Good Practice Can be Celebrated

For many yews the only intervention needed to meet health and safety requirements is the placing of supporting props. Dozens of ancient yews receive such support. Examples: Churchill (Somerset), Overton-on-Dee (Wrexham) Rotherfield and Wilmington (Sussex).

At three sites, Bentley (Hants), Dobveridge (Derbyshire) and Much Marcle (Herefordshire), this has been taken a stage further with the construction of vast wooden frames above head height to carry sagging branches over a considerable distance. This has avoided both the removal of branches or the need to divert the path.

Even fallen trees may survive if given the chance, as at Benington (Herts), Cofton Hackett, Kington and Powick (Worcs), Craswall Priory (Herefordshire) and Lee (Buckinghamshire).

Yew stumps do eventually decay. We know that the tough layer of white sap wood surrounding the red heartwood (whose more rapid decay leads to the tree becoming hollow) may take decades, if not centuries, to finally rot away. At many churches a feature has been made of the stump so that the much respected landmark lives on in its new form. Examples are at Goetre (Monmouthshire) and Hartshead (Yorkshire), where the yew has been "dead now for over 100 years", and Cantref (Brecon) where the 'decayed trunk' was noted as early as 1834.
Stumps should be left as long as possible because it is not unknown for life to spring from a seemingly dead tree. I was told that more than 200 years ago at Tangmere (Sussex) a hollow yew was considered dead and a new one planted to take its place. The new tree apparently did not last long - while the old yew recovered and today is a fine healthy tree with a girth of almost 25'.

This concept 'past its prime' is not applicable to the yew, with its ability to regenerate from the smallest amount of living material. It may indeed go through several 'prime' periods during its centuries of life. At Acton Beauchamp (Herefordshire), the yew is undoubtedly in a transitional stage and may not at the moment look the fine tree that appeared in a painting 200 years ago. This pictorial evidence shows that half of the tree has disappeared since then, but from the substantial stool fragment that remains (itself 20ft in girth) many new branches are carrying sufficient foliage to fuel the tree's recovery.

Neither does an ancient yew have to be destroyed to enable a church building to be extended. When additional space was required at Buckland-in-Dover, Kent, their ancient yew was successfully moved to another part of the churchyard. If this could be done in 1880 it should be possible to repeat that process today. There is no reason why the Harlington Yew, under threat because of the proposed expansion of London Airport, should not be successfully moved.

The following are examples where individual or community action has been taken to ensure an old yew's survival.

The Winterbourne Dauntsey Yew, Wiltshire

"Local residents would fight to protect this lovely old tree if it were ever in danger." The church was demolished in the 19th century, but it is only recently that the churchyard has been made into a wildlife refuge with this fine yew as centrepiece.

Peter Norton

The Minstead Yew, Hampshire

After a storm in 1979 destoyed half of the tree its future looked uncertain. Good sense prevailed and thanks to expert remedial action it is growing vigorously. We would like to congratulate those people who made the decision to save the tree and the experts who carried out the work. (24th May 2005)

The Caring for God's Acre Project

Reports have been commissioned by this project for many churchyards in Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. They recognise the significance of their veteran/ancient yews and offer specific advice on continuing care. (30th August 2005)

Igtham Mote, Kent

This old yew in the care of the National Trust has been treated and given time to recover from too many visitors. “The Yew Tree has been suffering stress over the last few years. One of the reasons for this is that the ground underneath has become very hard and compacted causing the roots to slow and in some cases stop growing. In turn this has stopped the leaves and branches from growing, making the tree look very unhappy. To help overcome this problem before it is terminal the Garden Department employed a contractor to carry out a decompaction and root treatment, which should help the roots and ultimately the whole tree to thrive once more. This treatment is called Terraventing. The process involves injecting compressed nitrogen through a probe which simultaneously de-compacts the soil while delivering bio-stimulants and mycorrhizal fungi to the root system. To helps this whole process along the area under the tree canopy has been roped off for this year to allow the area to recover.”