhilad yew is old enough to date from then. The early Celts must have associated the yew with their belief in immortality. The symbolism continued into the Christian era. Toulson (1987) has written that "...the new faith was smoothly grafted on to the old." She gives three examples. One was the druidic tonsure. This to the form of shaving the front of the head from ear to ear, a practice continued by the Celtic monks. Another example was the "soul friend", comparable in some respects to the Christian spiritual director. The third was the druids' colleges mentioned by Julius Caesar and which had their counterparts in the monastic schools such as St. Illtyd's at Llantwit Major. In the same way, the symbol of eternal life was readily adopted by the new religion.

Yews were planted in churchyards, often in a prominent central position. Gwent has some 32 examples, sited away from boundaries and paths. Their purpose is not primarily the utilitarian one of providing shelter, but to be reminders of eternity and constancy in faith. There are fine specimens at Tredunnoch, Penallt, Penterry and Rockfield.

It is only the Mamhilad yew, however, which witnessed the actual coming of Christianity to our country. The tree had probably already served as a meeting place when St. Illtyd's followers arrived in the 6th century. At that time it would have had its original trunk, now long disintegrated. Where better for those enthusiastic preachers to start their task of evangelising the district? People were naturally congregating there. And the evergreen would provide year-round shelter for the cross the missionaries would erect. In time that cross would have its own covering, later extended to accommodate the worshippers.

The oldest yew at Mamhilad, its branches brushing the South porch of St Illtyd's Church © S.K.Jones



The yew would remain. Imperceptibly its form would change as the centuries passed. But amongst those who viewed it there would always be some who shared a common insight – that pervading our transitory life is an eternity in which, strangely, the mortal may have a part. The perceptive receive that revelation still.

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