

FIGHTING FOR TREES

By Sandra Saer

This article first appeared in *The Antique Collector* 2/85

It was also one of the Appendices to Sandra's book *COLDWALTHAM: A STORY OF THREE HAMLETS* published in August, 1987

Hearts pound, hackles rise and money is hard to come by when old trees are fought for. A case in point was the West Sussex yew standing in leafy majesty in Coldwaltham churchyard, and reputed to be one of the 12 oldest in the land. In 1964, a local resident informed West Sussex County Council that the vicar and parish council were fearful that parts of the yew might be cut down 'to avoid interference' with two new buildings just given planning consent to go up in adjacent plots. Horsham District Council enforced a Tree Preservation Order to prevent the 'topping, lopping or wilful destruction' of the yew.

Before the Order comes into force, a careful examination of the tree is made. Assessing age can present problems, although one method is simply to put a tape measure round the tree's girth and multiply the inches by a certain figure to get the total of years. However, this method doesn't work with yews, which grow very slowly. Taking a core sample from the Coldwaltham yew was impossible, too, because most of its core had gone.

Coldwaltham parishioners were displeased when a local newspaper reported that the tree was only 280-plus years old. This contradicted local knowledge which placed the yew's age at nearer 1000 years. There is no way, however, of proving such a grand old age. The first county maps only date back to 1575, and these are very small-scale, with few features such as specific trees distinguishable. Large-scale (tithe) maps only began to be made in the middle of the 19th century.

However, one piece of 'evidence' for there having been a chapel 1000 years ago on the site of the present Coldwaltham church was, in fact, the ancient yew. Even if the yew were not planted until the yard of St. Giles' Church (built in 1120) was enclosed, it could still be around 500 years old, if not more. The latter is the theory of Mr Derry Watkins, the tree surgeon responsible for its repair.

The age of the tree was stated as 280 -plus years by Horsham District Council's report in November 1982 on the work which needed doing. This, in the council's opinion, was sufficient age to merit the importance of continued preservation; plus the fact that the Tree Preservation Order demanded it.

There is something reassuring about having a Tree Preservation Order and certainly an order gives a measure of protection, by its very existence. Penalties are inflicted for the violation of orders, via the courts by the local authority concerned. Such penalties vary in severity, according to a tree's importance. In Kent recently, a man felled a whole avenue of preserved trees and was sent to prison for six months, and fined heavily. In Sussex, a developer who cut down preserved trees was fined £300 per tree - £1500 in total.

The Tree Preservation Order's main weakness is that a piece of paper, however official, cannot alone suffice. The Council for the Protection of Rural England discovered in a survey that TPO legislation is at fault, in failing to ensure positive management of protected trees. Yet without the brief, or the resources, those making the Orders cannot stand guard over the trees. It is usually left to those living nearby, to enforce the orders by 'keeping an eye open'. That is rather haphazard, to say the least.

Ironically, these same voluntary guardians raise another weakness in the system. When it became apparent that the Coldwaltham yew needed attention, Horsham District Council, as the councils do, suggested to the churchwardens the names of several reputable tree surgeons, including that of Mr Watkins. But often people, wanting to save money and ignorant of the complications involved, use their own labour, or that of people not good at that kind of work, to do repairs. They end up by inflicting worse damage, and some of the 'jobs done', according to Mr I. C. Richardson, the Tree Officer for Horsham District Council, are 'appalling'.

Anyway, back in Coldwaltham, Mr Watkins set to work, bracing and stapling. The yew was repaired, and the bill for £299 was sent to the churchwardens for the Parish Church Council to pay. The Diocese of Chichester had no money to spend on a tree. The Historic Churches Preservation Trust only give grants towards essential church-fabric repairs. The District Council, also approached, had no money to spare. The County

Council, much involved in its share of the national forward-looking tree-planting campaign, had no grant aid available for 'private' trees, however old.

So it fell to the caring parishioners of Coldwaltham, plus lovers of the village from all over the district who saw the tree as part of their heritage, to foot the bill. Various fund-raising events brought in two-thirds of the cost. There is no resentment. Pride has won the day.



The Coldwaltham Yew in 1999 © Tim Hills

It seems hard, though, that they should have to pay that bill, in addition to the many other charities and works they, and their counterparts all over the country, unfailingly support.

There are very few national bodies who can help. The Men of the Trees Society has long been aware of the need to help not only churches with their trees, but individuals who might buy a house and find that thrown in with it was a 'protected' tree, the maintenance of which they would be forced to take on. The Men of Trees do give financial help for individual trees, on the advice submitted to headquarters by all the county bodies.

The Royal Society for Nature Conservation, to which are affiliated organisations in 44 British counties - called county naturalist trusts, conservation trusts or nature conservation trusts, does provide money for important tree-preservation projects, either through governmental bodies or special charitable trusts. Equally prepared to help, if the tree merits it, are the Countryside Commission, to which the county councils are affiliated, giving grant aid to protect and repair existing trees, if they are an important feature of the landscape. In the summer of 1983, for example, they offered a grant, via East Sussex County Council, to repair the Crowhurst churchyard yew similar to that at Coldwaltham.

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